

*Somewhere in the mountain region joining the former countries of Pakistan, Iran and Afghanistan. Sunset. The 22nd century.*

The machine gun bullets ripped into the soft stone walls of the house. The damage was a testament to the accuracy of the machine gunner; the almost linear nature of the indentations. However, he had been too slow to hit his target. The dark figure had ducked around the corner a split second before. The fleeing man sped down the narrow and winding street of the old town. As he weaved to avoid the attentions of rifle shots and small arms fire, he dropped small objects onto the ground. On closer inspection they looked like buttons.

The few people on the street scattered into doorways and through the open windows of the houses as the man ran past. The bullets whistling by, some ricocheting off the houses. Nobody tried to stop the runner. But as he disappeared around corners and his pursuers chased after him, people emerged and joined in the growing tumult that was spreading through the old town. A small boy picked up two of the button-like objects. His mother shouted at him. He made to throw them away. But only one left his hand. The other he rather adeptly hid from his mother's view and dropped into his pocket. His mother shouted at him again. He quickly moved back into their house's doorway. Seconds later a surge of more men came running down the street yelling at people to get out of their way. The people scattered again as the gun waving men went past. Throughout the old town alarms were beginning to sound and in the distance the sirens of the new town started up.

Ahead, the fugitive turned the last corner of the winding street. He could see the low town walls in front of him. A small building was built onto the walls. Its roof, in two levels, came to about three feet of the inner parapet in height. He paused to discard his black cloak and liberally spread the last of the buttons on the ground about him. Then as the sound of the chasing band grew louder, he ran at the wall house. Using a low gatepost to help him gain

height, he jumped up and reaching for the roof with his hands, he somersaulted onto the lower level. He rolled briefly, then got to his feet and quickly crossed the roof to the higher level and the parapet beyond. Without looking back, he rolled over the inner parapet and stopped there.

He knew he had only moments to work in. He needed to buy himself some time to escape in. He took out a pistol, took the safety catch off and placed it ready to use beside him. Next, he unhooked both of his earrings. They were rather large and intricate, vaguely resembling animals of some kind. In the centre of both were blue gem-like pieces of glass set in a metal clasp. He twisted the central part of one of them, clockwise, half a turn. The glass began to glow with a weak blue light. Holding it in one hand and the pistol in the other he peered over the parapet wall.

Almost immediately about twenty men burst around the last corner. The leader stopped suddenly, looking around him. Somebody behind him bumped into him. Cursing, he spotted the cloak on the ground. He barked a command and one of the men alongside him went to examine the cloak. The leader anxiously scanned the street. His eyes took in the parapet wall and saw their quarry, pistol outstretched smiling at him. The leader gave a loud shout. But he was too late. The pistol fired and the man examining the cloak cried out and fell forward onto the ground. A patch of blood slowly grew on his back.

A moment of time seemed to last an age, before the scene erupted. Men yelled, guns fired, not all of them towards the wall. The man on the wall fired more rounds, more people fell down dead. The leader shouted once more, and the men rushed to take what cover there was in the street. The lengthening shadows cast by the setting sun draped the street in somewhat eerie bands. Behind the parapet wall the fugitive lay flat and pressed the lit blue glass. It went into the earring a little and the light went out. Then the explosions began.

The other side of the parapet wall at the end of the street, around the cast-off cloak, as many as ten separate buttons exploded. It would have been hard to tell there had been ten, because the screams and yells started almost instantaneously. Bits of house fronts and bodies flew through the air, dust gathered into a swirling cloud.

The leader, thrown against a doorway, looked out onto the street as the dust began to settle. He could see the wreckage of houses and his men. Bodies lay in grotesquely contorted shapes. Blood covered the ground and he could see various body parts strewn around. The cries of the dying and the maimed filled his ears. Blood trickled down his cheek from a head wound. He was covered in dust and pieces of stone and wood. His ears were ringing, and his chest heaved. Then his gaze reached his legs. Or, rather, where his legs had been. His body ended in bloody stumps halfway along what were once his thighs. The mangled bones and sinews glinted slightly in the rays of the setting sun. The scream came from deep within his chest and continued with blood curdling ferocity until the last of his strength ebbed away and his lifeless eyes turned up.

Simultaneously, all along the path taken by the fugitive, other explosions ripped into buildings and bodies alike. People were blown into the air and into houses and into each other. Men and women screamed in terror. Panic gripped the old town with people running here and there, aimlessly, often trampling their neighbours. The woman was looking directly at her son when the button hidden in his pocket went off. For a split second she could see his head and shoulders apparently hanging in the air. His torso had disappeared, while his legs momentarily held their position. But then the blast blew everything away. The scream of the mother never escaped her lips, as another blast extinguished her life and the lives of her neighbours also.

The fugitive did not wait to see the results of his handiwork. Once the blasts and pressure waves had passed over the parapet wall, he slipped over the town wall. It was a fifteen-foot

drop. He landed a little awkwardly, stumbling forward slightly. He quickly glanced both ways and ahead of him. There was no one in sight as far as he could tell in the fading sunlight.

"Always have an escape plan, an escape route ready," he could hear the voices of his trainers." Preferably more than one. Take account of different times of the day. Different locations you may be in..." and so on until they, the trainee infiltrators, knew the speech off by heart. Well, seven completed missions on, this infiltrator knew well the importance of this advice. He was now following the second of four escape plans he had formulated for just this occasion, when his cover was finally blown.

He ran forward about twenty paces and slid down the side of the dried-up riverbed. At the bottom he checked the other earring that he held in his hand. He turned the blue glass half a turn in the opposite direction, anticlockwise, this time. On depressing the blue glass, it again glowed. With all the strength he could muster he threw the earring as far away up the riverbed as he could. Then he turned and quickly moved off in the downstream direction. The dried-up bed was only about twenty foot wide. He kept to the side covered in shadow, moving as quietly as he could in the deepening dusk.

A few minutes later he had gone about a quarter of a mile. Behind him at the point where he had dropped off the wall, men were gathering. But there was no obvious leader and no real consensus on what to do next. All the time more men were clambering over the walls and joining them. Roughly equal numbers wanted to rush off in the three possible directions the fugitive could have made off in. Upstream, downstream, or straight across the riverbed and over the boulder strewn plain opposite. The confusion was not helped by frequent cries from watchers on the walls, who seemed to be seeing at least six different fleeing figures from their vantage points; all going in different directions too. Just as it seemed that the crowd would split up and go three ways the second earring detonated. All eyes turned

upstream and watched the plume of the explosion rising slowly. A shout went up and the mass of men moved towards the explosion. Despite the desperate attempts of some to stop them, they headed upstream, some on the banks, some on the floor of the riverbed.

At the sound of the explosion the fugitive increased his speed and worried less about the noise he might make. He turned a bend in the riverbed and saw half a mile ahead of him, his objective. Beside an old stone bridge, fit only for traffic on foot or horseback, lay the pens for most of the horses that belonged to the people of the old town. The plan called for a short journey by horse across terrain unsuitable for any motorized vehicles that would eventually come from the new town. He needed to take a horse and stampede the others to try to slow down the pursuit. But he knew there would be guards to deal with. He still had a few rounds in his pistol and his long knife hung off his belt.

He gave up any pretence at hiding now. He ran towards the pens shouting out for attention. From the viewpoint of anyone standing by the horse pens it was difficult to make out much of the approaching figure. The sinking sun was directly behind him, and the rapidly fading light, combined with the increasingly long shadows, prevented clear recognition.

"Now that's handy," the infiltrator said to himself. There seemed to be only one guard left. The others were nowhere to be seen. Perhaps they had gone up to the old town to find out what was happening. He rushed on towards the guard shouting, "treachery! Spies! Westerners!" the remaining guard held his rifle up and pointed at the figure rapidly approaching him out of the gathering gloom. He thought he could recognize that voice, and as the man came up to him, he saw that it was Anwar, the shepherd. Silly Anwar, the shepherd who told silly stories for the children and who was the clumsiest person the old town had seen for years, the old men said.

"What is it, Anwar? What's happening? Who's doing all that shooting? And the explosions?" the guard asked eagerly.

"Damn Westerner spy, scum, killing and shooting," Anwar replied breathlessly. "The men are chasing him; must get a horse and follow."

The guard became very excited at this news and joined the shepherd in unlocking the pen gate. "Which direction did he go in?" he asked.

"Upstream," Anwar answered and pointed with his arm. He had found a suitable mount. The horses were a little jittery with the sound of gunfire in the distance. But this one was calmer than the rest. He was about to mount up when someone up on the walls called out. Too late, the guard got the gist of the information, and spun round to face the shepherd, rifle raised. But it was the last thing he did. The pistol shot went through his forehead and removed most of the back of his head.

The fugitive then shooed the rest of the horses out of the pen. As he got onto his horse the rifle fire from the walls above was getting uncomfortably close. A horse in front of him collapsed and his ride neighed loudly, rearing up on his hind legs. But one of the many skills of this infiltrator was horsemanship. He held on and soon had the horse under control again. Unfortunately, this had given a marksman the time he needed. The fugitive twisted suddenly as the bullet thumped into his shoulder.

"Good shot," he said aloud through a grimace. A yell of delight came from the walls; but it changed to dismay and then anger as the horse and rider shot forward across the bridge. A few more shots chased after the horse and rider, but none came close to their target. Soon they had rounded the bend in the path and disappeared from sight.

A quarter of an hour later, men had come out of the old town and come running down the riverbed. A couple of beaten-up looking jeeps had arrived from the new town and someone was now in charge, giving clear orders to the assembling men. Soon twenty armed horsemen

had set off after the fugitive. The jeeps headed towards the stronger bridge, a mile further downstream, where they would cross and set off down the road to check in case the Westerner cut back onto the main road. Other men would follow the horsemen on foot in case they missed him in their haste. The remaining men were sent back into the old town to help with the injured and to calm the people down. They would begin to make repairs too.

The pain in his shoulder was bearable despite the constant jolts as the horse picked its way across the rough terrain. After around ten minutes they came to a fork in the path. To the left the route carried on skirting the mountains, eventually it would reach the road that led to the pass over the mountains. But the fugitive took the right fork and urged the horse on. The way lead into a box canyon where his flock roamed the poor pastures.

Sooner than he would have expected the following horsemen reached the fork. One dismounted and led his horse slowly as he scanned the ground around the fork. His face showed amazement, then lit up as a smile filled it.

"He has gone into the box canyon!" he declared. "There is no other way out. He must be mad. We have him now!" he quickly remounted.

"We must be careful," the leader said with a scowl. "By Allah! The damned Westerner has lived amongst us for months. We never suspected! He may well have more tricks of the devil to throw at us." He then urged his horse on again. The others followed, his words calming their zealous mood.

In front of them the damned Westerner had stopped to listen for the pursuit. His sleeve was wet with blood, but it looked like the bleeding had stopped. The bullet felt like a dull ache within his shoulder. When he was sure that they were still following him, he set off as fast as the horse could go on the difficult path.

After ten minutes the narrowness of the valley gave way to a sudden widening. It became about ten times wider being about two hundred yards now from one side to the other.

However, the walls of the canyon were now sheer and ahead they joined up to form the end of the canyon. There was no way through, or over. In the middle of this space a dilapidated shack barely stood erect next to some boulders of various sizes. Sheep and goats were grazing all around. The fugitive headed for the shack. He dismounted and slapped the hindquarters of the horse. It got the message and tore off in the direction it had just come from. The fugitive entered the shack and using a sledgehammer, left there for just this occurrence, he smashed up a few of the floorboards near the door. There was soon room for someone to creep underneath and indeed there seemed to be a cavity under the shack. He put the sledgehammer down and stood in the doorway and waited.

The returning horse ran into the pursuing horsemen and managed to unseat one of them. But others held it up. The riders noted with some satisfaction the sight of fresh blood on the body of the horse. They soon came to where the valley widened into the canyon. Ahead they could see the shack with a figure standing in the doorway. They spread out and stopped in a line facing the shack about fifty yards away. The fugitive waved at them cheekily and went inside the shack, shutting the door behind him.

This was too much for many of the horsemen. They cried out in fury and their horses sprang forward. The leader managed to shout some orders at them and soon the horsemen had surrounded the shack, at about ten feet away from it. Guns were levelled at the shack. The leader shouted for the Westerner to come out and face his doom. The others bayed like angry dogs. The sun had now set, and the stars lit up the sky. A half-moon was rising over the canyon wall to the east.

But no answer came from within. The leader called again. The others fell quiet, listening for a reply. Then the leader gave the order and twenty guns opened up on the feeble shack. Light machine guns, rifles, pistols, all were unleashed upon the shoddy wooden structure. After some seconds the leader held up his arm and shouted for a halt. There was a rush to



reload the various weapons. Parts of the shack had fallen in on itself. The door had been shot off its hinges and lay splattered with holes on the ground. The whole front of the shack had fallen in. But amidst the wreckage it soon became clear that the Westerner was not there. No body. Dead or alive. No sign of him. The leader's eyes narrowed in surprise and suspicion. He called out for the men not to approach the shack. They obeyed fearing a filthy Westerner trap or devilry.

As soon as he had closed the door the infiltrator had crawled through the gap in the floor. He slid ten feet down into the hole. He came to a stop up against a dark mass that filled the space under the shack. He felt the welcoming metal touch his face.

It felt cold.

It felt good.

He pressed a part of the metal that was scored with markings. A patch of light appeared just below his eyes as a panel in the metal slid open. He dropped his left eye level with the patch. A new light came out of the patch and scanned from the top to the bottom, covering his eye in the process. The retinal scan was registering as the leader called out to him outside.

Next, a touchpad appeared above the light patch. He quickly entered the correct sequence of numbers and figures. There was only a slight pause and then a panel big enough for him to slide through opened silently in the metal. Once inside the infiltrator stood up.

"Lights," he said aloud. Lights came on and the panel shut behind him. Above the firing had started. There was a faint hum.

"Computer, prepare for immediate launch," he called out. "Stop at fifty yards above ground level."

"Understood," a soft female voice replied. This infiltrator preferred a woman's voice for his computer's vocal interface.

As the bullets hammered into the crumbling shack overhead, he crossed the floor of his ship and sat in the single seat and watched the control panels in front of him, click, and light up into life. He strapped himself into the seat.

"Ship is ready for take-off," the soft voice announced.

"Execute," he said instantly.

There would be very little sound or vibration inside the ship. The control panel lights flickered on and off and the ship began to rise.

Around the shack the horsemen felt the vibrations through the ground first. The horses backed away nervously. Then the sound of something breaking through the shack floor split the night air. The ship rose majestically. The shack shattered into many pieces and the soil around it turned up. The boulders rolled away as the twenty-foot diameter ship broke free and slowly rose to a height of fifty feet, where it stopped. There was no apparent sound of engines working. The ship hung there above the riders, who cried out in alarm, barely controlling their steeds. Then the leader called out and the guns fired again. This time the target was the dull metallic cylinder hovering overhead.

But all the second salvo of bullets succeeded in doing was to knock off most of the soil and grit that still clung to the ship's sides. Eventually the bullets were all used up and the riders stared up at the silent ship. Only the noise of terrified sheep and goats and the nervous neighing of the horses broke the quiet of the evening.

Aboard his ship the infiltrator issued another command.

"Visuals."

A screen appeared on one of the panels. He could see the horsemen below as the screen showed him the full view beneath him. The infiltrator smiled grimly to himself. There were people he knew down there. He recognized Assad, Farouk, a couple of Alis and one of the

council leaders. His fingers reached over to a pair of buttons on the panel in front of him: one green; the other red. He considered for a second and glanced at the riders on his screen again.

"There's been enough killing for one day," he said as if to reassure himself. He pressed the green button. Outside a tremendously powerful sound wave was produced by the ship. Its frequency and amplitude were designed to knock out most creatures within a half mile radius of the ship. The infiltrator watched as the horses collapsed and the riders fell to the ground clutching their ears. Soon nothing moved below the ship; sheep and goats were struck down also. In an hour, or so, the people and animals would begin to come to. Temporary deafness, bleeding ears and loss of balance would affect the victims for a few hours. Eardrums would be perforated. They would feel pain. But eventually they would recover. However, if he had pressed the red button then death would have spread through the canyon.

Shielded within the ship the infiltrator gave another order, "take us up to orbit height. Contact Lyon Control and get us home computer."

"Understood," the computer softly responded.

Without a sound inside, the ship soared straight up into the night sky. It was already communicating with Orbital Control and through them with Lyon Control.

*Inside an infiltrator ship approaching low satellite orbit height*

The infiltrator began to relax a little. He knew from experience that the ship could be relied upon to get him home. There was no need for him to get involved. The ship had lain dormant the last nine months waiting for his return. The trickiest part of any infiltrator mission was the hiding of his ship. This had to be done without raising the suspicions of the local populace. Nine months ago, they had arrived during one of the worst storms in living memory. No one had been anywhere near as they established the ship's hiding place. Then later, he developed his cover as a shepherd, as he appeared to come to the area from outside; driving his recently acquired flocks before him. He had only used the ship twice during the previous nine months. Each time to send a report to Lyon Control. He used a remote link to the ship's transmitters to achieve this. The remote was disguised as a rather ugly looking buckle on his leather belt.

As if in response to his relaxation the shoulder wound throbbed painfully again. The computer had sensed the damage to the infiltrator.

"You have a bullet wound," it said suddenly. "Do you require medical assistance?"

"Yes, computer," he answered. "Take a look for me and suggest possible treatment."

The ship was about seven feet from floor to ceiling inside. Above him a compartment opened, and a few robotic arms emerged. They carried various devices and small trays. The infiltrator looked away towards the screen as he felt the sleeve of his shirt being cut by robotic scissors. The medical robot and programs could handle many problems or emergencies. Anything from poisoning to minor operations. The system was expected to be able to keep an infiltrator alive, under most circumstances, until the ship got them home. Depending on which part of the world it was returning from this should take two hours at the most.

While the infiltrator looked elsewhere the robotic system sensed the extent of the damage. It prodded him, making him jump slightly with the sudden increase in pain. After a short while it was ready.

"Analysis is complete."

"Well, let me have it then."

"Wound is largely superficial. You appear to have been shot at great range." Then in almost an afterthought, "luckily." There was a brief pause while it allowed him to digest this, not unexpected news. He had been shot before. He knew when it was serious alright.

"Bleeding has stopped," it began again. "The bullet is lodged against the shoulder bone. But there appears to be little damage to the bone itself. Two options are available.

"This unit is fully capable of operating and removing the bullet. Time for this procedure to take is under thirty minutes.

"Alternatively, wound can be dressed and treated for now, and then dealt with on arrival at Lyon Control."

"Estimated time to arrive at Lyon Control?" he interrupted.

"Orbital stations say we have immediate clearance. Time to Lyon is fifty-eight minutes."

"OK computer." He had decided. "Running repairs for now. Understood?"

"Understood."

Was it him? Or did it sound disappointed with his decision? A slight inflection in the soft voice. One day they would have minds of their own. He was utterly convinced of it. He had seen some of the classified reports on recent developments.

The medical robot cleaned the wound. Gave him painkilling and anti-infection injections. Then it put a dressing on. Finally, it cut the whole of his blooded sleeve off, letting it fall to the floor of the ship. The various parts then returned to the compartment and it closed. Inside it would be sterilizing itself ready for the next job.

The infiltrator considered the view he was getting on the screen. The ship, while travelling to the desired height above the Earth's surface, was also keeping up with the terminator. The Earth's spin had brought the terminator well into old Iran and the line between night and day was now cutting through the Gulf States. He looked back to where India lay under nightfall. It was impossible to see the catastrophic consequences of the India-Pakistan nuclear war from this height. But in his mind's eye he could see the devastation as if he had only just that moment seen it for the first time. He scanned across northern India into Pakistan. There was very little light down there. Where the great cities had once been, there was now only darkness. There would be very little activity in those places. They were still deadly. The radiation levels were crippling and carcinogenic to most life. Even now, years after the bombs had fallen.

His thoughts drifted back to a mission where he had been forced to travel across the northern Indian plains. He had made the journey as fast as the available transport could go. When he returned to Lyon Control, he had to have the longest post-mission treatment anyone had ever had to date with hours and hours in the scrubbers; chemotherapy; body fluid transfusions. He did not come out of the rehab program for six months. A shudder swept over his body at the memory of it.

"Are you well?" the computer asked.

"I am fine," he said reassuringly. "Just some bad memories."

The computer said nothing.

"Do you remember mission number four, computer?" he asked the machine. There was a pause.

"The data is stored in this unit still." Then, as if it had just run through the data to remind itself, "you were functioning at a very low level at that time."

"Yes, I was," he responded. "I survived, partly thanks to you."

The computer said nothing.

The infiltrator turned in his seat and looked around the ship. These things were capable of many wonders. A ship could keep a man alive for a year without any input from outside. Whether it was buried hidden in the ground or in orbit. It recycled waste as efficiently as any space vehicle yet designed. Almost indestructible; it was equipped with many weapons including the latest laser cannons. The life support systems would preserve and protect in the cold of space and under the pressure of many feet of water. Computer power and communication capabilities were quite simply state of the art for the 22nd century. There was nothing better on Earth or elsewhere in the Solar System; on the Moon; or on Mars. Most of the inside was taken up with the systems and their back-ups (three stage redundancy was the norm). There was some space directly behind the seat for what could loosely be called living quarters. Cramped and claustrophobic, it would be, if you had to spend some time stuck in here. But then on a normal mission very little time should be spent inside; once it had been concealed. Only in emergencies, or at the end of the job would it be necessary. The infiltrator had heard of one person who had stayed hidden away inside his ship for six months when his mission had gone wrong. Then at last they had been detected. They were fighting their way out as tactical support arrived. Control, realising the mission had now been fully compromised, sent in the heavy mob and every person within ten miles radius had been wiped out. That was in central Africa somewhere. An extermination ending.

The infiltrator changed the screen settings to show incoming sensor readings. The positions of satellites and any space craft in their vicinity were displayed. Each with its own little icon describing it. He gave a few minutes attention to this, then the computer spoke again.

"Ship is now at required position and maintaining it, waiting for final clearance from Lyon Control."

He switched to visuals again. But this time to the view above and around the orbiting ship. He looked at the nearby satellites, slowly spinning. In the distance, bathed in the raw, undiluted light of the sun shone the Space Station. He remembered his training there and the timeless experience of the spacewalk. The stars! He looked up again to see the sheer majesty of the stars. Stars! Unblemished by an atmosphere; even an atmosphere only recently recovered from the great Gamma Ray Burst disaster.

Sighing, he considered again the prospect of moving to the Moon, or perhaps Mars, when he was retired from active duty. If he lived that long, of course. Did he really want to go? He knew he did not know the answer to that question, yet.

"We have clearance," the computer broke into his private musings.

"Is there much traffic below us at commercial levels?" he asked the computer.

"Nothing that will come close to our marked flightpath," it replied.

"Take us home, ship," he cried, and could not resist pointing forward like they did in those old space series. The ship dropped out of orbit and rapidly moved into the day side of the terminator. It picked up speed and altered its angle of approach to minimize re-entry effects. Inside, the infiltrator enjoyed the temperature-controlled ride. It was a cloudless early evening as the ship crossed high above the Mediterranean. Soon they would cross Italy and the ship would change course to the north. Then the Alps would be seen in the distance, below them, but rising majestically above their surroundings. Their splendour illuminated by the rays of the reddening sun. Home was just around the corner.



