

Τηε Ανδρομεδα Βυρν βψ Λεε Εδγαρ

DEDICATED TO DAUGHTERS EVERYWHERE

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SEQUELS TO THIS BOOK
The Andromeda Seed
Return to Andromeda
The Andromeda Trial
Andromeda Time

ΦΙΝΑΛ ΑΠΠΡΟΑΧΗ

Cassiopeia Duncan glanced up when the computer beeped at her. Although it didn't happen very often, she didn't seem at all surprised. In fact, she even smiled as she reached over and pressed a key.

The flight deck of Wayfarer Two was fairly large and seemed to her all the more so when she was alone at the controls. On the main console there were three monitor screens. To her left there was a white one labelled I.R.I.S. Immediately in front of her, a black one which currently showed a bright pinpoint of light dead ahead and, to her right, a red one which displayed the status of the various drives.

The young woman leant forward slightly towards the centre screen and spoke. 'Enhance and identify.'

The image appeared to jump towards her as the enlarged picture of the star stabilised, while the left hand monitor cleared and the data began to flow.

IDENTITY	-	SOL
DIAMETER	-	1392Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	-	25.38d
INCLINATION	-	7° 15'
DENSITY	-	1.409

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ESCAPE VELOCITY	-	617.5 Km/s
SURFACE GRAVITY	-	27.9
NUMBER OF PLANETS	-	10
DISTANCE	-	41.39AU >

She pressed the button marked TANNY. 'Commander Duncan to the flight deck, please.'

After a few seconds, a man's voice came from a speaker on the console. 'What is it, Cassi?'

'Iris has Sol on the screen, Commander.'

She could almost hear his smile. 'Very good. Prepare the reactor for reverse thrust. I'm on my way up.'

Cassi turned to her right and moved her long, white fingers over the red keyboard. 'ACTIVATE MAIN REACTOR'

'Are you sure? (Y/N) >' replied the amber characters on the screen of the drive computer which then waited patiently for her answer.

She pressed 'Y'. Yes, she was sure.

'Main reactor activated > 10 minutes to critical mass >'

Cassi relaxed. There was nothing more she could do but wait. During the long haul across the void, the drive had been locked into stand-by mode and the auxiliary drive had taken care of all minor course adjustments. The bulkhead door opened with a slight pressure hiss and in walked a tall man who appeared to be around fifty earth years.

He laid his clipboard on the console and looked over the girl's shoulder. 'Good work, Cassi. We're coming home at last.'

Cassi glanced up at him. His blue-grey eyes still sparkled despite the crinkles in the skin at each side. The teeth were still his own though the once-fair hair and beard were now turning grey. All she knew was that she loved him and that she could sense his enthusiasm which was infectious as a tingle of excitement ran through her own body.

He sensed her observations and smiled. 'How long to critical mass?'

Cassi glanced at the red screen. 'Seven minutes.'

He stood up straight. 'Okay. We'd better strap ourselves in. It's been a long time since I've done this. Warn the others, would you?'

Cassi nodded and pressed the tannoy button. 'Attention all crew. Reverse thrust in approximately seven minutes. Repeat, reverse thrust in seven minutes.'

The Commander sat in his swivel chair and connected the straps across his lap while Cassi returned to Iris.

'Is the deceleration bad?' she asked.

He shook his head. 'Not normally. Just a sudden slowing to sub-light speed. We can't go tearing across a stellar system in Proton Drive. If we run into Miranda or Phoebe at this speed, they will do more than scratch Wayfarer's paintwork.'

Cassi glanced at the red terminal and pressed the tannoy button once more. 'Reverse thrust in four minutes and counting.'

James Duncan grinned. 'You're enjoying this, aren't you?'

Cassi's deep blue eyes flicked to him briefly as she set up the retros for possible course adjustment. 'It runs in the family.'

He threw back his head and laughed. 'That's my girl.'

Blushing a little, Cassi concentrated on scanning for any other nearby stellar bodies that could impede their progress. There were none within range.

'Three minutes to reverse thrust,' she said over the tannoy. 'Secure any loose objects.'

The red screen said 'Sol - Distance 40.2AU' when she hit the key. There was no noise, no sudden lurching or groaning, just a mild sensation of floating as the big ship started to decelerate rapidly. At half light speed, she cut the

motor.

The Commander smiled his approval. 'Anyone would think you had done that before.'

'I have.'

He frowned. 'When?'

'Yesterday, in the simulator.'

'It's not quite the same thing,' he said as he unbuckled his belt and got to his feet. 'Get it wrong on the simulator and all that happens is you get bleeped at. Loose off the Proton Drive at the wrong time in real life and we could end up splattered all over some stray asteroid.' He pressed the tannoy switch down. 'All crew stand down. Approximately twelve hours to Earthfall.'

Cassi turned to face her father. 'Did I do okay?'

He kissed her forehead. 'You did perfect. Go and get some rest.'

Her smile said everything.

WHEN Cassi woke, she felt strange. She put it down to the excitement of the moment and thought nothing more of it as she splashed cold water onto her face and arms. She then slipped into her overall before tucking her long, fair hair into her baseball cap and stepping out into the corridor. She was the only female on board ship which merited private accommodation next to the Commander's quarters, behind the flight deck. It was, therefore, not a long journey to go to work.

However, Wayfarer was a big vessel by interplanetary standards. Apart from the flight control centre and sleeping accommodation, there was also a science laboratory, an engineering shop, some storage space as well as a large area of fresh food growing under artificial ultra-violet light. Whereas local ships had only needed supplies for a few months, Wayfarer Two, like her unfortunate predecessor, Wayfarer One, had been designed to stay for years in deep space. Now, she was coming home.

As Cassi stepped over the threshold and entered the flight centre, five faces turned towards her. She smiled at them all. As long as she had known them, Alpha, Beta, Gamma and Delta had treated her with the utmost consideration. In fact, she could not remember an occasion when they had spoken an unkind word nor raised their voices in anger. Epsilon and Zeta spent most of their time in the reactor bay, while Eta and Theta looked after the food supplies and the like. She wondered how on earth they got such unusual names.

With some effort, her father stood up when he saw her. 'Good Morning, Cassi. You're just in time for our second reverse thrust. Would you like to do it?'

Her heart-rate doubled. Would she? She sat in front of Iris and ran her hands over the computer keyboard. The black viewer screen showed a mass of stars. She typed in one word - Terra. The viewpoint moved slightly and an arrow appeared to indicate a tiny pinpoint of light.

'It's either very small or still a long way away,' she observed.

'Both,' said her father with a grin. 'At this speed, we would get there in under three hours but we must slow right down to pass through the asteroid belt. This time, instead of one big reverse thrust, we will take it in stages as we approach.'

'Enlarge,' Cassi said to the monitor and the white pinpoint grew a little larger. The left screen clarified.

IDENTITY	- Terra
DIAMETER	- 12.76Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 23h 56m 4.091s
INCLINATION	- 23o 27'
DENSITY	- 5.517
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 11.18km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 1.0
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.07kg/cm2
NATURAL SATELLITES	- 1
DISTANCE	- 8.6AU >

James Duncan shook his head. 'Whatever would we do without Iris?'

'The Interactive Radar Identification System,' corrected Beta in his usual manner.

Cassi laughed. The Commander grinned. The screen bleeped. All chairs and

eyes swivelled towards it as a large, dark object blotted out the stars by its bulk.

'Good grief,' cried Cassi. 'What on earth is that? Identify!' she screamed at the monitor.

'It's Saturn,' muttered the Commander without waiting for the computer to respond. He turned to Gamma who was seated at the red control console. 'Full reverse thrust, right retro. We'll tuck in behind her.'

'No!' cried Cassi as she watched the readout. All eyes looked at her as she stared at the lettering gradually filling Iris' screen. Without looking at Gamma, she instructed: 'Emergency full ahead. Full left retro.'

'But...' began the uncertain pilot officer.

'Do it!' she said evenly without taking her eyes off the screen. 'And please do it now.'

This time, the ship did shudder as the anti-matter reactor went critical and the main retros strained to push the tail of the ship to one side. Gradually, the great planet swung across their bows as Wayfarer accelerated rapidly, plunging straight for the surface. No-one said a thing - it was already too late to change course as the cloud belt rushed up at them. All eyes were on the forward screen as the figures whirled crazily and the thrust bit hard, pushing now on the outer atmosphere of mainly Ammonia and Methane, as the nose-cone temperature rose rapidly. Suddenly, the tail flicked round as they burst into the upper atmosphere.

'She won't take much more,' cried Gamma as the ship fought for survival.

'Put it into the red,' instructed Cassi calmly. 'Go in under the rings.'

'I hope you know what the hell you're doing,' called Commander Duncan above the noise.

'Trust me,' she said with no more than a sidelong glance.

The whole bodywork seemed to flex and strain as the massive gravity pull of Saturn fought against the ship's reactor. For a long time, it seemed as though gravity had won until, suddenly, the cloud layer cleared and the Cassini Division between the main rings of Saturn was ahead.

Cassi glanced at the screen once more and then spoke to the pilot. 'You've got to get us through that gap.'

'We'll never make it at this speed,' Gamma muttered.

She turned to face him. 'We've got to.'

With alarming speed, the gap approached and, just as fast, was past. No debris battered the hull. No overheat melted them. They had survived.

'Cut Proton Drive and activate reverse thrust,' she instructed. 'And resume original trajectory.'

Gamma obeyed and the ship steadied and gradually slowed.

The Commander looked an old man as he sat down. 'That was close - much too close.'

Cassi just stared at the screen.

'And how did we come to be so near to the planet in the first place?' her father asked severely. 'How could you make such a terrible mistake?'

'But...' She was confused. 'I didn't know.'

He was angry. 'You nearly killed us all by your incompetence. I suggest you go to your cabin at once.'

With tears in her eyes, Cassi got to her feet and practically ran from the flight deck. She felt so humiliated. But where had she gone wrong? Sol was where it was supposed to be, give a degree or so on the parallax. What had happened to pull the massive Saturn away from its usual mean synodic period? Were any of the other planets out of their computed positions?

The door of her cabin opened and her father strode in. He was clearly livid. 'From now on, you had better stay off the flight deck; I cannot afford such mistakes. I told you before, this is not a simulation, it is the real thing.'

She bowed her head. 'I'm sorry.'

'Sorry? And what about disobeying my orders? What on earth possessed you to override my instructions, especially in front of the others? I think you had better spend the rest of the day in the gymnasium. I want at least three of your personal records broken before I see you again. Any disciplines will do. If this was the twentieth century, I would be thrashing the hide off you by now. Instead, I'll let you do it to yourself.'

Cassi looked down at the floor in shame.

He turned at the door. 'I'll drive this rebellious attitude out of your

system for once and for all.'

Cassi slowly undid the velcro of her pale blue overalls and let them drop to the floor. As if in a dream, she opened the door and stared into the gymnasium which had been built specially for her in one of the store rooms. Letting out a long sigh, she began her warm-up routine.

BY the time he re-entered the flight control room, Jim Duncan had calmed down a little. Had he been too hard on her? After all, she was only young. However, lives were at stake and mistakes like this could not be tolerated.

'Commander,' said Beta, sitting in front of Iris. 'I think that you had better take a look at this.'

What now? Jim raised his eyes and sauntered over to the console.

'Recall and rerun last sequence,' said Beta and the screen flickered for several seconds before stabilising. The bulk of Saturn appeared once more, creeping across the screen. 'Stop!'

The Commander looked puzzled. 'What's the problem?'

Beta looked straight at him with totally expressionless eyes. 'This is the point just before you gave your order.' He turned to face the screen. 'Begin recorded simulation.'

On the screen, the ship appeared to move towards the giant planet. Together, they watched the rerun and heard Jim Duncan's voice followed by Cassi's override.

'Cancel last instruction,' said Beta immediately and the ship's nose began to follow the Commander's instruction and pull to the right as the ship rapidly decelerated. With ease, the ship swung across the face of Saturn and curved in an arc away from the deadly rings. The technician pointed toward the simulation on the centre screen. 'The ship has missed Saturn itself but, due to the combination of drag from the planet and the centrifugal force of our turn, there is practically no room to manoeuvre.'

The Commander shrugged. 'So?'

Beta nodded towards the screen. 'Watch!'

It went blank. Jim Duncan stared at it with his mouth open. 'What happened?'

Beta leant towards the screen. 'Back and slow rerun,' he said and the ship turned once more. As darkness closed over the screen, he said: 'Pause.'

'What is it?'

Beta looked at him. 'Identify,' he said to Iris.

The screen flashed up a single word - "Atlas". There was no inflection in Beta's voice as he stated: 'Wayfarer Two is now in very small pieces all over the surface of Saturn's innermost moon.'

'Hell's teeth,' the Commander said with feeling.

For the next half-hour, they reran the sequence, simulating every possible course of action and each ended in disaster. Either the speed was too slow and they crashed onto the planet's surface or it was too great and they were pummelled to pieces trying to break through the rings. They had become trapped between Saturn and her moons.

He slowly got to his feet and placed his hand on the Flight Engineer's shoulder. 'Thank you.' He looked around the flight deck. 'See if you can find out why we got into this position in the first place.'

'Already done, Commander.'

'What?'

'Iris confirms that the data is corrupted.'

'Corrupted? But where? How?'

'The information concerning the relative positions of the stellar bodies seems to be still reliable. It is the time sequence that is wrong.'

'Time sequence? But I don't understand...'

'Neither do I, yet. Iris is working on it now.'

'Let me know when you have found the fault. And keep an eye out for Jupiter. We should be crossing her orbit in about an hour's time. By rights, she should be at perihelion distance on the opposite side of the sun. But, then, so should Saturn.'

'I will do what I can.'

The older man turned with shoulders hunched and left the flight deck. He found his daughter doing push-ups on the parallel bars.

'Seventy-five, seventy-six, seventy-seven...'

He placed his hand over hers. 'You can stop now.'

'Seventy-eight, seventy-nine,' she continued. 'Eighty.' Cassi dropped nimbly

to her feet and slowly walked into her father's open arms. She cried for a long time.

Her father held her tight. 'You knew, didn't you?'

Without speaking, the young woman nodded slightly as the tears gradually abated.

Jim looked down at her. 'You and I need to talk.'

'Wh..what about?'

'You....and me.' He draped a towel around her sweating shoulders. 'Come and sit down.' Side by side on the padded bench they sat as James Duncan placed his arm around her shoulders. 'Cassi. I have not been entirely truthful with you.'

She looked up suddenly. 'You haven't?'

He nodded. 'How old do you think you are?'

She frowned. 'I am thirty-eight years old. That's when we left Andromeda.'

He slowly shook his head. 'I left Andromeda thirty-eight years ago but you did not. You are only half that age.'

'Nineteen? Then...'

'You were not born in Andromeda.'

She frowned. 'But I don't understand.'

'Wayfarer left Terra eighty years ago. I was born there but the other crew members were born on one of the planets on the fringe of the Andromeda Galaxy.'

'I...' she began, unable to find the right words.

With his hand, he gently smoothed her hair. 'Have you not noticed that you are different from the others?'

'Of course,' she tittered. 'I am a woman.'

'Where do you think you came from?'

She shrugged. 'I don't know. Did my mother die?'

'You had no mother,' he said softly.

'No...mother....?'

'You were...created...here on Wayfarer nineteen years, three months and four days ago.'

'Then I'm a....'

He nodded. 'I'm afraid so.'

Slowly, Cassi got to her feet and wrung her hands in front of her. The black leotard she wore around ship stood out in stark contrast to her flawless pale skin which had never seen natural light from a sun. Carefully, she tied her long hair on top of her head, not from necessity but for something to do to take her mind away from the revelation with which she had suddenly been confronted. Now she knew why her reactions had always been so fast: why she saw things the others didn't. So many questions from the past began to make sense.

'Do the others know?'

'Of course. They helped me make you.'

'But, why? Why did you do it?'

'The others cannot live on Earth. The atmospheric pressure is unsuitable for them.'

'But is this not the same on board ship? Have we not simulated Earth gravity and pressure?'

The Commander shook his head sadly. 'Gravity here is half as much again as on Terra. Down on the surface, you will be stronger and fitter than their best athletes. Also, over the last year I have been gradually adjusting the internal pressure so that you are being conditioned to Earth's atmosphere. That is why both I and the others are reacting so slowly of late. In effect, we are dying so that you might live.'

She stood up. 'But, we must return to Andromeda. Then we can all live.'

Jim shook his head sadly. 'Andromeda is dead. The galaxy finally imploded into a black hole. We are the only survivors.'

'Then we must live somewhere else. Somewhere safe, for us all.'

'There is just you, Cassi. You are all our hopes for the future.'

'But how can that be? I am not normal. I am a....' She couldn't say the word.

He stood beside her and placed his hands on her smooth shoulders. 'I don't know what is left of Terra. Much can have happened in eighty years. When I left, it was a place of wars and disputes. I can only hope they have learned

their lessons by now. If not, you must teach them.'

'But, I...'

'Right from the start, you have been intensively educated with the technology of an advanced civilisation. You have learned the ways of a people who have never argued, never fought, never killed each other. You have much to offer Earth.'

She sighed a little. 'Will I look like them?'

'Just like them. No-one will know the difference once you are among them.'

'Can you not come with me?'

'I will come with you. The others must stay on board in orbit or they will die immediately, but I can return to Terra for a while.'

'Tell me.' She turned to face him. 'Why Cassiopeia?'

He grinned sheepishly. 'We came in past one of her stars.'

'Father?'

'You don't have to call me that any more.'

'I want to. I may not have been made in the usual way but I am still your child.'

'Whatever the circumstances, you will always be my little girl.'

She smiled. 'I'm glad.'

'You had better go and update your file on Iris.'

'May I?'

'Of course. The others will want to see that you are happy again. They love you, too, in their own way.'

She grasped his hand. 'Come with me.'

He shook his head. 'I must rest. Can you take us through the asteroid belt safely?'

She smiled proudly. 'Together, Iris and I can do anything.'

'Good. Wake me when we reach Mars orbit.'

She kissed his cheek. 'Good night, father.'

OPION

Jupiter was not where she should have been and neither was Mars as Cassi stared at the 6km diameter lump of battered rock which was her outer moon, Deimos.

'Are none of these planets inhabited?' she asked as Jim Duncan entered and sat down.

'I'm afraid not. The larger planets we have passed have extremely toxic atmospheres and pressures which would crush any of us to a pulp long before we reached the surface.'

She pointed at the screen. 'And Mars, this smaller one?'

'Just the opposite. After gathering data on the unmanned Viking and Observer missions, we landed three men there in twenty-ten and confirmed what we already suspected; there is very little in the way of an atmosphere and certainly not one that is in any way breathable. There is no water, no heat, no life, no nothing.'

'So Earth is the only planet with life.'

He nodded. 'The only one.' He glanced at the screens. 'Better slow right down. They won't be expecting us and might think we are invading aliens.'

As if in response, the radio speaker suddenly crackled. 'Orion Base to incoming vehicle. You are now entering Terran space. Please identify

yourself.'

The Commander smiled. 'After all these years they haven't even changed the voice of that pre-recorded warning beacon.'

Beta looked up. 'Do we respond, Commander?'

'If we don't, we'll soon see missiles launched at us.'

Beta looked puzzled. 'Missiles?'

Commander Duncan laughed. 'Of course. You never had such things in Andromeda. Missiles are a type of guided rocket which carry a warhead designed to explode on impact.'

The Andromedan looked horrified. 'They would seek to destroy us? Simply for approaching their territory?'

'I'm afraid that you have a lot to learn about humans, my friends. They can be very sensitive about strangers.'

The faceless voice came again. 'Orion Base to incoming vehicle. You are now entering Terran space. Please identify yourself.'

Jim Duncan pressed a button. 'Orion Base, this is Wayfarer Two. Do you read? Over.'

There was a long silence before another voice came. 'Please repeat your message. Over.'

'This is Commander James Duncan of the Europa Corporation space vessel Wayfarer Two. Request permission to dock.'

'Thank you, Commander Duncan. Please wait.'

The Commander straightened. 'These radio operators all sound the same. This fellow sounds just like the one Orion had when I left here all those years ago.' He smiled as he stroked his short beard. 'I wonder if it's his grandson.'

'Does Orion have many personnel?' asked Cassi.

'Quite a few. There is a permanent staff of around forty on the space station plus various crews on stopover. Luna Base is even bigger.'

Cassi frowned. 'Will it not come as a shock to them to find that you are still alive after all this time?'

'I guess it will. I had never thought about it.' He smiled at her as she sat, still in her black leotard. 'Better get dressed else all the men will be fighting over you.'

'But why?'

He placed his arm around her. 'I'll explain it all to you one day. When I was a lad, my father called it the story of the birds and the bees.'

She tilted her head slightly. 'What are these birds and bees?'

He laughed. 'It seems that a large part of your education has been inadvertently overlooked. Here you are, able to single-handedly control a full-blown anti-matter reactor and make a billion megabyte computer eat out of your hand and you've never even seen a bird.' He shook his head sadly. 'I've seriously slipped up somewhere.'

She kissed his cheek. 'I'll learn.'

He patted her bottom. 'Get dressed.'

'Orion Base to Wayfarer Two. Over,' came the voice over the air after about ten minutes.

'Commander Duncan receiving you loud and clear, Orion. What are your instructions?'

'Proceed to dock four. You will then please remain aboard your ship until a member of the station personnel can welcome you. Over and out.'

Jim shrugged. They were being very formal today. The door opened with a slight hiss and he turned and stared. Cassi stood in clean overalls with her freshly-brushed hair hanging long over her shoulders.

'Miss Cassiopeia,' said Beta formally. 'I think that you are looking very...colourful today.'

Cassi laughed. 'You're a fraud, Beta. But I love you.'

'Love? What is this love?'

'An extremely high regard for someone about whom you care very much,' Cassi quoted from memory and then laughed at the humanoid's puzzled expression.

'You had better all sit down,' said the Commander sternly. 'Docking can be a bumpy business.'

'Can I do it?' Cassi asked excitedly.

Her father stood up and moved over. 'Help yourself but don't bump Orion. It's a very sensitive piece of equipment and, if it was to get knocked out of

position and crash down onto the earth, the impact and subsequent explosion of the triple-sequence anti-matter reactor would probably make a crater the size of the United States.'

Cassi shivered. 'Nasty. I'll be careful.' As she turned the ship slowly, she spoke to Iris. 'Identify.'

IDENTITY	- ORION STATION
DIAMETER	- 0.4km
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 0.087hrs
INCLINATION	- 900
DENSITY	- VARIABLE
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- GEOSYNCHRONOUS
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 1.0
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.07kg/cm2
DISTANCE	- 000000033602AU>

The space station began to look huge to Cassi as she inched Wayfarer forward on the retro rockets as the distance counted down. '0.0000000016801AU >' the screen stated and then '0.000000000672AU >'

James Duncan held his breath at ten metres as the great shadow of Orion fell across the ship and they could see the well-lit docking area clearly as the guide lights flashed in sequence. Cassi gave a brief touch of reverse thrust at 0.00000000168AU and another at .000000000745AU. They didn't feel a thing.

'Wayfarer docked,' she said triumphantly as her father let out his breath slowly. She looked sideways at him. 'You didn't think I was going to do it, did you?'

He shook his head. 'I always manage to fully depress the hydraulic safety rams. They'll know from their old records that it wasn't me in control this time.' He nodded to the panel. 'Better lock-on to Orion else we'll drift away.'

Alpha pushed the button and a slight clunk was felt as the great hydraulic clamps fastened around the superstructure and held them fast. Through the screen, they watched the activity as men in space suits fussed around the docking area.

Jim turned to Beta. 'Shut down main reactor.'

Beta fussed over the red panel for a moment before nodding to his captain. They waited.

'Wayfarer Two,' spoke the radio. 'Prepare to receive a member of the Base Personnel.'

Father and daughter went out into the long main corridor where a flashing red light came on over the pre-stressed bulkhead to indicate that the outer door was open. The pumps hummed quietly until the red light was replaced by a green one. Almost immediately, the inner door opened and three men in space suits walked in. One unclipped his helmet and removed it.

'Commander Duncan?' he asked and Jim stepped forward a little nervously. The men shook hands. 'I am Marshal Hardy - new chief of Orion Security. The crew are just connecting up the airtight tunnel so if you would prepare to follow me to the station...'

'My crew would prefer to remain aboard Wayfarer, with your permission, Marshal. They are not used to Earth pressure and would like to stay within a compressed atmospheric environment.'

The Marshal raised his eyebrow slightly but did not object as a hiss behind him informed him that the umbilical walkway was now airtight. He bowed slightly. 'If you would follow me, Commander. I will escort you to the Admiral.'

THE space station has not changed a bit, thought Jim Duncan as he walked in the wake of the Marshal. The other security officers had been left to guard the walkway to Wayfarer and Cassi hung onto her father's arm as they followed the long corridor while men and women went about their daily business. It was all strange to the young woman. Once inside the rim, they took a lift to the top where they made their exit onto a wide platform that was covered in a rigid transparent material. Despite the soft ultra-violet light, the stars were clearly visible and, below them, a bright blue disc with white flecks scattered across its surface.

Cassi stopped and drew in her breath at the sight. 'It's simply amazing.' She pointed. 'Is that Terra down there?'

Jim nodded. 'That's good old terra firma. Seems strange to see the old girl again after all this time. For years, I thought that I would never see Earth again. Yet, here I am, home at last.'

'Are you glad?'

'I think so. Andromeda was beautiful in her own way but she never looked quite like this.'

The Marshal coughed slightly. 'If you would step this way, Commander Duncan.'

They were led through a wide doorway into a brightly-lit reception area where they sat and waited while their companion spoke to a woman at a desk.

'It's uncanny,' whispered Jim to his daughter. 'Everything looks just the same.'

Cassi looked around her. 'Perhaps they had no reason to alter things. Outside Terra's atmosphere, there would be no dust nor corrosion to damage the surfaces so they should last indefinitely.'

He leant closer. 'You, my girl, are a walking encyclopedia of useless information.'

She grinned. 'You taught me well.'

'You're cheeky, you are.'

'So I am.'

The Marshal approached and his eyes flicked from one to the other of them. 'The Admiral will see you both now.'

They rose and followed the Security Chief through a doorway into a large office which was lit by diffused lamps around the walls. In the centre of the room was a large, plastic-covered desk behind which was a man of about fifty in a red and blue uniform.

Jim Duncan stopped and drew in his breath sharply. 'Admiral Burleigh!'

The other man stood up and nodded. 'Jim.'

The Commander looked baffled as he shook the man's hand. 'But, I don't understand.'

'Don't understand what?'

'Why...why you are still here.'

The Base Admiral smiled slightly. 'I live most of my life on Orion. Surely your memory is not that bad.'

'My memory...?' He sat down and looked at Cassi who held onto his hand and squeezed it reassuringly.

'Have you forgotten so much already? They tell me that deep space has that effect on you after a while.'

'But I don't follow. After all this time...'

The other man frowned. 'Time? What are you blubbering about, man?'

Cassi tensed. She did not like this man who was making fun of her father.

'But everything's the same,' he was saying. 'Nothing's altered. You're still here.'

The Admiral laughed. 'Of course everything's the same. What did you expect? You've only been away a month.'

CASSI was dumb-struck. What kind of a trick were these people trying to pull on her father? Only been gone a month, indeed. These people were totally crazy and she said so.

'And who,' asked the Admiral pleasantly; 'Might you be?'

'I am Cassiopeia Duncan, the Commander's daughter.'

'Daughter?' His eyes were full of laughter as they looked her up and down. 'That's a new one, Jim. How did you manage to stow this young lady away with you? Tucked up in your bed?'

The Commander began to rise in anger but Cassi's hand on his shoulder was firm. Casually, she sauntered over to the desk, walked round it, and stood glaring down at the space officer who began to look worried. No-one had ever done that before.

Cassi placed a long, white finger in the centre of his chest. 'How would you like me to pick up this precious space station of yours and dump it on Mars?'

For a moment, he looked terrified and then burst out laughing. 'Where did you find this one, Jim? She's certainly got a sense of humour.'

'Cassi really is my daughter,' clarified Jim Duncan. 'She was incubated in transit.'

'Jim, you've been mixing too much helium in your air. I suggest you have the doc take a look at you and then have a rest while I report in to Europa Control. I somehow don't think the Director is going to like the fact that you have returned so soon without completing your mission but it's not my place to say anything.' His eyes returned to the young woman and he shook his head. 'And I don't know what he will say about your taking a bit of crumpet with you on the trip.'

'But you don't understand.'

Cassi turned to her father. 'They don't want to understand. You were right. Earthmen are very strange indeed.'

It was the Admiral's turn to be puzzled at her terminology, but he said no more as father and daughter left the room.

THE quarters they were assigned were on the spartan side but, nevertheless, comfortable. Cassi couldn't help but notice how she got funny looks wherever they went. Jim Duncan sat on the edge of the bed with his head in his hands as his daughter fetched him a drink of water. He sipped it slowly.

'There's a problem, isn't there?' she asked softly.

'There is, but I'm not sure what. I know I've been away for eighty years and yet, here I am, back on Orion only a month after I left. I don't understand any of it.'

Cassi sat down beside him. 'It might explain why the planets were all out of sequence. Cast your mind back to when you left Terra. Were they in roughly the same position when you passed them going out?'

He thought for a moment and then looked up. 'Not roughly: the positions exactly fit the period of my departure.' He shook his head. 'But it's all far too ridiculous.'

'Is it?'

He frowned. 'What are you suggesting?'

Cassi shrugged. 'I'm not. I have no explanation for what has happened. I only know that whatever these people say, it is you I believe.'

He took Cassi's hand in his own. 'You are very loyal.'

'I have good reason to believe you are telling the truth.'

'What convinces you?'

'Me. I know who I am, and I know that I have lived for more than a month, and that is good enough for me. It has to be they who are mistaken.'

'Cassi. You've spent too much time with Iris. You have the logical mind of a computer.'

'Is that a compliment?'

'In your case, yes. Cassi, I...'

She kissed his cheek. 'You don't need to say a word. I believe you.'

'But there are things you have to know. Things about what is likely to happen.'

'Happen? What do you mean?'

'I'm not sure myself, I'm so confused by the whole thing. I just have this dreadful feeling that, for some reason I can't explain, everything is going wrong and I have not prepared you for this.'

'What can happen?'

'I don't know. I just know you are going to need every bit of the skill you have gained simply to survive. Here I was thinking I would return as a hero but, suddenly, I find myself in some kind of trouble and, worse, I don't know why.'

'They must believe you in time. There is so much proof.'

'Proof is only proof to those who want to believe. I found out a long time ago at college that if someone wants to believe in something or other, he will do so regardless of what the established facts might prove one way or the other. Why, only forty years ago, men thought Mars had canals and Jupiter and Saturn were solid objects. How wrong they were.'

'Were those ideas not simply proposed as theories?'

'If they had been, it wouldn't have been so bad. No, the dreamers presented their theories as fact. They wanted to believe so... it became truth to them.'

'It's surely not as bad as all that.'

He shrugged. 'Computers base their decisions on what they are told - what data is imputed. People, however, generally believe what they want to believe.'

'Does that mean that they will think you are a liar?'

'Possibly.'

'How will they explain my presence?'

'I don't know, but I'm sure someone will think of something, something to your detriment. It may be better if you disappear if you get the chance.'

'Disappear? You mean, leave you?'

'It may be the best way for us all.'

She held her head high. 'I won't do that. You are my father.'

'Cassi, I'm not trying to persuade you to go. All I am saying is that, if the time comes and it seems the best thing to do, then do it. I will understand that you will have had good reason.'

She touched his face gently. 'I love you, father.'

FOR the rest of that day, they were not disturbed except to be brought food by an android in the presence of two security guards. In between times, the door remained firmly locked. As they settled down to rest, the door opened once more.

'Commander Duncan,' said the Marshal as he entered. 'I have orders to escort you safely to Europa Control. If you would please follow me.'

Jim stood up. 'My daughter...'

'The girl will come to Earth also. She faces the serious charge of stowing away on board your ship.'

'And am I to presume that I am also under arrest?'

'Most certainly.'

Jim frowned. 'On what charge?'

'You are to be charged with the wilful murder of the rest of your original crew.'

ΕΑΡΤΗΦΑΛΛ

As if in a daze, Commander Duncan was escorted from the room, down the corridor to the flight bay, and thence to the waiting Earth Shuttle. Cassi did not say a word as she was marched along behind her father and then firmly strapped onto a couch in a separate compartment. It was all very odd and, as the shuttle dropped away from Orion and began its descent, she found she was becoming inwardly disturbed at the way two of the men were looking at her and

muttering between themselves. Now and again, one would point at her and they would burst out laughing. Anchored to the flight couch, she had no way of defending herself should they choose to attack her in some way so she decided to ignore them and simply stared at the ceiling. What a primitive vessel, she concluded as her eyes ran over the stress bars and reinforced panels in the hold. Wayfarer had a much more up-to-date design. With a sudden doubt in her mind, she wondered if, in fact, the differences were due to modern human technology or to Andromedan modifications prior to its return.

The ride became bumpy as the shuttle entered the atmosphere and the internal temperature began to rise. Perspiration broke out all over her body but, with a sideways glance, she noticed that the other men were experiencing similar discomfort and were not alarmed. So she relaxed. After some indiscernible time period, the buffeting ceased and the shuttle went into a glide and finally there was a bump and they were down. Gradually, the shuttle rolled to a standstill as the two men unbuckled their belts and stood up.

One strolled over to Cassi. 'I think I could tolerate a month in outer space with you.' She squirmed as he reached out to touch her. 'Lucky old Jim Duncan, eh?'

She was saved by the Marshal. There was a metallic click as he entered and pointed a dark-coloured metal object at the man. She surmised it was a weapon of some sort because it had a small hole in one end which she assumed released some kind of projectile. Whatever it was, it made the other man stop what he was about to do and look very frightened.

'Don't even think about it, Girman. Miss Duncan is a state witness until the Director decides otherwise. You will do well to remember that.'

The man he had called Girman quickly drew back his hand and practically ran for the hatch as Cassi let her breath out with a slow hiss. She had no idea what the man had been about to do to her but she didn't like it. Were all Earthmen like this? Is this what her father had tried to warn her about?