*Lyon Control, West Europe Centre For Operations (WECO) - intelligence gathering and covert mission's division, late afternoon.*

It had been a quiet day, so far. In fact, all this week nothing much had happened. This was fine by technician Jean-Marie Biblio. He had managed to get some revision done for his final exams. When he had passed these, he would qualify as a Chief Technician/Second Class. Then he could transfer to that job waiting for him at the European Air Defence complex outside Paris. Near enough to be a homecoming for him. The exams were next month, and he was going to be ready for them; despite struggling a little in Mathematical Systems in AI.

The previous week had been much different. There had been a lot of action. Several missions returned: two training raid missions to Sub-Saharan Africa and South America respectively; an assault team fresh from Middle East exploits; routine servicing of space barges and satellite back-ups; a scout fighter jet had made an emergency landing; and finally, the local European Councillor wanted checks made on her executive runabout - very sharp piece of engineering that. There were casualties and injuries amongst the three returning active missions. Not just fuel and hydraulics were cleaned off the main landing apron last week. One soldier had died before the medics could save her. It seemed like half her chest had burned away in a laser blast. She finally died in agony with her head slumped on her remaining breast. It was not a pleasant sight; too much for one trainee technician who parted company with the contents of his stomach. But he recovered and did a fine job afterwards. At least his, J-M, new posting promised to be less gory up at EAD Paris.

Two hours left on this shift, Jean-Marie thought to himself. He began to drink another cup of coffee. Too much coffee this week, must limit myself. The sudden buzz of the intercom in the office made him jump and spill some drink onto the table. He cursed aloud as he reached for the controls.

"Tech office here, J-M speaking."

"J-M, get down to the landing bay," his Chief Technician was on the other end. "We got an infiltrator coming in." A trace of excitement was in his voice.

"Who is it?" Jean-Marie asked.

"Not told us yet," the answer came back. "No need to rush, J-M, 'll be about an hour or so."

"OK, Chief. I'll tidy up things this end and close the office. See you in a bit."

"OK, J-M." The line went dead.

Technician J-M Biblio quickly filled in a few pressing reports and ordered other paperwork into piles of relative urgency, ready for the morning. He finished his coffee and washed the cup in the office sink. Leaving it to dry on a hook, he left the office. As he set off in the direction of the main landing bay he switched on his personal radio, adjusting the setting to match that of the Chief Technician's. Walking at his normal pace it would take him ten minutes to get there.

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The instant the retinal scanner had been activated the ship came online. Coming out of its dormant state it had immediately sent a message to Lyon Control. Alerting them that someone was attempting to enter the ship. In the large central control room at LC the incoming message set off the warning protocols. There were many stations spread around the room; clumped together, all be it with their own space, into geographical areas. There was at least one operator sat within each clump of monitors and keyboards. The whole of the wall on one side of the room was taken up by a giant vidscreen map of the world. It was littered by led markers of many different colours; on the edge of one side of the huge map a key for the coloured markers ran down several feet. The screen could be updated at any time interval from thirty seconds to an hour. It was presently running with ten-minute updates. As the

screen adjusted each time, some of the markers changed their positions slightly. Many, however, did not move. All but the most secret missions or deployments were indicated up there on the great screen. Some markers were not explained, and their exact nature were only known to a few operators. Along the three other sides of the room offices were arranged in two storeys. These were occupied by the senior controllers and operators. Some were rest rooms and facilities for toilets and refreshment. Only two doors gave entrance to the main control room. Armed guards checked everyone's details and security passes.

Infiltrator ships did not show up on the vidscreen when they were in dormant mode. When the infiltrator had made his two reports the messages had been flashed very quickly to a suitable satellite and then passed on to LC. No marker was activated. However, now the ship's position was showing as a new green marker in the south east of old Pakistan. The operator sat in the clump for that part of the world was now able via satellite links to home in on the ship's signal. On the monitor facing him he had a close-up of the area the ship was in. He was joined by another operator who put on a headset and started to work an adjacent station.

The controller in overall charge that day looked out at the world map from his office. Not even he knew where active infiltrators were in the world. All they had was a general idea so that the operators for those areas could keep an eye and ear out for a signal. But this was only on the scale of 'the middle east' or 'central Africa'. When a signal did come in, it usually meant trouble, and they would have to act fast to help get the infiltrator home. Often rescue missions needed to be mounted, if it was feasible and if the fast response units around the world could handle it. Obviously, this was not always possible because of access and availability of suitable strength units. There would be no attempt to rescue an infiltrator or any other agent from certain parts of China; unless people wanted to get themselves killed!

The controller-in-chief could see on his monitor what the operator saw, and he was tapped into communication channels also.

"Ship ZX8 reports retinal scan correct," the operator informed the chief.

"Sequence confirmed and ship has opened." There was a short pause.

"Voice recognition verified. Commands given. Ship ZX8 instructed to return to base. Ownership protocols complete."

The chief controller breathed a sigh of relief. In the past infiltrators had been compromised. A dead man's eye had been dragged in front of the retinal scan. The sequence had been tortured out of them. But nobody could match or synthesize the correct vocal pattern. Even when an infiltrator had been forced to allow hostiles entry to the ship the computer would detect the people without beacon implants. Then, unless commanded otherwise, the computer would use the ship's internal weaponry to eradicate the unwanted visitors. Thus, the infiltrator would be able to make the ship secure, and escape, or fend off unwanted attention until relief arrived.

"Ship ZX8 is off the ground and on course for orbital position." The operator said with a slight hint of triumph in his voice. "Orbit position will be reached in four minutes."

"Identity of infiltrator, operator?" the chief controller inquired.

"Ship's computer confirms infiltrator RAMESES safely aboard." Then, "relayed implant signal shows RAMESES to have a gunshot wound. Ship's computer confirms data.

RAMESES is stable and in no immediate danger."

"RAMESES!" the chief whistled. "How long has he been active?" he asked the operator.

"Around nine months, sir." The operator shared his chief's feelings.

From the world screen the chief could see that Ship ZX8 was almost in orbital position.

"Is there much traffic on the normal route, operator?" he asked.

"Nothing significant, flightpath computers have already communicated necessary data to the ship. Awaiting the green light, sir."

"Let's not hang about. Bring him in, pronto, operator."

"Will do, chief." The operator concentrated on his job.

Around the control room a ripple of information spread. There were many smiles and a few raised eyebrows. The chief also smiled to himself. RAMESES coming home.

Wounded, but not seriously. How many missions had he survived now? He knew many people who had bet he would not last another one. Would he be sent on another full infiltration? The chief wondered to himself.

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When technician J-M Biblio reached the main landing bay, a small crowd of technicians: trainee and qualified had gathered. They were standing together looking out at the sky expectantly. The sun was low on the horizon. It's weakening reddish light shone deep into the bay. To one side the usual emergency crews sat, waiting patiently. Not really expecting to be required. A returning infiltrator ship had never got into difficulties before. Unless it had been piloted manually! J-M cast his glance about him. There was no sign of Jacques Anor, his Chief Technician. He acknowledged the other technicians and was about to ask where the Chief was, when he spotted him coming out of one of the side offices. He was wearing his headset that linked him to the control centre.

"What is its ETA, control?" he listened while waving J-M over.

"Thirty minutes everyone," he shouted aloud. The emergency crews grunted amongst themselves. The technicians nodded impatiently. J-M noticed that a couple of them should have gone off duty by now. But it was not every day an infiltrator came in. He had done the same once.

"Are you able to tell us who it is yet, control?" the Chief asked. The reply must have been immediate because the Chief Technician's face changed as he watched J-M come up to him. First, he raised his eyebrows as if in disbelief or surprise perhaps. Then a broad smile appeared.

"RAMESES! It's RAMESES, boys," he yelled to the waiting personnel. This time there was more of a reaction from the emergency crews. They talked excitedly to each other. A similar response was produced in the technicians. J-M and the Chief Technician walked up to the rest of the technicians. The leader of the safety crews joined them. The Chief Technician suddenly turned to face the medics; he was nodding to the voice in his ears.

"He's been shot," he called out. "But nothing to worry about, apparently," he added. The medics gave him the thumbs up and prepared their equipment. Some of the younger technicians exchanged concerned looks with each other.

"Well, well, RAMESES," the safety crew leader said to no one in particular.

"Should we call him RAMESES the third, or something," the Chief Technician chuckled. J-M smiled at the joke, but noticed it was lost on most people.

"Perhaps, RAMESES the great," the crew leader added, showing he had a knowledge of Egyptology. The Chief Technician beamed at him.

"We should call him RAMESES the seventh," piped up a younger technician. He looked quite pleased with himself. The others were bemused.

"Why?" someone ventured.

"Well, this is his seventh mission," he gleefully explained. "Seven completed, successful missions." Then seeing the doubt in some of the faces around him, "I'm sure it is seven." Despite the scepticism, he sounded certain of his facts.

"You're right," the Chief Technician backed him up.

"Seven missions," the crew leader repeated. "Is that a record?" he asked the Chief Technician.

"Equals the record set by PANZER," the Chief Technician informed them all. "She' retired now. Besides with due respect to her I don't think she went on the same kind of missions as RAMESES has. No other infiltrators have got to seven. Most of them don't get past three or four."

A member of the medics had joined the discussion, he cleared his throat and spoke. "I remember RAMESES returning twice before. The first time he had been knifed badly and was barely alive. The medical robot had done what it could for him; but he was in and out of consciousness when the ship landed. The ship broke the record for return from orbit to get him home in time. He had given the computer specific instructions. I tell you that was one hot ship on the outside when it put down. The engineers and designers learnt a few things about the ships' performance that time. And the computers too. As we took him out, he patted the ship and thanked it. You know what? The computer said 'Understood' back to him. He smiled and promptly lost consciousness."

"Yes, they did," the Chief Technician agreed.

"Another time," the man went on, "there was so much radioactivity on him and the ship everyone who was there when the ship landed had to have the full radiation treatment. I tell you, them scrubbers hurt. I had to be sedated," he admitted rather ruefully. "Mind you he was in rehab for months. The ship's systems took a right battering, I heard," he glanced expectantly at the Chief Technician.

"We had to replace many of the systems," he volunteered with a slight far away edge to his voice. "We took the chance to upgrade all the systems. Luckily, the memory banks had survived intact. They had been surrounded by the latest radiation protection materials and

technology. They use them now on the asteroid deflectors and all space craft spending time off-world."

He paused. Gazing up to the orange-red sky.

"When we rebooted the ship computer and interfaced it with the systems. Once it had established itself and who we were and that it was not going on a mission, a curious thing happened." He paused again for dramatic effect.

"It asked us about the 'status' of RAMESES. Was he still 'functioning?' it asked. Damnedest thing we had ever heard. It shut itself down after a perfect test flight."

For the remaining minutes they talked about infiltrators and their ships. Tales, hearsay, gossip and fact mixed with conjecture. Folklore and truth were both reinforced.

Finally, a shout heralded the arrival of the ship. It gracefully approached the landing bay. Now at a much-reduced speed.

"Is he flying it manually?" one of the trainees asked.

"Don't be daft," another voice cried back.

An infiltrator ship was only flown hands-on if there was a serious problem. Like complete computer system failure. This was a routine ending to a mission. The ship came to a stop thirty foot above the landing bay and then, almost soundlessly, dropped onto the floor. It was home.



*RAMESES at WECO*

Only seconds after the ship had landed and a few meaningful sounding clunks and clinks had been heard from it, a green light appeared in a suddenly revealed small panel. The ship was ready. If something had gone wrong at this point, for whatever reason, then the only person present, at that time, who could get the ship to open was the Chief Technician. Only he had the necessary know-how. This was one of the skills that J-M was looking forward to acquiring in the next stage of his career. He listened as there was a release of compressed air from several vents on the side of the ship. Then a person sized panel slid open. Standing in the gap was a man of average build and height. He was dressed in black. Dirty black trousers, somewhat ill-fitting, with a hole or two here and there. The equally grubby looking black shirt was blood stained. Quite a lot of blood, he thought. One of the shirt sleeves was missing and J-M could see the damage to the man's shoulder. An ugly wound highlighted the purple red swelling that made the shoulder seem to be bigger than normal. The face was dominated by a thick, long beard and moustache. It was mostly black in colour but there were patches of a brownish colour intermingled within both the five- or six-inches long beard and the upper lip growth. The man's dark eyes could be seen struggling to look out through the straggle of hair that fell from his head. His face, the hair, all were smeared with dried sweat, dirt and blood. The general appearance and the stance of the man cried out fatigue to J-M. But there was also the air of recent relaxation, a loosening of tension that was beginning to take over him.

The man patted the ship's sides and said aloud, "played ship. See you next time." With that he stepped out of the ship onto the landing bay floor. He swayed momentarily. From within the ship a soft woman's voice came, "Understood," it uttered. The man smiled.

"We don't spend much time together," he said as he strode to meet the Chief Technician. "But it's always good." As if he was talking about an old girlfriend. The Chief Technician shook his hand and greeted the infiltrator.

"Welcome home, RAMESES. Good to see you back." He noticed him wincing. "Not too badly hurt I hope?"

"Nothing too serious, Chief," he answered.

"How's the ship? Any damage or problems."

"No, Chief." RAMESES reacted almost proudly it seemed to J-M. "She's a gem. Went straight for it, no problem." He looked back at the ship.

Technicians were linking up various leads and pipes of varied thicknesses to connections which the ship had now revealed all over its outer shell. Some technicians were inside checking the readouts on their sensors and watching as the data fed into laptops. Others were examining the ship's outside.

"Ship's been fired at," one of them called out to the Chief. "No damage."

"We'll run the usual diagnostics and clean her up," the Chief said to RAMESES. "Then we'll put her away." Rameses nodded at him.

The Chief called to the emergency crews to stand down and went to have a look inside the ship. J-M watched the medics approach RAMESES and give his wound a thorough check. A new temporary dressing was placed on the injury. One medic then accompanied RAMESES. They headed off towards the back of the landing bay. The rest of the medics collected together their equipment and moved towards one of the offices on the side. The leader was on the radio to the medical centre. He confirmed the infiltrator's condition and relayed the information that he was on his way to immediate debriefing. When this was finished, he would be brought to the medical centre for treatment. Then in response to a question he told them that a full radiation check would be required along with the usual treatments and of

course removal of the rifle bullet. J-M went to join his Chief. So that was the famous RAMESES. He did not know quite what to think of him. He was not exactly as he imagined him to be. He seemed rather normal. J-M thought that he would be, well, rather grander. Bigger. More impressive somehow. But then he supposed you did not last for months in strange, dangerous places by standing out.

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The debriefing did not take too long; just over two hours. It took place in one of the buildings that were part of the complex above ground. The room looked out across the flood plain of the Rhone to the river itself in the distance. Further away to the south the city of Lyon straddled the river. Looming even further away to the east in the deepening twilight rose the mountains. To the west and north, hidden from this view, below and above ground sprawled WECCO.

Rameses was now quite tired. His partial reflection in the window did not do justice to the drawn features the waiting medic observed. The medic coughed, and as the infiltrator glanced at him, he indicated the door. Coming out of his reverie, Rameses nodded. They were the only people left in the room. He followed the medic out of the room.

He had not been able to give the debriefers much in the way of eye-opening information. He knew that everything helped. Little pieces helped to form a larger picture. It was all fed into the databanks and would be used to inform future policy and decisions. The debriefers were always very careful to value everything he could tell them. Whether it was a change in food distribution or the movement of local militias or a softening of a strongly held religious custom. He reported on the growing links between the various towns and tribesmen across the whole region. How the emergence of a new and young religious leader was driving this process on. The growing trade between the regions. People, despite the obvious dangers,

returning to the areas devastated by the nuclear war. The staging posts that were developing there. The slow but nevertheless unstoppable acceptance of modern technology: particularly telecommunications. Also, there were the rumours of, worryingly, lasers being used to the north on the Russian marches. He did not know if it was true. Where the lasers had come from could only be guessed at? Eventually he had told them all that he could remember at that time. If he remembered more in the future, he was expected to report the data.

Soon Rameses was being treated in the medical centre. A place he was very familiar with. Doctor Andreovsky was supervising. She had taken care of him after his last four missions. Before he succumbed to the anaesthetic he told her he expected to be out of recovery in less than a week this time. She was unimpressed and reminded him that it all depended on what radiation treatment he required. As he slipped away, he felt again the attraction of this older woman. The last thing he could recall was Dr Anna Andreovsky considering him as if she knew what he was thinking.

The doctor performed the operation to remove the bullet herself. There were no complications. After she had stitched the wound up, she placed the pig derived dressing on it. There would be hardly any scar left when the dressing indicated it was time to be removed. The doctor then left the orderlies to make him comfortable for the night. She gave orders that she wanted all the results from the blood tests, other body fluids, radiation damage, brain scans and so on, ready for her first thing in the morning. She would be in at seven thirty. The doctor stayed that night in her room on the complex, rather than returning to her apartment in Lyon.

By eight the next morning she had analyzed the results, and checking with Rameses' previous treatments, had decided what attention he needed to produce a recovery in his condition this time. She left her office and went to see her charge.

"Good morning, Rameses," she said cheerfully as she entered his room. The tone of her voice did not carry the awe or reverence that others had. He was glad for it. He grunted a greeting back at her, through a mouthful of breakfast.

"How are you feeling?" she enquired.

"Fine," he replied, "a little sore here," and he indicated his shoulder. She nodded, "do you want something for it?" he shook his head, "no need."

She consulted his charts while he finished off his meal.

"Well, how did the tests go, doc? As I said, I shouldn't need too much going over this time." He spoke hopefully.

"How do the bacteria feel?" she asked, apparently ignoring his question.

"Same as ever." He said with a hint of exasperation. "Still haven't felt them for years now."

"Well, they seem to have done their job, again." She sounded genuinely pleased.

"I don't think it was a bad area for radioactivity this time," he suggested. "Some in the food and water of course, but levels otherwise seemed to be on the low side. I only had the sickness for the first week I was there."

Doctor Andreovsky did not seem to be listening very carefully. Her mind had drifted for a moment. She was back to the day when they had first introduced the bacteria to Rameses' body. The special strain that had been found to be incredibly resistant to high levels of all forms of radioactivity. Resistant and able to regenerate. The research labs had tinkered around with it. Made refinements and introduced organic additions that they hoped would make it compatible with human physiology. However, the early trials had resulted in the death of the human guinea pigs. Their immune system did not accept the new bacteria. More years of experimentation on other mammals and human 'volunteers' had made inroads.

Finally, someone had survived long enough to be tested. They were exposed to dangerously high levels of radiation. The results were encouraging.

Meanwhile advances were made in chemotherapy. Drugs were now able to arrest cancer development and even promote production of new cells and tissue. Then scrubber technology came along. Even so she had been very doubtful about giving the infiltrators the bacteria. However, Rameses offered to be the first. He insisted on knowing everything about the bacteria and how they thought it worked. He studied the details at every level right down to the molecular interplay that the microbiologists and biochemists believed was happening. After some discussion the bacteria were introduced into his bloodstream.

Rameses told the doctors that having a mental image of what was happening, or what might be happening, inside his body. The fact that he could imagine the bacteria 'doing their thing' as he described it. Also, that he wanted to do it and wanted it to succeed, all these factors helped the process to work. 'Mind over matter' he kept pointing out to a sceptical Dr Andreovsky.

But amazingly it had worked. For a week it had been less than clear that Rameses would survive the introduction of the bacteria to his system. He was able to give the eager doctors and researchers a blow by blow account of his body's reactions to the aliens. Where it was hurting, what it felt like. The changes he sensed inside. The feelings he had even if they were metaphysical and rambling at times. Eventually his condition stabilised. They could tell that the bacteria had settled in the digestive tract and seemed to be coexisting with the bacteria that normally lived there. Once exposure to radiation occurred, however, a truly remarkable piece of symbiotic behaviour came into play. The bacteria were able to move via the bloodstream, and to some extent through the other transport systems of the body, to places where the radioactivity was building up. Once there they seemed to be able to absorb the radioactive particles and atoms. These were then carried to the digestive and then the

excretory systems where eventually they were ejected from the body incorporated into the normal body waste. Some bacteria even stayed around damaged parts of the body seemingly helping the body to regenerate. It was fantasy science come true. Scientists did not really understand how it worked. But it did, and it worked best of all in Rameses, Dr. Andreovsky thought.

"Yes, they have done their job," she repeated. "You will need a course of the usual drugs. We will give you a full blood transfusion." She paused to watch his reaction. "I think one visit to the scrubbers should do it." He smiled grimly. "Good, be out inside a week then?" he asked.

"We will see," she smiled at him, "now get some rest." She left him to organise his treatment for the days ahead.

In his bed Rameses stroked his recently shaved face. It was itching. He looked at the view out of the window. Stroking his belly, he thought to himself. Good job boys and girls. He was itching to leave, and it was only the first day. It would be at least five days' worth of basic treatment. He knew from experience. Before the attractive doc would even consider discharging him. Oh well. He fiddled with a remote and flicked through the vidscreen channels.

*Recuperation, WECO. Leave.*

The infiltrator Rameses was a good patient. Too much experience of recuperation after his missions had taught him that the doctors knew best. He did as he was told and when he was told. Much of the treatment was almost second nature to him; he had been through it many times. Especially the drugs for the radioactivity he had picked up. He could enter a dream-like trance when he had to keep still for hours as they scanned the purging of the radioactivity from his body. He was given permission to wander about the base between treatments, as reward for being a model patient. Rameses enjoyed the chance to move about the complex. It was always changing with new buildings added and old ones dismantled. Then there was the activity going on below ground to consider. He did not mind the constant demands for his ID and security pass. It was part of the life at the complex.

It was while he was strolling along the endless corridors during a break on his third day, that he saw a familiar figure coming towards him. An indescribable feeling came over him. Neither hate nor contempt; feelings that once he would have held at the sight of the approaching man. It was not a feeling of any friendliness that he had, either. As the big black man got closer and closer, he decided that he had only a clinical interest in him anymore. He was big, over six foot. His frame was bulkier now and more bowed than when they were training together; a lifetime ago. The main difference was the tortuous limp he suffered with. The cause being the dreadfully mangled and disfigured state of both his legs. The result of a brutal and terrifying ordeal at the hands of a singularly gruesome warlord in the heart of the African jungles. He had been rescued eventually and a great slaughter of the warlord's followers was unleashed. The ferocity of which still struck terror into the hearts of the people in that area. But not before his body had been smashed. There was damage to his torso that was not apparent from watching him, struggling along, head bowed.



Rameses halted and waited for him to reach him. He remembered, with bitterness untempered, those training days. They had been a select group. Chosen from various branches of the services, thought to have the necessary abilities to cope with the demands of being an infiltrator. The training was long, endless in its intensity. It was as strenuous and taxing on the body and mind as they could make it. No shame was incurred from dropping out, or not making the grade. Rameses had failed underwater training. He had gone to pieces completely. Needed saving before he drowned. It was enough to fail him. But while a decision was made, Billy-boy, as he called himself, led the vicious bullying of Rameses. It was a testosterone fuelled environment that they lived in at the best of times. Rameses did not always join in fully in the 'boys-own' antics of the group. A doubt about him lingered at the back of their reactionary minds. He had always been too cultured for them.