'I'm sorry about that,' said the Marshal as he unbuckled her restraining straps and allowed her to swing her legs to the deck.

She wobbled slightly due to the unfamiliar gravity, so he took her arm and guided her to the hatch. The yellowish light in the sky which she knew had to be Sol shone brightly as she stepped from the shuttle, although the air felt very cold on her face and hands. She looked around her and, to her surprise, there seemed to be no visible protection from meteorite attacks. On the plus side, she could see no impact craters so she concluded they were relatively safe for the time being.

'This way,' guided the Marshal and the grey ground felt hard under her feet as she was led to some kind of wheeled vehicle with windows. Seated inside with her father in another of these strange modes of transport, Cassi winced as the carriage made a roaring sound and was then driven towards one of the odd-looking structures in the distance.

As they drove along, she noticed that the road was bordered by largish areas containing some kind of green growth which was obviously kept artificially short. To the left of this green area was a low barrier wall beyond which was a flat, blue element which she surmised was water in a very large quantity indeed. It stretched as far as the eye could see, so she concluded they had touched down on the edge of one of the great land masses her father had called continents. Out near the horizon, she could see black spots which had to be floating vessels. The car pulled up outside the building and the door was opened. She looked back and saw that her father was getting out of the other car and she smiled to him.

'Step this way, please,' commanded the Marshal and they were led towards the building. Instead of being taken inside, they were escorted around to the rear where another kind of vehicle waited. It had a glass front with a long tail and a big rotor fitted on top. Some kind of primitive flying machine, Cassi concluded as she was pushed inside and instructed to fasten her seat belt. Having no option but to obey, she did as she was told. With a terrible whining noise, the helicopter slowly rose into the air and then headed out over the sea.

After about twenty minutes of skimming just above the surface, Cassi saw land ahead. Like the continent they had just left, it was low and flat with what looked like a wide river estuary in front of them. The difference was that this land was completely white, and the ribbon of water below looked

black and ominous by comparison. They followed this narrowing strip of waterway for another ten minutes until she could see a dark patch ahead.

'That is the city of London,' shouted her father above the noise of the rotors.

'It looks big,' she called back. 'Do many people live here?'

'Not any more. The sea level rose at the end of the last century and most people had to be relocated in either the North of Britannia or on the mainland. London is now mainly offices and warehousing.

'Is that where we are going now?'

'I expect so. The offices of the Corporation are just outside the city in a place called Harrow.'

The Marshal interrupted. 'I have instructions to take you straight to the Europa headquarters at Oxford. He wishes to speak to you personally before word officially gets around of your premature return.'

Cassi noted that her father gave no argument by way of reply so she held her own tongue as the helicopter once more passed over a brilliant white landscape. Eventually, a large estate came into sight with a collection of squat buildings and an area of cleared level ground towards which they headed. Upon landing they were escorted into the house, fed and then allocated separate rooms and, for the first time, Cassi knew what loneliness felt like. The window of her room looked out over rolling hills and, despite her poor spirits, she was filled with a kind of wonderment at all she had seen in so short a time. Her father had told her of many things but none of the descriptions were up to the reality as she simply stared out of the window.

As the disc of Sol lowered in the sky, a knock came at the door and it opened. 'When you are ready,' said Marshal Hardy.

Cassi nodded and walked towards him but she had not yet adapted to the difference in gravity. By the door, she tottered and would have fallen but for the Marshal's steadying arm. He frowned. Something was happening that was beyond his comprehension.

'SO this is the young lady I've been hearing so much about,' greeted the Director pleasantly as Cassi was shown into a large room. Carefully, she sat down at a large polished table opposite her father at whom she smiled as half a dozen others came and were also seated.

The Director cleared his throat. 'Ladies and gentlemen. As you all know, I have called this unofficial meeting because of the early return of Commander Duncan and the somewhat unusual report from Admiral Burleigh.' He looked at the Commander. 'You must forgive our haste in bringing you both here, Jim. I wanted to find out the truth of the matter before the press got wind of it.'

Jim nodded. 'I understand, sir.'

The Director addressed the room in general as Cassi looked around at the odd assortment of personnel - military, civilian, scientific. 'The Space programme has had a bad enough reputation since the Wayfarer One disaster without further tarnishing its image unnecessarily.'

There was a general muttering before the Director faced the space traveller once more. 'This is not a court of law, Jim, so no judgement can be made nor sentence passed. It is simply an unofficial preliminary enquiry into what has happened. I have made sure all of my staff are present so a consensus can be attained. I think you know most of them.'

Jim Duncan glanced around the table and nodded.

'However, in view of the unusual nature of the circumstances, I have also invited Monsieur Monier of Interpol so he can listen to what you have to say.'

A man with a moustache stood up and nodded towards Jim. 'Monsieur Duncan, you do not have to say a word of reply at this stage. However, I must caution you that what you do say will be recorded and, if charges are to be formally brought, the information could be used in evidence against you.'

The Commander smiled at him. 'I understand, Inspector. I will tell you the complete truth and answer your questions as fully as I am able.'

The Director's secretary switched on the recorder. 'Informal hearing. Commander James Duncan. Twenty-third of January - Twenty-twenty-one.'

'First of all,' said the Director. 'For the sake of those present who are not entirely conversant with the Wayfarer programme to date, I have asked Professor Heinrich Akherd from the Europa Space Institute to fill us all in

with the background.' He looked at a middle-aged man with beard and glasses who stood up in front of them.

'Thank you, Herr Director.' He looked around at the faces who watched him with interest. 'I will not go to the very beginning of space travel but begin just forty-two years ago when I was just a boy in short trousers.'

A titter went around the room at the thought of such a learned man in a child's attire.

'Following several reasonably successful manned missions to the moon fifty years ago, as well as the Mariner and Viking unmanned flights to Venus and Mars respectively, the North American Aeronautical and Space Administration launched Pioneers Ten and Eleven to closely observe the larger planets. As technology improved, they also launched the two Voyager craft to pass close by and photograph Jupiter, Saturn, Uranus and Neptune along with their relevant moons. Voyager One was launched atop a Titan Centaur Six from complex forty-one at precisely eight fifty-six on the morning of September fifth nineteen-seventy-seven to follow Voyager Two which had already been launched on the twenty-second of August.'

'Two before One?' asked a balding man who looked like an accountant.

'A last minute change due to a fault that was rectified in time. Voyager One was the more important craft because of its longer journey.'

The other man nodded, not at all convinced. 'I see.'

'Fifteen months later, Voyager One passed Jupiter and sent back pictures of the planet and several of her moons which changed many of our existing opinions as to the make-up of the planet's atmosphere. It then went on to Saturn.'

He walked around the room and every eye watched him, even those who already knew these relatively well-known details from the history books.

'In August nineteen-eighty, Voyager approached Saturn and sent back many pictures which answered a great number of our questions. Unfortunately, for as many answers as were found, twice as many new questions were raised. What was the specific nature of the rings? Was the atmosphere of the planet really on the move at a thousand miles per hour? There was no way of confirming these details by remote cameras.'

'What was the problem?'

'The resolution of the pictures was good despite the distance but not adequate enough for serious research. By the January of nineteen-eighty-six, similar questions had been raised concerning Uranus and, three-and-one-half years on, concerning Neptune. As you know, only some of these questions have been answered by the later Galileo Mission to Jupiter and by the recent Cassini Mission to Saturn.'

'Why were these missions so important, Professor?' asked a dark-haired woman with glasses who was seated at the far end of the table.

He smiled for the first time. 'Comrade Ralentov, your own people at that time saw the need for space observation. Was it not your own scientists who designed Orion? The problem was, ladies and gentlemen, that these planets were clearly undergoing some kind of change. Ever since the Shoemaker-Levy impacts of nineteen ninety-four, Jupiter's cloud belts have been undergoing considerable change. The Solar system is held in a very delicate balance. A small change as far away as Jupiter or Saturn could have grave effects on our own capabilities of survival.'

'But why?' asked one.

'Because, among other things, of the effects of the comets. Comet Halley, for one, is partly held in its wildly eccentric orbit by the outer planets and so was Swift/Tuttle which caused so much unexpected damage last century. Increase or decrease the magnetic pull of one or more of these and life on earth could be seriously threatened.'

'These doubts were not recorded at the time of the Voyager missions were they?' argued an older woman. 'They were kept from us. Why?'

The Professor shrugged. 'I was just a student at the time. However, on reviewing the data it seems the significance of many of these anomalies was not realised immediately. It was only when a full data analysis could be made that it became urgent to progress further.'

'Hence the manned flights.'

He nodded. 'Hence the manned flights. It was essential, if we were to gain any detailed information that, firstly, the details should be recorded live,

and that meant greater control than we could achieve remotely, and also it would be necessary to bring back the acquired data.'

'Was that not a risk? Sending men so far from earth?'

'It was indeed. And a great deal of discussion took place before the decision was made. It was the total disappearance of Jupiter's red spot that made up our minds for us. We had to go and we had to go as soon as possible.'

'Then why the delay until recently?'

'Several reasons. Firstly, we had no space craft capable of making the journey. And, secondly, we wanted to visit all the planets Voyager had passed by, and they were not to be in the right alignment for a long time afterwards.'

'How long?'

He shrugged. 'Many years. NASA visited Jupiter and Saturn on several occasions between nineteen eighty-nine and nineteen-ninety-seven, with the Galileo craft among others, but little attention was given to the outer major planets. It was not going to be until twenty-ninety-six before the ideal conditions were going to come again.'

'Why is that, Professor?'

'Because of our propulsion limitations. We could not carry a lot of fuel so we needed the gravitational pull of the larger planets to help the craft along.'

'I don't follow.'

'Perhaps I can help,' said a younger man.

The Director introduced him. 'Doctor Hans Bartek of the Europa Propulsion unit.'

'Thank you, sir.' He removed his spectacles. 'As many of you know, my speciality is nuclear rocket motors and it was my late father who designed the Proton Drive for the Wayfarer Craft. When a vessel is in deep space, the rocket, any kind of rocket, has a somewhat limited effect. It has little to push against, you understand - no atmosphere once it leaves Earth. It is therefore, by its very nature, a relatively inefficient means of propulsion. However, it was the best we had at the time. Therefore, it was necessary to utilise a gravity-assist from the larger planets.'

'Where did your Proton Drive come in, Doctor?'

'It would take a month to describe the actual anti-matter particle generation procedure so, if you would take my word for it, believe me when I say we now had the means to propel a ship a good deal faster than ever before. Its only limitations were the planets it could use to swing around.'

'With Doctor Bartek's new drive,' continued the Professor. 'Alternatives became possible and we re-examined our planetary forecasts. If we could, by means of the Proton Drive, double the speed of the spacecraft, a situation would arise in twenty-twenty when the planets would be in a suitable alignment. Not only that, a return trip would also be possible.'

'How?' asked the accountant.

'Because Wayfarer could launch towards Mars and then turn for Jupiter. Jupiter's pull could be utilised to swing the craft on to Saturn. After that, it could by-pass the orbit of Uranus and go right on to Neptune. With skill, it would be possible to turn through seventy-six degrees and head back in towards Uranus. They would then be heading back home.'

'And you would expect Uranus to give the craft enough impetus to return to Earth.'

He nodded. 'That was the theory.'

'Then what was the problem?'

'Such a craft could not be launched from Earth.'

'Why not?'

'Insufficient mass to escape-velocity co-efficient.'

A big uniformed man leant forward. 'You mean the thing was too darn big.'

The Professor smiled. 'Precisely, General Phillips. That's what I said.'

Another titter went right around the room. The Director restored order. 'How did you overcome the problem?'

'We had already started on building Luna Base and our Soviet allies had begun Orion Station so we decided to launch from space. We took pieces of the ships to Luna for pre-fabrication and these larger units were then simply assembled alongside Orion in geostationary orbit over the Atlantic. We built two ships so that if one failed, the other could be utilised. They had to be

big, you see. Apart from the crew, there was a need for storage space and areas in which to work. They could be in space for up to fifteen years, so adequate provisions had to be made for fresh food and the like.'

A little man stood up. 'Professor Akherd. Earlier, Doctor Bartek told us that it was often difficult to gain adequate thrust in outer space. How, therefore, did you get Wayfarer on the move in the first place?'

'The answer came to us quite by accident. One of the shuttles ferrying equipment to Orion went haywire upon re-entry. Instead of gliding back to Europoort, its trajectory was too high and it started to skim across the top of the atmosphere. Several times, it bounced and completely encircled the earth. By the time it got back to its original position, it was travelling at over one-hundred-thousand kilometres per hour, more than double the cruise speed of Voyager.'

'What happened?'

'Sadly, it crashed onto the Moon in an attempt to prevent itself being flung into space. All the crew were killed.'

'Was it such a dangerous manoeuvre?'

'Not particularly. It was just that no-one was ready for it to happen.'

'So how did you launch Wayfarer?'

Hans Bartek spoke. 'On the sixteenth of March last year, Commander Henry Markham and a crew of nine left Orion under normal power and dived towards the Earth's atmosphere. The outer shell had been specially treated so it could stand the heat of re-entry and it accelerated rapidly. With the Proton drive thrusting against the atmosphere, it reached a phenomenal speed.'

'Then what happened?'

'It disappeared. There was no debris, no energy surge, nothing. Wayfarer One simply went away.'

'Have you any theories, Professor?'

'It was assumed that Wayfarer One had crashed on Mars or one of her moons. It was uncanny.'

'I know what happened to it,' said Commander James Duncan.

The room fell silent and stayed that way for a very long time as the veteran pilot got slowly to his feet. 'I didn't know at the time but I do now.'

'What is it?'

'Wayfarer One is still out there, somewhere, drifting helplessly.'

'But how do you know? Why didn't we see it?'

'Because it was going too fast.'

'But we would still have seen it on radar.'

'I doubt it. Moving away from Earth far above light speed, it would be completely invisible.'

Silence reigned again.

'Your Proton Drive is very efficient, Doctor Bartek. Under the right conditions, it can generate incredible speeds.'

'But surely.... The speed of light?'

Jim smiled. 'One billion kilometres per hour? Not so fast really. If Commander Markham managed to dodge the major planets, Wayfarer One would be completely out of the Solar System in under six hours.'

'How do you know this?' asked the Russian diplomat carefully.

Jim sighed. 'Because, Comrade Ralentov, that is the speed which my own ship, Wayfarer Two, achieved precisely seventeen minutes and thirty seconds after its launch on the twenty-first of December Twenty-twenty - just one month ago.'

ΔEBATE

The room was silent for a long time as everyone stared at the Commander, his own daughter included. *Was he mad*, she thought?

'Would you care to enlighten us, Commander Duncan?' asked one of the research team.

'I would,' Jim agreed. 'But first of all, Professor Akherd, may I ask what happened, from Earth's point of view, after Wayfarer Two was launched?'

The scientist shrugged. 'The same thing. Your ship simply disappeared from the screens. The matter was hushed up for a while but, eventually, the secret got out and you were assumed lost with all hands. Imagine our surprise when, a month later, you arrive from the opposite direction.'

'Professor,' interrupted Doctor Bartek. 'I think you may need to explain the differences between the Wayfarer One mission and the Wayfarer Two mission. I think it is relevant at this stage.'

'Very well. As I have already stated, Wayfarer One used Mars as its first point of reference. Nine months later, Earth and Mars were no longer in the same relative positions. Instead, Venus lay almost in the direct path between Earth and Jupiter.'

A younger man spoke up. 'How is that possible? Venus is on the solar side of Earth.'

The Professor smiled. 'Quite right, Peter. However, like the Galileo Mission of 1995, to catch the correct Jupiter/Saturn alignment, Wayfarer would have to start off heading on a solar-bound tangent which was to take it close to Venus. We hoped to gain pictures as Wayfarer passed by but the ship went off our screens before she reached the Venus orbit. Some garbled data was received a few hours later but was afterwards discounted as unconfirmed.'

The Director cleared his throat once more. 'Perhaps you would care to enlighten us now, Commander Duncan. What, precisely, happened?'

Jim stepped out from behind his chair and stood for a long time looking out of the window at the snow which had again begun to fall before he spoke. When he did, he had everyone's attention. 'Initially, the launch went according to plan. Clamps were released, retros fired and we began to fall towards the surface under minimum power. If Wayfarer One had crashed, it was imperative for us to avoid a repetition.'

The Director smiled. 'We understand, Jim. Go on.'

'Four minutes after leaving stationary orbit, we entered the Earth's atmosphere and trimmed to overshoot by the required safety gap. At zero plus nine, we fired the main Proton Drive and accelerated across the upper atmosphere at half speed, turning to follow the mesospheric contour as instructed. At eleven minutes precisely, the Drive went to full thrust and we began to pull away towards the sun. It was clear, even then, that we were going much faster than anticipated. At fourteen minutes, we were picked up by the sun's own gravity field and the speed increased even further. At zero plus seventeen and a half minutes, we passed Venus and actually skimmed her atmosphere, giving the motors a further thrust platform. We were headed virtually straight for the sun under full power on a pre-set programme I could not override and it was then I realised we had reached the speed of light.' Slowly, he turned back towards the table and every eye was upon him.

'We are talking fiction here,' accused the General. 'How in tarnation could you break light speed? Einstein's Law of Relativity states that such an eventuality is simply not possible.'

'Theory,' said a small voice.

Every eye switched to Cassi. 'Theory of Relativity,' she emphasised quietly but confidently.

The senior United-Forces man leant forward aggressively. 'What the hell does a kid like you know about it?'

Cassi looked straight up at him. 'Albert Einstein, along with others, proposed that the mass loss of a particle is precisely equal to the resulting energy divided by the speed of light squared.'

'Yes, we know that.'

She pulled back her shoulders. 'They were wrong.'

The Professor frowned and the General gaped. 'Wrong?'

'Einstein hadn't anticipated that the resulting dilation co-efficient of the

diffused mass is not always directly proportional to the relative compound velocity of the initial energy release at source.'

If a pin had dropped at that moment, they would have heard it on Luna as a broad grin slowly widened across her father's face.

It was Cassi herself who broke the silence. 'Einstein had also forgotten Newton's second law which showed that the mass of an object varies with its speed. He proved that the force applied to a body is in the direction of the acceleration imparted to the body and is equal to the mass of the body times its acceleration.'

As the General gaped, the Professor slowly walked right around the table until he was directly behind Cassi's chair. 'Tell me, mein kinder. According to Bode's Law, at what distance is the planet Neptune from the sun?'

Cassi opened the flap of her overall and took out a pocket calculator. After a few seconds of finger exercise she smiled. 'Johann Elert Bode followed the guidelines of Titius in calculating the relative distances of all the planets within the solar system. Titius had said that Neptune would be...' She consulted the display. '...5,800,599,634.098 kilometres from the sun. However, Bode found that his older colleague had been mistaken in the case of Neptune because even at aphelion distance, it is only 4,535,908,329.62 kilometres from Sol. At the perihelion of its orbital trajectory, it is a mere 4,458,115,474.1 kilometres along its sidereal period of 164.90465 Earth years.'

The Professor stared down at her for a long time. 'What is the mean synodic period of her largest moon?'

Cassi touched the buttons again and then smiled as she turned to face him. 'Triton's retrograde lunar month is five days, twenty-one hours, three minutes and twenty-nine point eight four zero nine seconds in length.'

Give him his due, Professor Akherd didn't even blink. Instead, he just stared into Cassi's blue eyes.

'Gentlemen,' he said to the room in general without moving his head. 'I think we had better listen very carefully to what Commander Duncan and his daughter have to say to us.'

Slowly, he walked back around the room and sat down, his eyes never leaving Cassi's for a second.

Jim Duncan started to speak once more. 'We tried to shut down the reactor but it was still being controlled by the main guidance computer on Mount Aigoual. In fact, we were way outside the orbit of Uranus before I managed to override it and regain manual control, but in the meantime, we had covered almost three million kilometres in just over two hours.'

'I don't believe it,' said one.

The Commander looked at him. 'You ain't heard nothing yet.'

'Go on, Jim,' prompted the Director impatiently.

'I had gained access to the internal systems but, due to a fault in the energy-transfer system, I could not shut down the main anti-matter reactor. I could adjust the direction of Wayfarer to some degree but still had no control over its speed. I tried to turn at Neptune as originally planned but it just made matters worse by giving the drive a further atmosphere to bite on. In less than twelve hours, we were well outside the Solar System and still accelerating rapidly.'

'What was the condition of the crew?' asked the team psychologist.

'Most realised what was happening and some began to panic. Others fought amongst themselves. Home was receding rapidly in the rear screens and there seemed to be no letup in the Proton Drive's thrust.'

'What were your own feelings at this time?'

'Mixed. I was elated the drive had worked so well and we were covering ground that was totally unexplored. And yet, I was also growing more and more apprehensive concerning the steadily decreasing possibility of a safe return to Earth.'

'What was the supply situation?'

'Not bad at that stage, but I gave orders to ration both food and water and that caused considerable friction amongst the crew.'

'And the state of health of the others?'

'Two died en route to Andromeda.'

'Where?' asked one.

'What we used to call the Great Nebula,' said the Professor. 'M31 in the main catalogue - spiral Galaxy in the Constellation of Andromeda. Two-point-

two million light years away.'

The General gaped. 'You mean...?'

The Professor nodded. 'At the speed of light, it would take over two million years to get there.'

'And the same to get back?'

'Exactly.'

The General faced the Commander. 'And you got there in how many years?'

'Thirty-seven.'

'But that's....' he calculated.

Cassi saved him the trouble. 'Eighty-one thousand and eighty-one point zero eight one times the speed of light.' She looked around the room. 'An average speed of 86,867,026,439.2 kilometres per hour.'

The General dropped his own calculator. The Commander grinned. the Director swallowed. The Psychologist stared. The Professor smiled. 'The Tachyon Factor.'

'What?'

'Have you never heard of the Dirac constant?'

'Never.'

Cassi spoke. 'Equal to the Planck constant divided by 2 times pi. Paul Adrian Dirac discovered that it has a value of 1.0544 plus or minus 0.0003 times ten to the power of minus thirty-four joule seconds.'

The General sneered. 'That's gibberish.'

'That,' contradicted the designer of the Proton Drive: 'Is higher quantum mechanics.'

The Director spoke again. 'And where were you, young lady, while all this was happening?'

She frowned. 'I was not born.'

There was a long silence which the Commander broke. 'By this time, there were just seven of the crew left other than myself. The motor had long since stopped burning but we were still running across the void under inertia. There was nothing to stop us. Until Andromeda, that is.'

'Is there life on Andromeda?'

'There was.'

'Human?'

He nodded. 'Similar. The main difference was that their life-span was a lot longer.'

'You keep saying "was".'

'The galaxy finally started to implode into a black hole. They all died but eight.'

'Eight?'

'The crew now on board Wayfarer.'

'They are Andromedans?' said several in unison.

Jim nodded. 'Of course.'

The inspector of Interpol interrupted. 'Let me get this straight. You say that you left Earth a month ago with a crew of nine and have just returned with a crew complement of the same number?'

'That's right.'

'And they are alive and well?'

'Perfectly.'

He stood up. 'I just don't swallow all this junk about light speed and Anrdo...whatever you said. It sounds to me as if someone is trying to make an ass of the process of law.'

'But the original crew did die. Of the ones who survived with me, three more were killed when we crash-landed on Mythos.'

The Director looked puzzled. 'Mythos?'

'One of four planets around a middle-sequence sun at the outer edge of the galaxy. The only four which contained life as we know it.'

'I see. And these eight men on board Wayfarer are from this Mythos?'

'Yes, sir.'

'General Phillips is right, Jim. This is beginning to sound a little like science fiction.'

A murmuring broke out around the room so the Director stood up. 'Ladies and gentlemen, I suggest we take a break for some supper. It looks from the weather as if we are going to be here for some while so feel free to use whatever facilities you need. We will reconvene in one hour.'

GROUPS formed immediately. Cassi and Professor Akherd formed one, her father and the Director another. The remainder went into small huddles around the building. The Inspector wandered around, alone and confused, while the Marshal kept a watchful eye on everyone. The meal was a simple buffet served in the main hall, but it was a delight to Cassi who had neither seen nor tasted so many different kinds of food before in all her life. With baffled Professor in tow, she tried something of everything. Eventually, they were asked to reassemble.

The Director coughed to gain attention. 'You have now all had chance to discuss the matter amongst yourselves. I realise that Commander Duncan will still have a lot to tell us about life on Andromeda and how he managed to get back to Earth but I feel we have heard enough for now to gain an initial reaction from you all. Professor Akherd, would you start, please.'

The Professor stood up. 'I don't know about the part concerning the journeys. Among the radio galaxies, superluminal speeds have been observed for thirty years or more. However, up to now, we have always maintained that there is no artificial motion which exceeds the stable speed of light. However, that is mainly because of our relatively limited knowledge of astrophysics.'

'So Miss Duncan could be right.'

The Professor nodded. 'One thing is certain, at only forty percent of light speed some measurable time variance does occur but, up to now, it has always been dilatory.'

'How do you mean, Professor?'

'In all the experiments, time moved faster on Earth than in space. However, here we are being confronted with a situation where time has moved at an alarming rate in space while it has almost stood still on Earth. If we are to believe Commander Duncan, the time differential is almost three thousand to one.'

'But what if the Wayfarers didn't reach light speed?'

'Then the figures get worse. At mean light speed, we are talking... over seventy million to one.'

'Is such a thing really possible?'

'During my short life and career, I have very quickly learned to remove the word impossible from my vocabulary. However, many things are unlikely and I think most of us agree that this is one of them.'

'Unlikely is not the word,' said the General. 'None of this has happened at all. It is all one grand conspiracy to justify the continuance of the space exploration programme.'

'I disagree,' stated a man who had as yet not spoken. 'The converse is the truth. You have been against this programme from the beginning, General Phillips. I suggest that you have pre-arranged this whole matter to discredit our attempts to reach and observe the planets.'

'Ridiculous, man. I know I have been against it but I would not stoop this low...'

'Then what about that fuss over Wayfarer One last year? The ship had barely gone off the screens before you were screaming blue murder about inefficiency and disaster.'

Another voice interrupted. 'Gentlemen. Let us face a third possibility. If I understand it correctly, there are presently eight aliens on board Wayfarer at this moment.' He looked at the Commander. 'Is this true?'

'It is.'

'And they have an intelligence as great as our own?'

Jim nodded. 'If not greater.'

'And they are now in possession of an anti-matter reactor not a stone's throw from Earth.'

The whole room became silent at the implications.

'I strongly recommend, gentlemen, that we keep a very close eye on them.'

'Already done,' spoke the Marshal for the first time. 'Wayfarer is locked on to Orion and no-one can enter or leave the ship without my permission.'

'So what do we do with them?'

'Look,' said the General. 'We're now assuming that all this bull about a long journey to Andromeda is true.'

'What is the consensus of opinion on that?' asked the Director.

'I think we are being had,' said the General. 'All this rubbish about space flights to Andromeda.'

'The Andromeda Burn,' said the Professor quietly.

'What?'

'The Andromeda Burn. Did it happen or did it not?'

'It didn't. It's really very simple. The original nine crew members were taken off Wayfarer somewhere just outside of our scanner range and these strange-looking people substituted in their place.'

'And the girl?'

'Sent along to...' He leered. '...Entertain.'

'And her knowledge?'

'Read from books.'

The Professor's eyebrows raised slightly at the ignorance of such a highly-esteemed man. 'Then what do you propose has happened over the last month?'

'With a beauty like that on board? What a ridiculous question.'

'You are suggesting something improper has taken place? With our approval?'

'Why not ask her?'

The Director turned to Cassi. 'Miss Duncan, if I might still call you that. Do you mind if I ask you what might be an embarrassing question?'

Cassi held her head high. 'Not at all.'

'During your space flight, have you ever slept with the man you have referred to as your father?'

The room fell silent once more as every eye focussed on the young girl. She looked around at them all before facing the General. 'Of course I have.'

Uproar broke out and it took the Director several minutes to regain peace as Jim held his head in his hands.

'How many times?' he persevered.

She shrugged. 'Why dozens of times.' *What a strange question, she thought to herself.*

He ignored the hubbub. 'And the others? Have you been slept with any of the others?'

Cassi nodded. 'All of them at some time or other.'

'Let me get this straight. You have slept with every single member of the crew of Wayfarer including Commander Duncan. How many times in total?'

She looked utterly confused. 'I have no idea.'

The General leant forward in his chair. 'Just confine yourself to the last month. In thirty-two days, how many times have you been to bed with one or other of the men on board Wayfarer?'

She looked around at all the faces. 'I have slept alone a couple of times.'

The room was full of mixed anger and laughter as Cassi tried to think of what she had said which was wrong. She glanced at her father who looked ill.

The General was ecstatic. 'I suggest that we get these "Andromedans" down from Wayfarer as soon as possible and seriously interrogate them. We'll soon find out the truth then.'

'You cannot do that,' said Cassi suddenly.

'Ah, my dear, but we can.'

'But they will die. They are not yet adapted to Earth's atmospheric pressure.'

'I'm afraid we don't believe you.'

'What about quarantine?' asked the Commander quickly in an attempt to delay the inevitable.

The General sneered. 'After only a month? Come of it, Commander. I say we get them down now and find out what the hell this is all about, once and for all.'

The Director looked around the room. 'Any further objections?'

Other than those of Cassi and her father, there were none. The Director picked up the telephone and the order was given.

The Marshal, who was watching Cassi closely at the time, saw her collapse and rushed to her side. 'Let her have air.'

As Cassi began to recover, a number of disjointed voices reached her as if echoing through a thick fog.

'What's wrong with her?'

'She fainted.'

'Realised that the truth was about to come out, I expect.'

'Huh! Proves she's guilty.'

'And the Commander?'

'Of course. They're both in it together.'

'What a complicated plot just to prolong the space programme.'

'Or to shorten it.'

'Is there any truth in it, do you reckon?'

'Highly unlikely.'

Gradually, Cassi's senses returned and she sat up and faced the Marshal.

'You can't bring them down to Earth. I tell you, they'll all die.'

'It's too late, Miss Duncan. Here, drink this.'

The liquid scorched her throat as she swallowed but, after a few moments, she felt better. The Commander stood beside her. 'Father? Don't let them do it.'

He sighed. 'I have no choice. It is out of my hands now. You were right, we should not have come here.'

The Director regained their attention. 'If I might make a suggestion. Unless there are any pressing questions, I recommend that we all get some rest. We can fly to the limits of the Solar System but are unable to drive through snow, so I offer you all my home for the night. Marshal Hardy, would you ensure that the Commander and his daughter are looked after?'

One by one, they filed out until only the Professor and the Director remained.

'Well?' said the Director without preamble.

Professor Akherd leant forward. 'I see only two possible explanations.'

'Yes?'

'Either this is a very well thought-out plot, motive as yet unknown, in which Commander Duncan and the girl are totally involved or...'

'Yes?'

'Or they are telling the truth.'

'Gut reaction?'

'The former. I would like to believe the story of an accidental visit to a far-flung galaxy but it is somehow just a little too fantastic.'

'You don't think they are telling the truth?'

'I do have nagging doubts but logic tells me that the word "impossible" has just reappeared in my vocabulary.'

'I thought you were impressed by the girl.'

'I am. She is one incredibly clever young lady and clearly understands all she is talking about. I'd certainly like to know where and how they discovered such a gem.'

'Her knowledge is accurate?'

'Of course. She could have read up on Einstein and Newton but she could not have had even an inkling as to the questions I was going to pose her concerning Neptune and Triton.'

'She was right, then?'

He nodded. 'To the fourth decimal point. I honestly don't know a dozen people on Earth who could have given the answer like that, unprompted.'

'And her understanding of relativity and time-dilation?'

'Supreme.' The Professor became thoughtful again. 'I must check over what she said once more. She may just have the answer to life as we know it.'

'It's that good?'

'Yes. But I wonder who taught her. That man I would very much like to meet.'

The phone rang and the Director picked it up. 'Yes?'

Professor Akherd watched him as his face went ashen and, after a while, he slowly replaced the receiver. 'What is wrong?'

'It's the eight men from Wayfarer.'

The Professor somehow knew the answer before he asked. 'What about them?'

'They died of atmospheric decompression during re-entry.'

ΕΣΧΑΠΕ

The Director sat with his head in his hands for a long time. The only sounds were the slight whistle of the wind in the old chimney and the ticking of the clock as the two men sat in silence. Eventually, he picked up the phone and dialled. 'Mike? Can you come to the library, please. Something had come up.'

Neither of the men spoke until there was a knock and the door opened. The Director beckoned to the newcomer. 'Come in and sit down. I'm afraid that there has to be a change of plan.'

The Marshal sat at the table with the two older men and, without asking, he could see that the news which had prompted the change of plan was not good.

The Director raised his head. 'The men from Wayfarer have all died.'

'What? Have you told Miss Duncan?'

'Not yet. That will be your job.'

The Marshal looked taken-aback. 'My job?'

'I'm afraid so. I want you to go now and take her away somewhere, I don't care where, somewhere remote where she cannot be found until we need her again.'

'I can do it, but I don't understand why.'

'Two reasons. Firstly, we were unable to prevent a leak of information when the shuttle bearing the aliens landed at Europoort and the press have got onto it. So far, we've managed to present it as an accident but you know what some reporters are like.'

The Marshal smiled wryly. 'I think I have an idea.'

'Apparently, it didn't stop there. They managed to collar one of your own men who let it slip that a young girl had returned with Wayfarer Two.'

The younger man gritted his teeth. 'Girman.'

'Well, it's too late now, the story is out. The reporters do not yet know the full details but once they even smell the possibility of visitors from outer space, they won't let go. Secondly, I don't know who is behind all this but I want to thwart their plans right at the outset. If it is a hoax, I want the disappearance of the girl to keep them on edge.'

'And what if those people really have come from Andromeda? That makes the girl an alien, too.'

'All the more reason for us to have her hidden away. I am relying on you to keep a close eye on her and to keep her away from everyone. How many men do you need for the job?'

'None, we'll be better-off alone. With your permission, I will leave immediately.'

'Where will you be?'

'I will keep on the move and contact you every few days. If you need me urgently and can't get me on my mobile, page me and I will get straight back to you. What of Commander Duncan? Do I take him, too?'

'No. We have to keep him here. We cannot cover up his return indefinitely as he is too well known. However, we can pass off the girl as a stowaway and the public will probably swallow it. After what she said today about sleeping with them all, it will not be far from the truth.'

The Professor pondered. 'I wonder if she realised the implications of what

she was saying.'

'No-one is that naive. That's why I want to try to avoid a scandal.' He looked at his watch. 'Well, Mike, can you get away during darkness?'

'If I have to, I can fly that 'copter blindfold in a sandstorm.'

'Okay, get her out of here. When you've gone, I will tell Commander Duncan.'

'Is that not just a little unkind?' asked the Professor. 'Supposing she really is his daughter? I know how I would feel if my kid suddenly disappeared.'

'You think she is his daughter?'

'I don't know. But then it isn't me who has to tell the man who might be her father. I suggest that when you do, you will know for sure by his reaction.'

The director swallowed at the thought and he said no more as the Marshal left.

CASSI looked up from her bed at the knock on the door. 'Come in.'

Mike Hardy strode into the room, picked up her pale blue overalls from the back of the chair and dropped them onto the bed. 'Get dressed, we're leaving.'

She sat up. 'Why?'

'Don't ask questions. Just believe me when I say that it is for your own good.'

Cassi swung her long legs to the floor. 'Where are we going?'

'Not far,' he lied in case the room was bugged. You can't trust anybody these days. 'I'd put on everything you've got, it's pretty cold outside. I'll wait for you in the hallway.'

As quickly as she could, Cassi put on her overalls over the top of her leotard and then opened the door. The Marshal handed her a fleece-lined coat and baseball cap. 'Put these on.'

She did and then followed him towards the doorway. In the darkness, the snow still fell from the sky like overweight confetti as she waited while he brought the car right up to the doorway. It was dryer inside the vehicle but only just as the wipers fought to move the lumps of snow from the screen which was misting up fast. In a matter of moments, they were beside the aircraft.

'Stay inside the car until I get the helicopter started,' he said and leapt out into the blizzard. Two minutes later, the motor started and the blades turned slowly and then the engine caught and the sound penetrated to the interior of the car. He opened the passenger door. 'Let's go.'

It was an amazing sight, strapped into that glass bubble as the flakes fell all around her, whipped into a mad fury by the whirling rotors. For some time, the Marshal punched instructions into a tiny computer and eventually the screen showed a map. Satisfied, he moved the controls and they became airborne. The ground receded beneath them and finally disappeared altogether as they headed south, across the Thames which was a dark, hazy blur beneath them and, half an hour later, Cassi saw that they were over the sea which looked totally black. Cassi wondered if it was as cold as it looked, and shivered at the thought of falling into it. There were no lights or things to see. Instead, they were in a tiny capsule in a world of black and white contrast as the Marshal flew by a mixture of radar and instinct.

Cassi felt no real fear, merely excitement, as they continued south until they were over land again and there were lights and buildings. The snow had stopped halfway across the Channel and all was dark as they headed for the cluster of bright lights ahead.

'Where is this?' she asked as the helicopter circled prior to landing.

'This city is called Paris, Miss Duncan. It was the capital of what used to be called France. It is now the entertainment centre for mainland Europe.'

'Isn't it exciting?'

He smiled. 'If you say so.'

Carefully, Marshal Hardy manoeuvred over the heliport and landed close to a row of vehicles. In a few moments, two of them came to meet the helicopter. A young man leapt from one of them and ran over. 'I have the car you requested, Marshal.'

'Thanks. Is it full up?'

The man nodded. 'As you instructed, sir.'

'Very good. I will need it for some time. Bill it to Europa.'

'Very well, Marshal.' He left in the accompanying vehicle.

The Marshal opened the car door for her. 'Well, Miss Duncan. Let's go and see Paris.'

'Cassi,' she said as he climbed in.

'I'm not sure...'

'Cassi,' she insisted.

He paused for a while and then smiled as he held out his hand to her. 'Michael Hardy. They call me Mike.'

Uncertain, she took his hand and held it while repeating his name and then smiling back. Time seemed to stand still as they looked at each other across the hand brake.

'I think we'd better go,' he finally said without moving.

'Okay. Where?' she replied, afraid to take her eyes from him in case he disappeared. A strange tingly feeling was running through her whole body as the snow on her hair continued to melt and run down her neck.

He dragged his own eyes away and started the engine and, slowly, they drew out of the airport and headed into the city. A long time ago, he had learned that to hide someone, you do not isolate yourself somewhere remote where everyone notices strangers, you go to a place which is full of them. Metropolitan Paris was one of those places. In spite of the fact that it was the early hours of the morning, the city was crammed with people and traffic. Eventually, Mike located a parking spot and they climbed out and entered a building with a well-lit porch. Cassi stared around at the fancy decorations as Mike spoke to a man behind the desk and then came over to her. 'I've booked adjoining rooms at this hotel for the night. We are on the third floor.'

In a kind of daze, she followed him up some stairs which seemed to go on for ever though she was glad of the exercise she was missing since leaving Wayfarer. The Marshal unlocked a door and held it open for her as she hesitated and then entered. The furniture was not new but clean and pleasant as Cassi touched the woodwork with the tips of her fingers and ran her hands over the silk sheets.

'This is where we will be staying for a few days,' said the Marshal as he threw his small bag of things into a room through an inter-connecting door. 'But first, I have a special treat.' He led her back down stairs and they walked around the corner into a precinct full of shops and stores which displayed everything from food to clothes.

Cassi thrust her hands deep inside the pockets of her warm coat as she walked along beside him, her eyes seeing things they had never seen before. Lights flashed and winked at her and people pushed along, laughing and talking.

'In here,' said the voice at her elbow and the Marshal led her into a large store full of all sorts of clothing. He spoke for a moment to a glamorous-looking woman who smelt odd and yet, somehow, pleasant, and this person led her away to a private room. Cassi glanced apprehensively over her shoulder once but Mike was smiling. She relaxed as the woman helped her to undress and, ten minutes later, her body was encompassed in something black and tight which almost fell from her shoulders and, for some unknown reason, reached only halfway down her legs. She looked around and relaxed upon noticing that most of the other females were dressed in similar attire. The shoes felt odd as she tried them on. The heels were not particularly high but she wobbled at first and felt nine feet tall. A warm feeling flooded over her at the sight of Mike's face as he nodded his approval. For some reason, she found she wanted to please him and if pleasing him meant wearing these ridiculous clothes, she would do it. The outfit was finished off with a coat which was soft and warm inside and, feeling on top of the world, Cassiopeia Duncan strode out into the Avenue Champs Elysées with her overalls and trainers in a gaudy carrier bag that advertised the store.

'Happy?' asked Mike as they strolled towards the river.

Cassi smiled and looked up at the flashing lights as the excitement of the occasion overcame her. She nodded. 'Very.'

The carrier bag was tossed into the back of the car but they didn't re-enter the hotel. Instead, the Marshal led her to a low wall beyond which was a wide river that reflected the lights of the buildings on the Left Bank.

Mike gripped her arms and turned her to face him. 'This is where you see Paris. And the best way to do that is from the river.'

She smiled. 'Okay.'

Eventually, she took his offered hand and they went down some stone steps and boarded a long craft that did not sink when Cassi tentatively placed a foot on the gunwale. She was surprised at the phenomenon but, nevertheless, stepped aboard and they were shown to a small table under a large transparent canopy. It was warmer inside and, after a few more people embarked, the boat cast off and began to run downstream towards St Denys. Cassi felt the odd vibrations through her feet as she kicked off her uncomfortable shoes and slipped the coat from her shoulders. For some reason she couldn't understand, people kept looking at her. What was wrong? Did she appear alien to them? Her father had said she wouldn't but both men and women were watching her though they clearly pretended not to.

'What would you like to eat?' Mike asked, handing her the menu.

She took it from his hand and stared at it for a long time as if calculating while the boat rocked slightly after it crossed the bow-wave of a sister cruiser.

'Bienvenue aux Bateaux Mouches,' said the strange voice at her elbow.

She looked up and saw a smiling young man with a pen in his hand.

'Merci bien,' she replied politely with a slight smile. 'Aussi, je voudrai la carte du vin, s'il vous plait.'

Mike Hardy was a little taken aback for a second but he hid it well until the waiter disappeared in search of the requested wine list. 'Your French is very good. Where did you learn?'

Cassi smiled at the clear memory of when she was about five or six years old. 'Iris taught me.'

Mike frowned. *Iris? Who was this Iris?* 'Can you speak any other languages?'

'Si, señor.'

'Just French and Spanish?'

She shook her head. 'Nein, mein heir.'

Mike grinned as he picked odds and ends from the tray of hors d'oeuvres which had been placed as a matter of course on the table between them. 'Is there a language you don't know?'

She thought for a moment. 'I found the Bantu dialect of Swahili a little daunting.'

They laughed aloud as the waiter stood, waiting, wine list in his hand. She took it from him and passed it to her companion. 'You choose.'

He smirked. 'Don't you know about wines?'

'I know the good ones by name.' She leant closer and whispered. 'But I haven't the faintest idea what they taste like.'

That's odd, he thought. 'What would you like to eat?'

Cassi studied the menu for a few moments and then looked up with a smile. 'Soya cakes and oatmeal?'

Mike burst out laughing. 'They say they can cater for all tastes here, but I think that soya cakes and oatmeal might just catch the chef with his trousers down.'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'Why on earth would he need to take his trousers down to cook soya cakes?'

Mike started to cough as the mixture of laughter and eating caused a severe conflict of interests in his gullet.

'Are you all right?' she eventually asked as he regained control with the aid of a glass of clear liquid which materialised as if by magic in the waiter's hand.

'Where on earth did you learn to eat soya cakes and oatmeal?'

'On board Wayfarer, of course. There was little else except the occasional UV-grown vegetables.'

'UV? Oh, you mean Ultra-Violet.'

She looked puzzled. 'What else could I mean?'

Mike ordered food from the patient waiter and they said no more as the lights seemed to drift by the boat and Cassi stared excitedly at all the new things she had read about and had been told about and was now observing herself for the first time.

'You are very beautiful, you know,' Mike eventually said.

Cassi looked at him over the top of her wine glass and smiled. 'There are many beautiful things here on Earth.'

He leant forward. 'You're changing the subject.'

Her face looked cheeky and, for a moment, she looked little more than a

child with her flawless, almost fragile, skin of her face and shoulders and long golden hair that was so perfect above her deep blue eyes. The soft lips parted. 'Why is everyone watching me?'

'It's because you look so lovely. They can't believe you are real.'

Cassi slowly looked around the floating restaurant and the other diners suddenly found their meals more interesting. She laughed inwardly at their self-consciousness. The meal came quite quickly and they ate prawns and oysters followed by fresh trout. Cassi was horrified at the gateau and refused to even taste something so obviously poisonous to her system.

Mike watched her very carefully, observing every movement, every flicker of her eyes, desperate to find some clue as to her real identity. Like the Professor, he had been impressed by her knowledge but also knew how good teaching methods could be these days, especially if done in conjunction with a course of prolonged brain-washing. Someone, somewhere, had gone to a considerable amount of trouble to do all this, especially to be able to apparently convince the Director who was not easily fooled. One way or another, he was going to find out what this was all about.

His chance came an hour later when the young girl seemed to be cheerfully merry with the wine with which he had been repeatedly topping up her glass. Her eyes sparkled as she sat, glass in hand, her elbows resting on the table. The music came from a small jazz band which had been commissioned for the night-time trip and which played quietly in the background. When the moment seemed right, he gently took the glass from her hand and placed it upon the table as her face questioned his actions. Carefully, he took both her hands in his own and leant closer.

He smiled to relax her. 'You can stop this pretence with me, Cassi. I know about the plot, you know.'

She sat up straight and pulled her hands free. 'Plot?'

'Yes,' he said vaguely, seeking information. 'You know...'

She smiled and leant forward. 'Oh, you mean the plot?' She was suddenly on her feet, her eyes staring in anger.

Mike grew wary as he slowly sat up straight and faced her. 'It's all right, Cassi. I do know all about it but I won't tell anyone else, I promise. You can trust me.'

The sound was like a gunshot as Cassi lashed out, hard, and he felt that he was flying as he careered through the air and then skidded across the deck for twenty feet before ending up against the stage, his head swimming. The music faltered and finally stopped at the interruption as he felt the eyes of all the others looking at him.

Eventually, he felt the hands of two waiters dragging him to his feet, thinking him drunk, but he shrugged them off and started back towards their table. Half way across the boat, he stopped and stared. Cassi was not at their table any more. As everyone watched him, he frantically searched around the single-decked boat but she was nowhere to be seen.

He couldn't believe it. Her shoes were under the table and her coat still over the back of the chair but of young Cassiopeia Duncan there was not a sign.

TPYTH

Cassi lay flat on the cold boards as the floating restaurant drifted away from her into the darkness. She felt betrayed. The one man whom she had believed she could begin to trust had been playing games with her all along - teasing her. Her feelings were mixed but one emotion had come close to the surface for the first time in her whole life - one she had observed in her father on the occasion when they had had their near-miss with Saturn but had never personally felt before. It was pure anger.

To calm herself, she rolled over onto her back and stared up at the sky which was black with multiple pinpoints of light shimmering and twinkling back at her. Somewhere up there was Orion Space Station and, still attached to it, Wayfarer - the only real home she had ever had. She longed to be back there along with her father.

The air was icy and she began to shiver as she got to her feet and dropped to the narrow ledge around the barge. It was moving only slowly and because the jump had been a long one and she had only just made it across that ugly, black water. Her legs and back ached from the unaccustomed gravity defiance as she shuffled around to the rear, mostly upset that she had had to tear her new dress to enable her to make such a desperate leap to freedom. A movement made her look around sharply and crouch like a cat about to spring.

'Qui êtes-vous?' demanded an old man in a beret who stared at the manifestation out of the sky.

Cassi sensed that the man meant her no harm as she slowly straightened and moved closer to the heater he had perched under the low shelter at the back of the barge.

'Je suis perdu,' Cassi acknowledged and he seemed to understand though he could not believe his good fortune at suddenly having such a glamorous companion. She pointed to the shore. 'Je voudrai aller à la bas.'

'La bas?' he indicated with his head.

Cassi nodded enthusiastically. 'Oui, s'il vous plait.'

The old man sighed. It just wasn't his night. Heaven had dropped upon him the best-looking girl he had ever seen in all his life, dressed in nothing but a tight black dress slit almost to the waist and all she wanted to do was to be put ashore. Ah well, so be it. He didn't get as far as the shore. While still ten feet away, Cassi hitched up her skirt once more and leapt for the stone steps.

She landed nimbly, jumped to her feet, and then turned and waved her thanks. The old man looked at the half-empty bottle in his hand and shrugged. He decided he must take more water with it in future.

THE embankment was still fairly busy as Cassi brushed off her dress and stood, barefoot and shivering, on the broad pavement. Several people gave her funny looks as they passed but none spoke to her as she made up her mind and began to walk in the direction she surmised to be that of the hotel. If she could find a way to get into the Marshal's car, she would be properly dressed in overalls and, better still, warm. A car slowed beside her.

'Would you like a lift?' said an English-sounding voice.

Cassi stopped and looked towards where a smiling face peered out of the open window.

'Holy cow, you look frozen,' the man said with real empathy. 'Get in here and I'll warm you up.'

Warmth? Yes, that's what she wanted most of all so she got in and the car pulled out into the traffic.

'My name's Greg,' he said as the heat blasted out from below the dashboard and slowly thawed her frozen feet and legs.

'I'm Cassi,' she responded as she drew up her leg and began to rub her left foot.

He ran his eyes over the long, bare limb. 'You're not French then?'

Cassi shook her head and quickly lowered her leg. His expression reminded her of the one the man called Girman had given her in the shuttle.

'From England?' he persevered.

'No.'

'America?'

'No. I'm from Andromeda.'

'Andromeda,' he muttered to himself. 'Let me see, isn't that one of those new-fangled West-African states?'

Cassi smiled. 'Not exactly.'

He sighed and shrugged. 'Ah, well, I guess it's not that important. There's just you and me and the rest of the night.' He glanced sideways at her. 'If the boys back home could see me now.'

Cassi leant back in the comfortable seat as the car approached the city centre once more. 'My hotel is beside the river.'

He grinned. 'Your place, eh? Okay sister, you've got it.'

His car pulled up behind the Marshal's and Cassi jumped out.

Greg leant across. 'Hey, you not gonna invite me in for a drink or something?'

Cassi hesitated. Perhaps she owed him that much.

The night porter gave them both an odd look as Cassi asked for the key to her room. He also stared at her torn dress. 'Ca va?'

Cassi shrugged. 'Cela ne fait rien.' It was a long story and also very late.

The door to her room opened easily and she relaxed to find it was empty. The last person she wanted to meet right now was Marshal Mike Hardy.

Greg closed the door behind them. 'This is some swell pad you have here. You alone?'

'In a manner of speaking,' she said as she unzipped her dress. She gestured with her head. 'I think the drinks are in that cupboard.'

'What are you drinking?'

'Orange juice. I've had quite enough alcohol for one night.'

'Stone me, you're cool,' he said as she stepped out of her dress and tossed it onto the bed.

'I'm more than cool, I'm half frozen,' said Cassi as she turned to face him in her black leotard.

He offered her a glass of amber liquid. 'Take this, it will warm you inside. Then I will warm you outside.'

'Ugh,' she shivered as the brandy burnt her throat and his hands began to gently caress her bare shoulders.

'I'm going to have a shower,' she suddenly said and turned away from him. 'Are you going or staying?'

'I'll come in with you if you like,' he leered.

Cassi stared back at him at the thought of two people in such a confined space, and wondered why on earth he would even suggest such a thing. She smiled. 'I don't think that will be necessary.'

She closed the door carefully and, bearing in mind her father's reservations as to the motives and intentions of some Earthmen, she locked it, turned on the shower and slipped out of her leotard. The hot water was beautiful as it cascaded over her bare body, reaching and warming the remotest extremities. Occasionally, she heard a scratching at the door and smiled to herself. She was glad of her precautions.

Suddenly, there was a great crashing and the door burst open. Cassi peered out of the join in the shower curtain to see Greg advancing, his hands outstretched towards her. She backed into the corner as he gripped the edge of the plastic curtain and tore it from her grip. Cassi screamed as she slipped on the soapy shower tray and fell, arms and legs all over the place. She cried out as he caught her wrist in a vice-like grip and began to drag her toward

the bed. Instinctively, she kicked out at him and he retaliated by viciously slamming his fist hard into her stomach.

Cassi gasped for breath as she collapsed onto the bathroom floor and things began to move very fast around her. After a while, she found she was alone so, carefully, she pulled herself up a bit and peered around the edge of the door frame. A plastic bag hit the floor beside her.

'Get dressed,' said the harsh voice of Marshal Hardy.

Thoroughly confused, Cassi staggered to her feet. Reaching up, she turned off the shower, dried herself and wrapped a big towel around her body before venturing into the bedroom where she saw Greg unconscious across the bed with Mike rummaging through his pockets.

She was horrified. 'What are you doing? What have you done to him?'

The Marshal grunted. 'He'll be out for a few minutes. I thought I told you to get dressed.'

'Not until you tell me what you are doing?'

'You do realise what he was about to do to you, don't you?'

She shook her head as Mike tossed a small package onto the bed and began to tie Greg's wrists behind him with a piece of electrical cable.

He stood up and pointed a finger at her. 'Are you going to get dressed or do I beat the hell out of you first? I've just about taken all I can stand from you for one night.'

'What? After the way you insulted me on the boat? You deserve everything you got.'

'And so do you. Get damnwell dressed.'

Cassi stormed back into the bathroom, anger reaching the surface once more, and got into her leotard and overalls. When she returned, Greg was just coming round. She knelt by his side and touched his head. 'Why did you have to hit him? He was only trying to help me.'

Mike looked at her sharply. 'Don't you realise who this is?'

'Just a man who took pity on me out in the cold. At least he was a gentleman which is more than I can say for some people I know.'

'Cassi Duncan, you are very naive, do you know that?' He tossed a wallet onto the bed and it fell open. 'Major Gregory Watson, Army Intelligence. This guy works for General Phillips.'

Cassi picked it up and confirmed the truthfulness of his statement. 'What was he going to do?'

'Can't you even guess?'

'No. I'm not into this sort of thing like you obviously are.'

'Ask him.' Mike gripped Greg's face and turned it towards him. 'Tell her, feller. Tell her what you were going to do to her.'

Greg struggled to be free. 'Go to hell, Brit.'

'Now that's not nice in front of a lady. Tell her nicely or I will have to damage you a little more.'

'No,' cried Cassi. 'You don't need to hurt him.' She turned to the American. 'What were you going to do?'

'What you deserve, bitch.'

Cassi noticeably recoiled at the insult. She was not used to being offended in such a manner nor to these strange guessing games. Mike picked up an item which had fallen onto the floor and brought it over. It was made of glass and had a long needle on one end.

Greg broke out in a sweat as Mike advanced towards him with it. 'You wouldn't.'

'I would, or are you going to tell me without it.'

The tied man simply shut his mouth tightly as Mike pulled up Greg's sleeve. He tried to struggle but it didn't work.

Cassi watched as the needle entered his arm and the liquid was fed into his body. 'What is it?'

'My guess is that it is a mixture. Probably something like sodium pentathol with some other drug added. I'm right aren't I, Greg?'

Greg simply stared at them both as the drug slowly took effect. After a few minutes, Mike touched his face. 'Well, well, well. It seems I was right. A nasty little cocktail that has an extremely unpleasant side-effect that is often referred to as death.'

Cassi was shocked. 'You mean he is going to die?'

Mike nodded. 'Possibly.'

She started to get up. 'We must save him.'

Mike grabbed her arm. 'Whoa! Wait a minute. Don't forget that this needle was meant for you.'

'F...for me?'

'Why else did he break into the bathroom with it in his hand? He was going to give it to you.'

'But why? I don't understand.'

'Let's ask him. Greg, can you hear me?'

Greg simply groaned. Mike touched his face again and the man jumped.

'No...no.'

'I think you'd better tell her, feller. I don't have much time and neither do you.'

'What is the drug?' asked Cassi.

'A truth drug added to a massive stimulant. Any sensation, pain or pleasure, is magnified ten-fold. It is designed to force people to tell the truth and then to become totally untraceable afterwards.'

'But they die.'

'Only if they resist.'

'How do you mean?'

'I mean that adrenaline produced naturally under times of stress mixes with this drug. If you simply relax and tell the truth, you live. Resist, the truth still comes out but you die very painfully.' He smiled. 'Or happily, depending on what is being done to you at the time.'

'Greg,' said Cassi gently. 'You must tell him. Don't die.'

The American's eyes jumped from one to the other of them. He finally gave in. 'I was sent to find out where you really come from.'

'But I come from Andromeda. My father told the Director that.'

'My boss doesn't believe you.'

'The General?'

He nodded.

'Tell her how she was going to die, Greg.'

The intelligence man struggled but the pain forced him to lie still. Mike touched him again.

'Stop, I'll tell you.' He fought for his breath. 'I was to give her the injection, find out what the General wanted to know and then...'

'Yes?'

His eyes involuntarily jumped to the long-bladed knife lying on the bed. 'It was meant to look as if someone broke into the room, raped and abused her, and then slit her belly open. The General said I was to be sure she died very slowly and painfully.'

Cassi was horrified and nothing more was said until Mike stood up. 'We'd better get out of here. There are bound to be others around.'

'You're going to leave him here?'

'We have to. It's up to him now whether he lives or dies. We can do nothing for him.'

Greg just groaned on the bed and tried to force himself to relax. Mike placed Cassi's coat around her shoulders and led her to the door. He glanced back. 'See you later, feller.'

They went down the stairs and got into the car. Cassi looked at him as he turned the ignition key. 'Where are we going?'

'To see a friend of mine.' He started the car and headed north-east out of the city.

They had gone some way before Cassi spoke. 'I'm sorry I hit you and then abandoned you, Mike. That was unkind of me.'

He shrugged. 'How did you get ashore?'

'I jumped.'

'Jumped?'

'Onto a passing barge and then clambered ashore.'

'I thought I'd lost you for good.'

His mobile phone suddenly rang. He pulled onto the hard shoulder and answered it. After listening for what seemed like a long time, he acknowledged the message and terminated the call. He turned to face her. 'It's your father.'

Cassi caught her breath. 'Is he...?'

'He has become very ill.'

'I want to go back.'

'Where?'

'To see him.'

'That's not possible.'

'Why not? I have a right.' Her eyes were as cold as the weather. 'There's something else, isn't there? Something that made us come away in the first place?'

He nodded.

'What is it? Tell me here, now.'

'The crew from Wayfarer. They're....'

'Yes?'

He looked her straight in the eyes. 'Dead.'

Cassi didn't speak. She simply stared at him without blinking.

'What can I say?' he said soothingly, not daring to touch her. 'They were your friends, weren't they?'

'I saw them every day of my life. I loved them.'

'Were they really from Andromeda?'

She suddenly turned on him. 'Don't you start that again.'

He held up his hands defensively. 'Okay. Okay. I'm sorry.'

She thumped her fist on the dashboard. 'I wish I had died with them.'

Mike looked astonished. 'But why? You have all your life to look forward to.'

'Have I? Some kind of a freak to be observed under a microscope? I am not of your world, Mike. My father told you all about what the Professor called the Andromeda Burn but you wouldn't believe him. He started to tell you about all the things that happened during his period on Mythos but you thought him a crank. If you didn't listen to my father, how will you listen to me?'

The Marshal said nothing. There was nothing appropriate to say. He started the car once more and drove for over an hour before stopping in front of a large, glass-fronted building. The sign said "Europa Institute of Biophysics." They both went inside and stood before a spotless reception desk as a woman in white approached.

'Doctor Pederson please, nurse,' said the Marshal.

The woman smiled. 'If you would wait over there, I will locate him for you.'

They sat together in silence as one or two other people, also in white, passed by on one duty or another. After ten minutes, a tall, fair-haired man approached and greeted the Marshal warmly. 'Hello Mike. Long time, no see.'

'Sorry to disturb you at this hour, Jon,' the Marshal said as they walked down the passageway and into a private observation room.

'We're fairly busy tonight, Mike,' the doctor said as he closed the door behind them. 'This had better be good.'

'It's highly important,' said the Marshal as he slipped off his coat. 'Probably the most important hour of your life, maybe in the whole history of mankind.'

The fair-haired man smiled. 'Sounds intriguing. And who is the girl-friend?'

'Someone I want you to take a look at. I won't say a word nor tell you her name. Just take a look at her, thoroughly, and we'll talk then.'

The man called Jon smiled at Cassi. 'Step this way, young lady, let's see what you're made of.'

Cassi glanced over her shoulder as she was guided through the doorway into a large room that was immaculately clean. She stared around at the vast array of equipment and sensors as John raised a big lamp.

He smiled. 'Please take off your clothes and lay on this couch.'

Cassi obeyed and lay, face-down, on the white sheet while Jon fussed around with a tray of gadgets.

'There will be a slight prick and you will become a little drowsy,' he said as he held up the syringe. He was right. A tiny pain jabbed her bottom and she gradually felt tired as her eyes slowly closed.

MIKE woke with a start and realised he had fallen asleep on Doctor Pederson's emergency bunk. His friend stood beside him, hot drink in hand.

'I'm sorry....' Mike began but the other man smiled his forgiveness. 'What time is it?'

'It's eleven in the morning,' said Jon. 'You slept well.'

'Cassi? Is she...?'

'So that's her name, is it? She's still out but I expect her to come round within the next few minutes.'

Mike rubbed his eyes. 'I didn't realise I had slept so long.'

'Don't worry. I've only just finished myself.'

'You've only just...?'

'It took a long time, Mike. That girl of yours is something very special, but I guess you knew that already or you wouldn't have brought her to me.'

Mike looked guilty as he held the hot cup in his hands and stared at the floor.

The doctor sat down on a stool, facing him. 'Do you start or do I?'

Mike looked up. 'You start.'

'Very well.' He picked up his notes. 'In the next room is a perfect specimen of Homo Sapiens and when I say perfect, I do mean perfect. There is not a single thing wrong with her, at least not physically. Her blood count is exactly right as is her sugar level, cholesterol level, pulse and all the other junk that we medical people talk about.'

'You're sure?'

'I had to do a double check, Mike. The results were just a little too perfect for my liking.'

'So...?'

'In my experience, only one type of being has an internal system so accurately balanced.'

'Androids?'

The doctor nodded. 'Exactly.'

Mike leant forward. 'Cassi is a robot?'

'I didn't say that, though I admit I did think so myself at first. However, there are several major differences between humans and androids.' He stood up and opened the curtains. 'Although modern androids are very good, there is no need, for example, for them to have a human digestive system. Nor is there any in-built facility for reproduction. There are, of course, other factors but those two are the main ones which can be identified without surgery.'

'Cassi has those?'

'Your young lady has a perfectly normal digestive system which functions correctly in every way. She is also endowed with a womb and active ovarian cycle which seems to operate just like that of any healthy young virgin.'

Mike found himself smiling as he thought back on what the others had assumed and remembered also what the Professor had said about her supposed nocturnal activities.

'Are there any abnormal characteristics?'

Jon grinned. 'I thought you'd never ask. That's what took me so long.'

Mike put down his empty cup. 'Tell me.'

'Her central nervous system is developed to a degree I have never seen before. Compound that with a highly intelligent brain function and an instant photographic memory and I would guess that her response-delay time in an emergency must be virtually nil.'

'Is that all?'

The doctor smiled. 'All? Isn't that enough?'

'There is something else, isn't there?'

'You are very discerning, Michael Hardy. Yes, there is something else. If I were not just a doctor but an astrophysician, I would surmise that her muscular geometry was designed for a planet other than Earth.'

'Wh...what do you mean?'

'I mean that her natural physique is superior to any I have seen in my life but without looking it. It would appear that she was brought up in an environment with a much greater gravity and atmospheric pressure. Here, on Earth, she is simply ticking over, on stand-by as it were. I'll bet she could pack a hefty punch if she wanted to.'

Mike rubbed his still-aching jaw. 'She can. Anything else?'

'You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?'

'Come on. You might as well finish it.'

Jon smiled. 'Okay. I won't go into details but I guess you know that every human body contains antibodies to fight-off disease. Well, that girl has a most unusual and highly-developed resistance to disease and it looks hereditary rather than an acquired immunity. From what I have seen so far, I

would say it was impossible for her ever to succumb to illness of any kind.'

'What, precisely, does all this mean?'

'Well. Put together all we know about her and it means, my friend, that unless your girl is unlucky enough to get knocked down by a number twenty-seven land shuttle, she will quite probably live forever.'

ΠΛΑΝΣ

Cassi's senses returned slowly. As she opened her eyes, she noticed she was alone, lying on a couch in that clean room, a sheet draped over her torso to retain her modesty. The events of the last twenty-four hours flashed through her mind as she tried to decide what to do next. Before she could reach such a decision, she realised that, first of all, she had to know whether or not she could trust Marshal Mike Hardy.

Faintly, she could hear voices from the other room as she lay staring at the ceiling - male voices. Carefully, she slipped her bare feet to the floor and wrapped the sheet tightly around herself, tying the ends at her waist. On tiptoe, she crept to the door and listened.

'You had better tell me what this is all about,' the one called Jon was saying, his voice slightly muffled because of the door.

'I don't quite know where to start,' she heard Mike reply. 'You see, there are two possible explanations.'

'Give me the official story first,' the doctor said. 'Then you can tell me the truth.'

'You always were very perceptive, Jon.'

'So were you.'

'It started a month ago when the Europa Corporation launched the second of their manned survey ships to gain information concerning the outer planets. It left under the direction of Commander Jim Duncan. They tell me he is the best cruiser pilot in the system.'

Cassi smiled to herself from the other side of the panel.

'Alone?' she heard the Doctor ask.
'No, he had a crew of nine with him. Seven men and two women.'
'Go on.'
'The ship disappeared soon after launch and suddenly reappeared at Orion Base early yesterday afternoon.'
'With everyone fit and well?'
'Sort of.'
'Explain.'
'Commander Duncan was there along with a crew of nine.'
'Then what is the problem?'
'A different nine. Eight men and one teenage girl.'
'The one you call Cassi? The girl in the other room?'
'Precisely.'
'I see. Any explanations offered?'
'Plenty but all very far-fetched.'
'Official explanation?'
'Accusations of attempts to discredit the space programme or to enhance it. You name it, someone dreamt it up.'
'Okay. Now tell me what really happened.'
'I'm not sure that I know myself.'
'What explanation did the Commander give?'
'That the ship had been to some distant galaxy called Andromeda because of a sustained engine burn and had only just got back.'
'And his explanation for the crew changes?'
'That the original crew had died somewhere along the way and the new eight men were from some planet in the Andromeda system and that Cassi was born in mid-flight. He reckoned he had brought back life seeds in the form of female eggs. He said he fertilised one with his own sperm and incubated her in the Medlab.'
She heard the doctor get up. 'I can see why it was not believed. It does sound a little difficult to swallow.'
'That's what I thought at first.'
'But now...?'
'I honestly don't know. Too many things have happened so quickly. I only know I'd like to believe it.'
Cassi heard the Marshal explain about the death of the Andromedans, about the inquiry, about her father. 'I really wish I knew for certain, one way or the other.'
'That's easy,' said Jon.
'Easy?'
'Yes. There must be something on board the ship that can give convincing information. This laboratory for instance.'
'But no-one is allowed on the ship. Wayfarer has been placed in official quarantine.'
'What about you?'
'Me?'
'You are now Chief of Security. You would be allowed on board without any explanation and with the weather being so bad, no-one else will have attempted to get to Orion Base and I don't suppose for one minute that Admiral Burleigh would do anything without official approval.'
'You mean...?'
'Commandeer a shuttle and get yourself up there. It's the only way to find out if the girl is really telling the truth.'
'You know, Jon. I think that you may be right.'
'Leave her here with me and go. I'll make sure she's all right while you're away.'
Cassi didn't hear the rest - she was too busy getting dressed. While the Marshal was getting into his coat, Cassi slipped out of the side door, ran down the corridor, out of the front door and then clambered into the back of his car and waited.
'Don't worry,' she heard Jon call out from the doorstep as the Marshal got in the driver's seat. 'When she comes round, she'll be quite safe with me.'
Mike thanked him and the car started to move. Through the window, Cassi saw the snow starting to fall and wondered how she was going to get into the helicopter undetected. She had to get to Wayfarer and even Mike Hardy was not

going to stop her.