Smarting from the shame he felt from such an utter failure, Rameses 'lost it'. A fight ensued, and Billy-boy had beaten him up, quite badly, before the others gave him more to remember them by. There was no enquiry. But Rameses was placed in the cohort of trainees a year behind. It was acknowledged that he had too many qualities, one being his brilliant grasp of languages, to lose him. The underwater fiasco was ignored. He trained even harder with the new group and he excelled in the space walk and orbital exercises. He was only marginally more of 'one of the boys'. But during the year he was revenged upon all those who had beat him. Taking them on, one-to-one, and exacting an equally brutal, physical recompense. However, Billy-boy eluded him. They fought to a bloody draw.

When Billy-boy was level with him he stopped to glance over at the person standing there. A look of recognition filled his face. It was replaced by a grim smile and he exclaimed, "ah! It's you. I heard you were back."

Rameses said nothing. He allowed his eyes to give Billy-boy a lengthy appraisal from head to toe. Billy-boy shuffled awkwardly on the spot.

"Having your treatment?" he enquired, more stiffly this time.

Rameses nodded and held his old enemy's eyes, "and you, Billy. I heard you are on the training staff these days." It was a statement, not a question. It was the big man's turn to nod. They stared at each other.

"You been to the scrubbers yet?" Billy asked.

Rameses shook his head. That was what tomorrow had in store for him.

"I only had it one time," Billy continued, "hurt like hell! But you've had it more than that I'd say. Do you get used to it?" his eyes were hoping for some words of response this time.

"Never. It always hurts like fuck! Billy." Rameses started to walk on. Without turning Billy-boy called after him, "do you still want to beat me?"

"All the time." His voice was cold. He did not look back. Billy-boy twisted painfully and watched him out of sight.

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The next day he was taken to the scrubbers. He had not eaten for about eighteen hours; just some fluids. His stomach grumbled in hunger as they strapped him into the suit. He was scared. He could feel his fear all over his body. Even his toes were trembling. He felt sick. There was nothing there to throw up but his stomach wretched anyway. A nurse wiped the yellowy trickle that had slipped out between his clenched lips.

"Try to relax," he said encouragingly. Rameses glared at him. He was going to shout at him. 'Have you had this done to you?' But he didn't. He was trying every type of relaxation and calming exercise he had been taught. Including some he had picked up on missions. They were only helping in a small way. His pulse and breathing were up. The monitors showed him this. The scrubber suit, when zipped up and 'moulded' to his naked body, fed back data on his vitals. When he was ready, and all the sensors were checked he would be

hoisted a little off his feet, half a foot or so. But before that they would offer him the chance to be put under. It was better if you could manage to be conscious during the process.

Unfortunately, it was a traumatic experience which very few people could endure. Rameses had tried it once. He had gone into a seizure, very nearly a cardiac arrest, and uncontrollable convulsions. The scrubbing had been abandoned.

"Put me under," he said to the nurse, who already had in his hand the needle primed ready. The last thing Rameses felt was his sweat being mopped from his brow and his mouth and nostrils being washed. Dr Andreovsky had arrived to watch over him again.

Scrubbing was an offshoot development of the technology that allowed divers to survive at depths of up to a hundred yards without any of the usual diving apparatus. A breathable fluid was used to fill the lungs. This substance, if you could cope with it, enabled a person to work under water. The fluid was saturated with oxygen which the lungs could use, replacing it with waste carbon dioxide. Some oxygen could also be extracted from the surrounding water. This helped to prolong the time a diver could spend underwater. But eventually not enough oxygen was left and a return to the surface was necessary. Another good point was you did not get the bends. The bad point was getting the stuff into your lungs in the first place, then getting it out again. Not a pretty sight and very discomforting for the diver. It worked well in specially altered space suits too.

This process had been adapted to help remove radioactive particles, and any other contamination from the lungs of returning service personnel. Tubes were fed into Rameses' mouth and nostrils and down into his stomach and lungs. These would carry the oxygenated fluid which also contained extra particles of substances which would absorb and 'scrub' the offending muck out of the lungs. It worked right down to the innumerable alveoli. The fluid needed to be pumped around the lungs and replenished with fresh oxygen regularly.

Rameses was going to have just the one session lasting two hours.

When he came around later that afternoon, he was still feeling the effects of the painkillers. He knew that by the next morning the full pain of the scrubbing would be his to 'enjoy'. Every breath painful, his ribcage sore, his throat and nasal passages bruised. For a while he would experience a giddy feeling if he stood up or tried to walk around. His lungs were much more efficient for a few days and more oxygen was getting into his bloodstream.

Finally, after six days Dr Andreovsky released him. He reported to the head of the infiltrators section. Rameses was pleased to see his boss. The grizzled featured middle-aged man opposite was equally glad to have his best agent back and recovered so quickly too.

"Read the reports of your debriefing, John." He had an accent different to most of the other people at Lyon Control. They were mostly French, Italian and Swiss. Rameses had a different accent also. But whereas his was British, Jurgen Black, the head of section for infiltrators and member of the service panel, had a northern European lilt to his. John thought it was Danish. But he never asked him whether he was correct. He did enjoy first, real name terms with his boss, although.

"Thank you, sir." It didn't seem the right time for him to use familiarity.

"You look like you could with a rest, John." John nodded. His weariness was impossible to hide.

"I want you to take at least a month off. At least a month." He reiterated. "I'm going to tell the gate to forbid you entry, understood?"

They grinned at each other.

"Get yourself up into the mountains, do some skiing. Relax!"

John kept smiling. It was typical of Jurgen, so thorough in his work and knowledgeable of many things, that he did not realise it was late spring, and the skiing was over for another season. A sportsman Jurgen was not. A thought occurred to John; he might take a tour of the glacier skiing that was still running. But then he could just stay in Tignes for a few weeks.

"Want a drink, John?"

"Thanks, Jurgen, I haven't had a beer in months," he laughed. They talked about the mission and things in general. Jurgen briefly brought him up to date with what had happened in the world while he was away; particularly in the European sphere. A more complete version of events would be downloaded to his apartment computer for him to peruse at his leisure on his vidscreen communicator. Jurgen informed him of the important things in relation to them at WECO and their place within the greater operation of world security. Always, however, only the information John/Rameses was meant to have, considering his position. The truth was Jurgen Black was only a few rungs further up the knowledge and awareness ladder. Infiltrators had to be well informed. Much more than your average person. Or service personnel for that matter. John/Rameses hoped that his boss was not aware of the contacts he had that provided him with more awareness of what was going on in the world than he was supposed to have. But then come to think of it, he probably had similar avenues open to him.

Pressing matters finally cut short their friendly conversation and John left. He was going to be driven to his Lyon apartment by a staff officer in the latest hovercar no less. As he left, section head Black considered his infiltrator's condition. There did not seem much wrong with him that a good rest could not cure. When he came back to work, he would see how he performed and then make his decision. In his own time and when he was good and ready. No section head had sent an infiltrator on eight missions before! Perhaps they should retire him and use him in the training program. All that experience and he would make an excellent trainer. He was convinced of that. Well, we will wait and see the state of his mind and his thoughts when he has been back in the normal, safe but boring perhaps, routine for a few months.

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The journey to Lyon centre was quick and very smooth. These new hovercars really were easy on the body and mind. He had nodded off a couple of times, to the mild amusement of the staff officer driving him. They talked very little. Even if the officer wanted to know more about his passenger, it was not the 'done' thing to enquire. He imparted some local news and gossip as he thought appropriate.

Soon John/Rameses was standing in front of his apartblock. He glanced up as the hovercar pulled off, drawing many admiring looks from passersby. He could see the balcony of his penthouse suite. What were all those flowers doing there?

"So good to see you again, sir," a voice beside him announced. It was the apartblock supervisor who had come out to greet him. As befitted a former service man he was light on his feet. Rameses has barely heard him approach. He was a local but preferred to speak English to his favourite and most mysterious tenant. Although English was now accepted as the first global language and was used for all business and communication purposes. Local people stubbornly and proudly held onto their native tongues in everyday life. Rameses, prolific in languages, was more than capable and willing to speak in French. The supervisor knew this but insisted on using English. They had only spoken French together once; when the supervisor had got very drunk celebrating a sporting achievement by the national side.

"Nice to be back, Jules," he smiled at him and shook his hand. "Everything OK?" he asked as they walked to the apartblock entrance.

"No problems, Rameses." Jules answered. "The base alerted me you were on your way and I have just turned the flat systems on," he quickly added, "of course we always check things regularly, as you know." Rameses smiled at him.

"I'm sure you do, Jules." Yes, the supervisor was responsible for taking care of the service personnel who filled the special apartblock. He and his staff were responsible for security

and keeping an eye on the tenants. Making sure nothing untoward went on or endangered security. He was able to and was expected to monitor all communications into and out of the block. Very little privacy was the price paid by the tenants for being very well looked after in flats that the word luxurious barely described adequately.

On the way up to the penthouse they exchanged small talk, mostly about Jules' family. Rameses received his new security passes and door cards, Jules allowed him to open his flat door. They went in and Rameses immediately went to the main window, slid open the glass pane and stepped out onto the balcony. He examined the flowers in their baskets and tubs. Very colourful and aromatic.

"Madame thought it would be good to liven up the top floor a bit." Jules stated by way of explanation. "Some colour. Been here for a few months now," he added. "Don't mind, do you?"

"Not a problem, Jules," Rameses said easily, taking in an exaggerated breath and smelling the flowers strongly. He looked down onto the street and watched the people for a while. Then he cast a glance across the city skyline and eventually beyond to where the mountains began. He felt the call of them. Give the city a week he thought and then he would go up into the mountains once more. He turned and went inside.

In the next few minutes Jules explained and demonstrated several new changes to some of the existing systems, such as the vidscreen and the computer desk. The fridge and freezer had been stocked with Rameses' favourite food and drink. They drank a small beer each and Jules went through the few messages that had arrived for him in his absence. Rameses had no real friends in France; and very few in Britain come to that. He had a few acquaintances, usually service people or linked to the service. There were a few calls and e-messages from some of these.

"I went to that friend of yours in the Rue des Galles," Jules was saying. "I had to Rameses," he reacted to the raised eyebrow. "She was beginning to make a bit of a fuss. Came around too often. Anyway, I persuaded her to leave it out, you know the kind of thing." Rameses nodded helpfully. "Told her you were away on important business. You would get in touch on your return. It might be sometime. She got the message finally without me having to go to another level. Not been in touch for over a month, as you can see," he highlighted a message on the computer screen which was shown simultaneously on the big vidscreen which dominated one wall of the flat.

They both watched and listened to the message from a quite attractive woman in her late twenties. Rameses knew she was Spanish, and her dark hair and fuller, well-curved figure was testament to that. Yes, he must look her up again he thought.

"Madame was quite taken with her," Jules said. "Thinks you should try to make more of an effort with her. You know, more than you usually do." He sounded a little embarrassed. Rameses grinned at him.

"How did Madame come to meet her?" he asked Jules.

"Well, you see, she would not let me go and see her on my own," he grinned back at him. They both burst out laughing.

Jules left Rameses to himself soon after that. He warned him as he left to expect a visit from Madame sometime soon, certainly today. Rameses opened another beer and sat on one of the balcony chairs looking at the views and listening to the sounds of the city. He would spend a few hours in front the vidscreen catching up on things, soon; but not just yet. His mind was on a certain Spanish researcher.



*La Grande Motte glacier, Tignes, French Alps.*

The hot chocolate drink liberally laced with Brandy eased itself down his throat. It felt good. The air was quite chilly today at around three thousand metres. The bright spring sunlight reflected off the glistening glacier. The restaurant veranda was only partly full of people sat at the tables neatly ordered in the available space. Rameses stood against the wooden rails, a little apart from the occupied tables. He cradled his drink and gazed about him. It was early morning and only forty or fifty skiers were making their way down the glacier; strung out by expertise and pace. The cable car had just set off for the top of the glacier run with a similar number of fresh skiers, chirping away happily inside it. Thank god, they did not allow the new jetpacks here, Rameses thought. They might have revolutionised access to the pistes, especially off piste, but they were an eyesore and a noisy nuisance. In this resort you took the old-fashioned lifts and you liked it. Otherwise there were plenty of other places where skiers buzzed up and across the slopes like insects around the nest; you could go there.

Even though it was chilly today it would not be long before the snow began to melt, and conditions became slushy, even at this height. It was not Rameses idea of fun and he had decided against hiring equipment. Turning from the rail he sat at the closest table, indicating to the passing waiter that he wanted another drink. When the drink arrived, he was busy reading that day's edition of the West European paper (English language version) that he had picked up at the hotel reception. It was more interesting trying to work out what news had not made the paper than taking notice of what was there.

He was feeling relaxed once more. However, he had woken up with a start that morning. Clutching his still tender chest he had just gone through two bad dreams straight after each other. Not an unusual occurrence for him so soon after the completion of a mission. The second dream had dragged him back to the session in the scrubbers, when he had tried to be

conscious. He felt again the tubes in his chest; they seemed to be as thick as a fist. His chest heaved, his mouth filled with saliva and spittle. He was trying not to wretch, but his stomach muscles flexed in spasms. His lungs were filling with fluid that made him cough and splutter. The extra pressure was bloating his lungs; they pressed out on his ribcage. He could feel his heart racing and hear the voices attempting to calm him. But a fear was rising in him as the fluid filled his lungs and he thought he was choking on the pipes; his tongue seemed to have grown huge and was stopping him breathing. He panicked. He fought against the constraining suit. Trying to pull away from the cords holding and suspending him. He could not get any purchase, his feet off the ground. Succeeding only in thrashing around for a few seconds, strong arms soon restrained him. Fluid began to ooze from his nostrils and mouth as the white mist rose around him... then suddenly he was awake. Had he called out? A wild-eyed face looked back at him from the bedside mirror. He applied some calming techniques. He decided to get up and shower. A walk around the lake before breakfast would help dispel the demons.

As he sat with the sun on his face and his eyes on his paper, with the quiet chatter of people nearby and in his hand a soothing drink, Rameses had forgotten what the first dream had been about. He remembered, vaguely, gunfire and people crying out, the screams of children. A gun was in his hand and blood had splashed his clothes.

Rameses had finished reading the paper. He had given it to a grateful waiter. He was caught in two minds. Whether to close his eyes and try to have a nap. Or to order the first beer of the day. It was still relatively early. Then his communicator went off. He started at the unexpected tones emanating from his jacket pocket. Looking quickly around him, a few people had responded to the tones automatically. Soon realising their mistake and briefly glancing curiously at him. They looked away as he gained eye contact with them. Opening

the device Rameses read the name of the sender on the small screen. Jurgen Black. He pressed the receive button and watched Jurgen's face appear on the screen.

"Sorry to bother you, John," the face spoke. "But somethings come up. I need you to do a small job for me."

John nodded, "is it for our overseas clients?" he asked.

"No. It's not a typical contract." Jurgen answered with a cryptic smile. "More a favour for a friend."

None the wiser Rameses said, "I'll come right back."

"No need to do anything, John," Jurgen added quickly. "Someone on the way to pick you up as we speak. Will be there very soon. I will see you presently, please read the information carefully on your way down."

He was gone. Intrigued, Rameses decided to have that beer while he could. As he contemplated swigging the last mouthful minutes later, he noticed a familiar staff officer striding towards him across the veranda. As the officer stopped in front of him and nodded slightly, the fact he was not in uniform was not lost on Rameses.

"Time for a drink?" he tested.

"No, sir, we must go now," the officer replied quietly. Rameses called goodbye to the waiter and followed the officer to the funicular. Minutes later they were in the hovercar, turning heads once more, heading out of Tignes. There was another officer in the front, a woman Rameses recognised as a member of the section head's private staff. She had retrieved Rameses' gear from his hotel and had smiled at him when he remembered her name. Officer Dacourt.

She had passed him a file pad as soon as he had made himself comfortable in the back of the hovercar. He plugged the file pad's connections into a vidscreen on the back of the front seat facing him. He did, as requested, and studied the electronic files contained in the file

pad. They were mainly information on an astrophysicist from the last century. His life, which was interesting considering the changes that were happening at that time. His work and achievements, which were not particularly significant it seemed to Rameses. He was obviously no expert in this field; however, he had a good technical knowledge in many aspects of science generally. There was a lot of quotes and reports on this character from his peers and various security organisations. They covered largely the second half of his life. He had been an expert in interstellar molecular clouds apparently. However, he had a few eccentric views according to the files. Views that were largely discredited by his fellow scientists it seemed.

There was information on his eventual retirement. Rameses studied pictures of the man's home and friends. The remarkable thing about him was that he had lived to a very old age. Well past the century mark and from the reports in the files had kept his state of mind sharp until the end. Rameses double checked his age against the final pictures of him. He really did not look that old at all. A woman's picture featured regularly. She was considerably younger than him. In the last few pictures a very young girl also appeared sitting proudly on the old man's knees.

Other files dealt with a space probe mission that had gone wrong. The man had been called in to help with security for it. This seemed to be before he became involved in his research. The files gave some detail about the apparent sabotage attempts and the aims of the mission; to investigate the volcanic moon of Jupiter, Io. There was a hint here that the probe might find signs of life there. Well that theory had been found wanting by later expeditions, Rameses thought. The mission had gone out of control before the probe reached Jupiter. It sailed past and was lost to the outer reaches of the Solar System.

The last file in the pad contained a list of rumours and reports that had been compiled about the man and the things he had been involved with during his life. In here was a lot of

fascinating, but seemingly unlikely, information, including things he was reported to have said, wild allegations, along with more factual details from the security services. Quite a few tales he thought, some darkly touching on madness and the death of a child. The insensitivity of a man accustomed by all accounts to killing and the attentions of the authorities.

Rameses had scanned through the whole file pad twice by the time the hovercar cleared the gate at WECO. He had absolutely no idea what kind of mission this was going to be. The officer Dacourt could not, or would not, enlighten him further. It was past noon when Rameses entered the section head's office. He was not alone. Rameses recognised the European Councillor for southern France was sat in a chair reading a paper file.

"Rameses, we are just going to send for some lunch." Jurgen Black said business-like. "I assume you will have a bite to eat with us."

Rameses nodded and noticed that officer Dacourt had stopped to speak to one of the secretaries outside Jurgen's office. He was motioned to sit down. He waited for something to happen. The Councillor was still studying the unusual paper file. Rameses was trying to remember the last time he had seen someone using a paper file. Electronic file pads were ubiquitous. He noticed by the side of the Councillor a similar file pad to the one he had perused on his way down here. He gave up attempting to find that memory when the food arrived. Very little was said as they ate. Jurgen merely smiled good naturedly at him and the Councillor appeared to be lost in deep thought. Eventually the remains of their meal were cleared up. Rameses was now distinctly interested in what was going on.

Jurgen instructed Dacourt to make the office secure and she operated a few switches that had been hidden behind a panel on the far wall. There was now no way that they could be overheard. This was usual procedure for mission briefings for Rameses. Having a European Councillor in on it was not normal. He felt a flutter of excitement forming in his stomach. Councillors were not known by their names, only by the area that they represented. The

Council, European and then World, run the planet basically. The World Council was the supreme executive. Secretive and all powerful, the Councillors and their successors had ruled most of the developed Earth for over a half century. If they did not have direct control, then they were able to exert considerable influence over an area using the vast resources that the western world powers and their allies could call on. Sometimes this might only mean terrorising areas with their troops performing 'exercises'. Or perhaps squeezing a country using economic measures. It was the proud boast of their information ministries that they had not used nuclear weapons. However, they failed to mention all the incursions, raids, blockades, bombing and missile attacks. The assaults by chemicals, pests and disease that had been, and were still being waged in parts of the world. Yes, after the great Gamma Ray Burst disaster, they had come to the assistance of the stricken far east. But they had profited by it as the Chinese grip on the east slackened in the aftermath.

Rameses knew more than most about these matters. He was after all a highly trained agent of the system. He worked to help keep the system in place. He made his decision a long time ago and nothing he had experienced on active duty had persuaded him otherwise. They were not the only ones committing atrocities and he had witnessed firsthand the oppression of religion. People wherever they were quickly reverted to violence and inhumanity towards each other. He preferred the system he supported. It was restrictive. However, it provided security and a high standard of living.

"You have been a valued servant of the Western Union, Rameses," the Councillor was speaking with no accent. "You have read the files supplied on your journey here?" Rameses nodded. He was not sure he liked the sound of 'have been'. She handed him the paper file she had been studying, "this is a report from our astronomical division. Read it now."

Rameses took the file. It had no markings on the cover to suggest its origins. He quickly read through the report concentrating on every piece of information. It was not that long, but

it was replete with technical data and jargon. The gist of it was, as far as he could tell, a message had been picked up from outer space. The signal was faint but had first been picked up by the listening post stationed between the orbits of Jupiter and Saturn. Since then the strength of the signal had been increasing. Doppler shift analysis deduced an incredible speed for the approaching signal. Then the signal had changed from just a definite ordered noise to something more structured. The signal had been analyzed and was found to be coming from the Io probe. The same probe that had disappeared so many years ago. The transponder patterns matched impressively.

The constantly repeating signal was not configured as expected and the computers and software that had been set up to receive the probe's data originally were non-existent all these years on. But someone, somewhere, had adapted the present-day receivers and worked out an algorithm to translate the signal. How the hell had they done that? Rameses thought to himself. The translated signal was not data or pictures of the kind expected from this type of probe. It was a message. A message that fixed Rameses in his seat when he read it. He scanned the message again and again. His eyes bored into the paper; his face contorted in amazement.

TARA TO EARTH.

TARA TO EARTH.

WE ARE RETURNING.

REPEAT.

WE ARE RETURNING.

WILL MEET YOU NEAR MARS.

REPEAT.

WILL MEET YOU NEAR MARS.

IS WOODEND STILL ALIVE?

MESSAGE WILL REPEAT.

Rameses eventually looked aghast at each of them in turn. Dacourt was excited. There was a glint in her eyes. Jurgen seemed to be trying not to get excited. He held Rameses' eyes and raised an eyebrow, almost apologetically, it seemed. The Councillor waited for him to say something, watching him closely.

"This is the same Woodend as in the other files?" it was an obvious question.

"The computers can find no better match," the Councillor said quietly.

"And this is the name of the missing girl, the project scientist's daughter?" he asked her.

"She went missing at the time." The Councillor reminded him. "Never found the body."

Rameses was thinking of the wild rumours mentioned in the files. Perhaps not so wild. His mind was swimming with a mass of thoughts and questions.

We, who was we? Did it mean the girl and the probe? Did it mean something or somebody else? How could it be the girl? How could she have survived? It had to be a trick! As if reading his mind, the Councillor said aloud.

"Of course, we have checked the authenticity of this signal. It is real. What it means, however, is another thing!" she paused. "All the time the probe is coming closer. Tracking stations on the Moon, Mars and on Earth confirm the approach of a small vessel. Its present course will bring it into Mars space."

Rameses was stunned.

"I think it's time we had a drink, Jurgen," she spoke again. "Your infiltrator looks like he could do with one."



*From WECO to England.*

Rameses was thinking of the file that documented all the more outlandish comments attributed to and associated with Woodend. One of his theories postulated that life could exist in the vast, but tenuous interstellar molecular clouds. It was known that all the organic molecules necessary to put life together were floating around out there. Many scientists believed that life on Earth originated from space, brought to the planet early in its history by crashing comets and even asteroids. But Woodend tried to persuade fellow scientists that a complete life form could be out there. A type of extremophile. Perhaps single cell, or a bacteria type of organism. It was unclear how such a thing might survive. What it used for energy? How it reproduced? Did it feed? How it got there? What it was doing there? Woodend had rather convenient ideas and answers for some of these queries. He had not been taken seriously on this issue. His more typical and straight forward research was considered scholarly and had improved understanding in several fields. However, the discovery of, first, extremophile fossils on Mars, and second some live specimens deep underground in the Martian aquifers had shown the possibility of this type of life existing elsewhere in the Solar System. But out there between the stars seemed to be a step too far for most astrobiologists.