The problem was solved for her. Instead of returning to the heliport, Mike drove right on into the night and gradually, due to the heat and the motion of the car, Cassi fell asleep.

WHEN she woke, she found she was alone. Carefully, she raised her head and looked round. The car was parked at the edge of the launch complex at Europoort and, a short distance away, a shuttle was standing ready for departure. Surreptitiously, she pushed all her hair into her baseball cap, turned up her collar and slipped out of the car door with her head down and, crouching low, ran for the hatch. As she reached it, she saw the Marshal talking to another man a few yards away but they didn't see her as she slipped inside.

'Destination?' a robotic voice asked beside her.

She straightened up in her official overalls and tried to remember the terminology her father had used. 'Orion Central.'

'Front seats, please.'

She sat next to a man in red overalls who smelt of lubrication oil and stared up at the various screens on the wall that indicated the launch status. Desperately, she fought the temptation to turn her head as she heard Mike's voice behind her, talking to the Shuttle Captain.

'How's that girl of yours, Mike?'

'Maggie? She's okay, I suppose. I haven't seen her in two weeks.'

'I thought that was why you returned to Earth yesterday, to see her.'

'No such luck. I had to accompany some base staff to the directorate.'

'I suppose you heard about all the fuss last night? Some bunch of peculiar-looking aliens tried to invade Earth but we soon showed them what for. Apparently, they were all dead upon earthfall.'

'I see.'

'You up for long this time?'

Mike shrugged. 'I don't know. Just some special errand for the Director.'

The Captain leant closer. 'All hush-hush, eh?'

'Not particularly.'

The Captain looked around. 'Well, I think that's everybody aboard. Better get strapped in.'

Cassi heard and felt Mike sit down behind her and strap himself in and she trembled at the thought of discovery at this stage. However, she needn't have worried - the Marshal paid her no attention whatsoever.

The journey took longer going up than coming down and Cassi watched with excitement as Earth receded in the monitors and they were soon slowing to dock with Orion.

'Orion maintenance,' the android at the door called and the engineer with the Castrol after-shave got up and left.

The shuttle moved around the station, dropping people off at various points until the voice said: 'Orion Central.'

She heard Mike get up behind her but she waited until he was right out of the shuttle before she moved, just catching the airlock before it closed. Mike was fifty metres away, striding confidently along the corridor towards the main launch platform where Wayfarer Two was docked. Cassi hid behind a stanchion as he spoke to two guards for some time, joking about something which made the men laugh. They made no attempt to stop him entering the ship at the end of the conversation. Now what should she do? Wayfarer was a mere arms-reach away but there were two security guards in her path. She looked around for inspiration. Hung on the wall were space suits, the ones they had originally used when Wayfarer had arrived. She grinned to herself. Each had a name-badge.

'One of you gentlemen called Smithers?' she asked boldly in a deep voice, her hands deep in her overall pockets.

'Yeah,' said the taller one, turning. 'That's me.'

'Admiral Burleigh's looking for you,' she drawled in the way the General had done. 'Says it's urgent.'

'What does the old man want now?' he sighed.

Cassi shrugged. 'Search me.'

'Will you be all right?' Smithers asked his companion. 'There's supposed to

be two of us here at all times.'

The shorter man jerked his thumb towards the ship. 'The Marshal's on board. It'll be okay.'

'I won't be long,' the tall one said and left.

Cassi faced the other man and smiled. He scowled back. She stepped closer and took off her baseball cap. He stared at her long hair with his mouth open. She moved fast, slamming into him with her shoulder. He hit the hard steel bulkhead and went down like a dead-weight sack. In a flash, Cassi was through the hatch and running down the short walkway. She touched the panel on the ship's side and the door started to open slowly.

'Come on, come on,' she muttered as it seemed to take forever.

Slipping inside, she pushed the 'close' button and the big door began to shut. Through the gap, she saw the guard staggering to his feet and, as the outer hatch finally closed, she heard the alarm sirens. The inner door opened at a touch and she closed it after her. There was a small panel on the wall beside the door. She opened it.

The small screen said 'Pressurise or Evacuate? (P/E) >'

She pressed E and there was a slight hiss as the air was drawn out of the airlock. When the red light glowed, she took out the access key and hid it in her shoe. Now they would remain alone.

Cassi opened the door to the flight deck cautiously but she needn't have gone to the trouble. The room was empty so she assumed that the Marshal was inspecting the other parts of the ship for evidence. He had mentioned the lab to Jon, so that is where he would probably be. With the tips of her fingers, she touched the familiar consoles and thought about what she was going to have to do and whether she would be able to gain Mike's assistance in doing it. For the time being, she assumed that she would not. Switching on all the monitors on the main console, she waited for them to warm up.

'Ready >' they all said in due course.

Cassi went to the red desk and typed 'ACTIVATE MAIN REACTOR.'

'Main reactor activated >' said the screen. '10 minutes to critical mass >'

Cassi pondered the situation. She had to simplify the system if she was to work it alone. She pressed a key.

'Ready >' said the screen once again.

'INTERFACE IRIS,' she typed carefully, wondering if she was doing the right thing.

The screen stayed stubbornly blank for some time as she tapped her fingers on the top of the console impatiently.

'Control committed to IRIS >' the screen eventually stated and Cassi breathed again.

'Hello, Iris,' she said.

'Good day, Officer Duncan >'

'Stand by,' she said.

'Standing by >' said Iris obediently.

'Critical mass minus eight minutes >' said the red screen.

Through the external monitors, Cassi could see signs of increased activity as men congregated on the dock, some pointing at the ship, others donning space-suits. Cassi smiled. There was no way they were going to get in.

The inner door opened with a hiss and Mike's mouth fell open. 'Good grief. How did you get here?'

Cassi smiled. 'You brought me.' She explained.

'What had you planned to do?'

'Planned? I still intend to do it.'

Humour her, he thought. 'All right. What do you plan to do?'

She glanced at the red screen which said 'Critical mass minus five minutes >'. She pressed a button to seal the hatch. 'I'm going to supply the proof that my father is telling the truth.'

'And then what?'

Cassi looked at him. 'I could just destroy you all.'

Mike's heart jumped. *She meant it*. Not only that, he suddenly realised she probably had the power to do it, too. 'How will you provide the proof?'

'I will show you, and then you will convince the others.'

'What do you want me to do?'

She pointed. 'Sit down in front of Iris.'

He stared at the console. 'That's Iris?'

'Certainly. Say hello to the Marshal, Iris.'

'Hello, Marshal >' said the amber writing on the screen.

'Iris is under voice control?'

Cassi nodded. 'The whole ship is.'

'What? You mean....?'

'Reactor, Proton Drive, guidance systems, life support, everything.'

'I don't believe you.'

'Dim lights,' she said and the room filled with a low-frequency infra-red glow.

For the first time in many years, Mike felt the initial twinges of fear. They had killed her lifetime friends, they had hurt her father. She had a right to be angry.

'Critical mass minus two minutes >' said the red screen.

'Sit down,' said Cassi quietly.

Mike sat down.

'Fasten your seat belt.'

He panicked. 'Where are we going?'

'Wait and see. I will prove to you what happened but it will take a while. In the meantime, I do not intend to simply sit here while Orion's engineers burn holes in Wayfarer's hull in an attempt to get inside.'

'Critical mass achieved >' said the red screen. 'anti-matter reactor systems ready >'

'Prepare to activate Auxiliary Drive,' she said to Iris.

'Stop,' called the Marshal.

'Iris doesn't recognise your voice pattern, Mike.' She pressed a button on the console. 'Wayfarer Two to Orion Base. Please release securing clamps.'

Admiral Burleigh's voice came over the air. 'I'm afraid I can't authorise that, Miss Duncan.'

'Why not?'

'Because I do not have instructions from the directorate.'

'Then get them.'

The radio was silent for some minutes. Mike watched Cassi carefully. Maybe he could grab her, overpower her until Security could break in. He thought about what Jon had said about her supreme strength and then touched his jaw. Maybe not.

'Orion Base to Wayfarer Two. Come in Miss Duncan.'

'Wayfarer receiving. Go ahead, Admiral Burleigh.'

'I'm afraid I have some bad news for you.'

Cassi swallowed in anticipation.

'Commander Duncan died a few moments ago. I am very sorry but, in view of the present circumstances, I must ask you to surrender your ship. You are under arrest.'

For almost a minute, Cassi fought hard to control her emotions before touching the button once more. 'I will give you thirty seconds to release the clamps.'

'Now hold on,' said the Marshal.

Cassi stood up and paced the floor. 'Mike, what is the circumference of Orion's orbit around Terra?'

'Orion Base is geostationary above the equator. It doesn't have an orbit in the normal sense of the word.'

'But suppose it did.'

He shrugged. 'Orion is just over 35,000 kilometres above the surface. Double it and add the diameter of the earth.' He calculated. 'That's an orbital diameter of around 90,000 kilometres. Multiply that by pi and...'

'282,750 kilometres,' said Cassi before he could work it out. 'And the speed of light?'

'That's easy. Just under three hundred thousand kilometres per second.'

'So, how long would it take Orion to encircle the earth in her present orbit at light speed?'

'Just under a second. Good grief, you're not going to....'

Cassi sat at the controls. 'Iris, confirm alignment along orbital trajectory.'

'Aligning >' said the screen and the ship began to move slowly forward.

The creaking and groaning as Wayfarer strained against her securing clamps filled the ship. They were pre-stressed titanium and would not shear. Instead,

Orion slowly began to turn as well.

'What the hell are you doing?' came the frantic voice on the radio as the giant space station began to move.

'I'd strap yourself in if I were you, Admiral. You and I are going for a short ride.'

'I will give you one last chance to surrender before I have you and your ship destroyed.'

'Slow ahead,' Cassi called and Iris responded immediately.

'He means it,' said the Marshal, feeling helpless while the external groaning increased as Wayfarer struggled to drag the space station out of position.

'You have got to be joking, Mike. What do you think would happen to Orion if he fired missiles at us now?'

Mike did not answer as the groaning ceased. Orion Base was on the move.

'Activate Auxiliary Drive,' said Cassi and the two space machines moved together, locked in a deadly embrace.

She pressed the radio button. 'Admiral. I would strongly advise against releasing the clamps from this point onwards. I fear that Orion would shoot off at a tangent and never be seen again.'

'I would advise you to stop this nonsense at once and take us back.'

'Just sit comfortably and watch your clocks,' Cassi instructed as she sat down and fixed the straps across her lap while she watched the speed rise on the dial. She remembered her father's words: 'The potential of Doctor Bartek's new drive has been grossly underestimated.'

'Zero plus twenty seconds >' said the red screen.

'Slow acceleration along orbital track,' Cassi said to Iris.

'Confirm slow acceleration >'

Mike was getting frantic. 'Don't do it, Cassi. You don't know what they'll do to you.'

Cassi ignored him. 'Maintain synodic trajectory. Activate main drive.'

'Main drive activated >'

Mike's eyes opened wide as he felt the power surge through the ship as it rapidly accelerated, the massive space station in tow. He couldn't believe such a thing was possible.

'Zero plus thirty seconds >'

Cassi glanced at the data. 'Increase thrust to cruise speed.'

'Confirm thrust increasing to cruise >'

'Cassi. Stop. Please.'

'Zero plus forty seconds >'

'Iris. Stand by Proton Drive.'

'Confirm Proton Drive standing by >'

'Cassi. For Pete's sake...'

'Zero plus fifty seconds >'

'Prepare to activate Proton Drive.'

'Activating Proton Drive in six seconds and counting >'

'Five >'

'Four >'

'Don't do it, Cassi. You'll kill us all.'

'Three >'

'Hold onto your hat, Marshal.'

'Two >'

'One >'

'Proton Drive activated >'

The young girl looked straight at the terrified Marshal but spoke to Iris. 'Full ahead. Advance to light speed!'

TIME ΛΑΠΣΕ

Admiral Burleigh held on tightly to his desk as it started to vibrate. The door burst open and his secretary stood, framed in the doorway, terrified out of her mind.

'The station's moving,' she squealed, close to panic.

'I know, Tara,' he replied, feeling little calmer.

'What are you going to do?'

'What the hell can I do, woman? Go and knock on the airlock of Wayfarer and ask " Please, Miss Duncan, can I have my space station back" ?'

Tara started to scream but was stopped with mouth open as the Station Engineer pushed past her and confronted the Admiral. 'The reactor discharge sensors have registered an anti-matter burn. Wayfarer's going to full thrust. You've got to stop that girl before we break up.'

'How do you propose I do it? She is beyond reason.'

'Then shoot her out of the sky. If we keep on accelerating like this, there's no telling what damage will be done.'

'And what will happen then, do you think, when her reactor blows not a hundred metres from this spot? They'll never find a piece of Orion big enough for identification. She knows we won't fire on her.'

'But you've got to do something.'

The Admiral looked at him and then smiled. 'Yes, you're right, I have. Tara, get me a drink.'

THE Director's phone rang. He was in the middle of an important meeting so it had to be urgent. 'Yes?'

'It's Orion, sir. She's disappeared.'

He stood up and the chair almost fell over. 'What?' Every eye in the room was watching him.

'We got a garbled message from Admiral Burleigh on the emergency channel before we got cut off.'

'What did it say, man?'

'We didn't get it all. Something about Orion being hi-jacked.'

'Hi-jacked?'

If anyone wasn't paying attention before, he certainly was now.

'You say both Wayfarer and Orion have been hi-jacked?'

A buzz broke out around the room.

'It would appear so, sir. Radar have reported seeing Orion advancing in a synodic progression before she vanished.'

'Orion's gone into orbit? And now vanished?'

'We're looking for her now, sir.'

'And Wayfarer?'

'Also disappeared.'

'Who is on board?'

'The Admiral reported something about some teenage girl going aboard just before the engines fired. Someone called Duncan, I think he said.'

The Director's face was ashen as he slowly put the phone down.

MARSHAL Mike Hardy's knuckles were white as he clutched hold of the arms of his seat. Despite being almost a quarter of a mile away from the anti-matter reactor, he could hear the whine of the drive and the slight vibration as Wayfarer's Proton Drive applied full thrust and dragged its reluctant burden along with it. Communication had long ceased between the ship and space station and he imagined the state of panic there would be at seeing the sphere of the Earth spinning beneath them. He glanced at his companion who was totally relaxed as her eyes kept a constant vigil on the screens as they continually updated the state of play.

'Cut Proton Drive,' she suddenly said to Iris and the sound and vibration died away instantly. She looked at him. 'Remember this moment for ever, Mike. It is the moment of truth.'

The Marshal said nothing. Cassi leaned forward. 'Main drive - half reverse thrust.'

'Confirm half reverse thrust >'

For a moment, they both seemed to become weightless as the ship began to slow to sub-light speed.

'This is where I'm going to have to be careful,' Cassi muttered, more to herself than to her companion. 'Seven thousand tonnes of space station in motion carries an awful lot of inertia with it.'

The Marshal looked puzzled. 'You really care about those people, don't you?'

'Of course I do. The most important factor in this experiment is that no-one gets hurt.'

'Experiment?'

She grinned. 'Of course-an experiment in time travel.'

THE Admiral looked up as the man entered, breathless.

'We're slowing down.'

'Are we still intact?'

'As far as I can tell.'

'And Wayfarer?'

'Still with us, keeping us stable.'

'I hope to God that girl knows what she's doing.'

'We'll soon know. We should be back in our original position in about forty seconds.'

The Admiral suddenly leant forward and pressed a button on his desk. 'Navigation. I want a second by second update on the accuracy of our holding position.'

'How accurate?'

'How accurate does it need to be to maintain geosynchronous status?'

'Within half a kilometre or so.'

'Keep me informed.'

'Very well. We appear to be ten kilometres from our original position and closing.'

The Admiral glanced at his Chief Engineer. 'I think that I may have underestimated that girl's capabilities.'

His secretary scowled. 'You're doing that all the time with me.'

'Five kilometres and slowing,' said Navigation. 'Wayfarer has gone into full reverse thrust. I'm not sure the clamps will hold. She's trying to stop one hell of a load on the move.'

The Engineer smiled. 'I think she's going to do it. I'll put a tenner on her returning us to within a hundred metres of where we were originally.'

'You're on,' said the Admiral. 'That sort of accuracy is not possible without laser-guided rams.'

'One kilometre,' said the intercom. 'We're almost stationary.'

A slight groaning reached their ears. 'The clamps are straining. They're ready to shear. Wayfarer can't stop us in time.'

CASSI saw the predicament and reacted instinctively. 'Iris. Full ahead Auxiliary Drive and left retro.'

The Marshal sat up straight. 'What are you doing?'

'Dissipating the inertial energy. It's got to go somewhere, and round and round is better than forwards right now. I'm sure the staff on Orion won't

mind being airsick just this once.'

'WE'VE stopped,' said Orion's Chief Engineer.

Admiral Burleigh relaxed. 'Thank goodness for that. I think I owe you a tenner. How far are we off original position?'

'Seven and a half metres.'

'Is that far?'

'Not at all. We stray more than that every time the moon goes by.'

'Okay. Better check everything and make sure we really are still intact after racing around in orbit for the first time.'

'Will do.'

The Admiral turned to his secretary. 'Tara, get me the Director on the radio. Someone must have reported our movements to him by now.'

'At once, sir.' She dialled.

The familiar voice soon boomed out of the desk phone. 'And what happened to you?'

The Admiral sighed. 'It's a long story.'

'There we are in the middle of a conversation about staffing and we get cut off.'

The Admiral leant forward and stiffened. 'What?'

'Are you going deaf, man? Can you manage with your existing staff until the next shuttle, or not?'

'But... ' said the bewildered Admiral, 'About Orion...'

The Director's voice suddenly sounded wary. 'What about Orion?'

'Don't you know?'

'Not until you tell me, I don't.'

'Haven't you noticed anything... unusual?'

'Of course not. Look, about Jim Duncan.'

The Admiral hesitated before saying carefully, 'What about Jim Duncan?'

'He's had a relapse of some sort since hearing of the death of his crew.'

'Then he's not...?'

'Not what?'

'Not dead?'

'Of course not. Whatever made you say that?'

'I don't know. We've got some static on the air, I'll call you back.'

Admiral Jonathan Burleigh, veteran of the Middle American War, stared at his desk as he turned his pencil over and over in his hands while his secretary and Chief Engineer waited patiently. The pencil suddenly snapped as his eyes focussed on the clock. 'Well I'll be damned.'

MIKE Hardy watched Cassi as she skillfully shut down the main drive. 'What are you going to do now?'

'I... am going to wait,' she said cheekily.

'What for?'

'You'll see.'

The radio crackled. 'Orion Base to Wayfarer Two. Come in Miss Duncan.'

Cassi smiled smugly. 'Voila!' She pressed the button. 'Yes, Admiral?'

'How did you know?'

'I guessed.'

'You? Guessed? I can't believe you would ever guess about anything.'

'It was something I had to try. It turned out I was right.'

'This could revolutionise life on earth.'

'I don't think so, somehow.'

'But... Time travel. The possibilities...'

'Limited somewhat, I think you'll agree. Limited to those able to break light speed and that isn't very many of us.'

'Only one of us, to be precise - you!'

'You're right, Admiral, and that's the way it is going to stay for the time being. Will you do something for me?'

'If I can.'

'Get the Director to release my father and send him up here.'

'What did you have in mind?'

She told him.

'I'm not sure the Director would authorise such a venture.'

'I'm equally sure that you could persuade him. After all, lives are at stake'

and there is always the Marshal to keep his eye on us.'

'If the Director says no, then I'm afraid I must hold you here.'

'I could always take Orion with me.'

He sighed. 'I'll talk to him. You do realise that your father's health might not be able to take the lift-off, don't you?'

'He will be perfectly safe if you pressurise the shuttle's cabin to 1.2kg per cm². It will help him considerably and will not seriously affect the others for such a short time.'

'Very well, I will try.'

'Thank you.'

The Marshal watched her as Cassi stood up and checked everything. 'The Admiral was right, wasn't he? You didn't guess at all.'

'Nope.'

'You knew precisely what would happen, didn't you?'

'Yep.'

'How?'

'By observing the inherent characteristics of water.'

The Marshal looked startled. 'Water? You're joking!'

She turned on him. 'Have you ever heard me joke?'

He looked down. 'No.' He laughed a little. 'I can't ever imagine you joking, somehow.'

She smiled. 'Neither can I. Such a total waste of time and effort.'

THE Director stood by the bedside as the nurse fussed over Commander Duncan. 'Are you sure you want to risk it?'

Jim nodded. 'Yes, I'm sure.'

'The doctor tells me that if you stay on Earth you are unlikely to survive the night and there is little more he can do for you.'

'I'll be all right once I get back on Wayfarer. We are geared up to controlling the pressure more accurately.'

'Admiral Burleigh has told me what your daughter plans to do. I hope it works, for all our sakes, though I don't know what the other members of the Directorate will say when they find out I've let you go.'

Commander Duncan grasped his arm. 'We'll be back. I don't know when, but I somehow don't think it will be too long.'

'Good luck, Jim.'

The Commander smiled. 'Thanks.'

MIKE Hardy knocked gently on the door and pushed it open a little. 'Your father has arrived on Orion and the Admiral wants to get him aboard as soon as possible because of the pressure differential.' He gaped as she stood up in her leotard.

Cassi smiled as his surprise. 'Posh dresses are no good around ship, Mike. Above all, you need to be comfortable.' She pulled on her overalls and did up the velcro fastenings.

'Can I help with anything?' he said.

She smiled. 'Of course. You can make us all a nice cup of tea.'

THE reunion was a happy one and the tough Mike Hardy found himself fighting back the tears as he watched Cassi in her father's embrace. For a long time, they stood together as he observed them over a tray of cups. Eventually, they realised he was there.

'Thanks, Mike,' said Cassi wiping the tears from her own eyes with the back of her hand. 'You two have met, haven't you?'

The Commander reached out his hand. 'I understand you've been taking good care of my daughter. I thank you for that.'

Mike shook it. 'Are you all right, sir?'

Jim smiled genuinely. 'I will be soon. The change in pressure has helped considerably already. After having spent so much time in Andromeda, Earth pressure takes some getting used to again.'

'It nearly killed you,' Cassi said as she picked up a mug and began to sip the hot liquid.

'I'm all right now I'm back where I belong.'

The Marshal frowned. 'Does this mean you will never be able to return to Earth?'

The Commander shook his head. 'Not for long at a time. I lived for five

years on Mythos and her sister planets, Pymane, Erutha and Durandor.'

'Five years? With the to-ing and fro-ing, that must make you pretty old.'

Jim smiled. 'The conditions are...were ideal for life, Marshal. Especially with my kind of body.'

'What's so special about your body?'

'It's not the same one I left earth with. That died long ago.'

'I don't understand.'

'Neither do I,' said Cassi.

Jim Duncan looked at his daughter. 'Do you really want to know?'

She looked shocked. 'Of course.'

'It's a long story. Can I suggest that we get launched first and then I'll fill you in as we go. There may not be much time. In fact, it may already be too late.'

Cassi smiled. 'You're right. What do you want me to do?'

'Everything. After what the Admiral told me when he met me, I believe you capable of running this ship alone if need be.' He shook his head. 'He's going to have one dickens of a job explaining the details to the rest of the Directorate.'

'Will he bother, do you think?'

'He'll have to. However, he has agreed to maintain radio silence until after we've gone.'

'I suppose he won't have any choice from another angle. Orion's crew are bound to talk when they return to Earth.'

'They will have plenty to talk about.'

Cassi turned to the Marshal. 'You don't have to come with us, Mike.'

'Yes,' agreed the Commander. 'We could be gone for a long time and it might turn out to be very dangerous.'

'I have no choice,' he said with a slight shrug. 'I promised the Admiral I'd make sure you both got back safely.' He grinned. 'Anyway, I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

Cassi moved a little closer. 'You mean you can stand women drivers for a while longer?'

He swallowed. 'If they are as good as you - yes.'

Cassi looked at him from under long eyelashes for a moment and then held her cup in the air. 'If you keep making tea like this, I'll vote for you to stay permanently.'

THE retros fired once for less than a second and Wayfarer moved slowly away from Orion. Clamps now retracted, she was free.

'Critical Mass minus three minutes >' said the red screen as Cassi fixed her seat belt and glanced at her colleagues and noted the difference in their deportment. Jim Duncan sat back, relaxed, while Mike Hardy fidgeted nervously with the end of his strap.

'Live simulation sequence >' Cassi said to Iris.

'Enter Time and Date >'

'08:00 - 16:03:2020.'

'Date accepted. Input co-ordinates >'

Cassi punched figures into the keyboard while the others watched.

The red screen said; 'Critical Mass minus two minutes >'

'Co-ordinates accepted >' wrote Iris on her monitor. 'Confirm speed and direction >'

Cassi paused for a moment and then said 'Interact Wayfarer One trajectory with Wayfarer Two velocity profile.'

The tension mounted as the red screen stated boldly; 'Critical Mass in one minute >'

Jim Duncan glanced at his daughter. 'Are you all right, Cassi?'

She nodded. 'Yes. Stand by to launch. Light speed in seventeen minutes and...' She glanced quickly at the red screen. 'Forty seconds.'

'Nine >'

'Stand by Main drive.'

'Seven >'

'Main drive standing by >'

'Five >'

'Course computed. Awaiting instructions >'

'Four >'
'Activate Auxiliary Drive.'
'Three >'
'Auxiliary drive activated >'
'Two >'
'Follow computed trajectory, Iris.'
'One >'
'Trajectory accepted >'
'Hold tight, gentlemen. This could be bumpy.'
'Critical Mass achieved. Main drive activated >'

Orion began to recede in the rear screens as Wayfarer Two dipped her nose towards Terra and accelerated rapidly. Mike Hardy felt a twinge of anxiety creep over his body at the sight of the planet rushing towards the screen so fast. He needn't have worried. Cassi sat, calm and collected, as the great ship doubled her speed every few seconds.

'Activate Proton Drive when ready,' she said and Iris responded appropriately.

The temperature began to rise rapidly as they entered the atmosphere and began to follow the planet's curvature. The vague outline of China moved slowly beneath them and Mike began to feel excitement gradually replacing the fear. This was not a shuttle on which he had ridden so many times between Europoort Launch Area and Orion Station but an interstellar space cruiser capable of phenomenal speeds as he had already witnessed.

'Speed - 153,600km/h >' stated the red screen in front of him and he swallowed as he watched the figures escalating rapidly. As the ship swung over the Americas, he felt the Proton Drive drop in and the pitch of the whining rose to a crescendo that almost pierced his eardrums as Wayfarer burst out of the Earth's stratosphere under full thrust. So this is what it felt like to really fly.

The adjusted internal pressure made the G-forces bearable as Wayfarer rocketed towards Sol at half light speed and his limited knowledge of astromathematics reminded him that it would take only sixteen minutes to reach their sun at that speed. However, it took a lot less as the Proton Drive pushed the ship forward faster and faster. Venus was almost a blur on the screen as they passed by less than fifty-thousand kilometres from the planet's surface, thus giving the drive all the push it needed.

The clock said seventeen minutes and thirty seconds precisely when Iris said; 'lum - 1 >'

Half an hour later, the whining died away as Iris automatically cut the Proton Drive.

Cassi relaxed. 'Well. We are now under inertia.' She smiled at her two companions. 'According to Newton's Law, nothing can stop us now.'

Famous last words!

ΣΕΑΡΧΗ

Commander James Duncan, now fully recovered, with the assistance of Marshal Michael Hardy, kept an eye on the smooth running of the ship while Cassi began the search pattern.

'How will she know how to find the other ship?' asked Mike as they checked over the stores.

'To be frank, neither of us has any idea nor, I feel, any real hope of knowing even where to start looking for Wayfarer One.'

The Marshal looked puzzled. 'Then why are we here?'

'Because while there is even a million to one chance, Cassi will try, with or without me, or you for that matter.'

'Just to find a lost space-ship?'

The older man looked round. 'And ten men, don't forget.'

'But surely they will all be dead by now.'

'Not necessarily. Don't forget that, in Earth time, they only left ten and a bit months ago on a journey intended to last for up to fifteen years.'

'Then they really could be alive and well.'

'Possibly. They will not, however, be on the original course.'

'How do you know that? The ship will be heading for the extremity of the system and, therefore, too small for even the long-range scanners.'

'That's true, of course. However, Wayfarer One does have an extremely powerful transmitter on board. If she was anywhere within the Solar System, we would have picked up some signal from her by now. Even at the very outer edge of Charon's orbit, radio signals would take less than six hours to reach Earth.'

'And we haven't heard from them in ten months?'

'Exactly.'

Mike looked thoughtful. 'How far away is ten month's worth of radio signal?'

'Well, as you know, light travels at just over a billion kilometres per hour. Ten months divided by one hour multiplied by one billion is...'

'One hell of a long way.'

Jim smiled. 'Precisely. And that's just at single light speed. Don't forget that I got to Andromeda and back in a tenth of the time, relatively speaking.'

'But you were going a lot faster and, therefore, the time variation would be greater.'

'We don't know that. All we do know is that Wayfarer One hit light speed at roughly the same point in time-after-launch as Wayfarer Two did. If Commander Markham gained control of the reactor quicker than I did, and managed to cut the motor soon afterwards, they could be somewhere relatively close, perhaps even within our own galaxy.'

'So what are the options?'

'Firstly, Wayfarer One could be within our Solar System. However, if she is, they must be disabled or their radio out of action.'

'Or dead.'

Their eyes met. Jim nodded. 'Or dead. If they are smashed up on any of the giant planets, we have no chance at all of locating them below the cloud layers. The luckiest we might be is to find the wreckage on one of the asteroids or moons.'

'How will you find it on one of those?'

'By energy release. The reactor core will not decay for several centuries so, with Iris's help, Cassi will be able to locate any radio-active emissions from the ship, even if it has been totally destroyed.'

'Is that why we are taking such a roundabout journey?'

'That's right. We followed Commander Markham's route as far as the asteroids at which point he could have gone in any direction. They were not on Mars nor either of her moons so, at this moment, we are racing around the outer rim of the asteroid belt just in case they have piled up on one of them. We shall know for certain in...' He consulted his watch: 'Four and a half hours. Even at ten times light speed, it will take thirteen hours to complete the synodic circuit and if we go any faster, Iris might miss any emissions from the crippled ship.'

'Then what?'

'Then we head for Jupiter. Iris is scanning both ways at present so if Wayfarer One is anywhere within Jupiter's orbit other than close to the planet itself, Iris will find her.'

'But you wouldn't pick up the emissions if she was on Jupiter itself?'

'Not a chance. Jupiter throws off so much electromagnetic radiation that we'd have no hope of finding her on or even close to the planet. Anyway, if they're on Jupiter the crew are all long dead - crushed by the extreme pressure. It is possible she is on one of the moons but we will have to get in pretty close to even recognise any unusual energy dissipation.'

'When are we likely to get there?'

'About twenty-one hundred hours. I'm going to take over from Cassi in about an hour. She's been at it all night with hardly a break.'

'Clearing your name means a lot to her, doesn't it?'

The Commander put his hand on the other man's shoulder. 'Mike, as I am sure you've found out already, Cassiopeia Duncan is one very special person.'

'She saved your life, you know.'

'By bringing me on board? Yes, I guessed it was Cassi who arranged that.'

'Don't you know the full story?'

Jim Duncan frowned. 'What do you mean, the full story?'

'Didn't the Admiral tell you about what she did with Orion Station?'

The Commander stiffened. 'Only that she did something pretty spectacular to

exert pressure on the powers that be to have me released so we could make this journey. I asked her about it and she said that she took the Admiral for a ride. But she wasn't very specific.'

Mike roared with laughter. 'Took him for a ride? I like that. Didn't you hear just how she did it?'

'No,' he said warily.

Mike told him.

Jim was dumfounded. 'You mean she actually took Orion into orbit at light speed and reversed time?'

'You had died.'

'I had what?'

'I was with her when she heard it from the Admiral. I thought she took the news pretty well at the time. I imagined she'd be totally devastated but she wasn't. I'll bet she was planning what she would do even then.'

'Did the Admiral know what had happened?'

'Not at first. It took the change in time and the fact you were alive again to convince him. By now, everyone will know, of course.'

'Well I'll be blown.'

WAYFARER One was not among the asteroids. Nor was it on any of Jupiter's moons. As the second day began, the great bulk of Saturn loomed ahead.

Cassi turned to her father. 'I would like to cut in under the rings in case Wayfarer is among them. Iris can't sort emissions from static at this distance.'

'Not at light speed, you're not. Have some respect for the outer hull. It can only stand so much punishment.'

Cassi smiled. 'Okay.' She faced Iris. 'Cut Proton Drive. Stand by reverse thrust.'

'Reverse thrust standing by >'

'Better belt up,' said Cassi to the men.

'Is that a joke?' grinned Mike.

Cassi frowned. 'Should it be?'

The men laughed.

'Emergency reverse thrust,' said Cassi suddenly and both men lifted into the air as the ship rapidly decelerated.

'Put me down,' shouted the Marshal as he tried to swim weightlessly.

Cassi grinned. 'Now that is what I call a joke.'

CASSI used up Wayfarer's momentum by doing a quick run around the outer moons - Titan, Hyperion, Iapetus and tiny Phoebe - but with no success. As the ship's impetus died away, Cassi allowed Saturn to pull the ship in close so that she could inspect the inner moons. It was an eerie feeling, nudging forward just under the rings with debris above them. There were large rocks and small ones as well as fine dust strewn out in a flat arc. Close by, on their left-hand side was Enke's Division as Cassi matched the ship's speed to that of Saturn's odd-shaped moon, Prometheus, which was not far out from them. A full orbit of Saturn would be almost two million kilometres and, at that slow speed, it would take just over fourteen hours to complete the circuit. It was their first opportunity to relax together.

'Tell me about water,' said Mike as they ate.

'Simple,' said Cassi as she bit off a piece of bread. 'What do you already know about it?'

Mike grinned. 'It's wet.'

'Ha, ha. What else?'

'You can drink it sometimes.'

'What happens when you heat it?'