The Councillor had left the room to take an urgent and very secret call. It could only be received inside her runabout. Dacourt, Jurgen and Rameses had discussed the possibilities of life outside the Solar System. Dacourt like Rameses was interested and hopeful. Jurgen however did not appear quite as keen. It struck Rameses that Jurgen thought there was enough going on in the world for him to worry about without the arrival of possible extraterrestrials and a long-lost space probe.

The door opened and the Councillor for southern France returned. Rameses noticed that one of her personal guards had now taken position outside.

"Events are moving on," she said to Jurgen. "That adjustment to the mission I told you about will have to be made. As I suspected all along." She had the air of someone recently proved correct despite what others had thought. Jurgen merely nodded and smiled at her.

"It seems that we in the West European Command are not the only one's privy to this, er, information. Or should I say revelation maybe." She sat down again and directed her words at Rameses. "Sources indicate that our allies in the west have got wind of this message. They have managed their own translation and are aware of the probe's progress. Awkward questions are being asked in the highest places. Even the Chinese are demanding replies to some telling enquiries from their west European ambassador.

"This situation will become a global concern too soon. Rameses, you are to go to this Woodend's home. We know that our people have been all over the place already and taken copies or originals of anything that was thought useful. Your job will be to have another look, knowing as you now do, more of the story going on here. You will interrogate any family or friends you can find in the area. I mean interrogate, if necessary. You will consider yourself on active duty and will use whatever means you feel fit to achieve your mission aims. If any, er, foreign agents are in the vicinity you are to eliminate them. Understood?"

"Yes, Councillor," he snapped back quickly.

"The section head tells me you have the necessary skills to get the mission done."

"Councillor, forgive me," he began cautiously, "could you specify the mission aims, again for me, please."

She smiled at him, "I'm well aware that I have not specified your final mission aims Rameses. I am only now getting them clear in my head."

She thought for a moment, staring out of the window. Rameses thought for an instant that she might have a communications implant. He knew that they had been developed and

trialed successfully. There should be some sign of it though. A lump somewhere on the back of the head.

"Right," the Councillor stirred, "I've decided. Go to this Woodend's house. Go over it. Investigate and interrogate any remaining friends and family. Find out more about what happened all those years ago. Find out what might be happening now. Eliminate any outside interest, brook no interference."

"Clear, Councillor."

"Well, I shall leave you to prepare," she looked around the room at them. "Arrive there tomorrow, around noon, Rameses. No need to get there any earlier. I want to give my English friends time to apply a bit of pressure in the area." With that she was gone, guards accompanying.

"How do you want to travel?" Dacourt was asking him.

"I'll take the Swift," he answered without hesitation.

Jurgen addressed him, "I'll leave you and Dacourt to sort out the details. A word of warning though. Don't shoot the place up for the sake of it and be careful, watch your back. This is going to be a, well," he struggled for the words, "a big deal I think."

Dacourt agreed with a vigorous nod and a rueful smile.

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The next morning Rameses arrived in one of the Lyon Control launch pads. It was only seven o'clock, but a few technicians were roaming over the launch pads. A familiar face beckoned to Rameses as he stepped on to the launch pad. Rameses followed him. A hundred yards away waiting on the pad was his Swift. Dark metal, gleaming faintly around the edges, three metres high and shaped roughly like the bird it was named after. It stood on the tips of its tail; the wings were opened wide. As Rameses reached the machine the technician had opened the cockpit.

"How is the bird, Conor?" he asked the technician.

"It's all set to go, Rameses." The technician had a British accent. "I got it out ready yesterday. Double checked the systems this morning. It has a full tank. Weapons systems are fully charged and standing by. I've put in the usual operational equipment, stored in the side compartments."

"Thanks, Conor, with what I've brought in this bag," he reached in the cockpit and placed the bag inside a spare compartment, "I shouldn't want for much." He grinned. "How is the bird flying?"

"Beautifully," Conor gushed. "Took it into the mountains last time and buzzed a few choppers. Got told off, but it was worth it."

Rameses expected Conor to take care of his Swift when he was not around. This included flying it, putting it through its paces. It was thirty years old now but still in prime condition. Conor loved it as if it was his own. Rameses had an extremely well looked after vehicle. It had been updated continually. Mainly in the areas of weaponry and communications. Although Swifts were no longer part of the service's front-line vehicles, a few were still used. Some were privately owned. A gift from a retired instructor, this Swift had a quasi-operational status, which enabled it to be updated at no cost to Rameses.

Rameses entered the Swift. Conor helped strap him in. The pilot was positioned lying flat inside (at this moment before take-off this meant Rameses was strapped in upright but cocooned in the inner casing). Once flying he would be able to move his body a little inside this supportive casing. He would operate the Swift using controls that were in front of him and to the side of him. All within easy reach of his hands. You flew headfirst in a Swift. Someone had likened it to supersonic luge but going headfirst down the track not leaning back. The cockpit, which was quite small, allowed the pilot to see where he was going. But

there were also various screens and pop-up displays to give the pilot all round visual and radar views. Thermal imaging was available too.

Soon the Swift was shooting across central France at an altitude of one kilometre. There had been a slight delay at Lyon Control. They had wanted him to reach his destination by the usual route of going up to near orbital height and then dropping almost straight down. But Rameses had successfully argued for an old-fashioned cross-country route. As he knew, it did not take the LC computers long to work out an alternative flight plan and alert all the relevant controllers along the route. His preferred way would take an hour longer and use much more fuel. But he was not expected until midday; the Councillor had confirmed that to him at his flat, late the previous evening. Besides he could enjoy flying the bird again. He just about kept to his flightpath, straying occasionally to investigate anything interesting below him. He was gently reminded by the local controller to return to his course each time.

After an hour of flying manually, he tired. Turning the controls over to the flight computer he concentrated on the view below. They were crossing the English Channel. Rameses could make out various sized boats. Smaller sailing yachts dotted about between bigger boats. There were huge tankers and supply ships and the occasional ferry. Since the advent of low level hoverjets to carry people from A to B, ferries had become less used. This passenger traffic was flying at a higher level than the Swift. He saw them on the radar. The only other craft flying at his level were other security jets. They signalled an acknowledgement to each other as they passed.

Eventually the Swift crossed the English coast and the computer made a slight course adjustment in response to fresh commands. Rameses looked down with great interest at his home country's landscapes. This was the first time he had returned in five years. They passed over Stonehenge. What a place! One of the highlights of his life had been to watch the sunrise from within the inner circle on Midsummer's Day. It had caused the hairs on his

back and neck to rise. A mystical experience he could not deny. Similar feelings had come over him on several missions. It was not the sort of thing you admitted to the debriefers!

"Swift will land in twenty minutes," the flight computer mechanically told him. It had none of the warmth of his ship's voice. The Swift started to slow down and change direction once more. Rameses went back to manual. He had not landed the Swift in a year; he needed the practice. Seeing that he was coming in on manual a local landing field controller called him. They kept in contact until he had safely dropped the Swift in the designated place.

On the ground the servicing staff had gathered excitedly. They were used to all the usual modern craft coming and going every day. But only one of them had seen a fully working Swift before. Britain, and England in particular, had settled down a long time ago. There had been no reason to have operational Swifts there for years. Rumours had been flying since it was confirmed that one was due in that day.

The ground crews kept a respectful distance until the pilot stepped out of the Swift. It had landed almost silently, a mere escape of compressed air betraying it. Although the force of its thrusters had vibrated the ground. They rushed forward to offer any assistance. Rameses was pleased with their interest and allowed them to all have a good look inside the Swift. He retrieved his bag and gave instructions to refuel the bird and check its systems as the computer felt fit. He warned them that he was leaving it in operational stand-by mode. It would only give a short warning if it was called into action. They should stand clear if that happened.

Rameses made his way to the control tower. A controller was standing by the door waiting for him. Rameses could see from his uniform that he was the field Commandant. He seemed uneasy and saluted rather awkwardly at Rameses. "You are early, Sir." He seemed a little irritated but was trying hard not to show it.

"Please, Commandant," Rameses returned the salute, "don't stand on ceremony. I am early, I apologise for that. It's a habit of mine not to turn up when I'm expected. Especially on missions like this." He let this sink in. Then said, "I don't want to get in your way. If I could just wait somewhere until my, er, guide arrives."

"I understand, Sir." The Commandant relaxed a little. "How long will you need to keep your vessel here?" his eyes were taking in the Swift and the attention that too many technicians were giving it. Rameses waited until he could look the Commandant in the eyes.

"How long my mission will take is for me to know and no one else." He said it with an edge to his voice.

"Of course, Sir! I did not mean to pry," the unease had returned. "I was ordered to help you in any way."

"Don't worry, I'm sure your technicians will tire of my Swift soon."

"I have already alerted your, er, the woman who will be your guide, of your arrival. She will be here shortly."

"Thank you," Rameses wanted to bring this to an end. "I'll just wait here. I require nothing. Please don't let me stop you from going about your duties." He sat down on a bench and occupied himself by looking around the field. The Commandant went back into the control tower. He was glad that was over. There was a big heat on. He had been ordered to help if required but otherwise stay out of the way. Fine by me, he thought. He was thankful that the agent did not want anything from him. The less he was involved the better. Creepy bloke, that one he thought. Dangerous no doubt.

A half hour later a dusty old automobile type vehicle pulled up next to Rameses. A small woman jumped out and greeted him.

"You the Ministry man?" she asked him.

"Yes, I am." He replied. It was his turn to be fascinated. This vehicle must be over a half century old. Probably older. Apart from the dirty exteriors it seemed in fine working order. Rameses walked around it admiringly. "Fine machine," he said to the woman. She got into the driver's seat and opened the passenger door for him. A look of mild annoyance had passed over her face briefly. The car was soon bumping along a rough road that ran alongside a main road. There was hover car traffic on the main road. But they came across nothing on their track as Rameses decided to call it.

They said very little to each other for a while. They made no attempt to hide the appraising glances they gave each other. Rameses was struck by how small she was. Barely five foot tall he reckoned. Her hair was brown and curly, not quite shoulder length. A round face, with a few freckles, held eyes as dark as his. In profile her face implied a strong character. Her feet were able to reach the control pedals because her seat had been adapted and was closer to them than his was. A funny feeling had come over him as they drove down the bumpy track, he felt like he should tell this woman all about his mission. Even though there was strength in her he felt that she was vulnerable in some way. He wanted to help her if he could. She looked like she needed someone to care for her. But then he remembered the Councillor, and heard her voice telling him the mission aims.

The woman for her part saw an average height, average build bloke. He was olive skinned, she thought that was how he would be described, as if he was from the Mediterranean. He had dark eyes like her. She could sense the strength of character in him. His profile made her shiver ever so lightly; a cruel line was etched there, suspiciously thin lips she thought. This was the latest person to come sniffing around dear old Woodend's things. Ministry man, I think not. This one had a feel of something deadlier about him. He was no information gatherer like the others who had recently ransacked the old man's house and files. Then there was that rather worrying call late last night. The warning from a friend in the regional



council that there was someone serious coming. He would expect to see family and he would not necessarily be friendly or considerate. There was something big going on. Rumours of interest from the European Council. People in high positions jumping around trying to make themselves useful. Trying not to look useless was nearer the point her friend had whispered down the link at her before breaking off.

She did not want her mother bothered if she could help it. So, she had determined to take time off from the observatory. This was when she had realised things were 'hotting' up because the Director had been told to send her to pick up an agent from the landing field. She was not required that day. He made the call to the house at breakfast. So, she had met the threat and was now taking him to the old man's house as instructed.

"My name is Gaia," she said ultimately.

"Gaia. Gaia as in the Earth goddess," he acknowledged. She was surprised to find his accent was familiar. Well at least he had accepted her name without the usual explanations.

"I am Rameses," he returned the greeting watching her for her reaction.

"As in the Egyptian kings," she responded and looked into his dark eyes.

"Yes," he agreed, "I'm part Egyptian." That would explain the skin colour she thought.

"What's the other part?"

The question was the normal response to that piece of information. Rameses expected it but still he felt a strong compulsion to tell her as he looked back into her dark eyes.

"The other part is Welsh." He offered. That would explain the familiar accent she thought. She expected him to expand on this. But he did not. She was sure that he was going to say more. She glanced at him. But he was staring at the countryside. He was a strong one. Strong and silent so far.

Rameses had felt the urge to explain his background to Gaia, but he resisted it. Something was warning him at the back of his mind. He had felt something like this before and was

trying to remember where and when. A strange awareness grew in his mind as they made their way to Woodend's house. They spoke no more until they arrived.

*Woodend's house, England. Secrets and Revelations.*

The countryside they had journeyed through was typically English. Rolling fields of various hues. He recognised the yellows of mustard seed and wheat. Also, the greens of other produce. Occasional paddocks of cows and sheep broke the arable scene. There were hedgerows and copses of trees. Farmers could be seen riding a range of vehicles; he was particularly interested in an old-fashioned tractor. Gaia tooted and waved at the driver as they passed by. There was some undulation, gentle hills or more properly hillocks were climbed, and Rameses could see a line of more imposing outcrops in the distance.

After about half an hour of quite slow progress they reached their destination. Rameses could see about half a mile away a small rise with a building atop it. From this distance there was something curious about the shape of it. They were driving along a lane which ended at the foot of the mound. A ring of trees surrounded the mound. Their tops however did not seem to reach as high as the top of the mound. People could look out over them. There was a footpath that led up to the house. No trees grew on the mound itself. Except for one large Yew tree whose branches swayed slightly in the breeze. But there were many bushes and smaller shrubs dotted about the otherwise smooth and steep mound. They pulled up in an obviously flattened out piece of ground that could hold a number of vehicles. A natural hedge linked the trees in the ring. Gaia had stopped the car right in front of a metal gate, the grill of which was patterned in the form of the Solar System. A pink coloured plant was beginning to creep along the top of it.

Gaia jumped out and headed straight for the gate. Rameses followed suit. But he paused after taking only a few steps. Several of his senses were being assailed. He could see the colours. All the different greens and browns of the trees and hedge. Amongst them, the colours of the flowers in the hedge and the bushes on the mound. Reds, blues, pinks, whites. He often wished he knew more about plants. Which were which? How to recognise them by

sight and smell. This was one of those times. The only flowers he could identify with certainty were the red roses that flourished in the hedge and the blanket of bluebells that spread everywhere. Their domain came to an uneven end half the way up the mound.

The sight hit him at the same time as the scents. The air was heavy with the different aromas of the many flowers; some smells he had sensed before, but he had no idea what had produced them. Also, he began to feel the effect of pollen. It began to make his nose itch. He could taste it at the back of his mouth. He would be sneezing soon. His ears were also sending his brain information. There was a quiet rustling as the tree ring swayed gently. This undercurrent was pierced by the cawing of crows wheeling overhead. The car's arrival had disturbed them. They floated in the breeze above them screeching their disgust down at them. Rameses watched and listened. There was something else. Other sounds came to him. Faint. Musical. Tones: low tones mingled with some higher notes. It was not so much a tune playing on the wind but more like a tuning up happening. Rameses glanced around, intrigued and seeking the source of this 'music'.

"Everything OK?" Gaia asked him. She was smiling.

"Yes. Fine." He lied. She opened the gate and walked through. He quickly followed, his senses working overtime. Gaia climbed the mound rapidly. Rameses made no attempt to catch her up. When he reached the top, he noticed her puffing slightly.

"It's a real pain, the path," she said, "but it's worth it when you get here."

He followed her gaze out across the fields below them. But soon he was looking the other way towards the building that dominated the flat space atop the mound. It was quite large, but only a single storey, for a house. Rectangular with whitewashed walls and a high angled roof. At one end rising a few feet out of the roof was what suspiciously looked like a chimney. Further along the rooftop a nest of receivers and antennae bristled. The other end of the building had been modified. There must have been a tower at one time, Rameses

considered. Now a round dome thirty-foot-high and as much in diameter was built on. The wall facing him must have had four large windows at one time. Set deep in the walls, a few feet wide but as much as ten feet tall, ending in a high arch. Only two of them appeared to be windows still. The middle two were double glazed and tinted on the outside pane. The outer two were filled in. But they had not been bricked up. It was hard to tell from here what had been used to cover them; leaving them an ugly grey colour, offset against the brilliant white walls.

Rameses' attention now turned to the musical sounds that had grown louder as he climbed the mound. Attached to the branches of the Yew tree were large wooden and metal pipes of differing lengths and thicknesses. They were arranged in circular groups and bumped into each other from time to time. This caused the vibrations that produced the notes. Also scattered on the ground around the mound top were many curiously shaped metal, plastic and wooden creations. A musical sculptor had run riot up here, Rameses thought. A range of sounds and notes were being offered up to the air, as if in an artistic sacrifice; the wind was the player.

"Delightful," Rameses found himself saying. Gaia grinned.

"I untied the tubes this morning before I came to fetch you," she said. "Normally they are tied up these days and the other ones on the ground covered up."

"A musical hilltop," Rameses mused. "Did Woodend do this?" he gestured around with his hand.

"He had instruments made for him," Gaia replied, "and had this adapted for his use." She pointed at the building. She could tell Rameses was impressed. Funny how the old man's place affected people in different ways. Her mother never liked the place very much. She never managed to stay more than a few days. Other people like this agent were captivated by it immediately they saw it.

"Come on," she called to him. "The door's the other side." She began to make her way around the house. Rameses caught her up as they turned the corner. "Believe me you soon get tired of the 'music' if you spend a lot of time here." Sarcasm laced the word 'music'. Rameses was doubtful. He could hear the sounds still as he scanned the other side of the house. Four windows again. Two normally glassed in the centre. But this time the others were made of coloured glass. As he walked past one it appeared pleochroic. Like looking into CDs. There was a definite pattern of a figure occupying most of the window with smaller figures and shapes spaced around it. Interesting place Woodend had here, he thought to himself. He looked up to the sky and noticed that this side was south facing, it would receive more sunlight than the other side.

Rameses watched Gaia closely as she opened the various locks and entered the correct numbers into the sequenced alarm box. As the heavy door swung smoothly open, she turned to him and said, "remember all that will you?"

"Most of it," he answered with a sureness in his voice that cut the smirk off her face. "But I don't need to really bother. We've got all the numbers. I only have to call them up if I need them."

We also know about the electrified windows, he thought, but said nothing to her. She could not hide the annoyance she felt. Obviously, they would have the numbers. They were bound to have been through the place when she or her mother were not about to watch them. Deep down she knew all this and suspected more. But it was still bloody annoying! Bloody Ministry and agents, they could do anything they bloody well wanted! She shut the door after Rameses with a bang.

Rameses ignored her petulance. He sneezed loudly and too strongly. It took a minute for him to settle his nose down. Bad sneezes had the habit of making him feel he was going into seizure. It just took a minute to settle his chest, throat and nose area down. It was a side

effect of the scrubbers he was sure. Gaia watched him curiously as he fussed with his handkerchief.

When recovered Rameses began to survey the inside of the house. The high roof was supported by timber beams arranged triangularly. The smooth walls were plastered and painted with a combined pink and blue. The sunlight streaming in through the windows caused these walls to seem to glow with a faint blue-pink luminescence. On the walls were many pictures and prints. The paintings included landscapes and some blatantly surreal efforts that Rameses did not waste time trying to understand. The prints were mainly of astronomical photographs and images. Many of them he had seen before and were famous. He suspected that many houses had similar prints. There were many bookcases and CD racks placed regularly in the large room. The inside was, in fact, just one big room. Many chest high partitions sectioned off the space. To one side there was the kitchen and dining area, beyond that, the door to the domed end. The middle section was the working area, he guessed. Easy chairs and low tables were laid out here. Central was a huge table that served as a desk. Computer terminals, monitors, printers, communications equipment, everything a working scientist would want. Several cabinets nestled up to the vast table; records, his information told him. The far side was completely dominated by an enormous fireplace. Wooden logs were stacked to one side while on the opposite side a copper-coloured metal container held lumps of coal. More chairs and a four-person sofa gave a more intimate feel to this end. Two large beds lined opposite walls towards this end. They had adjustable partitions surrounding each of them. Just before this living area on the side the tree was, steps led down. There was more under the floor. Rameses concluded that the toilets and bathrooms were down there.

"Yes. Some place this," he said finally. Gaia had sat down at the computer terminal. She was typing away. She ignored him. Her thought was if she got the files ready to look at then

this man would finish sooner and go away. Rameses wandered up and down the remarkable room. He had a few questions. However, they were nothing to do with his mission, so they would have to wait.

"What are you doing?" he asked her.

"Pulling the old man's files," she replied. "It's what you are after, isn't it?" he said nothing. She turned to him with an 'isn't it' look. He felt the piercing quality of her glance again. But he understood now. He returned her stare blankly. Nodded his head negatively. She frowned. To herself she wondered what this was all about. Why was he so resistant to her?

"Unless you are going to conjure up something new. Something that has remained hidden from the searchers. Something you have not revealed yourself yet."

What was he on about? Gaia left the computer and walked over to the large sofa. All they ever wanted was the old man's records and files to do with his work and research.

Connections and friends. Notes and numbers. Addresses and interests. She watched him sit in front of the computer and start to type in commands. She could only see the back of the equipment from the sofa. But she was not worried about what he might be up to.

"I don't think the information I am after will be found in the computer files," he said, looking over to her. "Nor will it be anywhere in these records," he flicked his hand at one of the cabinets. He finished what he was doing at the terminal and came across to sit in a chair next to the sofa.

"The answers I am seeking can only be provided by you." He stared meaningfully at her. "And your mother, of course." A cruel smile had fixed itself to his face. Gaia held his stare but inside she began to feel some anxiety.

"My mother and I have always cooperated. We have always answered all the questions put to us," she stated defensively. "We have nothing to hide." She added after a short pause.



Rameses was trying to time it properly. He said nothing as he held Gaia's defiant stare for seconds.

"But I'm sure you haven't been asked the questions I have for you before. I think the information I want is kept in your memories. It was never written down, ever. Too fantastic. Too unbelievable. Until now."

He released her from his eyes and glanced back at the computer. Now would be very good, he thought. Gaia's anxiety was deepening. A bad feeling was growing in her stomach. This agent was trouble. She could sense that. But strangely she did not feel threatened by him. She did not feel in danger. There was an air of inevitability about it all. He knew something that only she and her mother knew. He just needed confirmation.

The voice of the computer suddenly spoke out. It took her so much by surprise that she did not really catch all the words first time. But as she listened, realisation crashed in on her. She stared wide eyed at Rameses unable to conceal her amazement. Or her understanding. God! She thought. Mum would have a fit! She had never really believed the old man.

TARA TO EARTH.

TARA TO EARTH.

WE ARE RETURNING.

REPEAT.

WE ARE RETURNING.

WILL MEET YOU NEAR MARS.

REPEAT.

WILL MEET YOU NEAR MARS.

IS WOODEND STILL ALIVE?

MESSAGE WILL REPEAT.

The words rung out in the room. But they positively blasted around in her brain. He was right. They were coming back. The Prokaryotes. As Woodend always called them. But Tara? Tara as well? She must be years old.