He frowned. 'It gets hot and eventually turns to steam and floats away.'

'Yes, but why?'

'Is this some kind of a science lesson?'

'Bear with me. Why does it float away?'

'Because it becomes lighter.'

'Correct. The appliance of heat energy excites the electrons in the atoms of hydrogen and oxygen to move faster, in a higher orbit so to speak, and the molecules consequently become lighter. The warmer, lighter molecules float on top of the cooler, heavier ones.'

Mike grinned. 'If you say so.'

Cassi winked. 'I do.'

'I haven't asked you yet.'

She looked puzzled.

Mike laughed. 'It doesn't matter.'

Cassi glanced quickly at her father who was trying desperately to stifle laughter himself. 'What's up with you two?'

'The words you used are the traditional way to reply when someone asks you to marry them.'

Cassi stared for a long time at the man who had tried to help her and who had now risked his own life in what must have seemed a vain attempt to help others. 'What about Maggie?'

Mike looked thunderstruck. 'Maggie?'

'Is your memory so short?'

'No....but....'

Jim came to his rescue. 'Cassi. How does the boiling point of water relate to time travel?'

His daughter sighed. 'It doesn't.'

'Then what have you been yapping on about for the last ten minutes?'

'Do you want to know or don't you?'

Jim ignored her outburst. 'I do.'

Cassi suddenly grinned. 'I haven't asked you yet.'

The atmosphere dissipated as fast as it had congealed as they ate a little more.

Cassi continued to expound her theory after a while. 'When water gets cold, the opposite occurs. Denied external energy influx, the electrons slow down and become closer, as if huddling together for warmth. The heavier molecules sink to the bottom and the lighter ones float on top, as before.'

Both men were listening with interest. 'And...?'

'At precisely the point of freezing, a reversal occurs. As the water turns to ice, it becomes lighter and floats to the surface. If it didn't, all marine life would die in winter.'

'How do you know this?' said Mike. 'You've never seen it happen.'

She grinned sheepishly. 'Iris told me.'

'Did she also tell you how this all relates to time travel?'

'Not to time travel, just to time dilation. The speed of light is constant, Einstein was at least correct in that hypothesis. He was also right when he said that the speed of other things is relative. Hence his Theory of Relativity.'

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

'Sometimes.'

'How do you mean?'

'The speed of light is constant, right?'

'Right.'

'Regardless of the circumstances.'

'Right.'

'But we've just learned from the example of water that energy in a particle can internally change due to external influences.'

'Right,' he said, more slowly.

'But the mass of the water doesn't change. Only the weight per volume. It is the density which changes. The same with time. Time is related, not to the actual mass loss but to the co-efficient of the energy release.'

'But mass also alters with speed.'

'Yes, I know, but disproportionate to the speed, and the difference is time dilation. A moving object has energy applied to it - inertia, if you like. Inertia can be static like we say that a gas is inert, with only residual energy. Alternatively, it can be moving, like Orion was. I tell you what, that space station had one hell of a lot of inertia when she gained momentum.'

The Commander laughed. 'I'll bet she took some stopping.'

'She did,' said the Marshal with feeling.

'According to Newton's Law,' Cassi continued; 'It would take the same amount of energy to stop something on the move as to start it moving but we all know that's nonsense because of inertia, momentum. Ask Iris whether Wayfarer used the same amount of fuel stopping Orion as getting her moving in the first place. She'll tell you.'

'How does all this relate to time-dilation?'

'The faster you go, the more energy is on the move, the greater the differential between static mass and impetal mass. At low speeds, no-one notices. For instance - a Lunar shuttle at full escape velocity will have a time dilation of a mere thirty-three point three trillionths of a second. Hardly worth measuring, I think you'll agree.'

Jim smiled. 'Unless it is maintained for a very long time.'

'Come on, dad. It would take over a million years to accumulate a time dilation of one second.'

'So you'd have to go faster.'

'Much faster. Two-point-six million times faster simply to achieve the speed of light. Even then, the time dilation would only be two and a half seconds in every hour, one minute per day, six hours in every year. Unfortunately, or fortunately, whichever way you want to look at it, that doesn't happen at all.'

Both men looked puzzled. Her father asked 'Why not?'

'Because just as the energy suppression curve in water reverses at freezing point, so it does at light speed. Instead of modest time dilation, you suddenly get massive time contraction. Hours are concentrated into minutes or, in your case, eighty years into one month. A concentration factor of almost a thousand to one. Does not Earth's holy book, the Bible, say that a thousand years to man are as but one day to God. Maybe it's because He moves so fast.'

Mike laughed. 'I suppose Iris taught you that, too.'

'She certainly did.' She paused. 'It must be possible to work out the common ratio, assuming it is constant throughout the time-scale. I must get Iris onto it.'

'Don't forget that I was stationary for five years when Andromeda time would run parallel to Earth time. I was only actually in flight for seventy-five years in total. Thirty-seven out, thirty-eight back.'

'You know what that means?' pondered Cassi.

'Not precisely.'

'The ratio must be much higher than anticipated. In going to Andromeda in the first place, you must have actually gone back in time.'

'Why do you say that?'

'You were more than a month in Andromeda, weren't you?'

'Good Lord, yes, of course.' He paused. 'Here, you don't think....?'

Cassi raised her eyebrows and smiled at her father. 'Raises other possibilities, doesn't it?'

Mike looked puzzled. 'What are you two on about?'

'Wayfarer One.'

'What about Wayfarer One?'

'If she broke light speed which we must assume she did and then didn't actually stop anywhere but somehow found her way back to Earth, she could have arrived back before she left.'

'How long before?'

'That depends on how fast she went and for how long.'

'Could we do the same thing?'

'I guess we could. If we don't stop anywhere, we might well get back before we left.'

'Or crash into ourselves taking off.'

'Don't be silly, Mike. If we didn't leave in the first place because we had crashed into ourselves coming back, how on earth could we come back and crash into ourselves leaving?'

Mike looked confused.

Cassi leant towards him with a twinkle in her eye. 'It's a joke.'

THEY took it in turns to keep watch. It wasn't that they seriously expected much to happen but Commander Duncan was taking no chances. It was during Cassi's watch that Iris bleeped at her. She shook the sluggishness from her head and leant forward. 'Identify.'

Iris thought about it for a long time. 'Unknown >'

Cassi's reaction was instinctive. 'Stand by Auxiliary Drive.'

'Auxiliary drive standing by >'

'Enhance intruder.'

'Unable >'
'Advise location.'
'Unknown >'
Cassi felt a cold finger run slowly up her spine. She consulted the visual and could see nothing unusual. 'Right thirty degrees. Up twenty.'
'Confirmed right thirty, up twenty >'
Her father entered. 'I heard the drive start up. What is it?'
'I don't know.'
'Then ask Iris.'
'Iris doesn't know either.'
He sat down. 'What are you doing?'
'Edging closer to the rings for protection.'
'That's an incredibly dangerous manoeuvre, Cassi.'
'Better to fear the known than the unknown.'
'Very well. I'll leave it to you.'
Cassi glanced from screen to screen but nothing appeared. Iris beeped again.
'Identify,' she practically shouted.
'Unknown >'
She looked at her father. 'Is it a fault, do you think?'
'I doubt it. And it's not like Iris to cry wolf.'
She placed her fingers on the keyboard. 'I'm going inside the rings.'
'Cassi. For Pete's sake be careful.'
Slowly and carefully, the young woman edged the big cruiser up into the wide belt of debris surrounding Saturn, the Enke Division close on her left.
'Left ten degrees.'
'Confirm ten degrees left retro >'
'Where now?'
'Closer to the gap. I want all my options open.'
A slight scraping noise came as a hunk of rock slithered and bounced along the outer hull.
Jim winced. 'I hope we don't get too many of them. Are you going to bring in the main reactor?'
'Not yet. If we do and whatever it is out there is alive as Iris seems to indicate, they will be able to home in on our energy emission.'
'But what if we need it in a hurry? It takes the reactor ten minutes to reach critical mass.'
'I know. We'll have to rely on the auxiliary drive for the time being and hope it's enough to dodge whatever it is out there that we can't see.'
'I'll wake Mike.'
'Okay.' Cassi toyed with the sensors but nothing was revealed. She opened sensitivity to maximum but all she got back was static from the planet itself. Whatever it was, it was not driven by means of an anti-matter reactor.
'Identify,' she said once more in vain.
'Unknown >' came the reply.
'For heaven's sake, Iris, try.'
The door opened and the two men came in, Mike pulling a jumper over his head.
'Nothing,' she confirmed to their questioning faces. 'I'm going deeper into Delta ring.'
Mike sat down next to her. 'Perhaps that's what they want you to do.'
'You're assuming that whatever it is has intelligence? Human or the like?'
'Possibly. In my field, you have to be prepared for anything.' He took out his automatic and checked the action.
Jim was horrified. 'What are you going to do? Open the airlock and start shooting at it?'
Mike was going to argue but, at the last moment, decided not to and reholstered his gun.
'Up ten degrees,' Cassi said to Iris.
'Danger >' flashed Iris.
'Identify.'
'Unknown >'
Cassi seethed. 'I... am getting just a little sick of that word.'
Several times, pieces of debris dribbled along the hull, clanking as they went. Jim watched the vision screen as it filled with lumps of rock and ice

particles.

'Five degrees left,' said Cassi.

'Danger >'

Oh well, try again. 'Identify!'

'Unknown >'

'Iris. I'm going to take a magnet to your chips if you don't try and help me.'

The tension rose as the procession of rocks along the hull became constant. Cassi calculated quietly and then made her decision. 'Activate main reactor.'

'Activating main reactor. 10 minutes to critical mass >'

'Left retro. Full auxiliary power. Down thirty.'

'Confirmed >'

The bumping ceased immediately as they dropped out of the rings and began to fall towards the planet.

'You'll never get clear without the Main Drive, Cassi.'

'I know that. Let's just hope we don't reach the surface of Saturn in less than nine minutes.'

One by one, the rings passed the visual monitor as their speed rapidly accelerated under Saturn's mammoth gravitational pull. Occasionally, an odd piece of debris clanged against the metalwork as Cassi hung on tightly to the edge of the desk.

'Critical mass minus five minutes >' said the red screen as the outer atmosphere enveloped them.

'Full Auxiliary Drive.'

'Confirm full auxiliary drive >'

'Identify danger.'

'Danger negative >'

Cassi glared at Iris. 'Don't you give me that ghost routine. Identify danger.'

'Danger negative >'

She looked up. 'Father. Iris has gone nuts on me.'

'Critical mass minus four minutes >'

They were falling blind, the Auxiliary Drive having little effect on their downward careering, merely offering a stabilising function.

'Critical mass minus three minutes >'

Jim Duncan stared at the vision monitor. 'We're about to find out what the surface of Saturn looks like.'

Cassi grunted. 'Ye of little faith.'

'External pressure increasing >'

'Critical mass minus two minutes >'

Mike leant forwards. 'Will we make it?'

Jim sat down. 'We're about to find out.'

'Critical mass minus one minute >'

'External pressure approaching stress limit >'

'It was nice knowing you, Mike.'

'And you, Commander.'

'Will you two stop being so negative?'

'Critical mass achieved >'

'Activate Main Drive.'

'Main drive activated. Proton drive in nine seconds >'

They all felt the surge as the reactor bit on the thick atmosphere and Wayfarer began to slow and then move forwards instead. Gradually, forward momentum overcame free fall and they moved along parallel to the surface.

'Up ten, Iris.'

'Confirmed up 10 >'

'Proton Drive activated >'

Jim fastened his seat belt. 'Let's get out of here.'

'Not yet,' argued Cassi. 'I want to spiral up slowly. While we're down here, our radioactive emissions are clouded against the background. I want to use that to our advantage.'

'And sneak up on whatever it is up there?'

'Exactly. It's the only way.' She leant forward. 'Iris. Proton Drive at minimum thrust to take us clear.'

The Commander stared at the forward visual monitor. 'This is like driving through methane soup.'

'That's exactly what it is,' said Cassi.
'The cloud belt is thinning. We're almost clear.'
'Danger >' bleeped Iris.
'Specify location.'
'Location - above >'

Jim toggled with the vision monitor as they edged out of the clouds. Faintly seen against the brilliant background of the rings was a dark, eerie shape which hung, poised like a waiting vulture in the shadow of Prometheus.

Cassi held Wayfarer Two in steady orbit just on the top edge of the cloud belts as she leant forward and, for some bizarre reason, found herself whispering: 'Identify.'

Iris's reply came immediately. 'Wayfarer One >'

⊕YEΣTIONΣ

By all rights, Cassi should have been delighted they had found the lost ship. Instead, she growled at Iris. 'Why didn't you say so in the first place?'

'Instruction does not compute. Please repeat >'

The two men laughed, partly because of Iris's reply and partly to break the tension.

She stared at the ship on the vision monitor. 'So she didn't get very far after all?'

'No. It looks like Henry managed to cut the drive early and swing her tightly around Saturn until she fell into orbit.' Mike frowned. 'I wonder why he didn't radio his position back to Orion.'

'Perhaps he did,' said Cassi thoughtfully.

'What do you mean?' asked her father.

'If he broke light speed to any great degree and for any prolonged period, he may well have gone back in time as you obviously did. He could have been broadcasting before they built the radio to receive the message.'

Jim contemplated. 'I suppose it is just conceivable.'

'They've been gone for over ten months, Earth time, but any radio signal they sent would only take a little over an hour to reach Orion.'

'And Admiral Burleigh said no signal had been received.'

Cassi stared at the motionless space craft for some time. 'It looks stable, father. Should I move in closer?'

He nodded. 'You may as well.'

'Wait!' said Mike and Cassi hesitated. 'Why do you think she is just sitting there like that?'

The Commander shrugged. 'Perhaps she's been badly damaged.' He turned to his daughter. 'Any life signs?'

Cassi pressed buttons. 'Negative. No reactor emissions, no radio signals, no

sounds.'

'Does that mean they are all dead?' asked the Marshal.

Jim shook his head. 'Not necessarily. The equipment is not yet sophisticated enough to recognise whether there is life inside the ship or not. Only in fictional films are we able to do that.'

'Then we have to physically go and check?'

'It's the only certain way. However, we'll try the radio first.'

'One moment,' said Cassi. 'Let me drop back a bit so that we can keep it in view ahead and leave our own way clear in case of emergency. If I have to drop in the Proton Drive now, we'll probably hit something on the way out.'

'Good thinking, Cassi.'

Carefully, the young woman manoeuvred the giant cruiser until it was close enough to the dead ship to see it clearly but with enough room to move around if necessary.

Jim pressed the button. 'Wayfarer One this is Wayfarer Two. Do you read, over?'

Silence!

'Wayfarer Two to Wayfarer One. Come in, please.'

Still silence.

'Henry, this is Jim Duncan. If you are receiving, give me a sign. If the transmitter is down, flash an emergency beacon or something.'

Nothing.

'Looks like one of us is going to have to go across.'

Mike stood up. 'I'm the least useful around ship. I'll go.'

No-one argued as he headed for the space-suit lockers while Cassi double-checked the sensors.

'Take a portable transceiver,' advised Jim. 'I'll keep your channel permanently open.'

Mike nodded as he lifted the helmet and shuffled towards the airlock.

'Mike,' Cassi called. He turned. She smiled. 'Be careful.'

He winked. 'I will.'

The airlock door closed and, after a while, the green light turned red as the air pressure evacuated and the outer door opened. Jim and Cassi watched on the vision monitor as the Marshal clipped the reinforced safety line onto the locating ring in the hull and then pushed off towards the dark shape. In under five minutes, he had reached the other ship and was working his way, hand over hand, towards the airlock.

Jim Duncan zoomed in the camera and watched as Mike twisted the recessed lever and the outer door slid open. Jim saw the red light inside the airlock. 'Wayfarer One must have still got power up or Mike would have had to crank the airlock open by hand.'

'But still no emissions,' said Cassi with a glance at the screens.

'He's going inside.' The outer door closed.

'Pressurising airlock,' came the voice over the radio. 'Everything seems to be functioning all right so far.' Over the radio, they heard the hiss of the inner door. 'I'm inside the main corridor. All the suits seem to be here but there is no sign of life. I'm going forward to the flight deck.'

There was a long period of silence.

Jim pressed the button. 'Mike. Are you okay?'

'Affirmative. The control centre is deserted.'

Cassi leant forward. 'What is the flight status? Can you tell?'

'One moment, I'll take a look.' There was a pause. 'Seems normal. All monitors are on. The red screen confirms all the drives are in stand-by mode.'

'And Iris?'

'Last course plotted was to this spot.'

'From where?'

'It doesn't say. I'm going to check the crew quarters and storage areas.'

Room by room, he checked and reported back. Nothing. An hour later, he confirmed that Wayfarer One was totally deserted.

'This is a lot like the mystery of the Marie-Celeste,' the Commander said almost under his breath.

Cassi frowned. 'The what?'

'A ship found floating on a Terran ocean many centuries ago. No-one was on that either.'

'Where did Commander Markham and his crew go?'

Jim shrugged. 'Beats me. I guess their Iris might reveal something but it will need either you or I to go across.'

'I'll move closer,' said Cassi.

'Okay but don't snag the line.'

She smiled. 'I won't.'

Iris bleeped. 'Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Unknown >'

'Don't start that again, Iris. Identify danger.'

'Unknown >'

'Sensors to full. Commence full scanning pattern.'

'Danger >'

Jim leant forward. 'What's out there, Cassi?'

His daughter pushed buttons frantically for a moment and then shrugged.

'Nothing. It's all clear.'

'There must be something. Iris is not paranoid.' He went to the radio.

'Mike, something's happening but we don't know what.'

There was no answer. Cassi felt her skin crawl and her stomach muscles tighten instinctively.

'Mike, this is Jim. Come in, please.'

Silence.

'Dad,' screamed Cassi. 'Wayfarer One has disappeared.'

He looked around sharply. 'Disappeared?'

'She suddenly vanished from the screen. She's not there any more. Iris, locate Wayfarer One.'

'Unknown >'

'Identify danger.'

'Danger negative >'

'Dad. What's Iris playing at?'

He sat down. 'I don't know.'

Cassi was frantic. 'But where's Mike?'

'With Wayfarer One, wherever she is.'

'But she didn't go anywhere. The motors didn't fire, not even the retros. She should be still there.'

'The cable,' said the Commander suddenly. 'We were connected by Mike's safety cable. I must go and check.'

'Wait,' pleaded Cassi. 'I don't want to lose you, too.'

'I'm not going anywhere. I just want to take a look at the wire. I won't be long.'

He donned a suit and went into the airlock. In two minutes, he was back. 'The cable's still there and it is also firmly attached to something at the other end.'

'But it can't be. There's nothing there.'

'There has to be, else it would be slack.' He pressed the button again.

'Mike, do you read? Come in, please.'

Silence.

'How strong is that safety cable?' asked Cassi suddenly.

'Pretty strong. They use them to anchor the shuttles sometimes.'

She leant forward. 'Iris. Slow reverse thrust.'

'Confirm slow reverse >'

'What are you doing?'

'Finding out just how strong it is.'

'You'll not break it easily.'

'I don't want to break it. I want to produce a response from Wayfarer One.'

'What?'

'It's working. I've got an anti-matter emission registering on the sensors.'

'Then the ship is still here somewhere?'

'Yes, and someone is on board her, firing up the main drive.'

'Mike?'

She shook her head. 'I doubt it. Even if he knew how to do it, I don't think he'd risk it alone. He's not a pilot.'

'Perhaps he's using their Iris.'

'Not possible. His voice pattern will be mismatched.'

'Then who...?'

There was a sharp jerk followed by a mighty twang on the hull and they both

instinctively ducked.

'The cable's broken,' said the Commander. 'They've gone into main drive.'

Cassi acted immediately. 'Iris, follow that emission source.'

'Danger >'

'Blow the danger. Get moving.'

'Danger >'

'Iris won't deliberately drive us into a crisis, Cassi. You'll have to do it manually.'

She nodded. 'Iris. Maintain reactor emission on scan. Full ahead main drive.'

'Activating main drive as instructed >'

Cassi sighed. 'Thank you. Right ten.'

'Confirm right ten. Danger >'

They followed for ten minutes. 'Wayfarer One is accelerating away. She must have gone over to Proton Drive.'

'Then we must do the same. Iris, activate Proton Drive when ready.'

'Confirmed >'

The whining increased as the anti-matter reactor supplied the needed energy to the drive and Wayfarer Two moved smoothly forward in the wake of her sister ship.

The Commander looked thoughtful. 'I wonder what she's up to and where she's going.'

'I don't know the former but I can probably get the answer to the latter. Iris, project destination along present trajectory.'

It took a couple of minutes. 'Plot complete >'

'List likely alternatives.'

The list was not a long one.

ASCENDING ORDER OF PROBABILITY -

ROSS 248

ALPHA GROOMBRIDGE 34

BETA KRUGER

ARCHID

CHAPH

CIH

SHEDIR

MARFAK

SEGIN

OMICROM CASSIOPEIÆ

GAMMA CEPHIUS

KAPPA CASSIOPEIÆ

NEBULOID ANDROMEDÆ

LIST COMPLETE >

Jim leant forward, looking suddenly very worried about the last entry - the one with the highest probability factor. 'Good grief, I hope not.'

'They might not know what has happened there.'

'Straight into an imploding black hole. Not a nice way to go.'

'We must get through to them somehow.'

The Commander leant back. 'Well. If this really is another Andromeda Burn, we've got thirty-odd years to work out how to do it.'

Cassi glared at her father. 'That's not funny.'

'It wasn't supposed to be.'

'What do we do?'

'We must stop them, whoever they are.'

'But Mike's on that ship, remember?'

'How do you feel about him?'

She looked puzzled. 'How am I supposed to feel about him? He looked after me and had some degree of faith in me when everyone else thought I was nuts.'

'Do you love him?'

Cassi replied honestly. 'I don't know. I like him a lot.'

Jim shrugged. 'That's close.'

She remembered the conversation she overheard on the shuttle. 'There's someone else in his life. Someone called Maggie.'

'Maggie? Margaret Hardy?'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'You know her?'

Her father smiled. 'Yes, I know Margaret Hardy. She came to visit me when I

was in hospital.'

'Is she...is she nice?'

'Nice? Yes, I'd say very nice indeed.'

She looked down. 'I see.'

He gently lifted her chin with his fingers. 'She is also eight years old.'

Cassi frowned. 'I don't understand.'

'Mike's wife died four years ago and his sister looks after the little girl while he is on Orion.'

'Oh.'

Iris bleeped. 'Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Wayfarer One activating reverse thrust >'

Cassi responded instinctively. 'Hard left.'

'Confirmed >'

The screen went blank.

Jim leant forward and peered at the vision screen. 'Where did she go?'

'I don't know. Iris, locate Wayfarer One.'

'Unknown >'

'Not again,' she groaned. 'Wide one hundred and eighty-degree turn. Stand by Proton Drive.'

'Confirmed. Standing by >'

The vision screen remained stubbornly clear.

Iris bleeped. 'Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Wayfarer One approaching from above >'

'Emergency full ahead.'

'Confirmed >'

The two of them were pressed back into their seats as Iris obeyed and the ship immediately rocketed forwards under full thrust. The sensors went wild.

'She's trying to ram us,' shouted the Commander. 'What are they playing at?'

'Proton Drive,' said Cassi and Saturn began to grow rapidly on the vision screen once more.

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to hide. We fooled them once, maybe we can do it again.'

'It certainly looks as though they are after us for some reason.'

'Perhaps they think we're aliens.'

'They must be able to see us on their screens.'

'Yes. But who is this "they"? Mike said the ship was deserted.'

'Perhaps they were hiding from him and he missed them.'

'But why? It doesn't make sense.'

In a tight arc, Cassi swung Wayfarer Two round the back of Saturn, narrowly missing the rings and tucking well in behind the planet. The upper cloud belt loomed ominously close.

The Commander stared at the vision screen. 'Now where did she go?'

'I think they tried my trick and dived into the atmosphere.'

'Can you pick up their emission trail on the screens?'

'Negative. Not against Saturn's radio noise.'

'We can't just wait here.'

Cassi grinned. 'You're right, father. Iris, hard right and up. Full power.'

'Confirmed >'

The G-forces were extraordinary as the vessel strained at the tight turn and zoomed up under the rings and out behind them.

Jim laughed aloud. 'Now try and follow that, Henry Markham.'

'Locate Titan,' said Cassi to the computer.

Her father looked round. 'Titan?'

'It's the only one of Saturn's moons big enough to hide behind.'

'It's over a million kilometres from the planet's surface.'

'In Proton Drive? Three minutes,' said Cassi confidently.

They were not followed and Cassi used up the inertia after shut-down by revolving around inside Titan's atmosphere until they regained a low orbital status. 'Stand by reactor.'

'Main reactor standing by >'

'Why are you cutting the reactor?'

'So they won't find us by radio-active emission.'

'Good thinking. You're not just a pretty face.'

They searched the sky but it remained clear as they gradually relaxed. Cassi peered through the thick but icy-cold atmosphere of nitrogen and semi-liquid methane. 'Pity we can't land on Titan for a while.'

'Wayfarer can't land anywhere. She wasn't built for it.'

'Then how did you get down in Andromeda?'

Jim looked guilty. 'I crashed.'

'You did what?'

Her father grinned sheepishly. 'I crash-landed on one of the moons of Mythos. The Andromedans came and found me there. If it wasn't for them, I'd be long dead.'

'You once mentioned you were different to me. How is that?'

'I'm afraid most of my body was destroyed. In fact, there is very little left of the real me. Most of my body was manufactured on Mythos.'

Cassi was astounded. 'You are an Android?'

'Not exactly. The Andromedans don't look exactly like Earth people, you see, and neither do their androids.'

'But your fellow travellers? Alpha and the others...?'

'They manufactured a new body for me that was indistinguishable from the original - that's why I have lived so long. It's still my own brain and memory but a manufactured body and the same was true of the others. They made their bodies to be so similar in appearance to humans as to be acceptable to them.'

'But androids can't reproduce. How could you father me?'

'They preserved several phials of my sperm before I...changed bodies. I used one to conceive you on the way back with an egg taken from a female Andromedan I grew to love very much. I wanted to have a child from her. A human child.'

Cassi's eyes went wide. 'So I am an alien after all.'

Her father shook his head. 'Not really. The most important parts of you are perfectly normal human. It's in your longevity genes you are most different. Like all Andromedans, you have the potential to live forever.'

She grunted. 'Unless Wayfarer One gets me first.'

He laughed. 'You have a remarkably keen sense of self-preservation, my dear. I think it will take more than a ghost-driven space cruiser to eliminate you.'

'Will you live forever, too?'

'Only if I stay in space. They couldn't make me able to take Earth's atmospheric pressure. Somehow, between us, we miscalculated the difference between the two planets. You however, being true human, can adapt more easily.'

'I was happy on Earth. The people were odd yet, for some reason, homely.'

'I know the feeling. That's why I came back.'

She frowned. 'I thought you came home because Andromeda was imploding.'

'We didn't know the full extent of the problem at first. The Andromedans modified Wayfarer while I was there.'

'They modified Iris, too, didn't they?'

He looked at her oddly. 'How could you know that?'

'Iris knows too much about things outside the Solar System. If she was just programmed for a run around the outer planets, she wouldn't need so much intensive programming.'

'You, my girl, are too clever by half.'

She grinned. 'I'm your daughter.' She paused. 'Tell me. Does either ship have radio direction-finding capabilities?'

'Not very sophisticated ones. They were designed only to locate a homing beacon on Orion.'

'I see.' She looked thoughtful for a moment and then touched a button. 'Wayfarer One, do you read?'

The reply was immediate. 'Where have you been?'

Cassi was ecstatic. 'Mike?'

'Of course. Who did you think it was? Genghis Khan?'

Cassi looked puzzled and whispered to her father. 'Who's this Genghis Khan? One of Commander Markham's crew?'

Jim laughed. 'Not exactly. Mike, what have you been up to?'

'Up to? I'm just sitting here patiently waiting for you.'

Cassi glanced at her father. 'Waiting?'

'Of course. I can't fly this thing. Iris just ignores me like you said she would. What else could I have done for the last week?'

Father and daughter replied in unison. 'Week?'

'Of course. I've done nothing but eat and watch the clock. I thought you'd crashed or something.'

'Mike,' said Jim Duncan carefully. 'Are you alone?'

'Of course I'm alone.'

'Mike, listen carefully. You've got to get out of there.'

'Get out? Why?'

'Just believe me. Where are you?'

'Where you left me, sitting under the rings in the shadow of Prometheus.'

'Go to the airlock now and leave the outer door open. If the ship starts to move, jump out and we'll pick you up. We can be there in four minutes.'

'Move? This ship's not going anywhere. The reactor is still shut down.'

Cassi sat in front of Iris. 'Proton Drive. Take us out of orbit.'

'Confirmed >'

The ship began to whine as it banked sharply out of Titan's atmosphere and headed towards Saturn at full speed.

Jim pressed the button. 'Are you out, Mike?'

'Putting on my helmet now.'

Cassi became frantic. 'Hurry up, please, Mike. Get outside.'

'What's the urgency?'

'Don't ask questions, just do it. Do it for me.'

'For you? Why the sudden personal interest after leaving me alone for so long?'

'Quickly. I'll explain when we meet.'

'Cassi. Will you marry me?'

She glanced sideways at her father who seemed to be deeply engrossed in something on the screen. 'Yes!'

There was a sudden note of urgency in Mike's voice. 'I'm on my way.'

ANΣΩEPΣ

It didn't take long to get Mike safely back on board Wayfarer Two. He found it a somewhat frightening experience without the reassurance of the safety line but Cassi managed to edge the ship carefully forward until he could get a grip on the hull and swing himself in through the open airlock. Commander James Duncan remained at the controls as his daughter left the flight deck to welcome home the hero. He checked the status, the scanners, the radio, everything - several times. Eventually, the door opened and the two of them entered, arm-in-arm. Cassi looked flushed and excited while Mike just looked guilty.

Jim turned to Iris. 'Reverse thrust. Edge back to limit of visual scanner range.'

'Confirmed >'

'Stand by Main Drive.'

'Main drive standing by >'

The Commander relaxed and turned to face them. 'I guess you two know what you're doing.'

Cassi stepped towards her father and touched his arm. 'Do you mind?'

Jim smiled and glanced at the Marshal. 'Not at all. I hope you'll be very happy together.'

Mike looked relieved. 'Thank you, Commander.'

The men shook hands. 'Take good care of my Cassi.'

Mike smiled. 'I don't think your daughter is going anywhere for a while. I have convinced her that she must meet Maggie before she commits herself completely. Only then will I finally accept her answer to my spontaneous proposal.'

Commander Duncan adopted a stern face and voice. 'We still have a lot to do so you'd better behave yourselves in the meantime.'

Mike looked embarrassed. Cassi grinned cheekily. 'Father, I really don't know what you mean.'

NOTHING more happened to Wayfarer One. For three days, they sat and watched and watched and watched, occasionally trying the radio but with no response. Mike strode up and down across the flight deck. 'Where on earth can the crew have vanished to? Everything around this part of the Solar System is such an alien environment to humans.'

Jim shrugged. 'Cassi is convinced that this is all some peculiar kind of space/time drift.'

'That could explain the differences in the two ships. I suppose, at a pinch, it could even account for Iris being confused. I know I am. What it doesn't begin to explain, however, is where the crew have gone. They and the ship would surely have been shifted in the same time dilation after take-off.'

'Compression,' corrected Cassi as she walked in, her pale blue overalls looking immaculate for once. 'It's only dilation up to light speed. After that, it is time compression.'

'Could the two have crossed somehow? The crew gone one way and the ship the other?'

She shook her head. 'That doesn't seem likely unless they all left the ship and came back again after she had broken light speed.'

Mike butted in. 'What was all that you were telling me about Wayfarer One suddenly leaving and then attacking you?'

'Perhaps it wasn't.'

Her father looked around sharply. 'What?'

'Perhaps it didn't see us there. Mike says the ship didn't move but we saw it go away and followed it. Perhaps it just turned around and came back again.'

'But Mike would have seen us on his scanner.'

'Not if we were in a different time field. If you remember, Iris was thoroughly confused by the whole thing and that's not like her.'

'You mean there might not have been any danger after all.'

'It's possible.' She picked up the clipboard. 'Look, let's list down all we know. Dad, you start.'

'Wayfarer One left Earth orbit with the crew on board.'

She wrote. 'Mike?'

'We must presume that she went to light speed at least.'

She nodded. 'I think that's a fair assumption.'

'She maintained radio silence for ten months.'

Cassi started to write again but then hesitated. 'We don't know that for certain. We only know that no signal was received at Orion Base during that period after the launch.'

'Okay. We know she must have arrived here at some stage.'

'That's true. What we don't know is when and neither do we know where she went in the meantime.'

'If anywhere.'

'I think we must assume that she went somewhere. After all, she's been gone ten months at least, possibly very much longer in their time.'

Jim slipped from the edge of the console. 'We know that Wayfarer One is here now.'

'Do we?'

Mike smiled. 'That was no ghost ship I walked around. It was real.'

'Okay,' she conceded. 'But we know we cannot rely on instruments anymore. Not even Iris got it right.'

'I wonder what their Iris made of all this.'

'There's only one way to find out. I'll go and take a look.'

'You, young lady, are not going within a kilometre of that ship. Not when it might up and leave at any moment.'

'We can prevent it doing so.' Cassi looked at her father enquiringly. 'Can we not anchor to her like I did to the space station?'

'Our clamps are not as strong as Orion's but they will take a fair bit of strain.'

Mike looked up. 'Enough?'

'Probably.'

Cassi jumped to her feet again. 'Then what are we waiting for?'

Her father was more cautious. 'Now, wait a minute. You've just seen what can happen. We could get separated by either time or space or both.'

'Not if we're locked together so one can't move without the other.'

Mike agreed. 'Is it not worth a try? We might just solve this whole mystery in one go.'

Jim gave in. 'If anyone can get to Iris, Cassi can.'

AND so, Cassi did. Within the hour, her father had manoeuvred Wayfarer Two close in to Wayfarer One and the clamps locked home. The two ships became as one.

Cassi hated space suits. They were always too big for her and she felt awkward and cumbersome but to cross from ship to ship there was no other way. Mike went with her.