But then the sound of her car beeper broke through her thoughts. Someone was tampering with the car. She rushed to the window. But that was a waste of time. The car could not be seen from the windows. Scowling, she made for the door. Rameses was annoyed at the interruption. He followed her. At the top of the path she stopped. Rameses joined her. Below them, the parking space had two extra vehicles in it. Modern hovercars, quite expensive. There were also a couple of hoverbikes; their riders sat on them as they hovered a few feet above the ground. Rameses noticed a few people, male and female, gathered around Gaia's old car. Some were sat inside it.

Gaia sighed deeply. "Wait here I'll deal with this." She walked down the path. Rameses had no intention of waiting there. He would give her a few minutes, then he would get involved. He could do with some action. Assuming he got the chance. He pressed a few push buttons on a metal band around his wrist. Some coloured lights shone out. From one of his pockets he produced a palm sized gadget. Again, he pressed a few buttons, lights shone. He placed the gadget carefully on a low bench at the top of the path. Then he returned his attention to the foot of the mound.

*A spot of local trouble.*

The woman Gaia appeared to know the people interfering with her car. Despite her small stature she did not hesitate. As she came down the path, she called out names. Some of the men and women acknowledged her civilly. Others responded jeeringly. The hoverbikers performed some tight circular moves. Needlessly kicking dirt and dust into the air. With a little difficulty she cajoled and urged the people out of her car. Gaia never touched any of them, or seemed in danger of losing her temper, even when a man and woman, who appeared to be the leaders, patted her head in an overly patronising and condescending manner. They joked with their friends, the relative difference in size between Gaia and her car being a great source of merriment. There were ten of them in total: three women, the rest men. Rameses estimated their age to be early twenties. None of them gave him the impression that there was any substance to them. Young people with not enough to do and too much time to do it in.

The men on the bikes spotted Rameses first. They called up at him. He ignored them. Once the leader and his girl had tired of being rude to Gaia, they turned their attention to the man on the mound. They led the shouts that encouraged him to come and join them. He could tell from the look that Gaia gave him that she did not want him to do that. However, his mind was made up. He was soon standing in the gateway. He put a hand in a pocket and smiled pleasantly at the man who was the leader. He noticed that one of the riders had dismounted from his hoverbike.

"So, who are you?" the leader said rudely. The man had his arm round his girl. He was a little smaller than Rameses. The girl was the same height as him. They both had thick blonde hair, shoulder length. Matching hair bands were displayed for all to see. No doubt proving their love for each other.

"OI! I said. Who are you!"

"I don't think I need to tell you that." Rameses smiled. He hoped it was as irritating to see as it was to perform. He noticed the bike rider step forward a pace. Rameses stayed in the gateway and slowly looked round the people. They were beginning to take more notice of him. Rameses was even more convinced of his analysis of their threat to him. Negligible.

"Not very friendly are you stranger?" there was still more amusement than annoyance in his voice.

"I have no need to be friendly," he replied calmly.

"Oh, really," the man said disbelievingly and smiled around at his mates. "No need to be friendly." He scoffed at them. They chuckled with him.

"Well, stranger, you are not home now, wherever home is." He was trying to sound strong. "Somewhere south of here I'd say, by the colour of you." The people laughed. "Someone on their own and in a strange place should be a bit more friendly and, well, polite." He tried to add menace to his tone. The others mumbled amongst themselves and shifted in their positions. They tried to look hard. Rameses took time to look each of them in the eye before he allowed an even bigger smile to split his face.

"Oh, I don't think I have anything to worry about here. Do you?" he asked the man. His smirk had disappeared, and he viewed Rameses with narrowed eyes now. The mumbles were louder. The rider stepped another pace closer. He glowered at Rameses. But the strange man ignored him. This served to make him angrier.

After some seconds the man disentangled himself from his girl and took a step nearer the swarthy stranger.

"So, what are you doing here with the tiny goddess?" his smile returned as his mates chortled at his joke.

"You don't seem very clever, do you?" Rameses said provocatively. "You don't seem to have got the message. Have you?" he smiled at the angry frown that had formed on the man's face. "I do not explain myself or my mission to the likes of you or your ragged band." The angry shout and movement of the band did not get far. The leader and the biker were about to go for the stranger when the significance of his words sunk in. Mission. What did this confident stranger mean by mission?

"But," Rameses said "as it is, I will tell you that I'm having a look around the place. But, again, I am really here for this woman and the information she has."

There was a mixture of whoops and scoffs. Gaia looked uneasily at Rameses. She had remembered the message he had typed into the computer.

"Well you're wasting your time with the place." The man sneered. "I keep telling the little one that I'm going to have this place. And sooner rather than later too." He glared at Gaia.

The laugh that Rameses produced snapped the tension back. They all stared at him again.

"No. That's not going to happen," he shook his head emphatically. "No."

There was a certain quality in his voice that made the others unsure. But the man and the biker were not put off.

"I don't think you know who I am," the man said coldly.

"Does not matter to me who you are, young man," Rameses returned the menace. "If you and your gang don't clear off, you won't be around much longer."

The man growled. The biker came for Rameses, who pulled his hand from his pocket and pointed at the advancing man. The man stopped suddenly. Rameses smiled as he shot him. The bullet hit him in the leg, just above the knee. The man cried out as he fell to the ground clutching his leg. The others stepped away in shock. Gaia stared at the agent as she slipped away to the side of the car. Rameses fired twice again. One shot put the rider's hoverbike out

of action. The second shot went through the rider's hand that clutched his wounded leg. He screamed in pain.

The girl was also screaming. But she was screaming at the man to do something. But he was staring at his shot friend and then the stranger. He was backing off. The girl kept screaming at him. Rameses shot her in the shoulder. She spun round and fell against the side of the car. As she slid to the ground she twisted, and Rameses could see the numbing shock on her face. Gaia just stared at the bloody patch spreading through the girl's top.

"My...My...My dad's the chief of Police...You just can't do this...My...My dad's the chief of Police." The man had lost his composure.

"Go fetch his dad," Rameses motioned to the other biker. He needed no further encouragement. He zoomed off back down the lane. The others took Rameses' flicked hint with the barely visible gun and jumped in one of the hovercars and followed the hoverbike. Rameses watched the man as his friends disappeared into the distance. He was, perhaps, a little surer of himself.

"You might want to see how your friends are," Rameses raised his eyebrows at him. "They'll be OK. You might want to apply some pressure. Have you got anything suitable?" he asked Gaia. She nodded and began to rummage around in the boot of the car.

"Don't worry too much," he called after her. "Medical aid is on the way. They'll survive."

"Yes, my dad will soon be here," the man spat at him.

"Yes, I will decide what to do with him when he gets here. We will see how he reacts." Rameses said. Looking right at the man. "He might keep his job." The man recoiled from his calculated look. He had not come to help his friends. He was beginning to look around him. There was something about this stranger. He certainly was not bothered about the imminent arrival of his dad, the area Chief of Police. Perhaps he could get away before more bullets started flying.

Reading his mind and furtive body language Rameses assured him he would shoot him dead if he tried to get away. The man was about to shout he wouldn't dare when he realised that he would. He decided to watch Gaia tending his friends. Rameses consulted his wrist band and pressed some buttons. Gaia glancing at him, noticed lights flashing.

It was not long before they all could hear the fast approach of a hoverjet. The wounded were propped against the side of the car. Gaia and the man watched as the Police hoverjet landed. There was a slight delay. Assessing the situation. Rameses thought. Then as the man was frantically waving at the hoverjet. Two men emerged. One was the same age as Rameses. He was tall. He carried a laser rifle and was being cautious. Beside him the older man was obviously the dad. His remaining blonde hair failed to cover his head. He had passed on the sneaky feel about him to his son too. He held a revolver in his hand. Rameses knew that he was too full of himself. Too cocky. Too arrogant.

"What's going on here?" the chief eyed Rameses noticing the weapon in his hand, which was pointed at him and his Deputy.

"Dad this nerd has just shot my friends," the man blurted out.

"Shut up son!" the chief kept his eye on Rameses.

"You from the Ministry?" he asked Rameses. Rameses shook his head.

"You in the Service?" he tried again. Rameses smiled and shrugged as if to say maybe.

"I don't know of any operations going on in my area at this time. Perhaps, you are not quite what you want us to believe."

"I can assure you; you would not know anything about me or my mission. Our paths have only crossed because this," he pointed at the son, "has got in my way. Now be a good fellow and take him away from me." To the Chief's son, "If I see you around here or if you come near me, your dad will be scraping your body off the floor." The man gulped and stared at his dad.

The Chief of Police bristled. His Deputy whispered in his ear. But he shook his head vigorously.

"Service man, or not!" he said this as if he doubted it. "You are a bit out of your depth here. I could make life difficult for you. You could have an accident here, all alone." He slyly looked over at Gaia. She stared at him with controlled loathing.

"You do not know how glad I am to hear you say that," Rameses almost hissed at him. Gaia spotted him touching his wristband.

The Policemen had been taken aback at the venom in his voice. But they did not have time to worry about it. The telltale scorching sound of a laser cannon rent the air. They jumped around to watch the beam cutting into their hoverjet. The smell of ozone mixed with the burning. The laser stopped and into their view dropped the Swift, it hovered above the wrecked hoverjet.

"Drop those weapons!" Rameses ordered them. The Deputy immediately threw aside the laser rifle. The Chief was fuming. He spun around. But Rameses was ready for him and shot the revolver from his hand. The Deputy edged to the side away from his boss. The Chief was stunned. His son stood mouth agape. The wounded moaned; they could not see what was occurring.

"Now I think it is time to finish this," Rameses said evenly. He pointed into the sky. But not at the Swift. More hoverjets were approaching.

"You see a man like me is rarely alone." He motioned the son to join his father. "These people are here to clean up the mess." The hoverjets landed. "Only one thing left to do." He smiled grimly at them.

"You can't...I mean, you can't..." the Chief had realised what was coming.

"When I am on a mission, I can do whatever I feel is necessary."

"But I'll stay out of your way, so will he."



"You don't serve a purpose," Rameses said coldly. "There is nothing to be gained here." He touched his wristband. Two smaller lasers hit the father and son in the back and burnt their way down for a few seconds. The screams ended almost as soon as they began. The charred and smoking torsos crumpled on the ground. Smoke gently swirling from the black and red carcasses. Their untouched faces stared in lifeless horror at the circling crows.

Gaia looked at the smouldering remains with a clinical, scientific eye. The Deputy winced and held his nose as the smell of burnt flesh reached him. From the various hoverjets a small crowd of uniformed people emerged and began to clear away the Police hoverjet wreckage. Gaia did not recognise the uniforms. One of the men approached them. He was beaming and in a jolly mood. He did not give the bodies a second glance as he almost bounded up to the agent.

"It is you!" he shouted. "I knew I recognised that signal. Told the boys it was you. Didn't believe me!" he snorted. Rameses smiled at him.

"Rameses! What are you doing here? And on active duty! What's an infiltrator like you doing here?" then as he realised what he had said and saw the wry look on Rameses' face, "I mean what's an age...." His voice died away as he saw the Deputy give Rameses a sharp look. Gaia was now viewing Rameses with dawning understanding.

"You never were too discreet, were you!" Rameses shrugged his shoulders at the now grinning again man. "No wonder you were kicked out of WECO. There's been a spot of local trouble, you might say. Clear it all up will you. The recorder is up on the bench there." He pointed over his shoulder.

"Will do," the man replied brightly. He began to climb the path still chuckling away to himself. "Never thought I'd see infiltrator action again."

"Deputy," Rameses picked his laser rifle up and handed it to him. "You had better go with the cleaners. They will drop you off and sort out these casualties also." The Deputy nodded.

"Hopefully you will make a worthier chief than that mess." They watched as some men bundled the bodies into bags. The Deputy followed the people who were carrying the biker and the girl away. The girl now in shock.

Rameses tried to gauge how Gaia was feeling as she watched the cleanup proceed in front of her. She seemed to be taking it in her stride. She turned to Rameses and asked, "was all that really necessary?"

Shrugging, Rameses responded, "is anyone going to miss them?"

It was her turn to shrug her shoulders, "doubtful."

"Well, why concern yourself." It was the final word on the matter, she could tell.

"Downloaded everything Rameses," the jolly man handed back the gadget. I'll do the rest from here." Rameses shook the offered hand. "Nice doing business with you again, Sir!" the jolly man was enjoying himself. "Shall I tell the boys to expect more of your handiwork?" he got a 'don't ask look' from Rameses, who said "just make sure you come when you are called." The jolly man continued chuckling as he walked away.

They watched the hoverjets disappear over the horizon. Rameses turned on his heels and walked through the gateway. Gaia fell in behind him as they climbed the path. At the door to Woodend's place he paused and gestured to her to listen. The computer was still repeating the message. He ushered her in saying, "we still have unfinished business you and me. I expect the granddaughter of Paul Woodend to have the answers I seek." She did not feel surprised at his statement.

Her uneasiness returned in waves. The old man. Prokaryotes. Tara. They were coming back. He had foretold it. She tried to imagine the old man's reaction to the news, if he had still been alive. A smile crept across her face. Rameses was watching her closely. All this and an infiltrator. It had to be true. But what did it all mean? Changes, that much was certain! They would never be able to keep this secret! The world was in for a shock!

"You want a drink? Infiltrator Rameses." She walked towards the kitchen. "I think I could do with one before we start."

*The truth, the legacy of Woodend.*

They were sat facing each other in the living room area. She on the large sofa and he in one of the easy chairs. He had felt her make one last effort to put him off, but it had been a weak attempt. "Cut the mind control crap," he said to her as he took a sip from the excellent tea she had made. The realisation that he somehow knew this about her had finally broken her resistance. She slumped into the sofa. Her shoulders drooped. She appeared even smaller in the vastness of the sofa. He left her to her thoughts for a while.

"I know you would have got rid of those kids," he said eventually, "as I'm sure you have done many times before. Yes?" she nodded.

"They 've never been a problem for me. They think that they are having great fun at my expense, and they do. But they go away and forget what they came for. The Chief's son would always get really annoyed when it dawned on him that we had not even discussed the place when they were up here." She smiled. "How did you know?"

"You might be surprised just what training I have had," Rameses answered. "Also, I have come across some, er, unusual things on my missions."

"Where have you been on missions?" Gaia asked innocently. He just stared at her, through her. She shrugged her shoulders and nodded.

"I felt something off you as soon as I met you," Rameses began. "It was quite strong at first. But once I realised what you were doing it lost its effect." Gaia nodded again, "I thought you were resistant from the first. Not many people can ignore me like that."

"You should get out more," he said. She just gave an unconvinced sigh.

"So, is it a gift, a talent you have stumbled on?" he asked. "Were you trained in some way?"

She looked him in the eye. "It's something I've inherited from the old man. The talent was a gift from,"... she paused still looking into his eyes..."them to him before they left." There had been only the slightest flicker from Rameses' eyes as he held her gaze. "He had to work out how to develop it, more or less on his own. He told me about it before he died. He left instructions for me on how to use it, strengthen it, exercise it."

Rameses watched her intently. "Mum never really believed him, you know. She didn't want to try the mind controls. She never thought his version was the truth. She didn't want to think badly of the old man, but she did not want to believe about things from out there." Gaia pointed to the ceiling. She paused for a few seconds. Rameses was about to say something when, "I'm not sure whether I really believed it," Gaia continued. "Until today." Another pause.

"Is the message real? I mean, it's not some kind of hoax, is it?" she seemed almost hopeful. Rameses explained as well as he could. He tried to get as much of the technical detail into his answer as he could remember. She had enough knowledge of the basics to follow him and begin to accept the veracity of the signal.

As Gaia went to brew more tea Rameses extracted his gadget from a pocket. He carefully adjusted some of the settings. A green light flashed periodically. Gaia eyed the gadget cautiously as she returned with the tea.

"Everything we say and do from now on will automatically be transmitted to WECO" Rameses said to her in a rather meaningful tone. She nodded and looked serious. Then as she understood the significance of what he had said she glanced at him quickly. He raised his eyebrows slightly, confirming her thought with the merest of smiles. No one need know she had a certain power!

"I would like you to tell us, Gaia, everything that you know about your grandfather and Tara and these things from off-world." He had paused very slightly before the last word. Gaia stared at the gadget. "It is the most secure link we have," he assured her.

Gaia told the story of Woodend and the Prokaryote. Rameses listened only feet away and tried not to interrupt her. Prompting her on a few occasions. He was linked to WECO through the gadget and an earpiece. In WECO section leader Jurgen Black and Dacourt were the only ones monitoring the transmission. They constantly consulted with the many files laid around them. Checking, verifying, changing and adding information as Gaia recounted what she had learnt from Woodend, the old man, her ancient granddad.

The organism, which Woodend always called 'the Prokaryote', was really a kind of extremophile that existed, somehow, outside the Solar System. Living within the huge interstellar molecular clouds. She tried to explain the picture in his mind that he had been given, of this place by the Prokaryote. Rameses eye was immediately drawn to one of the paintings on the walls. He understood it now.

Single celled, bacteria-like life form, it had been trapped or protected within a meteorite that had eventually struck the Earth. For some reason it needed to get out of the meteorite and could not survive on its own. So, it had 'called' Woodend to it and had entered his body. Eventually revealing itself to him and being crucial in his survival in an old Zone area. Woodend, she said, had been convinced that while the Prokaryote was within him it would protect him, and he had benefited both physically and mentally. She highlighted his improved condition and, sudden, ability to absorb prodigious amounts of information.

The organism had given him the ability and confidence to look after himself more efficiently. But always it had driven him to find a way to send it home. The result of this was the sabotage of the Io mission and the escape of the Prokaryote on board. But the cost had been dreadful. They had caused the Project Scientist to go mad and the organism had

transferred to her infant. A child prodigy, only a few years old. Tara. Together the probe, Tara and the Prokaryote had last been heard of zooming out of the Solar System.

Gaia felt that Woodend had never got over it. He had felt guilty for the rest of his life. Even though he could not do anything to prevent it. He had been left better off by the experience. Improved physical condition that had allowed him to live a long life. A tenure with the local technical campus where he developed his research interests and taught for many years. In his later years he had hoped that the Prokaryote would return. But apart from offering some theories, considered outrageous by other scientists, about extraterrestrial life, he never disclosed the truth to anyone. Except his immediate family.

Gaia spoke for an hour with few breaks. After a brief exchange with Jurgen, Rameses indicated that would do for now. He held the palm of his hand out to her as she seemed about to go into another benefit the organism had brought to Woodend. A final word with Jurgen and Rameses broke the link, putting the gadget back in his pocket. Gaia excused herself and went to the toilet, going down the steps.

"What now?" Gaia enquired on her return. "Can I go home now?"

"No," Gaia recognised the finality in the tone. The empty anxious feeling in her stomach reasserted itself. "I need a visit below too."

As Gaia watched Rameses descend the steps to the toilets and washrooms, she thought I could make a run for it. Get to the car before he would even know she was gone. But sense soon reclaimed her. You could not run from someone like this, or the people he represented. There would be no hiding place. Then she thought of the Swift. Out there somewhere. Probably still hovering above the clearing. No, she was in it now. Part of something that could rock the world. Whether she liked it or not, she could not escape it. She would just have to go with it and hope it would work out well. At least she had kept her mother from being involved.

"We must return to WECO in the morning." Rameses explained finally. "You can sort things out with your mum this evening. I am commanded to not let you out of my sight until the transport arrives tomorrow. We will have to spend the night here." He looked around at the beds in their partitions.

Gaia thought for a while. "We'll have to get some food in," she suggested. "Or we could go for a meal?" he looked uncertain. "The locals will be dying to see the man responsible for killing the Chief and his son." She added mischievously. "It will be all over the district by now, you know."

Rameses considered what she had said. There was no sign of any other agents in the area. If there was a problem they could be backed-up just as easily out there as here at the house. It might be interesting to see the place a bit more.

"I could see my mother, and sort things out on the way," she offered hopefully. "Then come back here afterwards." Rameses had decided.

"OK, let's do it. We need to talk more anyway." They prepared to leave the house.

"Will you want to make another transmission?" she asked him. He nodded negatively as he watched her lock the house up. She looked curiously at him. She could sense something important was coming and he was going to tell her with no encouragement needed. He stopped at the top of the path and gazed about the mound top. Evening was upon them.

"What are they growing in those fields?" he asked her.

"Those are our fields," she replied. "We grow plant-based plastics."

He did not seem to take any notice of her. He was observing the crows who were cavorting on the air above them. One of them flew down to the ground and hopped onto the low bench. Rameses watched him, then said to Gaia.

"You do realise the importance of this news, don't you?" a wary tone had crept back into his voice.



"Well sure I do!" Gaia exclaimed in exasperation. "Life from outer space! On its way here! It will change the world!" her eyes were gleaming.

"No, I was thinking of something more important than that." He said matter of factly. She looked at him dumbfounded, her jaw slack. The stern look to his face made her only mouth the word, 'what?' and shake her head gently. He briefly glanced down at the large black crow, a wing outstretched, and head cocked to one side as if listening to their conversation. It's eyes on Rameses.

"We could be in great danger. Not many people know about this yet. People can be easily eliminated. It need not come into the general knowledge of the world." He stopped and held his arm out to the crow. With no hesitation the bird hopped up onto his arm. His claws gripping Rameses' forearm tightly. He cawed aloud and looked sideways at his human roost. Staring into the yellow eye of the crow Rameses continued. "I can think of many people who would like to keep this secret, who would not welcome aliens, whatever form they took, whatever their good intentions; if that's what they have. It could get very dangerous in the time ahead." He looked back to Gaia. "Don't tell anyone about your 'gift'. It might come in handy. In fact, work on anything you have inherited from Woodend. It might chance that the prokaryotes will be the least of our worries."

He stared back at the crow and launched it with a movement of his arm. The bird soared into the air and cawed its approval. Gaia was somber of face. She was astonished at his words and was having trouble coming to terms with them. But also, the crow had amazed her. Only the old man had been able to get the crows to approach him and that was years ago.

"How did you do that?" she asked him as if in a daze. He merely shrugged his body. "Only the old man was ever able to get the crows to come close to him." Rameses nodded in a knowing way.

"Perhaps the stench of death lingers around some of us."

"Come on" he said more brightly. "Let's get on it," he tried a smile at her. They walked down to the car. As he opened the door he looked back at the house. Suddenly he shouted out, "I've got it!" Gaia jumped a little in surprise. "A church! It used to be a church." He pointed at the house and smiled as if he had solved a great problem.

"Yes," Gaia smiled with him.

"What happened to the graveyard? Was there one?"

"Oh yes. But the graves were removed years and years ago. Long before the old man came to live here."

"Do you have many religious people in the area?" Rameses asked as he got into the car.

"Not too many. A few traditionalists. A few sustationists."

As Rameses pressed a few buttons on his wristband the Swift landed on the mound and he remarked.

"Well, they are two groups of people I guess would have an interesting reaction to the news of life from outer space."

### *Last night in England*

Thirty minutes later they arrived at the large and quite imposing farmhouse that was home to Gaia's family. The old car had safely negotiated the often bumpy and overgrown lanes that led from the old church. No wonder the car was so messy, sometimes it had to sweep the encroaching growth before it; like some icebreaker in the pack ice.

As the car lurched to a halt in the typical farmyard. Gaia begged Rameses not to get out, not to come into the house. Rameses could see real concern in her face. But the lure of a stroll round a real, working farmyard was very strong for him. He gave her a compromise. He would not come close to the house. However, he was going for a wander about, look at the animals. There were several people busy working, men and women. Rameses knew there were some male members of the family involved in the business, but he did not recognise them amongst the farmworkers he could see.