'How will you get through to Iris?' he asked as he helped Cassi off with her helmet.

'I'll have to key the instructions in by hand. She will not be programmed to accept my voice pattern.'

'Can I help?'

She kissed the end of his nose and then smiled. 'This might take some time. Put the kettle on.'

Leaving her suit in a heap on the floor, Cassi stretched in her black leotard, did a forward flip to loosen up and then slipped into the swivel chair and rested her fingers on the keys. 'Right then, Iris Mark One, let's see what you've been up to lately.'

'LOAD RECALL,' she typed.

'Recall ready >' said the screen after a moment.

'RERUN POST-LAUNCH SIMULATION.'

'Searching database >'

Cassi's long fingers tapped impatiently on the top of the console as the computer hunted for the data among its memory banks. The recorded sequence began with the disengagement from Orion and the plunge towards Earth. It was very much a repetition of her own recent experience and the events raised little excitement although she guessed they probably had ten months ago. Mike brought tea and then a snack later as she watched it through carefully, taking odd notes on her clipboard. Earth fell behind quickly to be replaced by a reddish planet which just had to have been Mars. The speed showed as Lum 1 - light speed.

Mike got bored after a while and set off to explore the ship once more. Occasionally, he returned and contacted Jim on Wayfarer Two. However, there was no repetition of the previous experience. Both ships remained firmly locked together and any adjustment the Commander made to Wayfarer Two to remain in orbit was paralleled by the firmly-attached Wayfarer One.

On computer-synchronised visual replay, Wayfarer One started to head out, away from the sun, and soon passed through the asteroid belt at high speed. An hour later, Jupiter appeared and, soon, was left behind. Cassi was tempted to go on to fast forward but it was this section she wanted to see most of all, to find out what happened on approach to Saturn. She needn't have bothered. Saturn was virtually a blur on the vision screen as it passed, the ship still accelerating rapidly. She saw neither Uranus nor Neptune as the whole sky seemed to be on the move and she had to rub her eyes to ensure that her eyesight wasn't becoming tired. It wasn't. The ship had been vibrating under full power and was leaving the Solar System in precisely the same way her father had done later. Cassi switched to fast rerun and, as she watched, the ship left not just the solar system but the Milky-Way Galaxy itself. It was less than an hour later that she became absolutely certain as to where Wayfarer One had been headed.

'IDENTIFY,' Cassi typed as an oval blur slowly began to grow in the centre of the screen but she knew what the answer was going to be before it came. She watched the sequence right through and then stood up slowly. *So that is what this was all about.*

Mike walked in. 'Finished?'

She nodded sadly.

He stepped closer and frowned. 'What is it?'

She told him. He sat down. 'I don't believe it.'
'Do you think I want to?' she yelled at him.
They were both silent for a long time.
'Where do you fit in?' he asked eventually.
She shook her head. 'I don't know any more. I'm all confused.'
'Is the data correct?'
'Iris would have no reason to lie.'
'And the crew?'
'Dead.'
'But for what?'
She looked up at him. 'Can't you guess?'
'But... but that's incredible. You're suggesting....'
'Precisely.'
'But your father...?'
'Is he? Are you sure?'
'But you can't mean...?'
'I don't like to think so but what alternative is there?'
He stared at the blank wall. 'The Professor was right.'
'What?'
'The Andromeda Burn.'
'But it had already happened.'
'He didn't know that and neither did your father, remember?'
'But where did they go wrong?'
'I don't know. But they made sure they got it right the second time around. Instead of killing the crew, they used them, or at least one of them.'
'They still got it wrong. They miscalculated the difference in atmospheric pressure.'
'It seems a strange thing for them to have done, doesn't it?' He shrugged.
'I suppose even they couldn't think of everything.'
'You may be right,' she said with resignation.
'And your father?'
'I don't know.'
'Do you tell him what you've found?'
'He will already know. He's not stupid.'
'But how...?'
'Why do you think he let us come here? He knew that I would probe the computer's memory banks. He knew that I would find out what really happened.'
'Yes, I did,' said a voice behind them.
Cassi jumped to her feet. 'Father!'
'I think we can stop that pretence now.' He held the gun pointed straight at Mike. 'I'll take your automatic, Marshal - slowly.'
Mike obeyed and dropped his weapon to the floor.
The Commander picked it up. 'I convinced myself that you would not find out the whole truth about the Andromeda Burn, but I guess I should have known better. I trained you just a little too well, Cassi.'
'But it can't be true.'
'I'm afraid it is. As you so easily found out, Wayfarer One reached Andromeda before me. Fortunately, it didn't crash and all the crew survived. Until Mythos, that is.'
'But they didn't have to kill them.'
'They needed their bodies. The crew had to die.'
'But why?'
'Mythos was dying, Cassi.'
'So couldn't they look elsewhere?'
'They did. But there were only three other habitable planets in their system but they were in danger, too. They began to look farther afield but didn't have the means to leave the galaxy. Then, one fine day in the month of May, as they say in England, what should turn up on their doorstep but an interstellar cruiser capable of long-distance space travel.'
'Wayfarer One,' Mike said.
'Exactly.'
'But why did the crew have to die?'
'The Andromedans needed to see what they were like, what made them tick.'
'But how did Wayfarer One get back here?'
'I thought you knew that already.'

'Iris only recorded the launch and the part of the journey back as far as Saturn. When they got that far, for some reason, they decided to return to Andromeda.'

'What?'

'It's all on the computer. See for yourself.'

'I'll take your word for it. Does it say why they opted to return?'

'They were dying.'

'I see. So they got that wrong, too.'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'What do you mean?'

'It doesn't matter. Does the computer say who was on the ship?'

'Not precisely, although it was not the original crew.'

'How do you know that?'

'They had to re-programme the voice-patterns on Iris.'

'Ah. You would know that, wouldn't you?'

'Who was on the ship?'

'They would have to be Andromedans, I guess. Manufactured to look like humans as I was.'

'Is that what happened to your own crew?'

'More or less. Only two men died en-route. The others died on Mythos.'

'Why?'

'As I said, their bodies were needed.'

'Why?'

'For research and reproduction.'

'For what?'

'The Andromedans needed human women to act as guinea-pigs. Mary and June were perfect for the job.'

Cassi was disgusted. 'The two women were used to make half-aliens, like me?'

'Of course. All in the name of science.'

'Father, you disgust me.'

The Commander held up his hands. 'It wasn't me. I didn't touch them.'

'But you approved of it.'

'I had no choice.'

Cassi sat down and began to cry. Mike moved forward but was halted by Jim's gun. 'Don't, Mike. I don't want to hurt you but I will if I have to. Too much is at stake.'

The Marshal's shoulders slouched in resignation. 'What happened to the Andromedans who left on this ship?'

'They must have died. It is obvious to me they found something alien in the Solar System and endeavoured to return to Andromeda.'

'Then where are their bodies?'

'Andromedans are quite different to humans, Mike. Human bodies take many years to decay completely but Andromedans turn to dust in a matter of hours. I expect if we look around, we will find their powdered remains somewhere.'

'Is that what will have happened to those who died on Earth?'

'Yes.'

'Did the Andromedans come to colonise Earth?'

Jim nodded. 'That's why they came.'

Cassi dried her eyes. 'How could they do it without females? All the ones that returned with you were males.'

Jim smiled. 'They would use human women.'

'Then how could they reproduce Andromedans?'

'The Andromedan strain is stronger. True human life would die out after a couple of generations.'

'Couldn't the first lot have managed alone?'

'It was certainly thought so. However, in view of what happened, it's a good thing for them I came along with a duplicate ship. I think we will find that the Andromedans on Wayfarer One discovered they could not take the difference in atmospheric pressure. For that reason, the new Andromedans would be born on Earth itself and be adaptive, as you are.'

'Then why did they need you?'

'To get them safely down to Earth.'

Mike coughed. 'So you are a traitor to the human race.'

'In a manner of speaking, I suppose you could say that I am.'

'And Andromeda is not dying after all?'

'Of course it is. However, it will be many, many centuries before

astronomers on Earth find out because light takes so long to cover the intervening distance.'

'Over two million years,' murmured Cassi.

The Commander nodded. 'Precisely. And in the meantime, the Andromedans will have dominated the Earth.'

'But they are dead.'

'Yes, they are. But there is me...and you.'

'Me?'

'You have the opportunity of becoming the mother of a whole new human race. One that does not fight or squabble. A race which lives in total peace, forever.'

'By eliminating the existing human race?'

'Only by natural selection.'

'But how? The Andromedans are all dead.'

'But I'm not and neither are you.'

'You've got to be joking. I am having no part in all this.'

'But it is for the long-term good of the human race.' He indicated a box in the doorway. 'I have brought life seeds from Wayfarer Two. With them, I will conquer, with or without your help.'

'But I saved your life.'

'So you did. And for that, I will let you live now.'

'What do you mean?'

'I have disabled the Proton Drive of Wayfarer Two. I intend to leave you here, on board her.'

'You're not going to leave us to die?'

'Not at all. You will get back to Earth, eventually. Under normal power, it will take around six years. I suggest you just head back there and make babies on the way. Perhaps, later, you and I will go into competition together.'

'You mean any child I have...?'

He nodded. 'It will be Andromedan, regardless of who the father is. Either way, we will win, Cassi.'

'I can't believe this is happening. I trusted you and loved you.'

'You still can. By the time you arrive at Earth, it will be too late. It seems you have two choices - follow along and arrive in time to see paradise being established or drift around aimlessly for the rest of your lives.'

'Forever?'

'In Mike's case, definitely not. In your case, only as long as you can keep growing food. However, you will run out in time so you would be better off joining me on the New Earth. We might even develop a new body for Mike so that he can last longer.'

'We won't do it.'

'Nevertheless, I must now ask you to return to Wayfarer Two while I set course for Terra. Do have a pleasant time together. See you back at the space-station.'

They had no choice. Cassi was torn apart with grief but she put on her suit and followed Mike into the airlock.

'He could kill us both now,' said Mike as the pressure dropped.

'He won't do that.'

'How can you be so sure?'

'He is still my father.'

The outer door opened and, hand in hand, they leapt for Wayfarer Two and entered the airlock. Minutes later, they were removing their suits. By the time they reached the controls, Commander James Duncan and Wayfarer One had gone.

ΔΕΣΠΕΡΑΤΙΟΝ

Cassi frantically tried to prevent herself crying in anguish as she sat in front of Iris. Mike felt useless. There was nothing he could do to comfort her as she ran her hands over the keys, her tears dripping onto the console.

'LOCATE WAYFARER ONE,' she typed, no longer able to control her voice.

'Unknown >' said the white screen.

'Blow!' she said.

'What could he have done to disconnect the Proton Drive?' asked Mike.

She shrugged. 'Any number of things. He told me he was an electronics engineer before the space programme so it could be a manual break somewhere in the circuitry.'

'Or a software corruption, maybe?'

'Unlikely. He knows I would find that, given time.'

'Perhaps that's what he wants you to think.'

'Let's try the computer first. Iris, activate Auxiliary Drive.'

'Auxiliary drive activated-Enter trajectory >'

'Right twenty. Trajectory for Terra.'

'Confirmed >'

'Stand-by Main Drive.'

'Main Drive standing by >'

She looked at Mike. 'So far so good. Stand by Proton Drive.'

'Unable >'

'Identify fault.'

'Unauthorised access not permitted >'

'Advise condition of anti-matter reactor.'

'Stand-by >'

'The reactor itself seems to be working. It's just that we can't control it.'

'Then the break must be within the software itself.'

'Let's try. Iris, full ahead Main Drive.'

'Main drive activated. time of arrival Terra - 0322 hours:15/4/2026 >'

'He was right. Six years on Main Drive. Iris, release interface with drive computer.'

'Interface released. All future input by keyboard only >'

Cassi selected a large volume from the drawer beneath the console and then moved across to the drive computer and typed 'END.'

The screen said; 'Ready >'

She typed 'LIST PROGRAM PROCEDURES AND FUNCTIONS,' and the screen filled with what appeared to Mike as a meaningless jumble of words.

'LIST DRIVE.INI.'

A dozen rows of lines that set up all the initial variables filled the screen and, one-by-one, Cassi checked them all, comparing the results with her manual.

'LIST DRIVE.SYS.'

Same again. 'Every line correct.'

'LIST PROTONDR.EXE.'

This one she checked extra carefully. Perfect.

Mike sat down and watched as Cassi checked every other procedure, listing each in turn and making comparisons.

Two hours and twice as many cups of tea later, Cassi was still scratching her head. 'The programme is complete. Everything checks out.'

'Try and run it again.'

'Okay.' She typed 'GO DRIVE'.

'Ready >'

'CONFIRM STATUS.'

'Auxiliary Drive on Stand-by >'

'Main Drive Activated - Full Ahead >'

'Proton Drive on Stand-by >'

'Hmm. Still not working.'

'What could he have done in so short a time?'

'We were over there some hours, remember, and he knew I would find out the truth.'

'So he had enough time if he knew what he was doing.'

'But he doesn't.'

'What do you mean?'

'Father can use an on-board computer, of course, but he can't re-programme one.'

'How do you know?'

She glanced sideways at him. 'After nineteen years, I know. There was no need for him to know how to do it.'

'Why not?'

'Because all the general guidance was to designed to be controlled by the main computer on Mount....Aigoual. I think I've got it!'

'What?'

'Cast your mind back to that inquiry at the Director's residence. Why did Wayfarer Two end up going to Andromeda?'

'Because no-one could override the main guidance computer on Earth.'

'Exactly.'

Mike looked puzzled. 'But where does that get us?'

'How did father slow the ship down when we returned?'

'I don't know. You were there, not me.'

'We simply shut down the Proton Drive and deployed reverse thrust. What does that tell you?'

'That somewhere along the way he had found a way to override the Earth-based guidance computer.'

'Exactly. Wayfarer was only away for a month, Earth time, and therefore only a fraction of the way through its originally-prescribed mission - as far as they knew on Orion. Therefore, it would still be assumed to be under Earth control.'

'Yet it wasn't.'

'No, I was able to slow the ship normally, being unaware of any other kind of intervention at the time.'

'Hmm. I wonder how your father made the break.'

'He didn't do it with the normal mission software or I would have noticed upon re-entry. There has to be a physical link somewhere. Some way father found whereby he could switch-out the Earth-based control of the drives.'

'In other words, your father has now probably re-activated that switch so that the computer thinks it is under Earth Control from Mount Aigoual?'

'Precisely. And, of course, the operators will have shut that programme transmission down upon our return to Earth last week. The drive computer is waiting for a signal which will never come.'

Mike bent down to look under the console. 'We must find that switch.'

Both of them got on their knees and examined every inch of the console. They took off the covers and inspected all the circuit boards but there was no isolating switch that shouldn't have been there.

Cassi got up from her knees. 'It may not be a physical switch, of course. It could be a software command accessed by a password of some sort.'

'And we've got no chance of finding that. It'll be like looking for a needle in a haystack.'

Cassi looked thoughtful. 'Not necessarily. If he had been a programmer I would expect something very unusual, perhaps even an obscure osbyte call in machine code which would be very difficult to identify. However, he wasn't.'

'Then what?'

Cassi sat down. 'I don't know.'

'So we're stuck here in slow motion.'

'It looks like it.'

'Will he go through with his plan, do you think?'

She looked sad. 'I guess so.'

'How?'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean, how do you think he will do it?'

'By using the test-tubes from Andromeda.'

'Yes, but how?'

'I don't know. Perhaps your friend, Jon, at that hospital in Bruxelles will help him.'

'But won't all that take time? He only has six years before we get there, remember.'

'But don't you see, Mike? I cleared his name so Earth will accept him with open arms as he is known and recognised from years ago. He will be a home-coming hero this time and will be able to dictate almost anything he likes.'

'The same applies to yourself.'

'Not at all. Father is still a human, despite his replaced organs and the like. I am an alien. Doctor Pederson knows that, too. The people will probably try to eliminate me like they did before.'

'They didn't just try to kill you, Cassi. If that is all they wanted, Greg could have run you down with his car or shot you with his gun. No, it was important to their plan that you should be totally discredited in the process.'

'I don't understand.'

'What do you think the papers would say if it was revealed that you had been beaten up whilst carrying on what they firmly believe to be your normal profession? The whole thing would cause world-wide hilarity for a few days, the space programme would become a laughing stock and, worst of all, no-one anywhere, would believe anything you or your father had said.'

'The General would stoop to that level?'

'To stop the peaceful exploration of space, yes. It's well known that he would rather have those billions spent on arms and warfare. He has always wanted Orion used as a battle-station.'

'Perhaps people like that deserve what father is doing.'

'Producing this Andromeda-human species, you mean?'

'Exactly. It seems he might be doing the right thing after all.'

Mike smiled. 'A fellah called Hitler tried the same thing eighty years ago. He had the idea that he could produce a master race which would better the world.'

'Did he succeed?'

'Almost.'

'But if the scheme was for the benefit of mankind, what was wrong with it?'

'You're beginning to talk like your father.'

Cassi looked down. 'I'm sorry.'

'It didn't work because humans have rights. All humans, whatever their race. And regardless of the good intentions of others.'

'If this Hitler had succeeded, would the world have been a better place by now?'

Mike shrugged. 'Who knows? Unfortunately, there were a number of side-effects to those who didn't belong to this master race. People who didn't fit the mould were simply exterminated to make room for the others.'

'Do you remember this?'

Mike laughed. 'I may be older than you but I'm not that ancient. No, I was born fifty years after Hitler's day.'

'But what father is doing is somewhat different. Andromedans are peaceful. They would never kill to accomplish their aims.'

'Tell that to the seventeen crew-members who didn't return from Mythos.'

Cassi was silent for some time. 'I wonder what really happened to them.'

'I thought you said they had died. Even your father said the Andromedans experimented on them.'

'Wayfarer One's data-banks just said that their lives terminated. It doesn't say how.'

'Or when?'

She shook her head.

'So they could have died naturally. Your father said he was there for several years, don't forget. And there was a journey time of thirty-seven years to add to whatever age they were before leaving. They would all have been pretty old.'

'You could be right but none of this is solving how we get back to Earth in time to prevent my father playing God with the human race.'

'I'll bet he doesn't see it that way. After all, if it works out, the world will benefit.'

'Eventually,' Cassi said sadly.

They ate a little food while Cassi pored over the manuals some more. Eventually, she finished up in the appendix.

Her face lit up. 'Just a minute!'

Mike looked up. 'What is it?'

'I think I've found something.'

She typed 'HELPUTILS' and the screen listed ten lines of utility procedures.

'I think I've found out how he did it. Iris, Interface with Drive Computer.'

There was the inevitable pause. 'Interfaced > Proceed under voice control >'

'Stand by Proton Drive.'

'Proton Drive standing by >'

'Activate Proton Drive.'

'Unable >'

Cassi smiled a wry smile and said; 'Input override password.'

Iris responded as she expected. 'Enter password -- >'

'Got him!' she said triumphantly. 'I now need a four-letter word.'

Mike smiled. 'I know a few of those.'

'Tell me some.'

'I can't imagine your father using most of the ones I have heard.'

'We have to start somewhere. Four digits with a choice of twenty-six letters and ten numbers. That's over a million and a half possible permutations.'

'This could take forever.'

'Not necessarily. It will have been some code he wouldn't forget easily.'

'Try Mars.'

'M-A-R-S,' typed Cassi.

'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'Hmm. Base?'

'B-A-S-E.'

'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'Damn.'

'D-A-M-N.'

'Hey. I didn't mean that literally.'

'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'M-O-O-N.'

'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'L-U-N-A.'

'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'Wouldn't it be easier to contact Earth and get them to activate the drive on our behalf?'

'It will take over an hour and a half for the message to reach Orion, assuming they are listening and there are no time differences. No, we're on our own. Think of some more words.'

They tried Beta, Zeta, Iota, Juno, Crux, Lyra, Rhea, Grus, Lynx, Pavo, Vela - every word, planet, moon, star and constellation they could think of and the result was identical. 'Input error - Enter password -- >'

'Help me, Iris. Who's side are you on, anyway?'

'Command does not compute. Enter password -- >'

'This could take a very long time.'

'Father had lots of time to think about it. It was one very long journey to and from Andromeda.'

'The Andromeda Burn.'

'Exactly.'

'Burn.'

'What?'

'A four letter word associated with long distance travel to another planet or stellar body.'

Cassi's heart was in her mouth as she carefully typed 'B-U-R-N.'

'Password accepted. Proton Drive ready >'
'Yippee!!!' She threw her arms around Mike, kissing him frantically, and he swung her round and round. Cassi shouted over his shoulder 'Iris, Activate Proton Drive.'
'Activating Proton Drive in ten seconds and counting >'
'Nine >'
They sat down. 'We did it.'
'Eight >'
'Better get strapped in.'
'Seven >'
'Will we make it in time?'
'Six >'
'There's only one way to find out.'
'Five >'
'What will we do?'
'Four >'
'I'll think of something when we get there.'
'Three >'
'I certainly hope so.'
'Two >'
'I love you.'
'One >'
'I love you, too.'
'Proton Drive activated. Advancing to light speed >'
The whining of the motor increased to a crescendo as the two travellers were pushed back into their padded seats by the G forces.
'Hard left,' Cassi commanded and the big ship began to turn, struggling against the centrifugal force of the curve.
Mike looked at her with surprise. 'What are you doing?'
'Using Saturn to give us a boost. Father didn't do that so we will hopefully have a slight advantage.'
'Won't he be at Orion by now?'
'Not yet. Don't forget that he doesn't know he's being followed and he will not risk light speed through the asteroids. I estimate he won't get there for another half-hour or so.'
'You're the boss.'
'I don't suppose you still want to marry me after all this.'
'Of course I do.'
'Even if I am an alien?'
'Especially because you're an alien. I wouldn't trust anyone else with you.'
They laughed as Wayfarer curved in under the rings and began to accelerate rapidly through the upper limits of Saturn's atmosphere. The ship came out almost broadside on, going full-bore towards Jupiter. The largest planet in the Solar System came and went in less than twenty minutes, giving Wayfarer an additional boost to Lum 6.
Mike began to look worried. 'You're not going through the asteroid belt at six times light speed, are you?'
Cassi glanced sideways at him. 'You've got to be joking. There'd be no room to manoeuvre. I'm going around and over them.'
'Won't that take longer?'
'Yes, but maintaining this speed will more than compensate.'
'Will you need Mars to help you?'
'No. It's too small to be of any use. Anyway, it's on the far side of Sol just as Earth is. The next planet we reach will be Venus, then Sol.'
'You're going to fly close in to the sun?'
'As close as I dare. I don't have to time for lengthy detours. We'll just have to take a chance on getting a little warm in the process.'
'You'll get more than a tan if you get too close to Sol.'
'There is another reason for doing it. The radiation from the sun will mask our approach.'
'Coming out of the sun,' Mike pondered.
'What?'
'It's what they used to do in wartime. Fighter aircraft would fly high, between the sun and the enemy who wouldn't know a thing until it was too late.'

'Wayfarer is hardly a fighter plane, Mike.'

'No,' he laughed. 'It's a bolt of lightning out of the blue. They won't know what has hit them.'

'It's my father you're talking about.'

'I was referring to Earth people in general rather than your father in particular. After all, the Wayfarers are not equipped with any form of weaponry. We certainly can't shoot each other out of the sky, can we?'

'Certainly not. I wouldn't stand for anything like that.'

'Then how will you stop him?'

'We must get hold of those egg-embryos or whatever they are. Without them, father is relatively harmless.'

'He could still start a new race.'

'I doubt it - he doesn't have the physical capability. I think he was being optimistic when he spoke about what he could do for them. Anyway, don't forget that when he last went to earth, he fell ill very quickly due to the pressure differential and died not long after. What does he hope to accomplish in a day or so?'

'It looks as if it all depends on those unfertilised eggs.' He suddenly had a thought. 'You don't think he will try to cross-fertilise them himself, do you? Prior to landing?'

Cassi shook her head. 'He won't have the time. He'll have his hands full on the flight deck, looking after the ship single-handed. He doesn't have voice command over his computer so everything will have to be keyed in by hand. That takes time so he will have to drive carefully to be sure of getting there in one piece. He has come too far to lose it all now on one rash manoeuvre.'

'I guess you're right.'

She smiled cheekily. 'I know I'm right.'

SOL grew large in the vision screen as they zoomed towards the pivot-point of the solar system. Venus flashed by and they could see tiny Mercury in the distance as they headed inwards at full speed.

Mike turned to Cassi. 'Can you pick up Wayfarer One's emission trail yet?'

'Not possible. The Alpha and Beta rays from the sun's electromagnetic photosphere obliterate even the remotest possibility of such a sighting. Father could be anywhere.'

'So it's wait and see, is it?'

'I'm afraid so. However, we won't have long to wait. At this speed, we shall pass Sol in a few seconds. Earth is then only two and a half minutes away.'

'Aren't you going to slow down at all?'

'Not until I have to. I want to use surprise to our advantage.'

The temperature inside Wayfarer Two rose rapidly as they approached Sol and banked around the edge, as close to the chromosphere as was practically possible. At one stage, Mike was sure that Cassi had miscalculated and they were both going to wind up as toast, but they didn't and the sky ahead became suddenly clear and dark as the giant solar inferno fell behind them.

'Locate Terra,' said Cassi to Iris.

'Located. Do you wish for approach trajectory? (Y/N) >'

'Negative, Iris. Trajectory to pass Orion Base at one kilometre range.'

'Confirmed >'

'At this speed?' queried Mike.

'I want to see what has happened before I confine my options. At LUM-8, they won't even see us pass.'

'They'll know though.'

'Oh yes,' she grinned slyly. 'They'll know all right. Several seconds later, the emissions from the Proton Drive will sent their sensors crazy and their engineers frantic, especially with nothing in sight.'

Iris bleeped. 'Emission ahead >'

'Identify.'

'Wayfarer One >'

'We've found him again. Iris, pass by at ten metres range.'

Wayfarer One was already well below light speed and using reverse thrust on final approach when Wayfarer Two flashed past and Mike instinctively ducked as the dot on the screen grew rapidly and was past. Orion Base was a mere blur as Cassi curved around in a wide arc and went around the Earth in less than a

second as gravity slowed them down. Wayfarer One was dead ahead.

'Emergency reverse thrust,' said Cassi and the restraining straps bit into their shoulders as the cruiser fell to below light speed. She reached out and pushed a button. 'Wayfarer Two to Wayfarer One. Do you read? Over.'

The voice came back immediately. 'Cassi? Where are you?'

'Look at the forward screen.'

'Good grief! How did you get here?'

'How do you think? I used a burn.'

'I didn't think it possible.'

'Possible or not, if you don't stop soon we're going to collide.'

'What do you mean, stop?'

'Heave to, as they used to say in the navy.'

'I can't.'

'You can and will. I can't let you go through with this, father.'

'How will you stop me?'

'I will ram you.'

'What? We'll all be killed.'

'So be it. Stop now, father.'

They saw the reverse thrust of Wayfarer One increase as Cassi continued to slow Wayfarer Two until the two ships hung poised, nose-to-nose, as if kissing in space.

A new voice came over the radio. 'Orion Base to incoming vehicles. You have invaded Terran space. Please identify yourselves.'

Mike looked at his companion. 'What do we do?'

'Nothing. See what father does, first.'

After a minute of silence, the voice came again. 'Orion Base to incoming vehicles. You have invaded Terran space. Please identify yourselves.'

'They'll launch missiles,' warned the Marshal. 'Admiral Burleigh has been trained to shoot first and ask questions afterwards where the security of the Earth is concerned.'

Cassi pressed the button. 'This is Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Duncan of space cruiser Wayfarer Two.'

'One moment, Officer Duncan.'

There was silence until another voice came over the air. 'This is Admiral Burleigh. Is Commander Duncan on board?'

'The Commander is on Wayfarer One which is currently moored alongside.'

'And Marshal Hardy?'

'With me on Wayfarer Two.'

'Commander Markham and his crew?'

'Missing, believed dead.'

'I see. Stand by.'

'Standing by, Admiral.'

The other channel crackled. 'You didn't tell him?'

'No, I didn't. I came to stop you, not to shop you.'

'What are you going to do?'

'Stay here until you agree to hand over the Andromedæ eggs.'

'What are you going to do with them?'

'Take them to Earth.'

Mike looked at her sharply. Cassi shook her head to dispel his anxiety.

The radio said 'Why would you want to do that?'

'To present them to the authorities in the proper manner.'

'What do you mean?'

'We will let the Directorate decide what is to be done with them.'

'You know that I can't do that. People like General Phillips will want to see them destroyed. I will do anything to prevent that happening.'

'Anything?'

'Yes, anything. I didn't want it to come to this, Cassi, but if you do not go away now and let me go ahead with my plan, I will have no option but to destroy Wayfarer Two with you in it.'

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Cassi just sat, stunned, as her father's words sank in. Everything else paled into insignificance - the crew of the ships, the deceit, the abandoning at Saturn, the threat to the world. He had physically threatened her life and that's what really hurt.

'He can't do it,' said Mike quietly. 'He doesn't have the means.'

'I know that.'

'He's bluffing.'

'I don't care. I just don't care any more.'

'He's deliberately trying to frighten you, can't you see that? Besides, he wouldn't harm you. If he wanted that, he'd have done it three hours ago.'

'That's not the point. I really thought he loved me.'

'He does, but he's just temporarily out of his mind about what he is doing.'

Her finger suddenly stabbed at the button. 'Father?'

'Yes, Cassi.'

'I'm not giving in. You are going to have to kill me.'

'Cassi, you are very clever at computers and science, but you are totally ignorant about life. We're talking about saving the entire human race from itself.'

'You might be, but I'm not. I'm talking about giving them the same potential future but offering them the opportunity to make their own choice. You cannot inflict something like this upon them without consulting them first.'

'The human race is incapable of making such decisions.'

'I think you may be underestimating the rest of mankind, father. They want peace and security as much as you do.'

'No, my dear. It is you who has got it wrong. Take the Andromeda Seed down to Earth and hand it over and the eggs will all be dead in a very short time. Most Earth people want life all right, but only on their own terms. What I am offering mankind is a chance for common people to live for ever, not just some selected few.'

'By doing it your way, the whole human race as we know it will die out.'

'Of course, nothing can prevent that. Either way, with or without the Seed, this generation will die naturally.'

'Then the eggs must be used for the future, to preserve life for the next generation.'

They heard the Commander laugh. 'You really are a naive little girl at times, Cassi. For the last century, experts and conservationists have been saying that mankind ought to think of the next generation. During the nineteen eighties and nineties, scientists warned of the long-term effects of cutting down the tropical rain forests, polluting the atmosphere and destroying the Ozone Layer, but the governments largely ignored them. "Think of your children," the experts said, but mankind just carried on in its own sweet way, and look at the result - so many beautiful cities now lost under water due to the greenhouse effect it produced.'

'But they will learn their lesson, given time.'

'They have had the time, but they don't learn at all. Apart from a few groups of concerned people, everyone thinks only of him or herself. Business people pour waste products onto the land and into the seas, farmers poison the rivers with chemicals, even ordinary people just throw their rubbish into the streets and ruin the environment. Don't talk to me about responsible people caring about their childrens' world.'

'But how will what you are doing help?'

'Andromedans didn't do that sort of thing. They developed the perfect way of life in a peaceful and loving manner.'

Mike butted in. 'And yet you are prepared to murder your own daughter, one of the generation you claim to be protecting, just to do what you feel is right?'

'Stay out of this, Marshal. I don't expect you to understand, you are one of them.'

'Listen, Commander. I have a daughter, and I would do anything to improve her world - except kill others.'

'I'm not killing anyone. I'm simply replacing the next generation with a better one.'

'Don't split hairs. I'll agree the world is not a perfect place. I'll even agree that there is much about it which needs changing. However, I cannot agree that one person can enforce this kind of change upon them; something

which is, when all is said and done, only right in his own view.'

'We are wasting valuable time. This is not just my view - it was the view of the greatest minds on Andromeda.'

'It would be their view, wouldn't it?'

'Don't condemn them too hastily, Mike. They opted to stay behind and die. None of them would live long enough to see the next generation to be born on Earth.'

'Sixteen of them tried it.'

'True, but they knew they would not be able to descend to Earth itself and produce the next generation naturally. That is why they decided upon the Seed. My eight companions came along for one purpose and one purpose only - to get me home where I could do the rest.'

'And where do I fit into the equation?' asked Cassi suddenly.

'You were my insurance.'

'Insurance?'

'If anything happened to damage the eggs, you would live and the Andromedan race would survive through you.'

'But you seem prepared to destroy me if I stand in your way.'

'The race must not be allowed to die out. Can't you see that? By introducing them onto Earth, conditions can only improve. I'd rather it be you, but if you don't agree, I must use the eggs and see that they are fertilised.'

'I'm not against them going to Earth, father. I simply want to be sure that everything is above board.'

'It won't be if we do it your way. Only a select few will ever get to hear of it. Mention living forever and politicians and other powerful individuals will use the eggs, while mankind in general dies out. What you are suggesting will only make matters worse.'

Cassi sat and thought about it for a while. 'Mike?'

'He does have a point. Your father has summed up human nature pretty accurately.'

'I see. Tell me the truth, is there no-one on Earth who can be trusted to give an unbiased opinion as to how the Seed should be handled?'

Mike smiled. 'To be perfectly frank, no-one that I can think of off-hand.'

'Good grief! What an outright condemnation of humanity.'

'I'm sorry. You did ask me to be honest.'

'What do you think? Personally?'

'I can see good points on either side. In principle, you are totally correct - mankind should be given the choice. However, your father is also right - the privilege will be abused. Of that I am absolutely certain.'

'Cleft stick, eh?' She pressed a button. 'Father?'

'Yes, Cassi.'

'Whom do you trust on Earth?'

He laughed. 'Very few. Jon Pederson, Professor Akherd, perhaps.'

'Very well. Don't go away.' She switched channels. 'Orion Base, do you read? Over.'

'I'm here, Miss Duncan.'

'Something extremely important has happened. I need an immediate meeting on board Orion with yourself, the Director, Professor Akherd and Doctor Pederson from the hospital in Bruxelles. Can you arrange that?'

'Why?'

'Please bear with me. I am not exaggerating when I say that the future of the entire human race is at stake.'