As Gaia walked to the backdoor, she waved and conversed with many of the people. It was a huge farm, Rameses noted, with many employees despite the effective use of mechanisation. Rameses doubted if they were paid much in terms of actual money. The use of cash cards was universal and through their work the accounts of these people would be kept buoyant by the authorities. They would not want for much, within a certain range. They could not go out and buy a new hovercar easily. But most luxuries were attainable with care and saving.

Rameses roamed around the yard enjoying the cows, horses, pigs, chickens, pursued alternatively by the dog and the geese. Although he let neither bother him. He tried to engage the farmworkers in conversation. Most of them were happy to talk to him. The news of the demise of the Chief and his son had reached them. There was no lamenting their loss here. At times he glanced towards the house. He could see Gaia and her mother through the living room windows. Their discourse was animated, and with gestures often made in his

direction. Rameses observed that both Gaia and her mother shared the same strong profile. They inherited it from their biological ancestor, Paul Woodend. Using the collected and stored sperm of Woodend and the egg, chosen by Woodend, of a donor to the egg bank. Gaia's mother was produced. She had then had children naturally with one of the local men. Rameses knew that the mother had never approved of her 'conception'. It was a method which was commonly used these days to 'have' children. In fact, the authorities urged many people to produce children this way. Particularly single and older people of both sexes. They also offered to bring the children up. The biological parents, if still alive, could be involved, or not, to any extent they wished. Records, very extensive records were kept so that the children might 'know' their parents when they matured.

By these and other means the authorities managed to maintain the population at the levels they were at after the world-wide purge of the 21st century. In an area like this, Rameses thought, the people were more traditional. Most of the babies would be born naturally. Gaia's mother had not appreciated the way she had been brought into the world and resented Woodend for it. This was also why she was less inclined to believe his ideas. There had been a rift only sealed when the granddaughter was old enough to realise and to be able to bring them together again.

After a half hour Gaia emerged and strode over to where Rameses was enjoying the smell of the pigs. She carried a brightly coloured bag.

"That was difficult," she said.

"Took it badly, did she?" Rameses asked.

"Still won't believe the old man was right." They moved towards the car.

"Well, she will just have to watch the news," he said as he waved at the figure in the window staring at them. He got in and watched Gaia wave her goodbyes, perhaps for the last time.

Privately he thought, 'let's hope it does make the news'.

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Later they were settling into some seats around a table for two set in the front window of a typical English country pub. The village, probably, was once the home to a couple of thousand people, including the outlying hamlets and farms. Fewer people lived there now. The pub rarely became packed out. But trade was more than adequate. It still served as the hub of the village. Tonight, would be one of their best nights for some time. The news of the much-disliked Chief's downfall and the chance to see his nemesis drew a crowd in.

Rameses, as Gaia had sensed, enjoyed the interest and notoriety. He gave little away but was happy to join in the general banter. For her part Gaia could not hide the fact that she was going away, and that she might not be back for some time. The locals probed discreetly. But not too deeply. They had sense. A local police hovercar stayed parked outside all night. Rameses noticed that there were service cars at both ends of the main village street. He found himself relaxing and enjoying the company. The food and drink were excellent as well.

A blind man, middle aged and slightly crooked in the body, monopolised them for an hour early in the night. Rameses discovered that the man had left his guide dog at home; his normal practice when he was at the pub; because the sensible dog had its own ideas when he had had enough and tried to drag him home. Gaia informed Rameses that the man had become blind when he was monitoring Taipei's radioactivity levels on GRB day.

GRB day. Gamma Ray Burst day. Or the great Gamma Ray Burst disaster as it was also known. Rameses had not been born. It would be another year or two before he was 'put together' by the authorities, similarly to Gaia's mum. Gamma Ray Bursts had been known about for at least a hundred years before that day. Nobody really knew for sure what caused them. There were many theories ranging from colliding black holes to neutron star

interactions to types of supernovae explosions. Astronomers knew they originated from all directions and that they all came from other galaxies. Considering the power of the bursts by the time they reached Earth, if any of them had originated in the Milky Way the consequences for life on Earth were grave. Then one day, nighttime in the far east the greatest burst ever recorded before or since hit the Earth. Greater than all the known bursts before and after added together and coming from the direction of the galaxy centre.

Gravitational wave detectors on Earth and the Moon were the first to register something out of the ordinary. Very soon after, neutrinos in unprecedented numbers were sensed by the great tanks deep underground around the world. That was enough to set the scientists of the world chattering wildly at each other. Then a few hours later the gamma rays arrived. But it was not just the gamma part of the spectrum. Every part was represented. From radio to gamma and with cosmic rays thrown in for good measure. The far east was in night-time and facing the onslaught. The sky lit up with the impact of the radiation as it tore through the atmosphere. Myriads of aurorae sparkled in greens and reds and other colours. The charge saturated sky was blanketed in beautiful but fatal hues. The ozone layer failed under the ionising and suffocating grasp of the electromagnetic assault. Effects diffracted and reflected into the daytime side of the Earth. Meters and gauges all around the world went off the scale. Death from the Cosmos rained down.

The reports that Rameses had seen decades later confirmed the worst fears at the time. People had died in their billions. Not millions, billions. The population of China had halved in ten years (conservative estimate). Japan too. The south east Asian countries never really recovered. They eventually reverted to mainly tribal areas. India suffered also. Already weakened by the nuclear war with neighbour Pakistan it lost all semblance of unified government. China, south east Asia and the strip of islands below, that led to the western most part of Australia, all suffered the worst. In time Australia and Japan recovered more

quickly because of the help rendered by the western developed powers. China had refused all offers of help.

The most immediate effect of the radiation was to kill many people, animals and plants. People, animals and plants that had any kind of shelter lasted longer. As is the way with radiation some things survived regardless of the dose they received, people included. Blindness affected those caught out in the radiation storm. Later, cancers and radiation sickness developed. Food supplies failed, survivors starved: animal and human alike. Whole areas of the far east were laid waste and desolate. Devoid of life until nature slowly regenerated. Nature always found a way, thought Rameses. He believed that life of some form or another would exist on Earth whatever happened. Even if the place was blown apart it would reform under gravity and eventually life would return. Only when the sun went nova would it fail. He was not religious. He did not believe in a God. He just felt that the Earth was meant to be in the right place. It was a 'life' planet. Life in any form would be supported. He also believed that there had to be many others in the galaxy, seeds for life.

A generation of people were wiped out or scarred. Whole sections of life died out or were badly affected. Mutations in all lifeforms were reported and studied. Some plant mutations proved to be quite useful. Mass suicides in Japan were endorsed as people realised the terrible burden some were to the healthier survivors.

At first it had been impossible to get any information from the affected areas. At first communications around the world were severely compromised. Electromagnetic pulses and interference knocked most systems out. Many satellites, not just communications, were disabled or destroyed. (Many eventually fell back to Earth, not all of them burning up on re-entry). The most reliable link was by fibre-optics. In time, the remaining satellites were moved into position and photographs taken from upper atmosphere craft. The western powers helped; but only to their advantage. Some regions were assisted, while others ignored

and studied as they failed utterly. China recovered quicker than expected, they must have had vast banks of ova and sperm safely stored away somewhere. But nevertheless, its power and influence were diminished. When it had attacked Taiwan many years earlier the western alliances stood back, and the island was forsaken. But it had fought fiercely and suicidally. So much so that China gave up on it. They exploded a few well-placed atomic bombs, and everyone died. Only some plants and insects were found several years later when international teams began to monitor the island.

This was why the blind man had been in the wrong place at the wrong time and his eyes were fried by the Cosmic doom. Rameses was told by the man himself how he had been successfully treated when they got him home. The number of transplants he had received. How he had rebuilt his life. Rameses showed interest. However, he had seen much worse on his missions. People who had suffered the same, or more, and who had not benefited from an advanced and available medical care.

The devastation and ruin on the Earth was widespread and would last into the next few generations. But off-world, in space the burst left nobody alive. The base and mining operations on the Moon were left completely lifeless. Everyone on the more recent Martian base also perished. Not one person in any of the spaceships that were flying at the time remained alive after the burst swept over them. No matter where they were in the Solar System.

As befitted a technologically advanced and resource rich community the western alliances rebuilt and renewed quickly. Soon there were people toiling away on the dusty, airless lunar surface and in the dusty, thin unbreathable Martian atmosphere. More satellites ringed the world: spying and relaying. They raided other areas of the world for resources and supplies that they could not get by alliance trade or bullying military presence. Rameses had been born into this deliberately sectioned world with its biased development. A child of Welsh



and Egyptian heritage, born after his parents had died. He had grown up in the authority schools and homes, destined to work for the services. He might have been a teacher, or a cop, or a scientist. But he was an infiltrator.

Gaia and Rameses left the pub before midnight. It had been a pleasant evening for all. Gaia allowed one of the service men to drive them back to the old man's house. The guarding service people stayed at the bottom of the mound for the night. Rameses and Gaia retired into the house. After a late-night drink and a private discussion in which they talked through possible scenarios and outcomes, and what they could do in that eventuality; they went to bed. Tomorrow they would travel to WECO.

*Aboard the asteroid deflector, 'The Red Star', somewhere between the orbits of Mars and Jupiter.*

"Bugger!"

The man quickly typed in new instructions. His fingers moving rapidly over the keyboard.

"That's better," he said to himself as he tapped the execute button.

"Everything alright, Captain?" a female voice asked through his headset. There was very little concern in the tone of her voice. She could monitor the Captain's console from her position and knew all was well.

"Just pressed the wrong bloody buttons, I mean keys, there for a second. But I've got it sussed now." Captain Severn replied. "I must be a little tired," he added.

In another section of the ship, the woman, technical officer Pleiades, had winced slightly at the Captain's choice of words. After two missions with him, her sensitive Japanese nature had not quite got used to Captain Severn's penchant for colourful language. He loved to use words which had been in common use well over a century ago. Mind you he was not averse to use the modern equivalents from time to time. In Pleiades opinion it was his only fault.

Her real name was Subaru, the Japanese name for the group of stars called the Pleiades in the west. She preferred this name and referred to herself as such. A graduate of many establishments in Japan and the west she was a top-class techie in the Space Corps (asteroid deflection division). Pleiades had classical Japanese features: five and a half foot tall with short black hair; pleasant rather than pretty.

She turned to the man sat nearby. They exchanged knowing smiles. They knew that the Captain did not have to perform the last part of the operation. But he liked to do it. Either of them was better equipped to carry out the function. But they also knew that if there was a real problem the Captain would not hesitate to hand over to them.

At his position Severn watched the data beginning to arrive from the mini thrusters. They had reached the thirty-kilometre-long asteroid two days before. He had spent a day getting 'The Red Star' into the correct orbit around the slowly spinning lump of rock. This was where his talents lay. A skill honed by many years operating spacecraft between the planets of the inner solar system. Severn had also played a major role in the clearing of debris from the asteroid impact on the surface of Mars. Debris: some of which went into orbit around the planet; some escaped out into space to threaten the Earth. This was his fifth mission in the asteroid deflector; all successful despite a few problems at times.

Once he had put the ship into a safe orbit his more technically gifted crew began their calculations. The two of them checked the actual movement of the asteroid, comparing it with the predicted figures from observations made on the Earth, Mars and the Moon. Any discrepancies were inputted to the computers and the necessary changes made to the programs. These programs then worked out where the mini thrusters should be positioned on the asteroid and controlled the deployment of them as they were fired out of 'The Red Star'.

The mini thrusters stuck to the surface of the giant rock and waited for the instruction to begin operating. It was this instruction that Captain Severn liked to execute. His screen gave him the run down and he only had to type a few lines of orders. Once this was done and the data began to return to the computers, he left the monitoring, and any required fine tuning to the thrusters to his crew.

"Over to you, SFP and Pleiades," he said into his headset. His job, now, was to get the ship out of the way of the asteroid as it was slowly inched into a different flightpath. This one was being set on a course that would take it into the Sun. The last asteroid they had handled had been sent on a collision course with the huge planet Jupiter. It depended on where the rock was in its orbit when they caught up with it.

"OK, Captain." A male voice answered this time. "We've got it, incoming data suggests all going to plan, thruster systems operating properly." The accent was Australian, broad Australian.

As Severn eased 'The Red Star' away from the asteroid using the ship's main thrusters, he thought again about SFP and Pleiades. On this trip he had pulled himself through the main living area during one of his rest periods. He had wanted to get something to snack on from the galley. As he passed the crew's quarters, he chanced upon the two of them attempting to have sex. Severn quickly back tracked. He smiled at the brief glimpse he had got of their attempts to tie themselves 'down' into a suitable position. He knew from his own experience that it was almost impossible to counteract the effects of zero-G. It was a frustrating and ultimately unsatisfactory feeling. Later, as he retraced his steps, they had finished. He did not know how 'it had been for them'. But at times, during the next few days, they were both prone to break into fits of giggles. Captain Severn ignored it, merely smiling along with their obvious amusement.

SFP, it was short for Sky-Friend-Pointer, was an aboriginal. Sky-Friend-Pointer was the closest translation to his aboriginal name that he could offer. He always refused to explain how he came by his name, maintaining an air of mystery about it. In his turn, he was a classical physical representative of his race. His facial features being particularly typical of that people. Although he said nothing, Severn knew that he was a hero to his people back on Earth in Australia. The first of his kind to achieve such success in science, engineering and space. Captain Severn respected his skills and noted that he was developing into a decent pilot too.

After twenty minutes 'The Red Star' had safely parted company with the asteroid. As a measure of the fine detail that needed to be considered, the tiny amount of gravitational attraction between the ship and the rock had been allowed for in Pleiades and SFP's

computations. Telemetry and all other data being received by the ship's sensors showed the new flightpath of the asteroid to be well within the necessary parameters for a future meeting with the Sun.

Captain Severn spoke into his headset, "if everything is still OK, send the latest positional data on the asteroid to Earth orbital station."

"Understood, Captain," Pleiades answered.

"Another good job, team," Severn thanked them. "Well done everyone."

"Thank you, sir" they both responded, smiling at each other.

Severn unbuckled himself from his seat and floated slightly away from his console. Just as he started to turn his body an alarm sound rang out. His eyes scanned the control panel. They confirmed what his ears were telling him. A priority message from the Space Corps base on the Moon was coming in.

"Blimey! What's this all about?" he exclaimed to himself. His face turned to a scowl and his eyes narrowed as he read the message.

PROCEED IMMEDIATELY TO MARS.

DOCK WITH ORBITAL STATION ARIES.

AWAIT INSTRUCTIONS ON ARRIVAL.

PROCEED WITH ALL SPEED.

ADVISE ON POSSIBLE ETA AT MARS.

They were meant to return to the Moon base after dealing with another asteroid. Pleiades and SFP would not like this news. They were looking forward to spending some time on the Moon base. It was bigger and livelier than the Mars base. Mars was duller. Dustier. Redder! Only hardened miners and base officials. Worse! You couldn't see Earth from Mars. Well not properly.

"What's the matter, Captain?" SFP was asking. He knew the sound of a priority message. It could only mean a change in the mission orders.

"Bad news for you two, I'm afraid." Severn began. "We've got to go to Mars. And we are not to hang about."

Groans filled his headset. "How long till you can give me an ETA for arrival at station Aries?" a muffled discussion could be heard.

"Can we use all reasonable means, Captain?" it was Pleiades.

"Order says 'proceed with all speed'," Severn replied. More muffled conversation.

"Let you know in twenty." Pleiades again.

"OK." The Captain confirmed. "I'll turn the ship in the right direction." Severn then concentrated on using the ship's main thrusters to face the general direction of Mars with help from the navigation computer.

'The Red Star', like her sister ship 'The Blue Nova', was fitted with several propulsion systems. The main one being the latest variable ion engine which could power the craft equally well in orbital manoeuvres and in interplanetary space. But she also had chemical and nuclear thermal rocket engines. The main thrusters were compressed gas operated and only for use in orientating the spacecraft. Finally, she could deploy solar sails. These would be driven by the solar wind on journeys away from the Sun. But there was also a powerful laser for extra force on the sails and for journeys back towards the Sun.

All these systems might have appeared as overkill, and expensive to earlier generations of space travellers. However, cost was not an issue to the designers of modern spaceships like the asteroid deflector class. Their role was recognised as so vital to the very survival of life on Earth that all systems were built with many backups and degrees of redundancy. Severn and his crew had needed, on occasion, to use every means of propulsion available to them.

Severn searched the message for the send time and compared it with the arrival time. Seventeen minutes. After they sent their reply it would be at least thirty-four minutes before they would receive anything else from the Moon base.

"How's it going down there?" Severn asked his busy techies. Even though strictly speaking there was no up or down in space. Severn considered every part of the ship away from his control room, 'down there'.

"Be with you in a minute or two, Captain," SFP responded. His voice excited with the task set for him. Severn could do the calculations. He was sure of it. He knew and understood the relevant mathematics. However, it would take him well over an hour to do it. Also, he was much more likely to make an error. He did not like to admit it; but it was true. His techies were the finest in the Corps. They had proved themselves on previous missions. Nevertheless, Severn speculated on what they would come up with.

"Got the solution, Captain," Pleiades suddenly spoke. "Sending it to your console now." The Captain scanned it quickly. Looked particularly at the acceleration and deceleration details. Checked the top speed they would reach and noted the time for the journey to take.

"Excellent, team," Severn congratulated his crew. "Propulsion controls are now with you. Proceed with the plan. I am contacting Moon base."

Seventeen minutes later the following message arrived at Moon base.

MESSAGE RECEIVED.

ETA AT MARS THREE WEEKS TWO DAYS FROM NOW.

REPEAT.

THREE WEEKS TWO DAYS.

NOW ON COURSE FOR DESTINATION.

The base Commandant watched the message come in. He turned to his communications chief. "Advise Earth control of the ETA of 'The Red Star' at Mars and reply to Captain Severn."

He then left the communications centre and returned to his quarters. Still wondering what was going on. Perhaps he would get his answers when the unexpected shuttle arrived in the next twenty-four hours.

Aboard 'The Red Star' the acceleration was continuing. It would last for another thirty minutes. Then the various engines would be shut down sequentially. Finally, the ship would attain the calculated speed. Very close to the design top speed. (This was only relevant with regards to the consequential time needed to decelerate afterwards). It would then coast to Mars before the deceleration process would begin. This would take longer and be much gentler than the speeding up part.



*On Board 'The Red Star' on route to Mars.*

The voyage to Mars passed off without incident. To experienced spacefarers such as the crew of 'The Red Star', three weeks was nothing. Their original mission had been scheduled for a further two months after their encounter with the asteroid. Therefore, the change of orders to proceed quickly to Mars was a boost. They would get the chance to meet other people at the orbital station; people who they would know from previous visits. Not that they were not coping with each other's company aboard the ship. They had all been picked because of their abilities to suffer the peculiar problems of being stuck together in a metal can for long periods of time. They had shown the strength of character to handle the psychological and social pressures of the isolation of space travel. They all possessed the qualities of mental resilience, compatibility, patience, tolerance, sense of humour and high concentration levels.

Occasionally, there were some cross words and 'steam' letting-off. In truth, their training suggested these rarely seen sparks were essential for the safe running of the ship. For this reason, Captain Severn called a special staff meeting every fortnight where there was no agenda, and everything said was considered off the record. No minutes were taken. The training manual also advised against crew members forming any type of personal relationship. Severn was glad to see that Pleiades and SFP had not developed their relationship any further than a clumsy attempt to try zero-G sex for themselves.

They were all, naturally, loners. For one reason or another, they had found some contentment in the unrelenting loneliness of space.

Severn enjoyed the danger of space. It was ever present. Always there, even in the comparative safety of the orbital space stations around Mars and Earth. Especially in his bolt-hole on the Martian surface. He relished the danger involved in flying close to huge

chunks of rock. The scant company of the people working out here on the frontier of space was enough for him. He did not miss the people of Earth in general, or even the planet itself. Although the sight of the mother world was always an uplifting experience. Severn had not set foot on Earth's surface for five years. If he left it much longer, a return to his home planet would become difficult and dangerous. Probably, he would not survive long. But Severn was unconcerned. He loved the rugged beauty of Mars and the Moon. He knew from early in his space career that he would die out here. A long life was not expected for anyone working off-world. If a space accident did not get him. The remorseless radiation would. Captain Severn wanted to be buried on Mars; he knew just the place.

Sky-Friend-Pointer, like Pleiades, had tasted the thrill and glory of academic success on Earth. They were famous in their homelands; certainly, within academia. But for their own reasons they each had felt a sense of isolation there. Once they had experienced off-world travel on a trip to the Moon they were hooked. They both signed on with the Space Corps, trained together at the Moon base, then worked initially on the constant Mars shuttles that were supplying the burgeoning Mars base. For them the thrill and risk of working in space and on other worlds was everything. They rejoiced in the brilliant and infinite views of space all around them. For them the dazzling vista of the blue/white Earth, and the feelings it evoked within them, were spiritual in their intensity. They shared the belief, often discussed between them, that the future of humankind lay in the stars. But there would only be one Earth. One home to return to. Their shared desire was to protect and begin this future. When the asteroid deflectors were built, and crews sought to man them, they applied and were immediately accepted. The job would need the undoubted skills they possessed; technical excellence and problem solving. For the trainers the malleability of their personalities was a bonus.

Once the initial programming of the engines and navigational computers was complete and the engines had been shut down. There was little to do, except to monitor the systems in general. Nearer their destination they would need to prepare for deceleration. Then the calculations would have to be made to put 'The Red Star' into a safe orbit around Mars. Then Captain Severn, within a few orbits would steer the ship in to dock with the space station Aries. In the meantime, the ship sped on in the silence of space.

If a problem, lay ahead the sensors would warn them in good time. There might be much smaller pieces of rock that might have to be dodged. If the sizes were small enough, the ship's reinforced outer shell would be able to withstand the collisions. Impact with space debris, whether natural rocks or man-made, remained one of the most potent perils facing spacecraft. Besides the armoured outer shell there were other layers beyond it. These helped to slow down incoming meteors, helping to absorb the energy of the impact. However, this only worked for the very small pieces that were difficult to pick up with the sensors. The only safe method was evasion. It was best to get out of the way.

The other main problem was the radiation. The constant emission from the Sun of all kinds of dangerous radiation was bad enough. But there was also radiation from outside the solar system, from the galaxy. Even from beyond our galaxy perilous radiation spewed across space. Engineers believed that the problems of dealing with radiation would never be completely negated. They could only keep the levels of exposure down. Crews would live a little longer before the effects of ionising energies produced cancers, blindness, sickness etc. The new drugs helped. Other treatments like the scrubbers could give you a few extra years. Although there were rumours inside the Space Corps about the bacteria given to infiltrators on Earth, nobody in the Space Corps knew any more than that.

The truth was that everybody who signed on for the Space Corps, whatever division, knew full well the dangers. The average age of death in the Corps was thirty-five. It was no secret.

Yet there was a waiting list. Never any shortage of volunteers for even the more dangerous assignments. The Corps had a kudos, an aura about it and people wanted in. They wanted to serve. There was a belief, a creed even, among them that they were doing the most important work for humankind. For their loyalty they were rewarded handsomely. Although money was not so important off-world because everything essential was supplied free and in more than sufficient amounts. Privileges could be extended to family and friends on Earth. There was effectively no limit to the possessions that may be accrued on Earth. They might die young, but their memory would be preserved by their kin left behind.

'The Red Star' had the best radiation protection so far built into a spaceship. But even this would not keep death at bay eventually. During the journey the ship received a signal from the Space Weather Centre, which lay in an extended orbit around the Earth. A massive CME had been thrown out from the Sun and was heading for them. Intercept would happen in three days' time. The crew moved into the central heavy radiation protection chamber. This offered the most protection they could have. But from just before the solar storm hit until it had passed by them, they were confined in the claustrophobic room. All but the most vital systems were shut down or given more shielding. There was nothing to be done. It happened quite regularly, and it tested their qualities. They could not leave the room for anything. Food and water was plentiful, as it always was. The best food available and a very varied choice to keep boredom to a minimum. Privacy was not available. But then the crew were used to this. Once you have strapped yourself down in the toilet in front of your crewmates and done the business, you soon lost any inhibitions. Besides they had all been ill in space. When that happened, your crewmates were required to become very familiar with you, physically.

The storm lasted two days. When the radiation returned to acceptable levels the computer told them it was safe to emerge again. Then they were all busy for many hours running

diagnostics and checking all the ship's systems. There were no serious aftereffects. They were still on course and on time. They exchanged signals with Moon base and the Mars orbital station to assure them all was well.

As they got closer to Mars Severn began to monitor the signals between Earth, Moon base and Mars. He also listened in to communications with the spacecraft travelling between those stations and bases. Most of it was routine. He of course recognised voices and names. The time delay, although dropping all the time, made the monitoring a fractured experience. Severn's attention was taken by the number of coded signals that he came across. He was not familiar with the code being used. He set his techies the job of attempting to crack the code. They had partial success. As a result, the Captain trained some of the ship's sensors behind them. Looking back towards Jupiter.

After a brief search they were able to detect something very unusual. Passing Jupiter was a large dark patch. It was very black. Sensors could not penetrate it. Although they did reveal the presence of many large bodies apparently embedded in the cloud. These bodies included asteroidal, comet and Kuiper Belt material according to their spectra. But the really surprising observations were the speed at which this cloud was approaching, and the unrecognisable radio signal emanating from it. At its present rate it would arrive in Martian space only a day or two after 'The Red Star'.

As they completed the approach to Mars orbit, they discussed this mysterious cloud and what implications it might have. But their only partial decoding of the secret signals offered few clues. Finally, to their great surprise on arriving at Mars they found their sister ship, 'The Blue Nova', docked at Aries space station. Only one asteroid deflector was meant to be on active service at any time. 'The Blue Nova' was supposed to be undergoing a regular post mission refit at Earth orbital station. What was she doing here? It had to be something to do with why they were there, and the rapid approach of the dark cloud behind them.

Then to compound their amazement a new spaceship, which Severn had only seen on the drawing boards of Moon base before, swung round in orbit around the red planet. It all made Severn's job of docking with Aries just a little more interesting. As he made his approach, below them a vast storm was sweeping across the Martian surface. The planet brooded, scowling at the coming darkness.

### *Gaia arrives at WECO*

Gaia travelled to WECO in the transport. The same staff officer who had accompanied Rameses previously, chaperoned her. There were no other travellers except a squad of armed guards. Unnecessarily heavily armed guards; a mixture of both sexes with a female leader. Alongside, Rameses flew his swift in escort. But he was not alone. A squadron of WECO fighters also buzzed around them. Eventually all the craft landed at the base together.

Rameses gave his swift over to the loving care of Conor and wondered when he would fly her again. He proceeded quickly to section head Black's office. Gaia was left in the capable hands of the staff officer. He supervised her progress through the security system. All her details were put on record and stored in the computer. She passed through the most stringent checks and was finally given a security pass that matched the level of an infiltrator.

The staff officer then led her along the seemingly maze of corridors that lay underneath the complex. He chatted to her amiably as they walked, pointing out areas of interest. He knew of her observatory and scientific background. Gaia was taken aback by the sheer scale of the complex. A feeling that increased when they arrived by lift on the surface and she could see the full extent of the installations above ground.

"It's so big," she cried out loud. "I never thought it would be this size."

"Yes, it is a bit overwhelming when you first see it." The staff officer agreed. "But you do get used to it."

Gaia raised a sceptical eyebrow at him.

"It takes time, that's all," he smiled reassuringly.

"Is this the biggest government base in the world?" Gaia asked innocently. The staff officer grinned genuinely at her.

"It is the biggest base in all of western Europe," he began. "We have ultimate responsibility for the security of all of western Europe. We also oversee operations in other parts of the world."

He had been given precise orders about what he could tell the woman.

"Of course, the Russians and Chinese have big bases too. But the biggest ones are still in America. I have visited one which is at least three times the size of W.E.C.O."

"Unimaginable," Gaia spoke softly.

The constant checking of security passes and the presence of guards every ten metres, or so it seemed, did not bother Gaia. It gave her the chance to absorb it all and keep a sense of her bearings. At last they stopped outside an important looking office. She was introduced to a female officer.

"Gaia, this is officer Dacourt." The staff officer indicated.

The women shook hands and smiled warmly at each other. Gaia sensed the officer's welcome was genuine. She relaxed a little. In doing this she realised how tense she was. Dacourt was pleased to see her despite being obviously busy and a little stressed.

"Go straight in," Dacourt said to her. "You are expected." Gaia followed her directions and entered the office. Inside, a middle-aged man rose to meet her and introduced himself as the section head. Rameses was standing by the window, staring at the mountains. He turned to watch her as she met Jurgen Black. They flashed smiles at each other. Gaia found herself glad to see the infiltrator. She felt herself relaxing more. She tried something, looking at Rameses. Her reward came in the form of another smile and a slight nod from him.

"Well, you know Rameses," the section head was saying. "Let me also introduce you to..." Gaia lost track of what he was saying. As she turned to face the other two people in the room, all her tension returned and she visibly stiffened. Her mouth fell open. Sat on the seats were a man and a woman. The man was Astolpho - the leader of western Europe. He



seemed much taller than his pictures, even sat in the seat. Thin in the body and thin in the face. He had a gaunt look. Middle aged with thinning grey hair. He merely smiled and nodded slightly at Gaia.

Next to him was the woman. Appearing, again, different to the pictures. This time smaller in stature. She should be Gaia's height, with more rounded curves. Middle aged with unnaturally blonde hair. She fixed Gaia with her piercing blue eyes. She did not smile, and Gaia sensed a brooding menace. To her astonishment she was face to face with Cerro - the supreme world leader.

Her legs wanted to buckle under her. Her palms had become sweaty. Her hands were shaking. She could not look them in the eye. She shot Rameses a glance and sensed his amusement. She gave him a sharp thought. The smile slipped from his face.

"Are you OK?" the section head asked her. She slowly came out of her shock. "Are you OK, Gaia?" Black repeated.

"Yes. I'm just..." Her voice faltered.

"It is not every day a person meets the two most powerful people in the world." Rameses explained.

"No, it is not." Gaia's composure was returning. She smiled resolutely at everyone in turn.

Cerro spoke, "Sit down, Gaia." No accent. It was a command. Gaia sat and gazed at the supreme leader.

"Tomorrow there will be an emergency meeting of the world council," Cerro continued.

"You, young lady will have a leading role." A neutral smile appeared on her face. Gaia's stomach tightened. She managed not to glance at Rameses. She kept her attention on Cerro entirely.

"As a rehearsal, almost, we will go through the information currently available. You will tell us everything you know, in practice for your evidence tomorrow. You will also tell us everything you can guess and suspect about these aliens."

There followed the most difficult hour of Gaia's life. She settled to her task, responding to prompts from both Black and Rameses. Always Cerro considered her intently. Astolpho asked most of the questions. Occasionally Cerro asked a telling one. She was not supreme world leader for nothing. She was sharp to the point that her questions cut straight to the core of the matter. Always, she kept her gaze on the young woman. Gaia found herself remembering lost conversations with Woodend. She dredged up memories and scraps of information from the past. At the end, the room contained some very thoughtful people indeed.

"Section leader Black," Astolpho finally said, again, in his no accent, ruling class tones. "We will leave you to finish preparations for the conference." Then they left the room. Immediately they were surrounded by their guards and escorted away. The base guards returned to their positions in place of the supreme leader's guards.

Rameses led Gaia out of the office, "We will leave you to it, sir," he said to Jurgen Black. Dacourt rushed past them and soon she and Black were immersed again in the necessary details.

"Let's get something to eat," Rameses told Gaia.

"That sounds good. I'm quite hungry after that grilling." She paused as if remembering. "A lot of help you were in there!" she exclaimed.

"Oh, well." He shrugged. "You are playing with the big boys now." She nodded her head.

"And a very big girl!" she laughed. He smiled broadly.

"Any way, you did just fine. You can handle yourself." He led her down the corridor. As they went, he whispered in her ear, "and, importantly, you did not reveal all your inherited traits."

*Emergency World Council Meeting - part 1*

The rest of that day Rameses and Gaia spent together. They ate in one of the base refectories.

While they ate, they chatted generally. They could see the mountains in the distance.

Rameses told her of his love for the high places, the snowfields and skiing. She told him more of her life in sleepy England and her work at the observatory. They got to know each other quite quickly. Laughter and smiles punctuated their conversation. So much so that amid the growing feeling of something big about to happen. Their apparent levity drew interested looks from other diners.

Later they removed themselves to a vantage point on the roof of a surface building, near to the main landing bays. Here they could observe the traffic; which grew in frequency as they watched. But also, they could continue their conversation in more private circumstances. It had reached topics that were for their ears only.

During their vigil on the roof they saw the arrival of the rest of the World Council. Rameses indicated who was who. Gaia recognised most of them from pictures. Each emerged from their transport complete with a personal guard who accompanied them into the reception area. They could just make out the scurrying forms of Dacourt and the staff officer, helped by other base staff, meeting each new arrival. Once processed they were led away to their quarters.

As the Sun began to set Rameses and Gaia parted company and went to their separate rooms. Tomorrow promised to be a taxing day. The meeting might possibly be the most important one in the history of humankind.

...

When morning came Rameses was glad for the underground walkways. The weather had turned wet and stormy. It was forecast to last all day. He picked Gaia up from her room and they had breakfast together. His orders were to guard her and bring her to the conference room in time for the meeting. The base really did now have too many guards. The new guards spilled over near the area where the conference was due to take place.

"It's time, Gaia," he gently led her away.

"I'm nervous," she said quietly.

"So am I," he responded. No more was said until they were ushered into the conference room.

The room was an underground bunker. Many levels below the surface. Blast-proof. Nuclear weapon blast-proof. Rectangular in construction. Lifts accessed the room at both the shorter sides. Rameses knew there were also stairways that led upwards from points in the centre of the longer sides. Base guards stood at each of these positions. Set four metres off one of the longer walls a great wooden table curved in an arc. Seven chairs were set in metre intervals around this arc. Two metres from the end of each arc were straight tables three metres in length. Chairs accompanied them. Behind these tables more chairs were placed. In the centre of this U-shaped arrangement a projection desk was positioned. A technician sat in attendance.

Rameses led Gaia to one of the straight tables. Black and Dacourt were already sat there. Black indicated Gaia to sit between him and Dacourt. Rameses was pointed to the chair next to Dacourt. The staff officer and other base officials were sitting behind them. Rameses noticed they all had files of various kinds. Files were spread out on the table before Black and Dacourt. Across the room the other table was also occupied. Rameses recognised some very famous and high-powered scientists. There were important industrialists and government officials. Also, the person who controlled all the news agencies that were

permitted to operate under the aegis of the World Council. Files were lain before the frontline scientists; but these were open, and they were avidly consulting with them and each other. Drinks were liberally spread along the tables and throughout the room. Other base technicians lined the walls at intervals.

Ten minutes passed and then the lift behind the curved table opened. Guards swept in, followed by the members of the World Council, then more guards. The Supreme Leader sat at the head of the U. The other leaders took their places either side of her. Astolpho sat on her right. Behind each leader two of their personal guards stood. Rameses noted more of Cerro's guards forming up outside the lift and slipping in through the opposite lift. Everybody settled down and an expectant hush fell over the room.

The Supreme Leader cleared her throat. All eyes were upon her.

"Before we begin proceedings there is one more delegate to arrive," and with that she nodded at a guard by the opposite lift. Orders were barked out. The lift opened, the guards parted, and between them marched a group of people. There was a gasp from the room. Moving to take newly placed chairs opposite the Supreme Leader were five Chinese people. Two obvious security people stood behind the three chairs. In the middle chair the second most powerful man in China, Mao-Lee was making himself comfortable. He was flanked by two of China's most renowned scientists. A new table was brought in and connections plugged in. Rameses noted that the Chinese were equipped to send telecommunications out of the room. They could only do this with Cerro's permission.

The room slowly settled down for a second time. Cerro began again.

"Vice-Chairman, we are so glad you could make this meeting." Mao-Lee nodded in reply. "If any of you were in any doubt of how important this meeting is. Then the presence of the Vice-Chairman will convince you." She looked around the room. "Some of you bring information which, you probably think is of the utmost importance. But there are only a few

of us who have been privy to all your reports." She paused. "All of you will learn something new today. New, and frightening."

She let a low murmur reverberate around the chamber, while she sipped some water. The room was quiet again.

"We will start things off with the most serious of news. Professor Lane, if you please."

A man in his early forties rose from the scientists' table. He glanced at the projection desk technician, who nodded his readiness.

"Some of you will remember the great Gamma Ray Burst," he began. "All of you, I'm sure will know of it. The damage caused is still being felt in many ways in a large part of the world." At this point many people looked quickly at the Chinese. They remained impassive. "What many people do not consider about the disaster is the cause of it. When telescopes were directed towards the galactic centre after things had subsided here on Earth. Worrying observations were made. There appeared to be a great turmoil at the galactic centre. The size of this area was many thousands of light years across."

"Many theories have been put forward for the cause of the GGRB. Colliding neutron stars, many supernovae exploding at once, various interactions with the black hole at the heart of our galaxy. I tell you today that it is of little importance what was the cause; but more the continuing aftermath." He paused at this point.

The technician operated the projector. A four-sided holographic screen jumped into life in front of the delegates. It showed, in impressive detail, the same view on each side. It portrayed an image of the galactic centre. The view was large enough to show the extent of the bulge that extended out of the galactic plane. Rameses was transfixed. Looking at Gaia he could see her eyes were shining.

"If you would consider the area marked," the Professor continued. "This was the view a year after the burst hit Earth. Please note the extent of the disturbed area. Here there are

stars being slammed into each other, huge explosions, and vast swirls of gas and dust being churned around. But the whole area is expanding outwards from the centre. It is a maelstrom of tremendous power and destruction. From this came the intense radiation that swept the Earth. Or rather from what caused this." He corrected himself.

"Professor," Cerro broke in. "This event must have happened many years ago?"

"Yes, Madame Leader," he answered. "We estimate thousands of years ago. Perhaps seventy thousand. If we compare this with a recently obtained view of the same area." The projection altered. "Please note how the area of disturbance has spread. Here is where it was. This is now the leading edge." Everyone followed his pointers on the image."

There was a murmuring around the Professor. Rameses noticed one of Mao-Lee's aides leaning closer and whispering in his ear. There was no reaction. Mao-Lee had obviously seen this before. As if in response to this. The Professor called for a view of the entire galaxy. He pointed out the extent of the expansion again. This time the view afforded, allowed people to get a 3-D feel for the effect. It was obvious the disturbance was spreading in all directions. It had reached the edge of the galactic bulge in some areas.

"Now let me show you some pictures taken of areas of the galaxy nearer to us, but in line with this growing disturbance." Gaia leaned forward in her chair. The other scientists made similar moves of interest. "The implications of these images will be understood by some of you. But I will explain them so that everyone appreciates the significance."

For the next twenty minutes the Professor worked his way through many images. Always there was the comparison with the position of stars, star fields, nebulae and dust clouds, before and after. Something was knocking them out of their expected path or position. This effect was getting closer to the Earth's place in the galaxy. He finished with the latest images, only tens of light years from Earth.



"Can you conjecture what is the cause of all this?" one of the American leaders asked. The Professor grimaced slightly.

"There are many arguments. I believe it to be caused by a kind of shock wave that is travelling at speeds close to the speed of light. Very close to the speed of light."

"And what will be the effect of this shock wave when it reaches the Earth, Professor?" Cerro asked in a slow, determined voice.

The room fell completely silent. All eyes turned to the renowned scientist. He fiddled with his files nervously. It seemed like minutes, not seconds, then he replied.

"We have run many scenarios on the biggest hyper computers. Changing the starting variables and computing in all known factors." Rameses thought to himself, 'get on with it!'

"If the shock wave abates markedly then the Earth, and the solar system may survive. Very knocked about and in a different orbit - with all the implications that would have for life to survive. Otherwise the entire solar system will be swept away. Smashed to bits, cast into the Sun. There would be no life left."

"Thank you, Professor," Cerro dismissed him.

"Why are we just finding out about this?" one of the scientists behind Lane cried out. "How have we not heard before?" a tone of panic sounded in his voice. The Supreme Leader's gaze joined others as they looked at the man. Her face had turned to stone. Her fierce blue eyes held the man's attention.

"As you well now, all research is monitored. I felt there was no need to inform the academic community until recent developments changed my mind. Some people have had to be," she paused for effect, "persuaded to my opinion." The comment was not lost on the people in the room. Gaia noticed that the scientists sat by the man tried to edge away from him, even though they were sat down. Cerro made a mental note to have him eliminated.

"We will have a break now," she said aloud. "Quarter of an hour."

The World Council members left the room. Cerro waited for Mao-Lee and his two bodyguards, together they followed on.

## *World Council Meeting - part 2*

During the interval the base officers talked together. On the other side of the room the scientists did the same. Their Chinese counterparts joined them. Black, Dacourt, Gaia and Rameses stayed at the table and talked in quiet tones. The mood was sombre. Gaia confirmed, without being a real expert, what the Professor said. They kept referring to the radio message. It had to be linked with their impending doom. Gaia was convinced of it. Dacourt agreed with her. The men, however, were more sceptical. If these prokaryotes lived between the stars, how could they know? How could they operate telescopes?

The World Council members returned with the Chinese Vice-Chairman and his guards. Everyone took their seats once more. They waited for Cerro to start the session. She surprised them.

"Professor, I neglected to ask you how long we might have?" she looked directly at him.

"It may be as little as ten years. Perhaps as much as thirty years."

"Spoken with typical astrophysical accuracy," Cerro reacted, an almost warm smile underwriting the joke. Everyone relaxed somewhat and waited for the next stage.

"I think it is time for us to consider the radio signal next." She indicated another of the front row scientists. "Professor Williams will you fill us in on this development please."

Gaia had recognised the woman as soon as she had seen her. She had listened to her lecture many times. They had acknowledged each other before the meeting began. The Professor blatantly bemused by Gaia's presence.

"I think it best if we listen to the message first." Immediately the room filled with a meaningless jumble of electronic sounds. "This is the radio message first picked up by listening posts around Jupiter," Williams continued. "It was analysed and converted to these words." The message flashed along the screen in time with the computer voice. The

Professor let it run several times. Finally, the voice stopped, and the full message was left on the screens. Murmuring returned to the room.

Professor Williams began to explain the origins of the message. The Io mission was described, its intended flight plan highlighted. The final direction that it left the solar system shown on the screens. She finished with, "Of the names Tara and Woodend I have no knowledge." A nod to Cerro and she sat back down. The relief of her job done, evident.

"Section Leader Black will now give us details of these people," Cerro said. The man rose to his feet and gave a very detailed account of the circumstances surrounding the Io mission. At the appropriate times photographs of the various people appeared on the screens. Gaia gasped as she saw a picture of Tara for the first time. The body so young and so small. The face and those eyes so much older. When Black finished with the fears of some people at the time about the fate of the child prodigy. The murmurs began again. He sat down. Dacourt gave him an assuring smile.

"Thank you, Section Leader," Cerro cut through the murmurs. Rameses spotted Mao-Lee taking an increasing interest during Black's report. He kept glancing at Gaia. He had noticed, as Rameses had, the physical similarity to Woodend.

"We have in the room," Cerro again, "the granddaughter of Woodend." Astonished murmurs this time. Cerro indicated it was time for Gaia to stand up. She rather reluctantly rose to her feet. She felt the eyes of many people inspecting her. Rameses caught a slight smile on Mao-Lee's face. Yes, he thought, it was nice to be right.

The experience of the previous day, Gaia found, did help. Under the prompting of Cerro and Astolpho she told the meeting about Woodend. His views were treated with more ripples of murmuring from the scientist side. Then when she recounted what had happened to Tara the room erupted into a cacophony of noise: scornful, incredulous, horrified. The Supreme

Leader soon brought the meeting back to order with a loud clap of her hands. Instantly the room returned to hushed silence.

"Gaia, do you believe Woodend's story?" Cerro asked her.

"Yes, I do. What I cannot believe is that Tara is coming back." Gaia continued. "I mean how is she still alive? What does she look like? She can't have grown. She would not fit into the probe." She shook her head.

"And the Prokaryotes, what of them?" Astolpho inquired. "What do they want? What do you think?"

Gaia considered for a moment. She looked at the people beside her. Then she responded in a measured voice.

"I think it has something to do with this galactic catastrophe we have heard about." A murmur. "Woodend was convinced they knew there was life on Earth. They were not interested. They have been in interstellar space from before this system took shape. I believe in some way they are responsible for life on this planet. Or at least related to our beginnings in some way. Perhaps a strand of the same life that did not find its way to the planets. Or chose not to."

More murmuring around the room. Mao-Lee stared intently at her. Cerro considered her gravely. Rameses stared ahead into some distance. He had heard her views before. But now he thought about them more seriously. Could she be correct? Gaia encouraged by the more pensive expressions surrounding her, went on.

"I think the Prokaryotes know about this tide of disaster that will engulf us. Engulf us all. Perhaps they are at risk of extinction. Perhaps they can help. Perhaps they need our help. Now wouldn't that be something!"

Cerro smiled at the young woman. Her hopes and thoughts were somehow encouraging. Little did they realise the prophecy of her words.

"You do not think they are coming to take us over," it was Mao-Lee.

"No, Vice-Chairman. They could have done that at any time in our history."

"Then perhaps they see safety within our system. Something we do not see, perhaps?"

"Perhaps sir."

"Well, it appears that we are going to find out, one way or another," Cerro spoke to everyone. "The final report from Professor Rue," she ordered.

Another of the scientists rose from their table. He began at once. A series of images appeared on the screens. He illustrated the coming of the black cloud. Gave estimates of its size. Confirmed that it was heading for a rendezvous with Mars. Explained that the radio signal came from the cloud itself. Told them of the incredible speed of the approach and that no sensors could penetrate the dark mass. There was some evidence, not yet verified, that the dark cloud was influencing objects as it passed by. A few of Jupiter's' outer moons had changed their orbital paths. A wild report of the giant planet itself being perturbed. Asteroids being sucked into the cloud. No one knew what it was. But now it seemed that from what he had heard this morning. It must be transporting these Prokaryotes in some way. He completed his report and returned to his seat.

All eyes once more sought out the Supreme Leader. She looked around the room at some of the finest brains on the planet. The people who held the power. The best security men and their highly trained officers. There was even the most successful infiltrator currently on active service. Then there was the living relative of the only man ever to have encountered what seemed to be aliens determined to contact Earth. A woman whose hopes inspired her. Though she could not explain why to herself. She knew what had to be done. There was no need for a discussion. Enough discussions had taken place lately. The one persistent fact to emerge was that they did not have enough information to make decisions.