There was a full five seconds of silence. 'Very well.'

'Permission to dock?'

'Granted. Bay Six, please.'

'Thank you, Admiral. Iris, slow reverse thrust.'

The radio spoke. 'What are you doing?'

'I am going to dock at Orion, father. I suggest you do the same.'

'Is this some kind of trick?'

'Not at all. I have arranged a meeting between ourselves, Admiral Burleigh, the Director, Professor Akherd and Doctor Pederson. I recommend you leave the eggs on board Wayfarer One in a safe place. Mike will guard the ship and ensure that no-one gets aboard and interferes with them.' She looked across at Mike who nodded his agreement.

'How do I know I can trust you both?'

'Father, I'm insulted. We will not let you down, and I promise to fit in with the majority decision as to the use of the Seed. There will be no politicians present, so a decision can be reached strictly on the grounds of science.'

'It seems I have little choice.'

'Iris, one hundred and eighty degree turn. Prepare to dock.'

'CONFIRMED >'

Mike stood up. 'He says he trusts you. But the point is - do you trust him?'

'He has no choice, Mike. He cannot land Wayfarer on Earth so he has to dock at Orion.'

'Should I arrange a security reception?'

'No, he must be able to trust us. You've still got the gun you took from Greg, haven't you?'

Mike looked shocked. 'How do you know that?'

'Mike, I love you. Please don't abuse my love or treat me like a complete imbecile.'

He looked down. 'I won't.'

'Then guard the eggs with your life and await the decision of the committee.'

'Very well, Cassi. You know best.'

She smiled. 'I'm not so sure about that, but I do feel I am doing the right thing.'

'ORION BASE DISTANCE 0.00000000023AU >'

'Dead slow.'

'CONFIRMED >'

They docked without a bump and felt the clamps grip the hull firmly.

'Shut down main reactor, Iris. All drives to stand-by.'

'STAND-BY STATUS CONFIRMED >'

She turned to her companion. 'Well, Mike. We're back.'

'Mission completed at last?'

'Or just beginning.'

He smirked. 'You might just have something there.'

'Well, it's out of my hands now. I've done all I can.'

He placed his hands on her shoulders and kissed her briefly. 'Cassi, don't underestimate your capabilities. I have a feeling that much of Earth's future still depends on you. I feel quite insignificant by comparison.'

'Don't feel that way. You are part of my future, whatever or wherever that may turn out to be.'

WAYFARER One docked alongside and Cassi met her father beside the airlocks. Despite their recent disagreement, along with threats, she spent a long time in her father's arms.

Mike watched patiently until they broke off. 'I will personally guard the ship for you, Commander. No-one will harm your cargo, I promise.'

'You are a good man, Mike. I can't thank you enough.'

'I have your daughter. I need no further thanks.'

The Admiral approached. 'Good to see you back, Jim. You, too, Marshal.' He nodded toward Cassi. 'Miss Duncan.' His arms moved in gesture. 'Would you care to follow me to the boardroom? The others should be ferried up within the next hour or so.'

'I will remain here,' said Mike. 'Wayfarer One must remain in quarantine for the time being. Part of the ship has been contaminated,' he lied.

The Admiral looked concerned. 'Are you okay, Jim?'

'I'm fine,' he replied with a smile at the Marshal's ingenuity. 'The leak didn't affect the flight deck.'

'Good, good. This way, please.'

They were led to a canteen and fed well after which Jim was taken to the boardroom to await the arrival of the shuttle. Mike managed to persuade a couple of loyal security guards to relieve him and gave them strict instruction not let anyone aboard, no matter how important they were. Cassi, on the other hand, was taken away by the Admiral's personal assistant. She spend a long time in the shower before emerging, drying her hair.

'I've dug out some clothes for you,' said Tara as she lay them on the bed. 'If you are going to live on Earth, you will need something other than

overalls.' She put out some skimpy white garments Cassi did not recognise.
'You will also need these.'

Cassi frowned. 'What are they?'

'You really are from Andromeda, aren't you?'

Cassi smiled pleasantly. 'Did you doubt it?'

Tara looked guilty. 'Everyone did at first.'

'What convinced you?' Cassi asked as she finished drying her hair.

'The way you took us for that little spin around Earth and then brought us back to the exact same position. No-one else I know could have done it so accurately.'

Cassi dropped the towel. 'Tell me about these funny garments.'

Tara smiled. 'These are what we call panties, or knickers, to use the slang term. They are like the bottom half of your leotard.'

Cassi grinned sheepishly. 'I should have guessed.' She slipped them on and then held up the bra. 'And this?'

'It goes around your chest. You will find that Earth gravity becomes unkind to you if you don't wear one. It is somewhat cumbersome, but I suggest you get used to wearing it.'

Cassi smiled her thanks. 'I will.'

'Take whatever you want of these clothes. They have become a bit of the tight side for me and I've been meaning to take them home for some time now.'

'I wouldn't exactly call you overweight, Tara.'

'Maybe not, but Orion gravity seems to do horrible things to your waistline after a while. These clothes are a size ten but I struggle with a twelve these days.'

Cassi held up a couple of the dresses. 'They are lovely. I hope there is something to fit me.'

'There is bound to be. I wish I had your size and age again.'

Cassi laughed. 'Tara, you sound as if you think you are old. You cannot possibly be more than twenty-five.'

'Spot on. Can I recommend the navy blue skirt and top? It's not too flashy and will make you look less insipid. You can wear white when you've got yourself a bit of a tan.'

'I will follow your advice,' said Cassi as she did up the buttons on the tailored top. 'I can't thank you enough for your help.'

'Don't be silly. It's the least I could do. Do you feel okay?'

Cassi pulled up the skirt. 'I feel a bit draughty round the legs.'

Tara put her hand to her face to prevent herself laughing aloud. 'You'll get used to it. Good grief! You look sexy.'

Cassi frowned. 'Am I supposed to?'

'It must be the contrast with those drab overalls. Here, do your hair with this.' Tara handed the younger girl a brush. 'Leave it long around your shoulders. It will drive them all mad with desire.'

'I'm not entirely sure that's the effect I want to produce right now. I have a couple of hectic hours ahead of me.'

'Try these on,' said Tara as she dropped a pair of navy shoes to the floor. 'Those heels shouldn't be too high for you.'

'Thanks.'

Cassi wobbled a bit at first but, after walking around the room a few times, she got used to it.

'I still feel breezy round the knees. Are you sure this is all right?'

'You'll get used to the idea. You'll have to if you want to be acceptable on Earth. Trousers on women went out with the last century.'

'But does it have to be so short?'

'Short? That's not short. It reaches your knees which is more than skirts used to in times past. Why, in my grandmother's day, they used to wear them half that length.'

Cassi was horrified. 'How on Earth did they stay decent?'

Tara smirked. 'They didn't, most of the time. Those were the swinging sixties when everyone was encouraged to let it all hang out.' She sighed. 'Oh, to be a time traveller.' Her head came up suddenly. 'Here, you don't think...?'

Cassi laughed. 'Definitely not!'

THE Admiral looked up as the three prestigious men walked in and began to shake hands all round. Coffee was served and, after the usual pleasantries, they sat down around the big table. Two chairs were empty.

'Miss Duncan will be with us shortly. My secretary is taking care of her.'

As he spoke, the bulkhead door slid open and all eyes turned towards it. Six mouths dropped open as the two girls stepped in and walked towards them.

'Wow!' said Jon Pederson, which about summed up the general feeling.

Tara allowed herself a sly smile while all eyes followed Cassi as she went around the table, pulled back her chair, and sat down, trying not to show too much leg in the process.

The Director cleared his throat. 'Well, we all seem to be hear. Can I suggest that we commence as soon as possible? I have an urgent meeting this evening.'

'My apologies, Mr Director,' said Cassi quietly. 'It is my fault you are here. However, I suspect you will soon agree it is not time wasted. I suggest you radio Earth and postpone this other meeting.'

'But it is extremely important.'

Cassi looked straight at him with her big blue eyes. 'Defer it!'

The room fell silent and you could have cut the atmosphere with a laser as he stared back at the smiling teenager who had defied him. Everyone else held their breath.

He held her eyes for a full moment before saying; 'Very well. Tara, please make the call.'

Tara breathed again and went to the phone while all eyes remained upon Cassi.

She smiled. 'That's better. Now we can all relax and give this matter the attention it deserves.'

'What is it that is so important, Miss Duncan?'

'The future of the human race.'

Mike found himself smiling in the stunned silence which followed.

The professor shuffled his chair back slightly. 'I recommend that we dispense with the usual formalities and get straight into listening to what our three intrepid travellers have to say. I, for one, am dying to find out what has happened.'

No-one spoke for some time, each of them wanting someone else to lead the discussion. In the end, it was Mike who spoke first. 'Might I suggest that as the person least directly involved, I try to piece together some of the background? We have a proposition which needs to be discussed rationally by scientific rather than political minds, and I feel that only by understanding every facet of what has happened will we be able to make a decision at all, let alone the right one.'

'Anyone disagree?' asked the Director, feeling out of his depth for the first time.

No-one argued. Mike stood up and walked right round the table before coming to rest behind Cassi's chair. He placed his hands on her shoulders. 'Gentlemen, we have before us a situation, an opportunity, which will almost certainly never occur again in the history of mankind. The events leading up to this point of decision are long and complicated and I will be honest enough to acknowledge that I understand very little of them. However, of one thing I am certain, a decision must be reached and it must be reached here, in this room. If not, the results could be tragic.'

'This sounds very ominous, Marshal,' said Admiral Burleigh.

'Not ominous, simply crucial. You, Professor Akherd, have already reminded the Directorate of the history of the Wayfarer programme. Doctor Bartek also filled us in last week concerning his anti-matter reactor. I have seen for myself just what it is capable of and, quite frankly, I am astounded by what I have seen in so short a time.'

'How far did you go this trip?'

'As far as Saturn and back.'

'In just seventeen hours?'

'Earth time, yes. In our time, we have been gone about a week.' he smiled as he remembered what happened at Saturn. 'Maybe longer. Anyway, more of that later from Mis Duncan who can explain her theory far more lucidly than I. First, I think it is important that we accept the fact that Commander Duncan did visit the Andromeda Galaxy.'

'Why can you call it a fact?' asked Professor Akherd.

'Because Wayfarer One also went there. I have seen the electro-log recording from the on-board computer.'

'We must also see this.'

Mike nodded. 'All in good time. For now, please accept that it is true. It went to Andromeda and Commander Markham and his crew died there.'

'How did they die?'

Mike looked at Jim. 'Like Commander Duncan's crew, I believe they died of old age. I have been given no reason to suspect otherwise.'

'Then how did his ship return to the Solar System? Where did you locate it?'

'We found it close to Saturn. Apparently, people from Andromeda tried to travel here but died en route.'

'How did they die?'

'In much the same manner as those whom you tried to ship to Earth. The atmospheric pressure was too low for them and the simply... burst apart.'

'Did you find the bodies?'

'No.' He explained why not.

'That's what happened to the bodies of those who died on the shuttle. They... dissolved within hours.'

'That is one of the reasons why we believe you,' added the Director. 'Those beings were not human.'

'No, they were not.'

'Why did they come?'

Because their own planet was dying. Can you explain, Commander?'

Jim nodded. 'Andromeda is a galaxy not unlike our own. For a long time, it has been accompanied by four other galaxies, two of which were quite close in.'

'M32 and NGC205,' muttered the Professor in agreement.

Jim nodded again. 'For some centuries, these galaxies have been getting closer and closer until, just recently, it became certain that there would be a collision. What would happen, no-one knew. The Andromedans, not too unlike ourselves, were capable of limited space travel. there were four planets in their stellar system capable of supporting life. Mythos was the smallest and oldest.'

'This is the one you went to?'

'Yes, and Wayfarer One before me. I arrived just after Henry Markham had left.'

'Left? For where?'

'To search for other habitable planets. The full extent of the danger was not realised until Henry arrived. The Andromedans do have one distinct advantage over us. They live very much longer.'

'How much longer?'

'Virtually forever.'

'Preposterous,' said the Admiral. 'Such a thing is not possible.'

'I, too, thought it impossible,' interrupted Mike. 'But now I am convinced and will prove it to you in a few moments. Go on, Jim.'

The Commander wasn't sure why the Marshal was so certain but he let it ride.

'Thanks, Mike. I think you can see they had two problems; population growth and imminent danger of extinction.'

'So why did they need Henry and his crew?'

'They didn't. That's why they died on a tiny planet at the outer arm of the Andromeda Spiral.'

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The feelings around the table were mixed. For once, no-one disbelieved him. It was too fantastic not to be true.

'Why did Henry Markham do this for them?'

'Because they were a race worth preserving and Henry spent the last months of his life desperately trying to save them.'

'Did he succeed?'

Jim shook his head. 'He tried. By the time I arrived, nine months later, he had been on three trips but without success. Henry was so determined something should be done for them that he sacrificed his own life and that of his crew to try to save them.'

'What was so special about this race?'

'They lived in perfect peace and harmony. They fought no wars, had no disputes, concentrated all their energies into constructive rather than destructive things.'

The Admiral was cynical. 'Sounds idyllic.'

'That is why it was such a crying shame that they, of all people, should be the ones to die. If it was Earth which was doomed to disappear, the universe would have lost nothing. In fact, it will probably be better off without us and our warring ways.'

'That's a little harsh, Jim,' said the Director.

'Nevertheless true,' said the Professor quietly.

'When you say that Henry sacrificed his life, what did you mean?'

'I meant he gave them Wayfarer One to use.'

'For what purpose?'

'To come to Earth.'

'What?'

'With their help, he programmed the on-board computer to travel to Earth with a crew of Andromedans who were to come as ambassadors, forerunners in search of somewhere to live.'

'He sent them to Earth?'

'They had nowhere else to go.'

'But they would die.'

'They didn't know that at the time. It was thought their bodies would adapt to the change of environment but they didn't, as you know.'

'Why didn't he come with them?'

'He was far too old. Most of his crew had already died and he knew he wouldn't make the journey back.'

'But he was only a middle-aged man.'

'He was when he left Earth. He was ninety-odd when he died.'

'But...'

'My daughter will tell you about the time factor in a moment. For the time being, please just accept that they were there for some time.'

'How long were you there, Jim?'

'Just over five years.'

'Now you are joking. By rights you should be older than he was because you came home and he didn't. You should be at least a hundred years old.'

'But I am.'

The Earthmen all stared at him.

'I said Henry helped the Andromedans in several ways. One way, I have mentioned. The other way was that he donated his own body for research. As a matter of fact, so did most of our respective crews. Without their help, what was finally accomplished would not have been possible.'

'Precisely what was accomplished?'

'Several things. Firstly, through their research, a way was found to prolong my own life by substituting replacement organs and such like. It became clear that if they were ever to reach Earth, they would need at least one human still alive. I was chosen to be that one.'

'But we still don't follow. What good would you be to the survival of the Andromedæ race?'

'Personally? Nothing.'

'Then how...?'

Mike interrupted. 'Tell me, gentlemen. If the Andromedans had survived, how would they have been greeted on Earth?'

'With open arms, of course. We couldn't let them die out.'

'Even if they lived longer than we did?'

'That shouldn't make any difference.'

'No, it shouldn't: but think about it, Admiral. Within a few generations, there may well have been more of them than there are of us.'

'Only if they multiplied very quickly.'

'They did not want to do that. What they offered was the opportunity to mix with us, to form, in effect, a whole new race.'

'A master race?'

'Of a kind, but one that could be established without anybody having to be eliminated. They were not a fighting people and so there would be peace as long as earth people didn't react against them.'

The Director thought for a moment and then asked the Commander 'What really happened to Andromeda?'

'As I said before, it was destroyed. Particles from the galaxy began to be drawn off by M32 as it closed in, accelerating rapidly towards the end. The motion caused it to spin and a vortex formed.'

'A black hole?' whispered the Professor.

'Exactly. I only just got away in time. We had to fly pretty close to the vortex, even then. It was a terrifying experience, I might add.'

'There is still the mystery of the speed of the journeys, also the time differential.'

'Cassi is the best one to explain about that. All I can say is that it happened.'

Mike agreed. 'At first, I took the explanation with a very large pinch of salt. However, having seen her in action, I now believe it as the only logical explanation.'

'I think we will now hear this explanation, Frauline Duncan.'

Cassi smiled as she got to her feet and clearly and confidently explained about time dilation/compression while the Professor made frantic notes. She spoke of the characteristics of heated and cooled water, inertial mass in motion, complex energy transference and many things only the Professor understood fully. An hour later, the others were confused and the Professor was convinced.

'This is amazing,' he eventually said. 'It answers so many questions concerning relativity and motion. This information will revolutionise astrophysics as we know it.'

'Were the Andromedans so far ahead of us scientifically, Jim?' asked the Director.

'Not ahead, just different. They knew nothing of the internal combustion

engine, the wheel, the importance of magnetic fields. In fact, they had no concept whatsoever of radio - something we take so much for granted on Earth. I was able to teach them just as much as they taught me.'

'How was all this information recorded? Do you have books?'

'I have one,' said Cassi and she tossed a volume the size of a pocket diary into the centre of the table.

The Professor eagerly picked it up and then began to look puzzled. 'Is this some kind of a code?'

'It was their language. It is a pictographic language similar to ancient Chinese but with a larger set of characters.'

'Then how was the bulk of the information stored?'

'In Iris. Every book ever written, every theory and discovery made was fed into the Iris of both Wayfarer ships so it would not be lost.'

'Then we must gain access to this data immediately so that it can be studied.'

'Not possible. First, you must learn the Andromedæ language.'

'How is that possible?'

'Byytfgs haqqyrtws bqpzzidnrts qwa dithnnr,' Cassi said phonetically.

'Good grief! What's that?'

'Andromedan. Only I have total access to Iris.'

'You speak Andromedan?'

'Of course, Mr Director. Why shouldn't I?'

'But where did you learn it?'

'I didn't. I am the last living Andromedan in the whole universe.'

The response was mixed. Mike grinned, the Professor looked very thoughtful, the Admiral leant back in his chair with a sceptical look on his face, Doctor Pederson stood up. 'Gentlemen. Some of you know me already.'

'Of course,' said the Director. 'For those who don't,' he clarified, 'This is Doctor Jon Pederson of the Europa Central Physics Laboratory; advisor and senior lecturer to the University of Biological Studies.'

'Thank you, Alan.' He walked around the room as all eyes watched him. 'What only two other people in this room know is that I have met Miss Duncan previously. One of those people is the girl herself and the other is Marshal Hardy. Just a week ago, he brought her to me. He told me nothing about her, simply asking for a thorough examination.'

'And what did you find?'

'I found that she is a perfectly normal human.'

The Admiral grinned. 'There, what did I tell you?'

'Except...,' continued the Doctor as if he had not been interrupted. 'Except in a couple of important areas.' He went on to explain what he had found and already revealed to the Marshal.

'You are telling us that the girl is in fact superhuman?'

'In a manner of speaking. One thing I can say for certain is that she is definitely NOT an alien in the accepted sense of the word.'

'Doctor Pederson,' asked the Professor. 'What, in your opinion, would happen if Miss Duncan was to mate with a Earth-human and give birth to children?'

'It's difficult to say. However, my feelings, for what they are worth, are that no-one would tell the children from any others. They would be completely normal.'

'No different at all?'

'Except they would not die, of course.'

'Not die?'

'Their inherent immune system would prevent it. Otherwise, they would be indistinguishable from anyone else.'

'What about their intelligence?'

'Mademoiselle Duncan is highly intelligent, of course. However, that is to be expected as she has been born of very clever parents and then brought up in a virtually perfect environment. Others who followed may not all be so...' He smiled at Cassi: 'Wonderful.'

'Would Earth benefit from her presence?' said the Marshal suddenly.

'Undoubtedly, Mike. For one thing, just think of the knowledge she has.'

'I meant genetically. Would human life improve because of introducing the Andromedæ Strain?'

'It would take years, maybe centuries, to make any difference but my opinion is yes. Earth could only benefit from her presence.'

'What if there were others?'

The Director frowned. 'I thought she was the only one.'

'Bear with me, sir. Jon, what if there were a dozen like her, a hundred even?'

The Doctor shrugged. 'The process would happen much quicker, that's all.'

'And for the good of mankind?'

'Medically, yes. Genetically, undoubtedly.'

'What about morally?'

'If a peaceful manner is part of that genetic make-up, of course it would benefit mankind. It has to.'

Jim sighed. 'There will be those who will disagree.'

'Inevitably, Commander. Off hand, I can think of a few.'

'The question is, do we tell them?'

'I'm afraid it is too late to avoid that. The whole Earth is buzzing with news of aliens and flying saucers. I've never seen so much activity in all my life.'

'Marshal,' said the wise old Professor who hadn't missed a thing. 'What did you mean when you said there could be others?'

The room fell silent. Mike waited for Jim to start and Jim waited for Mike. It was stalemate. In the end, it was Cassi herself who explained. 'I believe that the Andromedans themselves realised they could not live on Earth. Despite their great knowledge and intelligence, Earth's atmospheric pressure was too alien to them. Consequently, with the co-operation of the crew of the Wayfarers, they developed the genetic capability of being able to reproduce offspring in an incubated environment. From what I understand, both female Andromedæ eggs and samples of male sperm were collected which could be used to mix with their earthly opposites. Even though the people themselves could not come to Earth, through those seeds, their lives could be transferred and, as a race, they could still live on.'

'Why are you telling us this, Miss Duncan?'

'Because Wayfarer One now has those life-seeds and female eggs on board.'

'You are joking, of course.'

'Admiral Burleigh, I do not joke about things like this. In an insulated container, electronically monitored and maintained at the right temperature and so forth, are the remains of a lost civilisation.'

'What will it take to bring them to life?'

'The female eggs will need to be fertilised with male sperm and then either implanted inside a human womb or incubated to birth. The male sperm cells can simply be introduced into a human mother.'

'As easy as that? Produce a whole new race?' said the Admiral sarcastically.

Her father came to her aid. 'The alternative is that the Andromedæ sperm can be implanted into the eggs but that would produce a race of Andromedans and, therefore, defeat the whole purpose of what they and we have been trying to achieve. Producing an alien race on Earth, however like us they might be, would cause all sorts of political problems but by introducing them in this way, it will avoid that.'

The Director shook his head. 'I'm still not sure...'

Cassi interrupted. 'Do you doubt the truth?'

'It's not that. It's...'

'What?'

'The possible repercussions.'

'Might I be so bold as to suggest gaining a consensus of opinion among the present group. At least then we will know where we stand.'

'Consensus on what, precisely?'

'Three things, if I read the situation correctly. Firstly, what we have said. Do you believe it? Secondly, do I get the opportunity of living a normal life on Earth? Freedom to marry and raise children? Thirdly, what do we do with the Andromedæ Seed? Do we announce its existence to the world or introduce the eggs quietly and let the Earth improve itself gradually over the next couple of generations?'

'There is a fourth,' added her father. 'Do we, as responsible scientists, opt out and let politicians or, God forbid, religious leaders, decide for us?'

'If I might make a suggestion,' said Doctor Pederson after a moment of silent contemplation. 'It would seem very obvious to me that we must answer the last question first. If we eight here are not qualified to decide, then it

is pointless discussing anything nor reaching any conclusions.'

The Admiral frowned. 'Eight?'

'Of course.' He smiled as he looked around. 'I may only be a doctor but I can count that far.'

'You would include my secretary?'

'Of course. I haven't examined her as closely as I have Miss Duncan but I surmise that Tara is a woman.'

'But she is not a scientist.'

'No, but she does represent the human race, perhaps better than the rest of us. I propose that she be consulted and that her opinion or vote is of equal value to the rest of us.'

'What say the rest of you?'

A majority agreed. Tara beamed. The Admiral sighed. 'Very well.'

'So,' said the Director. 'Are we qualified to make a decision or do we refer the matter to others?'

The agreement to decide was unanimous.

'May I make a suggestion?' said Commander Duncan.

'Of course, Jim.'

'If Tara would issue each of us with a sheet of paper, we would answer the three questions anonymously and submit them to Tara who will summarise the results for us.'

'Why Tara?'

'Because she is probably the least opinionated among us.'

'All agreed?'

They did and sheets of paper were handed out.

The Director addressed them. 'Let's make sure we understand what, specifically, we are recommending. The first question is - did Jim Duncan visit Andromeda and do all the things he said he did? The second concerns the future of Miss Duncan. What do we want to happen to her? The third is about the seeds. What do you want to happen to them? Before we start, do you agree these are the main questions to be answered?'

They all did. They all wrote. They all submitted them to Tara who collated them and read them through before making one or two notes.

At the Director's nod, she began. 'First question - is what we have heard the truth? Answer - we are exactly divided. Four of us believe, four do not.'

'That's interesting,' said Mike. 'I presume that Cassi and her father believe their own stories. I certainly do, so that leaves only one other person in this room who fully believes they are telling the truth.'

The Director ignored him. 'The second question, Tara?'

'With one exception, all of us agree that Miss Duncan can go to Earth and lead any lawful lifestyle she likes and can have as many children she wishes.'

'That's comforting to know,' said Cassi a little sarcastically.

'Thirdly, the matter of the eggs. The opinion is varied and I can only summarise. Four of us say they should be given every opportunity to develop on Earth. Three of those four say that the race should be absorbed into humans so as to benefit mankind. Two of them say their existence should be advertised as widely as possible, giving both the advantages and disadvantages of integrating them into our community and the other two argue that because of possible resistance, the seeds should be introduced quietly and without announcement.'

'What about the other four, Tara?'

Tara swallowed. 'They say the eggs should be destroyed immediately.'

'The results do not compute,' said Cassi instantly.

'How do you mean?'

'Three of the story-believers also want the eggs protected and then used. The fourth believer may not, of course, believe enough to want the Andromedans on Earth. The paradox is that at least three who disbelieve also want the eggs destroyed. That is illogical.'

'Illogical?'

'If father and I have lied, then the seeds are not from Andromeda at all, and are therefore completely harmless. Either we have misunderstood the implications or, if I read the situation correctly, three of you want to ensure you eliminate the Andromeda Seed completely and deliberately handicap the future development of the human race.'

'The results were to be anonymous, Miss Duncan.'

'I am not asking for the guilty ones to own up, I am simply asking if I understand the results correctly.'

'I think that you have summed it up very concisely,' said Mike seriously.

'Then, I might ask, what are you going to do about me? If you are prepared to destroy the eggs, will I suddenly disappear one dark night? Will you follow the General's example and try to have me raped and then left to bleed to death?'

The Director's mouth dropped open. 'What?'

Cassi smiled. 'You mean you didn't know?'

'I had no idea. When did this happen?'

'When Mike and I were in Paris.'

'I didn't think he would go to those lengths.'

'I caught the man at it,' said Mike.

'He was attacking her?'

'Nearly. I only just caught him in time with a hypo full of "tell and die."'

'Good grief!'

'So what happens to the eggs?' prompted Cassi.

The Admiral smirked, thus conveying to those in any doubt what his vote had been. 'Out of all the options, the greater choice is to destroy them.'

Cassi looked straight at him. 'I can't let you do that.'

'What?'

'They are my brothers and sisters. I will not let you destroy them.'

'But the majority decision...'

'There wasn't one,' Mike pointed out. 'The decision to destroy or to preserve was equal.'

'Ah, but the choice to preserve was a divided one.'

'Now you're splitting hairs, Jonathan, and it is beneath you.'

'As the senior officer on Orion...'

'Bull!'

'What?'

'I said bull. Neither I nor my men report to you and if you try to go near that ship, my men have orders to prevent entry at all costs.'

'I could override that order,' said the Director quietly.

'Yes, sir. You could.'

Everyone watched the Director to see what his answer would be. Cassi didn't wait. Standing once more, she walked around the table and stood next to him. All eyes turned to her. Slowly and deliberately, she took out her pocket calculator. Instead of pressing keys in the normal way, she held down one button and spoke into it. 'Iris, activate main reactor.'

Everyone sat stunned. Cassi handed the "calculator" to the Director. 'What does it say?'

The Director's voice trembled as he looked at the small screen and then spoke. 'It says "Main reactor activated. Critical mass in nine minutes and forty-five seconds."' He looked up. 'The seconds are decreasing.'

'Miss Duncan,' snided the Admiral. 'What are you trying to do?'

'If my brothers and are to die, so are you.'

'Die?'

'Of course. What do you think will happen when Wayfarer Two's reactor goes critical with no-one on board to control it?'

He snatched the handset out of the bewildered Director's hand. 'Give me that thing. I'll stop it.'

'I don't think so, Admiral. It is programmed to accept only my voice pattern. Iris will simply ignore yours.'

'I'll get on board and pull her plug.'

'First, you must get the Director to authorise access to the ship, then you must persuade security to let you aboard. After that, you will have to get through two airlocks and a closed bulkhead and get to Iris in...' She looked over his shoulder. 'Under seven minutes.'

He gave it back to her. 'Shut it down!'

'Not until you agree to preserve the Andromeda Seed.'

'But the vote...'

'Inconclusive and subject to some dispute, I believe.'

'I change my mind,' said Tara suddenly. 'I'm sorry I let you down, Cassi.' She faced the Director. 'I want the Seed preserved.'

'It's too late,' said the Admiral.
'If it is then I might as well use my last couple of minutes telling everyone about what you tried to do last night.' She lifted the radiophone from the wall. 'In fact, I might as well tell everyone on Earth, too.'
'That's blackmail.'
'That, my dear ex-boss, is what I would rather call self-preservation.'
'Ex-boss?'
She nodded. 'I resign. I have decided I would rather become the mother of an alien than work for you any longer.'
'Two minutes,' said Cassi.
'Can you shut down using that communicator?' said the Director.
'Of course. Alternatively, I can take us all for a spin around Earth while you make up your minds.'
The Admiral put his head in his hands. 'Oh, no. Not again.'
'Again?' said the Professor suddenly.
'Miss Duncan locked her ship to Orion and towed the base into orbit.'
Professor Akherd suddenly looked very interested. 'When was this?'
'Just before she left to find Wayfarer One.'
He looked at Cassi. 'At what speed?'
'Light speed,' said Mike. 'I was there.'
'Let me get this straight. You took Orion Base around the Earth at light speed?'
'Yes.'
'What was the time compression?'
Cassi's eyes lit up. 'Two hours and forty-two minutes.'
He looked at the Director. 'Not only do I now fully believe her, I want those eggs used - as soon as possible. Such intelligence must be preserved at all costs.'
'Privately or publicly?' asked Cassi.
'I don't care. Just shut down that anti-matter reactor before we are all reduced to cosmic dust.'

OPPOSITION

Cassi took the communicator from the Admiral. The tiny display read 'Critical mass in five seconds.' She pressed a key. 'Iris, main reactor to stand-by.'
'Confirmed main reactor standing by >'
Cassi smiled. 'Thank you, gentlemen, Tara. Now all we need to decide is what we do with the eggs. Do we inform the world or introduce them quietly?'
'How could it be done quietly?' asked the Director.
'I could arrange that,' said Jon Pederson. 'At my clinic, there are dozens of operations performed each month to produce birth by artificial insemination. Many of the mothers will be glad of the possibility of having children who will be highly intelligent and have prospects of living forever.'
The Admiral still argued. 'But is it ethical?'
'Of course. As several of us still don't believe they are from Andromeda anyway, I shall treat them as if they were normal human eggs.'
'But what if they contain disease or something?'
'I think you will find the screening process at my hospital is second to none since the AIDS epidemic during the nineties. Seeds or eggs which are in any way unsuitable will be rejected, yes Admiral, and destroyed, as would any donated from Earth humans that were found to be contaminated.'
'What now convinces you it is the right thing to do?'
'The attitude of Miss Duncan. She was willing to die herself to try and protect the eggs. If she was an alien of some kind, I would not have been influenced. However, as I have said before, she is not. If cross-matching humans with the Andromedæ seed produces people like her, then I am all for it.'

'Is it to be done quietly or publicly?'

'In my opinion, quietly,' said the Doctor. 'Each parent chosen will, of course be informed and given to option to choose. Other than that, we must not risk missing out on the opportunity of a lifetime.'

'You really think this is what it is?'

'Of course,' said Jim. 'Imagine what it would be like to find a lost tribe of Aztecs or Incas. This is no different.'

The Director looked around the room. 'Any strong objections, provided both the distribution and the results are monitored?'

There were none. He closed his notebook. 'Very well. The seeds will be transported to Earth and distributed from Bruxelles. Will you see to it, Doctor Pederson?'

'It would be my pleasure.'

The Marshal stood up. 'With your permission, Alan, I will go along to ensure security is maintained.'

The older man nodded. 'As you wish, Mike. I leave the matter completely in your safe hands.'

'I would rather remain on Orion for the time being,' said Commander Duncan. 'I am not yet ready for another dose of Earth atmosphere and would like to stay where I can gain access to Wayfarer so I can reduce my environmental pressure if need be.'

'Will you ever be able to return to Earth, Jim?'

The Commander shrugged. 'Who knows? It took two years for me to adjust to the heavier Mythos atmosphere. Perhaps it will take the same time to adjust back. Alternatively, I may have to stay in space for the rest of my life.'

THE Andromeda Seed was taken from Wayfarer One by Jon Pederson and transferred to the shuttle. Mike and the Director also went and, within the hour, the shuttle departed for Earth. Cassi stayed behind and took Professor Akherd to meet Iris.

The learned man touched the computer gently as if it was alive. 'So this is where the data is stored.'

Cassi nodded. 'All of it. I would recommend disseminating it gradually. It has been divided up into logical groups and can be accessed either sequentially or by subject.'

'You are willing to release this information to us?'

'Of course. That was the whole point of my father bringing it back to Earth. We offer them life, we get their knowledge.'

'It seems odd, somehow, to hear you speak of humans as "we" and Andromedans as "they".'

Cassi laughed pleasantly. 'I never saw Mythos, Professor. I was born in flight, remember? When I was a child, I thought of myself as Andromedan, like the other crew members who died. However, all I have ever experienced has been human. I feel like a human, think like one. I am human.'

He smiled a little. 'What will you do?'

'I want two things. To help you to get the data you need, and to marry Mike.'

'And have children?'

She nodded. 'I hope so.'

'Will you tell them? About Andromeda, I mean.'

'Only if I have to. I want them to live a normal life, not as freaks to be observed like microbes.'

'You are a very wise young lady, do you know that? You will be sadly missed in scientific circles.'

'Not a bit,' Cassi said with a laugh. 'Iris has far more to offer than I.'

He sighed. 'Iris may have the information but, alas, she does not have the beauty.'

THE Earth shuttle landed at Europoort where the Doctor and Marshal were met by an ambulance to take them and their precious cargo direct to Bruxelles. Tara, determined to leave Orion Base forever, asked to go with them and, within the hour, the ambulance was at the hospital.

'Are you sure we are doing the right thing?' asked the Marshal as the two men carried the insulated container between them.

'Do you have doubts, Mike?'

'I don't have any at all. I just want to be sure that you have none.'
'I will monitor the whole thing personally. I can see no snags.'
'May I ask a favour?' asked Tara as they entered the regulated storage area.
'Of course. Do you need a lift somewhere?'
'Not yet. I meant what I said on Orion. I want to be implanted.'
'With male Andromedæ sperm?'

She nodded.

'You are sure?'

'Very sure. I want to do everything I can to make this plan succeed.'

'Very well. How soon would you like to go ahead?'

'Now? Tonight?'

'Tonight?' both men said together.

'Does that cause a problem?'

Jon looked at Mike. 'Not necessarily. It wouldn't take long for a sample to be checked out. To inject it would take but a few minutes provided your menstrual cycle is in the right phase. Alternatively, we could extract an egg from your ovary and fertilise it externally before replacing it into your womb. That, of course, would take longer.'

'I want to go ahead as soon as possible. This is very important to me.'

THE American replaced the phone and looked at his colleague who sat in the armchair opposite him. 'That was the Admiral. It is time.'

The other man raised his eyebrows. 'The Strain eggs are on Earth?'

The senior man nodded. 'I've just heard from Orion. They came down by shuttle and are now on their way to Doctor Pederson's hospital in Bruxelles. The shipment is being guarded by the Marshal in person. You know what to do?'

'Of course,' the younger man said as he checked the action of his new automatic pistol. 'Don't worry, General, I have a personal score to settle with Michael Hardy. Neither he nor his precious eggs will be alive by morning.'

CASSI led the Professor back to Orion where she saw him to the shuttle.

'I will send my assistant to you tomorrow, my dear. He will bring a portable databank so as to start the transfer of information. I am very grateful for all your help.'

'It was nothing, Professor. Let us hope mankind can benefit from this.'

He smiled. 'There is no doubt about that.'

'I will be here to help your assistant in any way I can.' She shook his hand. 'I now need to see the Admiral to find out where I can sleep tonight.'

They parted and Cassi began to walk back down the long circumferal corridor. At the large door, she paused and found it ajar. Frowning, she stepped inside. The room had been Tara's reception office but was now deserted until a replacement could be found. The door to the Admiral's office was closed, but she could hear a raised voice from the other side. She was about to turn away when one word caught her ears. Going to the door, she listened.

'Very well, General,' the voice was saying. 'I will do what I can.' There was a silent pause as the reply was given before he said: 'Just make sure no-one knows about it. If the Director finds out it was me who told you, we'll all be in real trouble.' There was a further pause while Cassi listened intently and then; 'Don't worry, General. You deal with the eggs, I'll make sure the girl meets with a serious...accident.'

Cassi didn't hear the rest. She was running as fast as she could back down the passageway towards the shuttle bay. It was not only her life she was preserving, she had to protect the eggs at all costs. By the time she reached the dock, the shuttle had gone. Frantically, she looked around her. Wayfarer, she said to herself, I must get to Wayfarer.

She took out her communicator. 'Iris, state condition of main reactor.'

'Mass critical >'

'Prepare to activate Main Drive.'

'Main Drive standing by >'

The whole corridor was deserted. Cassi dropped her communicator into her pocket and slipped off her shoes. She had to pass the Admiral's office to get to Wayfarer's launch platform and she wanted to do it with the least hassle. Carefully and quietly, she walked in her bare feet and held her breath as she passed the doorway. The big sphere of Terra was below her as she ran across the central hub. As she started down the passageway to the launch area, a voice called behind her. It was Admiral Burleigh. Cassi ran.

'Stop that girl!' he shouted and his voice echoed around her as the airlock came up in front of her.

A security officer grabbed her arm. 'I'm sorry, Miss. I have instructions to let no-one aboard either ship.'

'But my father is on Wayfarer One.'

'Nevertheless, I must ask you to wait here until I have cleared it with the Admiral.'

She looked around and could see the officer in question walking towards them. Cassi ducked and the security man was taken completely by surprise and almost let go of her. On her haunches, Cassi spun round and leapt into the air, wrenching herself free as the man's arm went further than it was designed to go. He cried out with pain and Cassi leapt for the airlock. By the time it opened, the Admiral was right behind her.

She turned and held up her communicator. 'One step closer and Iris puts Wayfarer into Main Drive and you know what that means.'

'You wouldn't dare.'

'Iris. Activate Main drive. Slow ahead on rotational trajectory.'

'Confirmed >'

The Admiral's eyes went wide open in terror and he fought to keep his balance as the floor beneath him began to move.

Cassi stepped towards him. 'Release the clamps on both ships when I give the word or I'll tear this place apart.'

She didn't wait for his agreement but turned and entered the airlock. As the door swung closed, she watched his dark eyes staring at her with deep hatred.

Cassi sat in the pilot's chair and buckled on her seat belt. She pressed a button. 'Father, it's Cassi.'

The reply was almost immediate. 'Where are you?'

'I'm on Wayfarer Two. We have been tricked. The Admiral has been in communication with the General who is going to destroy the eggs.'

'What?'

'I suggest you start up the motor and get out of here.'

'Where are you going?'

'I'm going to Terra.'

'Cassi, you can't do it. Wayfarer is not designed to land on Earth. You'll crash and be killed.'

'I don't care. I must try to save them.'

'I'll come with you.'

'No, father. You must save yourself. Get somewhere out of missile range until I contact you again.'

'What if you are killed and I don't hear from you again?'

'Then remember that I love you and do whatever you need to do to preserve the information in Iris. One day, Earth might be ready for us.'

'Cassi, take care.'

'I will.' She switched channels. 'Admiral. Release clamps on both Wayfarer One and Wayfarer Two immediately.'

'What if I don't?'

'Then I will take Orion with me.'

She felt the shudder as the clamps came open and the vibration stopped as the big ship broke free. In the vision monitor, she saw her father's ship drifting away while his reactor warmed up.

'Activate Main Drive,' she instructed Iris.

'Confirmed. Trajectory? >'

'Europoort Launch Complex.'

'Unable to land >'

'Iris. Do as you're told or I'll switch to manual.'

There was a pause. 'Trajectory confirmed >'

Cassi smiled. *Iris was almost human after all.*

THE car rolled almost silently along the autoroute and Greg hummed as he saw the lights ahead. He dialled a number on his car-phone. 'We are just entering Bruxelles now. I should be at the hospital in ten minutes.'

'You know what to do?'

Greg smiled to his rough-looking companions. 'You bet.'

JON Pederson leant over the figure on the hospital bed. He smiled. 'Ready?'

Tara nodded. 'Yes. It will work, won't it?'

'I think so. The sperm has been checked out and your body is ready to receive it. In about ten minute's time, with a bit of luck, you will be pregnant.'

CASSI tensed inside Wayfarer Two as the ship entered the atmosphere and the temperature began to rise.

'Half reverse thrust.'

'Confirmed. Speed 25,000 kph >'

'Reduce speed to 5,000 kph. Maintain present heading but spiral down to dissipate heat energy.'

'Confirmed >'

The superstructure groaned as Wayfarer Two applied reverse thrust and began a wide circling over Europe.

Cassi pressed a button. 'Wayfarer Two to Europa Launch Control. I am about to attempt a landing at Europoort.'

'Landing not possible. Reroute to Orion Base Station.'

'Landing at Europoort essential. Please confirm arrival of shuttle.'

'Shuttle just arrived.'

'Request you detain Professor Heinrich Akherd there until I get down.'

'You cannot land. I repeat, you cannot land.'

'If I cannot land, then I must crash into the sea. Ask the Professor which he would rather have me do.'

There was a long silence as the speed gradually dropped. Cassi remembered her father's words. 'Wayfarer is not designed to land on Earth.' Then she remembered that Wayfarer had landed once before. Not only that, it had taken off again.

The radio spoke. 'Professor confirms that it is vital that the ship is not brought down in the sea.'

Cassi grinned. 'I knew he'd say that. Ask him to get Doctor Pederson on the phone immediately. I will talk to him when I'm down.'

'Good luck, Miss.'

'Thanks. Iris, replay sequence for landing on Mythos.'

'Commencing simulation >'

Cassi watched the playback of her father's attempted landing at Andromeda with interest and, suddenly, she knew how it was done.

'Full reverse thrust, Iris. Rotate through ninety degrees.'

'Confirmed >'

Time and motion seemed to stand still as the big ship turned broadside on and began to slow rapidly and fall towards the surface.

'Activate Main Drive.'

'Main Drive activated. Earth contact in two minutes >'

'Speed?'

'1000 kph and dropping >'

'Increase Main Drive.'

'Confirmed. Speed 800 kph >'

'Nice and easy, Iris.'

'Command does not compute >'

Cassi laughed. 'And here's me thinking you were intelligent.'

'Command does not compute. Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Earth contact in one minute >'

'Increase Main Drive. Decrease fall speed to 100 kph.'

'Confirmed. Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Earth contact in thirty seconds >'

'Decrease speed to 50 kph.'

Cassi heard the whine of the drive as it fought to slow Wayfarer and to keep the ship upright.

'Danger >'

'Identify.'

'Unknown structures below >'

'Full left retro.'

'Confirmed. Danger >'

'Identify.'
'Earth contact ten seconds and counting >'
'Nine >'
'Increase Main Drive.'
'Eight >
'Main Drive at maximum > Falling too fast >'
'Seven >'

What should she do? If she activated the Proton Drive now, she would spread strontium-90 into the atmosphere for miles around and she couldn't do that. She would have to go for a hard landing.

'Six >'
'Activate Auxiliary Drive.'
'Five >'
'Activating Auxiliary Drive >'
'Four >'
'Three >'
'Two >'
'Rate of descent 20km/h. contact imminent >'

Cassi held her breath.

The massive jolt was accompanied by the sound of tearing metal as the drive shields crushed and buckled under the weight of the cruiser. Cassi's eyes went wide as Wayfarer Two swayed slightly and then came to rest at an angle. One thing was certain: if her ship was ever to fly again, it would need major surgery first.

She sighed with the relief at being down safely. 'Iris. Cut all Drives. Shut down reactor.'

'Confirmed >'

The Professor's voice came over the radio. 'Well done, Frauline Duncan. I have Doctor Pederson on the line from Bruxelles.'

'Tell him there is danger. The Admiral has betrayed us and is working with the General to destroy the Seed.'

'One moment.'

Cassi unfastened her belt and dropped from the chair which was at an unfamiliar angle. She didn't feel at all graceful in her skirt and top but managed to land nimbly on her feet.

'Miss Duncan. I'm afraid we are too late. The General sent men to the hospital to collect the eggs while the Doctor was in consultation with a patient.'

'And Mike? Where is Mike?'

'Doctor Pederson regrets to inform you that the Marshal has been shot whilst trying to prevent the theft and is now in a critical condition.'

CASSI stared at the console for a long time with frustration, sorrow and anger vying for first place in her emotions, before switching off and heading for the hatch. Unfortunately, the floor was now a wall and the wall with the hatch was the floor. Consequently, the hatch counter-balances did not work at that angle. To get out, she would have to lift a hundred kilogrammes of titanium against Earth gravity. Kicking off her shoes and hitching her skirt right up to her waist, she placed one bare foot each side of the lock and, grasping the lever, hauled on it with all her strength. It would not budge. The flexing of the superstructure upon landing had twisted the hull slightly and the door was firmly jammed. Cassi sat down and stared at it. What could she use to help her? Wayfarer was keeled over at about ten degrees and if the wind came up, the whole thing could topple over and nothing could save her then.

Inspiration came suddenly and she reached for a small panel beside the door.

'Pressurise or evacuate? (P/E) >' said the small screen.

'E,' she stabbed and the pumps began to draw air from the flight deck. She knew it would take almost three minutes to cause a total vacuum inside and she would be dead long before that. She just hoped that the air pressure which had been so alien to her father and friends from Andromeda would now assist her by pushing the door from the other side. After a minute, her ears began to ring as she strained on the handle and struggled for breath in the reduced atmosphere. Gradually, the air pressure dropped, her senses swam and her strength began to fade. She didn't even have the power to turn off the pumps.

As she sat down heavily, there was a creaking followed by an almighty bang as the hatch flew back and smashed against the wall which was now her floor. Cassi was glad she had had the foresight to position herself on the opposite side to the hinges. If she hadn't, she would have been squashed flat.

The air was sweet as it flooded in and she reached out and turned off the depressurisation unit. She could feel the ship swaying slightly on its precarious base as she looked over the edge of the doorway. The corridor, normally horizontal in flight, was now vertical below her and to go through the hatch would mean a drop of a hundred metres. Close-by the left of the corridor was the wall of the cabin. An idea formed in her mind.

Carefully, she slipped her legs out over the edge and lowered herself until she hung by her fingertips and started to gently swing. Faster and faster, she swung until with a cry, she let go and flew through the air to land with a thud up against the cabin bulkhead. Winded, she rolled over and stared down the long tunnel below her. Somehow, she had to get down to the main airlock and, for the sake of the others, had to do it without delay. The airlock was on the opposite side, ten feet away, so she carefully lowered herself until she was opposite to the big doorway and, with a deep breath, launched herself across the gap.

Had the ship been upside down, she would have made it. Unfortunately, the handle moved as her hands gripped it. Instead of holding her weight, it rotated through ninety degrees and the door swung open with a sickening crash, almost dislodging her grip to fall down the long tunnel.

Slowly and stiffly, Cassi hauled herself over the edge, got to her feet and stood on the wall of the airlock. The sign below the flashing green light said "pressure equal - pull lever to open". Obediently, she pulled the lever and the outer door swung open.

Unlike the shuttle which has a doorway at ground level, Wayfarer's hatch was just below the nose-cone. Therefore, instead of being close to the surface, she was still a hundred metres up in the air and the wind was icy cold as it blew around her bare legs. In the darkness around, lights of all colours flashed at her as several vehicles arrived. While she watched, a searchlight came on and she was silhouetted in the harsh light. She looked down. It was a long drop. Now what do I do, she asked herself?

Inspiration came after a few minutes and she went back inside and slowly and carefully climbed down the inside of the corridor, holding tight to whatever she could grip. Her hands were slippery with perspiration but, eventually, she came across what she had been looking for. Just beyond the loading bay, immediately above the drive maintenance area, was the external access hatch to the engines. Carefully, she opened it and clambered through. It was pitch black but she knew that the ground could be little more than twenty metres below her. She could just make out the bottom rim of the engine cowling which was jagged and torn where it had twisted upon landing.

Cassi thought for a moment. She could, of course, simply sit and wait for a fire engine and its ladder to come and find her. Instead, she simply lowered herself through the opening and dropped into the darkness.

ΛΙΦΕ ΑΝΑ ΔΕΑΤΗ

General Dwight Phillips looked up as the door opened. He smiled. 'Any trouble?'

'Not enough to stop us,' said the other man who stood a large insulated container on the floor. 'I'm afraid the Marshal tried to play the hero as I suspected he might. Unfortunately for him, there were four of us and only one of him.'

'Is he dead?' asked the General with a noticeable lack of genuine concern.

'I didn't wait to find out.'

'Probably just as well. Did anyone see you?'

The younger man smiled. 'No-one still alive. Did Jonathan get the girl?'

'I don't know. I've tried a few times to raise Orion on the radiophone but, for some unknown reason, I can't get an answer. I hope everything is all right.'

'What could be wrong? Surely even he can't bodge up a simple job like throwing a girl out through an airlock.'

'Perhaps Commander Duncan interfered.'

'I doubt it. The Admiral's got too many loyal men up there who will obey without question. Girman and Smithers have done plenty of this kind of thing before.' He indicated the insulated box. 'Do you really think these things are worth anything?'

'I have no idea and don't really care. All I got from Jonathan was a frantic message to say they must be taken from the hospital and destroyed at all costs before they are used to benefit mankind. Benefit mankind, indeed. Who do they think they're kidding?'

The phone rang. 'Yes?'

It was his secretary. 'There is a woman on the phone for you, General. She says it's personal and highly important.'

He sighed. 'Another complaint about helicopter noise, I expect. Okay, put her through.'

There was a clicking and then 'Good afternoon, General Phillips.'

The hairs rose on the back of his neck as the general leant forward. Greg looked confused but simply watched.

'What do you want?' he said hoarsely.

'I believe you have something there which belongs to me,' said the familiar voice.

'I don't know what you mean.' He covered the handset. 'Get Susie to put a trace on this call.'

'Surely you haven't forgotten already,' said Cassi. 'Your men only stole it an hour ago.'

'What is it that you want?'

'I propose an exchange.'

'Exchange? What do you mean?'

'The eggs in return for me.'

'For you? What would I want with you?'

'I must be of some value, dead at least, or you and the Admiral would not have gone to such lengths to try and dispose of me. The eggs you have in your possession are not yet fertilised. When they have been, they will have some intrinsic value. Until then, they are worth nothing to you. I, on the other hand, am still alive.'

'No deal.'

'Then I make you a promise, General. If those eggs are destroyed, you are finished.'

'Are you threatening me, young lady?'

'Not at all. I am of a peace-loving race. I simply foresee the natural outcome. By the way, I understand that you have lost a certain space station, one which is essential for your military communications.'

He leant forward. 'What do you know about that?'

'Everything, General. I know where Orion is but I also know that you cannot contact her by radio and that a shuttle will be unable to dock there. For the time being, Orion is in my hands.' The line went dead.

The secretary entered. 'The call came from Europort Launch Centre.'

'How the hell did she get down to Earth? And why have I still not heard from Orion?'

'I keep trying,' said the secretary. 'But all I get is static. Major Stevenson from Engineering muttered something earlier about his believing that Orion was rotating and consequently unable to keep her transmitter dish aligned. But that can't be true, can it?'

The General laughed nervously as he remembered what Cassi had said. 'Orion? Rotating? I don't think so, Susie. Let me know when you get through.'

'Shall I take care of the girl?' asked Greg Watson eagerly after the secretary had gone.

The General nodded. 'You'd better. And quickly, before this all backfires in our faces.'

CASSI put down her phone and the Professor stared at her. For several minutes she paced the room, deep in thought.

'You won't really risk harming all those people on Orion, will you?' he said

eventually.

'No.' Cassi said firmly. 'The station is only rotating very slowly so they are perfectly safe. But General Phillips doesn't know that.'

'May I take a look at your calculator?'

'Certainly.' She took it out of her pocket and handed it over.

He turned it over in his hands. 'Ingenious little toy.'

'Beta designed it for me when I was very small and taking lessons from Iris. It meant I could sit in my room and communicate directly with the computer without having to clutter up the flight deck.'

He looked serious for a moment. 'Could you contact Iris from here?'

She nodded. 'If I had to. It has quite a range for such a small device.'

Inspiration dawned on the older man. 'So all those facts and figures you produced at the meeting were...?'

'Straight from the computer,' she agreed. 'You asked me so I simply asked Iris. You see, Professor Akherd, it is Iris who is the genius, not I.'

MARSHAL Hardy groaned as he tried to sit up but firm hands pushed him down again.

'You must rest, Mike,' said the Doctor. 'We've managed to get the bullet out but you've lost a lot of blood.'

'The Andromeda Seed?'

John looked sad. 'The General's men took it, I'm afraid.'

'But I don't understand why. What can they possibly want with those eggs? I must get to Europoort.'

'Relax, Mike. It's all a bit of a mystery right now. The Professor rang from the launch area and I told him what had happened.'

'How did those men know where to come for the Seed?'

'There must be a leak.'

'But there were only the few of us present when the matter was discussed aboard Orion.'

'Then one of them must have told the General.'

'But who?'

'Well, there aren't many alternatives. I didn't, you didn't and neither Cassi nor her father would have done.'

'And Tara has been with us the whole time,' Mike added.

'So that leaves the Director, unlikely as he wants to promote the space programme and this is his great opportunity for him to justify it to the whole world; the Admiral, an unknown quantity; or Professor Akherd - or both.'

Mike looked thoughtful. 'By the way, where is Cassi now?'

Jon looked suddenly ill. 'She is with the Professor.'

CASSI looked up at the knock and the Professor shrugged as one of the men unlocked and opened it. The Director walked it with Natasha Ralentov and Hans Bartek.

'Well, my dear,' the senior man greeted. 'I think you had better tell us what it is you are up to. There must be a representative from every newspaper and TV station in the world outside, waiting for you.'

'I know,' she said. 'I called them.'

'You called them? Have we not had enough adverse publicity already?'

'I think it is high time we brought certain things out into the open.'

'But it will ruin the space programme.'

'You didn't need me to do that,' she said quietly. 'Between you, you managed it all by yourselves.'

'What do you want?'

'An opportunity to speak to the world, to put the case for Andromeda.'

'To stop the exploration of outer space? Permanently?'

'On the contrary, Mr Director. If the Andromeda eggs are to be used, the population of Earth will grow rapidly after the next generation. We only have a few years to get organised and find additional planets on which to live.'

'And you think that by holding this press conference, you will achieve that?'

Cassi smiled. 'I know I will.'

MIKE Hardy stirred restlessly in the hospital bed as Jon Pederson discussed

anti-natal matters with Tara Dinsdale. The television in the corner chatted quietly to itself as the young child played with the knobs. The news began.

'Tonight, there is news of a startling discovery which has amazed scientists earthwide.'

Tara looked up and frowned as the newsreader continued his warm-up. Jon turned up the volume.

A reporter was speaking. 'This is Peter Cavannah for International Network News speaking direct from Europoort Space Centre. As you will know from recent news-flashes, the Europa Corporation's manned survey ship Wayfarer Two returned to Earth-vicinity just six days ago. I now take pleasure in being able to tell you that Wayfarer One has also been located and we can finally reveal the full truth of the matter.'

'Daddy! Look! It's a spaceship,' said the little girl as her father forced himself up onto one elbow.

The recently-arrived Margaret Hardy had not lied. Behind the newsman was the bulk of Wayfarer Two, keeled over at an angle where it had recently landed. Lights flashed, men ran around trying to make it safe as the voice droned on until - 'And now over to Erika Clark at the Europa Flight Centre itself.'

The scene changed to the interior of one of the buildings. A fair-haired woman was speaking. 'Good evening. I have with me Alan Thompson - Director of Europa Corporation, Professor Heinrich Akherd of the National Space Laboratory, Natasha Ralentov of the Orion Base Committee, Doctor Hans Bartek who designed the propulsion unit for the Wayfarers and Miss Cassiopeia Duncan, daughter of James Duncan who is Mission Commander of Survey Ship Wayfarer Two.'

CASSI felt her first twinges of apprehension as the cameras roved and showed the distinguished faces to the invisible audience. One by one, Erika questioned each of the scientists and gained for her viewers the overall picture of what had happened. It seemed odd to Cassi to hear these learned people, some of whom had opposed her father in the beginning, now telling his story as if they had believed it all along.

Eventually, the interviewer and her cameras came round to Cassi. 'Miss Duncan, am I correct in saying that you were not, in fact, born on Earth?'

Cassi nodded. 'I was born on board Wayfarer Two.'

'What of the others? The ones who died? Were they also born in flight?'

'No. They actually came from Andromeda itself.'

'And did they intend to come to Earth and take over from us?'

'Certainly not! They were not capable of reproduction and they would have been still alive today if they had been allowed to remain on board Wayfarer as had been originally intended.'

'Then if these Andromedans were not going to come to Earth, how did your father propose to save their race?'

'Wayfarer Two carried their genetic patterns in two forms. Female eggs which could be fertilised by male human sperm, and samples of Andromedan sperm that could be used to fertilise Earth women.'

'To produce a mixed race?'

'That was the idea. The Andromedans were a people who did not argue or fight and who could live to a very old age. However, they did not want to take over Earth for themselves.'

'Would this resultant mix benefit people on Earth?'

Cassi nodded. 'Most definitely.'

'You must understand that many viewers will be sceptical as to the benefits from this mix. How can you be so sure that the result would not be some kind of monster and that human life would not be threatened?'

Cassi drew in her breath. 'Because I am such a hybrid. My mother was Andromedan.'

Erika smiled. 'And you would seem perfectly normal to me.' She turned to face the camera. 'The qualifications of the experts around this table are indisputable. Professor Akherd, is such a fantastic journey really possible?'

The Professor sat back in his chair. 'I have done several calculations based upon Miss Duncan's theories and it does make sense.'

'And the Proton Drive, Doctor Bartek? Is it capable of such speeds?'

The designer shrugged but the interviewer was not to be put off so easily.

'If I understand the situation correctly, Doctor Bartek, your drive was designed to double the speed of the craft so as to take advantage of certain planetary alignments.'

'That is correct.'

'But Commander Duncan, and we assume Commander Markham before him, far exceeded this speed. Why was that?'

The inventor, clearly embarrassed, mumbled some unconvincing explanation but the interviewer now had a bone and she was going to worry it until it produced meat.

'Doctor Bartek does not know,' Cassi interrupted.

The room fell silent as all the cameras suddenly zoomed in on her.

'He does not know?' asked the excited Erika.

Cassi shook her head. 'The Proton Drive was never tested prior to the launch of Wayfarer One.'

'Not tested? How can that be?'

Out of the corner of her eye, Cassi saw a movement near the doorway. The lights were bright and it was difficult to make anything out in that area but she was sure she had not been mistaken.

'I think, with respect,' the Director was saying. 'The matter was not entirely the fault of Doctor Bartek. A considerable amount of pressure was placed upon him to produce such a drive with limited time and vastly inferior funding.'

'Why is this?'

'Because our respective governments, in their wisdom, have repeatedly cut our budgets over the years in order to continue to fund sophisticated weapon systems to destroy rather than to build. Much of our own scientific work, therefore, has been done voluntarily. If it was not for the dedication of men such as Professor Akherd and Doctor Bartek, we would still be sitting here looking up at the moon, thinking it was made of cream cheese.'

'The same is true in my country,' said Natasha Ralentov as Cassi watched the shape move again. 'All along, politicians and military leaders have not seen the importance of such research.'

The shape moved again. It was a man and he was trying to get into a position where he could see them all clearly.

'And is it really worth it?' asked Erika. 'I am told that such space travel does cost a considerable amount of money.'

The Director answered her. 'But the results are worth it. If this...accident...had not happened, a far-off civilisation would have been wiped out completely and we would not have the opportunity presented to us right now.'

Cassi stiffened. It was Greg Watson and he was surreptitiously moving behind some equipment, trying to get closer. She could see that he had something in his hand - something metallic and very like Mike's gun but with a longer barrel.

Erika Clark was speaking to her. 'And where are these eggs of which you have spoken?'

Cassi's brain whirled. She had to stop him, but she also had to protect the eggs. She had to think of a way to persuade the General to give them back without losing face.

'The eggs are quite safe,' Cassi suddenly found herself saying.

She looked around and saw that the scientists were all staring at her in disbelief.

'How do you know this?' asked the interviewer as Greg raised his arm to fire.

'Because General Phillips is looking after them for me. Doctor Pederson had already checked the eggs at his hospital in Bruxelles but it seemed logical that a second opinion would be advisable, especially if the investigation could be carried out under the direction of someone who had been responsible for opposing the space programme from the outset.'

Cassi saw Greg hesitate, uncertain. Now the whole world knew of the eggs and if the General destroyed them, he would be placed in an extremely embarrassing position, just as she had predicted.

'And the result?' said the interviewer as if from down a long tunnel.

Cassi looked straight at Greg. *Would he take the bait?* 'I spoke to the General just a few minutes ago by telephone and he confirms that the results

were negative. In fact, he has officially declared the eggs to be perfectly safe and beneficial for mankind and has also agreed to fully support the space programme in the future. I understand from him that the eggs will be returned to the hospital within the hour.'

Greg was clearly confused. *Had he swallowed it?*

Cassi faced the cameras and disarmingly smiled her sweetest smile to the watching billions. 'I think the General should be publicly commended for such a positive change in attitude.'

GENERAL Dwight Phillips watched the programme finish and then stood up, shaking his head. 'Well I'll be damned.'

'What is it, sir?' said the secretary.

'Susie, my dear. It seems I am about to become a world hero. Get Girman in here at once.'

'Yes, sir.'

His henchman appeared almost immediately as the General looked down at the insulated container and ran his fingers over the lid.

'Girman, take Smithers and get this box back to the hospital immediately.'

'But...?'

'Immediately. And whatever you do, don't go and have an accident along the way.'

A nurse was changing Mike's dressing a little later when Doctor Pederson entered. 'Feeling better?'

'I feel damn sore and you know it.'

'Never mind,' Jon said with a smile. 'I have a couple of visitors to cheer you up.'

Mike groaned as they helped him to sit up and the pain washed over him as he gritted his teeth and closed his eyes. When he opened them, Jon and the nurse had gone. In their place were the two people he loved the most.

'Hello, daddy,' said the younger one.

Mike smiled at her and then looked at the older one. 'You take some terrible risks but I love you for it.'

'I had to try,' said Cassi.

'I just got a phone call from the Director. It seems you succeeded. The government has agreed to fully support the continued exploration of space. On top of that, the eggs just reappeared out of the blue, safe and sound.'

She smiled. 'I'm glad.'

'Give us a kiss.'

'Only if you hurry up and get better.' Cassi leant over the bed and their lips met.

'Auntie Tara,' said Maggie excitedly as a newcomer entered. 'Cassi's kissing my daddy.'

Cassi turned and smiled at the dark-haired girl who looked flushed with excitement. 'Tara. How lovely to see you again.'

'I've got some good news,' Tara whispered as the girls embraced briefly. 'I'm going to have a baby.'

Cassi stood back in amazement. 'You mean...?'

Tara winked at her. 'A very unusual kind of baby.'

'You are very brave.'

'Nonsense. Lots of people have babies.'

Cassi smiled. 'Yes. But not one as special as yours. Father will be very happy.'

'What is he going to do now?'

'First of all, he's going to play "catch" with Orion. After that, he will start visiting nearby stars to try to find habitable places on which to live.'

'But I thought the planetary alignment was no longer suitable.'

'It doesn't matter any more. With Doctor Bartek's Proton Drive in Wayfarer One, the possibilities are endless. He can get to the edge of the Solar System and even visit other stars if need be, and bring back whatever data is needed.'

'But he could be gone for years at a time.'

'Only by his own time-scale. By Earth time, Wayfarer will be away for very

short periods.'

'And Wayfarer Two?'

'Once the databanks have been tapped and analysed, the ship will be repaired and re-launched. Doctor Bartek mentioned something about fitting temporary solid-fuel boosters to enable it to defeat gravity just this once.'

'And you? What will you do?'

'Me?' She turned to look at the invalid. 'That depends upon Mike.'

'Before he can do anything at all,' Jon Pederson said. 'He must recover and that means lots of rest. So, if you ladies have finished...?'

'Come on, Maggie,' said Cassi, holding out her hand to the young child. 'I think it's time you showed me where you live.'

'Goodbye, daddy,' the child called with a wave before accompanying Cassi down the corridor.

'You are a very lucky girl to have a father like that,' Cassi said as they entered the lift.

Maggie's eyes went wide with pleasure. 'My daddy is very clever, you know. He goes into space.'

Cassi acted all-innocent. 'Does he now? He must be really clever to do that.'

'We saw you on the telly tonight.'

Cassi smiled. 'Is that so? Would you like to be on telly one day?'

'I don't know. Would I have to miss school?'

'Perhaps. In the meantime, you and I are going to have to get to know each other. Would you like that?'

Margaret Hardy hesitated. 'I think so. Will daddy be coming home?'

'Your daddy will always be at home from now on. He told me that when he is well again, he's going to start a new job here at Europoort so we can all live together.'

'I'd think I'd like that.'

'In the meantime, I need to learn all about life on Earth. Will you teach me?'

The little girl nodded with pride as the lift doors opened and they stepped towards the car which was going to take them home. 'I like you, Cassi.'

She stopped suddenly. 'Tell me, is it right what daddy said? Are you really going to be my new mummy?'

THE BEGINNING

Commander James Duncan once again released the clamps from Orion after Cassi had helped him to correct Orion's position. She had also re-programmed Iris so he could interface with the drive console. Then it would respond to his voice control.

'Activate Main Drive,' he said with a smile at the recollection of the happy faces he was leaving behind on Earth.

The wedding had been beautiful, and he had flown to Earth just for the celebration. His little girl had looked so happy and so had the two bridesmaids in blue, one tall and smiling, the other young and still confused by the sudden changes in her life.

'Main Drive activated >' responded Iris and Wayfarer One began to move out of orbit.

Cassi had been right - he could not live on Terra. This is where he belonged, out in space. Who knows what worlds are out there, waiting to be discovered? Mike and Cassi had been allocated a house on the coast near to Europoort so they could pop up and see him each time he returned to Orion. He would look forward to that.

He set course - first stop Jupiter to take some samples of the upper atmosphere and then on to Saturn. Except for the androids who assisted with running the ship, he was alone at last.

He sat up straight and then smiled. Unclipping his seat belt, he stood up and left the flight deck. It would be an hour or so before he would need to slip through the asteroids so the ship was quite safe until then.

Down the long corridor he strode purposefully, to the tiny laboratory at the end where he went over to a small box of electronics. Instead of resting quietly until needed, the incubator hummed to itself as the life-support monitor registered a tiny heartbeat. He lifted the lid and looked inside. In his memory, he was thrown back twenty years and he realised that history was cheerfully repeating itself.

Jim Duncan smiled. Yes, he was alone. But not for much longer.

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Kendal and South Lakeland Guide

Οτιερ Βοοκσ βψ Ρεγεντλανε Πυβλισηινγ

Two Wheels on a Tin Road
Venus and her Men
Ready for Easter
Made to Measure
Granton
Murder Most 'Orrid
Northern Murders and Manslaughters
Cumbrian Characters