"I have decided that we must make this meeting at Mars." The Council nodded their heads in unison. The others waited for her to continue.

"We do not have enough information on which to base decisions that will affect the future of all humankind. The planet may well be doomed. Humanity may be fated to die with it. There may be a way to survive, perhaps deep underground. If the Earth is not destroyed utterly. But what humans might emerge to find is anyone's guess. Perhaps there is a way for a few remnants of humanity to flee into space and escape the coming death. Although exactly how we could achieve that eludes my technical knowledge."

A few concerned faces nodded their heads at her words.

"A mission will be organised to meet this Tara and the Prokaryotes. It will have to be done quickly and all available resources will be used. The control of this operation will be centred here in WECO. But it will require the cooperation of many bases and installations worldwide, and the moon and on Mars itself. My office will coordinate this and have overall control." She paused and looked towards the base table.

"Gaia, you will go." She let the shock set in. "You will go as my official envoy. The infiltrator will accompany you and look after your security. A member of my staff will join you. As will a representative of the Chinese government." Mao-Lee nodded. "The Councillors will return to their areas and prepare to make the necessary announcements to the people when the time comes. Also, they will consider any options we might have as a species; and for the planet itself. It is a time when all ideas must be put into the melting pot - no matter how implausible. Remember the resources of an entire planet can be called upon." She paused once more.

"Any interference in anyway with official policy will result in instant termination. The general population will know when we deem the time to be right. It could be years from now." A last look around and rising from her chair, "there is a lot of work to be done."

The room rose as one and watched the Councillors and the Chinese delegation leave. Then in groups the rest left, animatedly talking amongst themselves. The base personnel remained. Black was looking thoughtful. Dacourt and the other officers showed excitement, waiting for their leader to give his orders. Rameses remembered his experiences of space. He looked at Gaia.

"Well it seems you are stuck with me for a while longer."

"It is kind of exciting, isn't it?" she exclaimed.

"You could say that." He said dryly. The end of the world and space sickness. Yes, quite exciting!

"Let's get moving," Black was back from his thoughts. "I want a full command meeting in one hour. My office. You two, be there."

Gaia could not help herself. She giggled at Rameses.



### *Preparations for Space.*

Section Leader Black was a clear-thinking man. Cerro knew the abilities of her senior staff, wherever they were stationed in the world. Twice daily briefings were held between her office and Black. All dealings usually carried out through cyberspace. Although her first aide was responsible at her end, she made sure she was present at the daily meetings. If only on the end of her secure comlink. However, it was clear that the Supreme Leader would not keep her distance. She arrived, unannounced, with a much-reduced entourage, so many times at WECO. That officer Dacourt became quite relaxed about it. Relaxed, but not less alert or respectful. Rameses felt that Cerro and Dacourt seemed to be striking up a friendship. As much as it was possible, or safe, to be friendly with the most powerful person in the history of the world. Rameses mused, that Cerro always had a soft spot for her female staff.

Black, his staff, Cerro's office, and other qualified officers around the world did the work. Spacecraft, of all types, were readied. Resources assembled and moved where they were needed. Training was organised. Strict and time dependent deadlines were set. They were met. A week had passed, and Cerro noted to herself that no one had been eliminated, yet, for not completing their task on time. Or to the required standard. She was also pleased with the almost zealous efficiency with which Black's staff performed their functions. Around the globe in the areas where she had control a slow but steady mobilisation was taking place. For the first time in the history of the planet the whole of humankind was working together. Even the Chinese were involved and cooperating. Obviously, the two sides maintained the usual surveillance on each other's activities.

People were working together. True. However very few knew what they were working towards. A level of secrecy was maintained throughout the many disparate arms of the government and industry involved in the grand design. Occasionally someone tried to go public with the knowledge they had acquired. But to go public in these times was not even a

real option. There had been no free media for over a century. People who talked about what was going on simply did not live long. Anyone else had the sense to keep things to just the vaguest of rumours amongst the closest of friends. Things said, never to be talked about again. Never even expected to have a germ of truth in them.

Lunar shuttles were doubled in frequency. The Moon base was fully manned and equipped with enough supplies to last it a year of operation. The current Moon Base Commandant had never seen the place so busy. He had not been told what it was all for. But the Supreme Leader, herself, had spoken to him via live vidcast. She assured him that he would be informed, presently, of the situation. One of her personal aides would soon arrive on the Moon. He and the facilities of his base were to be ready to assist in any way. The number of transports to Mars were increasing and if the Commandant did not know better. The nature of the personnel and cargo en-route suggested a military operation. All the time people had been exploring and working in space. There had never been a need for anything other than cosmetic weaponry. They had never encountered anyone or anything else out here. In the history of the Moon base and the Mars base there had been discontentment in the early days. But this had been nothing more than social adjustment problems. Also, it had to be admitted, exploitation issues. But, apart from the occasional fight, the off-world environments were peaceful. The Commandant could only guess what was afoot. He was wrong on both accounts. It was not the Chinese; or a massive training exercise.

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A hastily arranged crash course in astronaut training proved difficult for Gaia. It helped that Rameses was undergoing the same instruction, mostly. He had resisted initially when Black told him he was required to train. But when it was pointed out to him that some systems had changed, and that ALL the training he had done previously was orbital work. He had not even travelled to the Moon, never mind Mars. He complied. It was the closest Gaia

had seen him come to disobey an order. Until the time came to train underwater in the great tank. Then to her astonishment he refused point blank to do it. Things might have got silly with the trainers. Rameses had a dangerous look about him. Gaia remembered the incident at the old man's house. Word must have spread very quickly. Black, in person, rushed to the tank and defused the situation. Rameses did not do the underwater training. He disappeared for a day.

Gaia successfully completed the underwater training. Little did she know it, but she was impressing the trainers. Everyday Black received reports that commended her abilities and aptitude for learning. At any other time, she would be ideal for the Space Corps. Gaia felt physically and mentally drained. It was difficult, but it was interesting. Like most people who studied the wonders beyond the Earth. She longed to go there. Soon she would be out there. Her body tingled with excitement.

Gaia managed to get the information she wanted from Dacourt. She understood now why Rameses did not want to do the underwater work. When he did not come to the next training session, she worried. But Black assured her he was still in training. She then managed to find out where exactly on the complex Rameses was staying. He knew where she was quartered but she had never been taken to his room. Black obliged this time. Neither Dacourt nor Black were aware of being manipulated by Gaia. She had found that Rameses was still the only person who had any sensibility to her other ability.

When she knocked on his door later that evening, she was feeling nervous. Not at all sure what kind of welcome she would get.

"Oh! It's you." Surprise followed by mild irritation in his voice. He waited for her to say something. But she was determined to say nothing yet. She just stared at him with her new-found confidence propping her up inside.

"You had better come in," he offered.

"Thank you."

His room was no different to the standard base room. It faced the mountains of course.

Gaia sat down.

"I hear you are back in training tomorrow," she said. A grunt.

"Yes, I'll be there." There was petulance in his voice. "EVA procedure. Been there.

Done it."

Gaia stared at him. He was avoiding eye contact. She tried a thought.

"Don't!" he almost shouted at her. "Don't, Gaia," more quietly.

"So, you are afraid of being underwater." She began. "So, what. So, you panicked during your infiltrator training."

He flashed an angry look at her. She was undeterred.

"Are you a superhero? Are you not allowed to have any weaknesses? So, you were put back a year. Big deal!"

He said nothing. But he sat down opposite her.

"Do you know what they think about you here? What they really think about you? Not Black or Dacourt. The real people, the technicians, the servicemen." She paused. "I was told how excited the whole base was when you returned from your last mission."

A hint of a smile on his face.

"They all know about the water thing."

A concerned look now, as he faced her. Eye contact.

"But nobody gives a fuck!"

Surprise. He had not heard her swear before.

"You are a legend in their eyes. They had bets going on whether you would be sent on another infiltrator mission. They don't want you to be sent out again. No one wants to hear that 'Rameses has fallen'."

Contact broken. Was that a glint of moisture in his eye?

"And I. Well, I just could not have handled the training without you by my side."

His eyes fell upon her again.

"I can't think of anyone else I want with me when we get to Mars and meet... and meet them." She flicked her thumb towards the sky.

There was a welling in the eyes now. His and hers.

"Do you want a drink?" he asked quickly and headed to the kitchen.

"Thanks. I'll have a beer please."

He returned with two opened bottles. Gave her one and sat down again. Their eyes had cleared. They took a swig from their bottles.

"It doesn't help much anyway," he said aloud. "All that water training. It is different when you get up there."

"They did admit that."

"Besides they can't train you for what really matters."

She knew what was coming.

"When you get up there you feel sick. Then you are sick. Then you feel sick. Then you are sick. Your stomach feels like it is in your mouth all the time."

She smiled.

"Then when you come back down."

"Yes?" she obliged him.

"When you come back down you can't stand up. You fall over and guess what?"

"What?"

"You feel sick," then together. "Then you are sick."

They laughed. Took another swig each and smiled at each other.

"Fancy dinner?" she asked him.

*Earth to Mars via the Moon.*

The rest of the training passed without further incident; or tantrums. It was rushed, and Gaia was barely equipped for the journey ahead of her. But they were working to a deadline set by the approaching dark cloud. The final briefing took place at WECO early one evening.

Cerro and her chief aide were present. Astolpho also attended, although he contributed little.

Their final instructions still being absorbed, Rameses and Gaia retired early.

The next day they were flown to the Russian launchpad. Here they finally met the Chinese representative, along with Cerro's. Xiang-Xo was male, shorter than Rameses but taller than Gaia. Stocky, muscular build, with very short black hair, Xiang-Xo was friendly and seemed to have a permanent smile on his face. Rameses had studied the information available on the likely Chinese representatives. Xiang-Xo had considerable space flight experience, the usual technical knowledge. Unlike Rameses he had been to the Moon on a goodwill visit. He had been fully briefed and was almost as excited as Gaia.

Surendra, Cerro's agent, was a female member of the Supreme Leader's personal guard. She had also recently completed a crash course to update her limited space experience. There was very little information on Cerro's personal guard available anywhere. It was advisable not to inquire. Rumour said that they were highly trained. Almost to infiltrator standard in intensity and complexity. Surendra was a little taller than Rameses, had short brown hair and the same vivid blue eyes of her Commander. A pretty woman. She was friendly, and she was in charge. Rameses could tell she was no stranger to being in command. Her attitude was 'we have a job to do, let's do it.'

The blast-off and journey to the space station was routine enough. There were weekly liftoffs from the Russian and American launchpads. They were aboard a specially arranged extra flight. At the orbital station they stayed for only a few hours. The asteroid deflector ship 'The Blue Nova' had been prepared for them. It had been refitted in record time. Her



crew, although no wiser to what was going on, were ready to transport them to the Moon base. All the lunar shuttles were busy supplying the base, as if for a siege it seemed to the orbital personnel.

Gaia had not been prepared for the appearance of the crew of 'The Blue Nova'. Even though during her training she had studied the effects of being in space. The emaciated sight of three people who obviously spent a lot of time in space still came as a shock to her. She could not stop a slight gasp escaping her lips. The crew were amused and merely reacted by giving her more advice on how to counteract the loss of muscle tissue, bone and all the other adverse effects of space travel.

The journey to the Moon took under a day - 'The Blue Nova' would not reach high speeds between Earth and the Moon - then transfer to the Moon orbital station - a much smaller version of the Earth orbital - and then a lunar shuttle to the Moon base. On arrival at the base they were met by the base Commandant. After the shortest of introductions Surendra accompanied the Commandant to his office. He was finally to be briefed on the situation. The other three were led to their quarters. They were sharing. Somebody felt this was good practice for them. They would soon be in each other's inescapable company for the journey to Mars. So, they might as well start now.

The brief time spent in space so far had not really been time enough for Gaia to acclimatise. Rameses had been correct. Sickness.

Being sick. Feeling nauseous.

Balance disorder.

Your stomach feeling in your throat. The food floating at the top of your stomach.

The odours.

The claustrophobic living and working rooms.

The taste of the air.

No up or down. Having to remember to push off when trying to move elsewhere.

The exercise routine they were already strictly adhering to. It was a little better on the Moon's surface. At least there was some gravity, if a lot less than Earth's. The size of the base meant that the recycling was better and the whole odour thing was under more control.

The base was in one of those spells where it was in darkness for weeks. The temperature outside was very cold indeed. The good thing for Gaia was the viewing panels were open and a truly tremendous sight of the stars could be had for free. The atmosphere free Moon gave a brilliant show. Rameses had to drag her away the first time she caught sight of the view. Naturally, at other times the Moon base was in permanent sunlight for the same number of weeks. Then it was extremely hot outside and the panels were kept closed.

Gaia felt she would learn to cope with everything in time, even the odours. But the one, quite unsettling thing were the bursts of radiation that seemed to explode on her retina. This radiation came from all angles and passed through the head leaving a flash trace on the retina as it crossed. Gaia just could not get used to them. The radiation shielding on the base helped but it was still happening. Rameses offered no sympathy; it was the Universe in action. There was always something flying about out here. Most of it bad for you, he smiled grimly. Xiang-Xo nodded, his smile still in place.

They spent only one night on the Moon base. It was a pleasant night with the Commandant and his staff. They ate well and swapped stories of near and real disasters in space. Much to Gaia's dismay. Surendra took little part. Xiang-Xo and Rameses, however, joined the base staff in recounting funny and frightening tales. There was a brief discussion of the mission. But Surendra was not keen to talk about it.

They talked about the new spaceship that was waiting to transport them to Mars. After the meeting they were given files and access to the base computer. Then, system by system, they were shown the new spaceship. Gaia got lost along the way. She hoped Rameses and Xiang-

Xo were keeping up. They seemed to be. Concentration etched on their faces. When she gave up trying to keep up, she glanced over at Surendra, who was not paying attention at all. In fact, she was looking directly at Gaia. She smiled at her, understanding. Gaia smiled back and raised a mock beaten eyebrow. Surendra nodded. Gaia realised that she was not beaten by the information overload like her. But that she was already familiar with this spaceship.

The ship was the obvious pride and joy of the Moon base staff. Developed there, tested there, it was the most advanced spaceship ever built. They could not hide their delight with it. A sister ship was being built, as they spoke, in the Moon base workshops. It took all the good things from the asteroid deflector ships and then even more was added. This ship could land and take-off from the Moon, or Mars. But not the Earth, whose stronger gravity it was not designed to cope with. A job for further development. It could dock with the various orbital stations. It had more powerful propulsion systems. Could stay in space longer. More advanced sensors. Weaponry in the form of the most recently developed military lasers. Rameses thought it had what looked like a bomb bay and rocket launching capacity. It was shaped much more like a plane because it was designed to land on atmosphere laden planets; if necessary, it could survive a crash landing on the Earth.

Before they went to their quarters there was one task left to them to perform; naming the ship. The base staff had obviously named it for themselves. But they were to be disappointed. Cerro herself had decided on a name. Surendra confirmed what the base Commandant had earlier been told. The ship was to be called 'The Ray of Hope'. Tomorrow she would take them to a meeting with destiny. Gaia maintained her excitement. She slept little that night.

'The Ray of Hope' took off from a special launchpad dedicated for its own use. It carried a cargo of people and supplies; and one or two other things that Surendra alone knew about. Surendra was the leader. Xiang-Xo was the flight engineer and a member of the Moon base

staff the chief pilot. Rameses had a responsibility for Gaia mainly, but also handled communications. Gaia busied herself learning as much as possible about the ship. She also took it on herself to keep morale at a high level. She helped to smooth over the occasional row that occurred. These usually were between Surendra and Rameses. Gaia thought that Rameses was not used to so many people around when on a mission. More used to operating on his own, he often made decisions without any consultation. Surendra, aware of his reputation, Gaia thought, made sure the chain of command was followed. It was just a sideshow really, mildly amusing to both Gaia, Xiang-Xo and the pilot.

The journey to Mars was completed in record time. 'The Ray of Hope' was performing perfectly. Gaia had forgotten about the odours. However, her dwindling physical appearance was disturbing, despite more exercise than she reckoned she had ever taken in her entire life before. They reached Mars a day before 'The Red Star' was due to arrive. Everything was on time. The schedule set out by Cerro was being kept to, for now. The dark cloud was still moving at a very fast pace. There was no sign of a deceleration. If a slow-down, or change of direction did not happen soon, the mysterious mass would collide with the planet. The radio signal had stopped a week previously. Almost as if they knew that the humans would be waiting for them at the rendezvous.

As they made the first orbit of Mars Gaia and Rameses looked out of the windows. They were not needed. The pilot was steering the ship towards a docking with Aries, Surendra and Xiang-Xo assisting with the controls. A storm was developing in the southern hemisphere of the red planet, close to the south pole. They passed over the giant volcanoes, the size of England. As they crossed the northern hemisphere the relative smoothness was put into stark contrast by the fifty-kilometre-wide Einstein's crater. This was the sight of the most recent asteroid hit in the inner solar system. It had caused the destruction of the first permanent Mars base, and the death of all the personnel. More importantly it had provided the impetus

for the development of the asteroid deflectors within the Space Corps. If it had hit Earth, then the Prokaryotes would not have had anyone to send a message to. But they would have known this.

Once the docking procedure was complete, Surendra revealed the options available to them. They could transfer to the Aries orbital station or take a shuttle to the Mars base below. The station was smaller than Earth's. But it offered some relative comfort and company, compared to the 'The Ray of Hope'. Surendra was going to stay at the station. Xiang-Xo said he would join her. The pilot would have to move the ship back into orbit once 'The Red Star' arrived. There was not enough room for the three ships to be docked with the station. Gaia and Rameses decided to take the shuttle to the surface. They had a day before 'The Red Star' was due and probably at least three days before the dark cloud arrived. Having come this far it would be a shame not to see Mars for themselves. They could compare the base with the Moon base, and of course the chance to experience some gravity again was a great attraction.

The other ship in dock was 'The Blue Nova'. After dropping off her passengers she had travelled on to Mars under full propulsion. Her crew briefly celebrated the quickest trip to Mars recorded; knowing that 'The Ray of Hope' was just behind them and expected to set the new mark. They were more interested in seeing the latest spaceship on her first mission.

As Rameses and Gaia dropped to the Mars base in the shuttle, Surendra began delayed communications with Cerro on Earth. Xiang-Xo was delighted to be made welcome by the station crew and determined to stay close to Surendra. The storm was now affecting a third of the planet. But the Martian shuttle was not bothered by it. Although the winds were moving at high speeds, they lacked the punch of their terrestrial equivalents. The much thinner carbon dioxide atmosphere being responsible. The main problem with the storm was the dust being kicked up. It would stay in the atmosphere for a while. However, coping with

Martian dust was one of the first difficulties overcome by the original Martian pioneers. The shuttle landed and after making their way through the various electrostatic dust removers and other environment controls, they were welcomed to the Mars base. Gaia noted that Mars smelt different.

*The meeting with Tara and the Prokaryotes.*

As with the orbital station, Mars base was smaller than Moon base. A guided tour lasted a few hours. It had the feel of being a riskier place. A place more on the edge. The security guards more visible. But there was also more of a bustle about the place. Gaia, and Rameses, noticed the presence of more women. A higher woman to man ratio than the Moon. This even though Mars was almost entirely given over to mining and engineering work. It had only a few tourist and recreational facilities. On the Moon activities were spread out around the lunar surface. On Mars, although the industrial and agricultural concerns were spread around the Martian surface, the main facilities were at the main base.

After the tour they were treated to some refreshments at the base bar. Until then they had been escorted by the base second in command. He knew about the advancing dark cloud. Obviously knew of the arrival of the various spaceships and the recent restocking of the base and the station. It was during their drinks together that the order came for him to report to the base Commander. Gaia and Rameses assured him that now he would get his answers.

Then the two of them disobeyed a direct order for the first time on the mission. Surendra had instructed them to stay on the base and wait for the order to return to the station. They were not to go exploring. Nothing was to happen to Gaia before the meeting with Tara and the Prokaryotes. But the glimpses of Mars from orbit had interested the both of them. They found a Mars shuttle pilot and Gaia 'persuaded' him to take them on a quick fly around the planet.

The tour was fast. Mostly flown at about a thousand metres above ground level. Occasionally the pilot soared higher to give them a better feel for the contours; for example, when they overflowed the great volcano Olympus Mons. He also dropped into the great gash in the ground that was the Valles Marineris. It did dwarf anything seen on Earth. Far deeper

and wider than the Grand Canyon. They flew over the poles and the great impact basins. They also gently buzzed various working projects. Luckily nobody seemed to care about their trip at first. The pilot was due to take a shuttle for a flying practice.

The Mars base was situated on the Arabia Terra, a low and comparatively flat part of the surface. They were making their approach to it when Rameses noticed a small bump in the side of one of the smaller crater's walls. They had dropped to only a couple of hundred metres in altitude and he could clearly make out the sign of human habitation.

"What's that?" he indicated to the pilot. Gaia followed his outstretched arm and saw the entrance-like structure in the crater wall. The pilot hovered above the crater.

"That's Captain Severn's place," he said. There was no tone of envy in his voice, rather a slightly incredulous lilt. "It's fully fitted out. Everything you could need to survive on the surface of Mars. The main living quarters are set further inside the crater walls." He moved the shuttle on again.

"It cost a fortune to build. But when you are one of the most experienced space pilots and the Captain of an asteroid deflector..." His voice trailed off and he shrugged his shoulders.

"Did the authorities build it for him, then?" Rameses asked.

"Oh, no!" the pilot shook his head roughly. "No, they didn't. When you have been around as long as Severn you can have virtually anything you want. You know they say he has not set foot on Earth for years." He looked at them gravely. "Some say it is already too late for him." Rameses nodded, but Gaia looked confused.

"In fact," the pilot had set the computer to land the shuttle. He turned to face them properly. "In fact, the Commander, and the rest of us, think he's a bit mad. Why would you want to stay out here when there is plenty of room on the base? Hardly anyone has been inside it." He checked a few controls. "You know he once spent an entire fortnight inside



there during a really heavy storm. He must have some fancy oxygen supplies amongst all the other stuff."

As they came out of the shuttle bay the second in command was waiting for them. He was not happy. Although relieved to see them unharmed in any way. He berated the shuttle pilot for taking them with him. It took a considerable effort from Gaia and Rameses to placate the man and protect the pilot from a charge. It was too late to feel guilt.

They stayed the night, and again endured a rather meaningless discussion with staff who had just been informed of the situation. In the morning they were pleased that the same shuttle pilot transported them back to Aries. They met up with Xiang-Xo in the command centre. His smile unabated. They met the crew of 'The Blue Nova' again and were introduced to SFP and Pleiades. Gaia thought what a striking pair they made, and what a beautiful name he had. They listened as the asteroid deflector crews compared notes on their most recent missions. They followed, with them, the progress of their work on the station's extreme range scanners. Finally, they tried to fill in the gaps left in Surendra's briefing from earlier that morning. They all stared out of the station viewing panel at the vast, ominous dark cloud. It blocked out half the available view. Impenetrable.

Then Surendra entered with Captain Severn. Introductions. They shook hands as they bobbed about at the windows. Gaia had been struck by how thin the crews were. These were people who spent a lot of time in space. But Captain Severn seemed to be the worst. His head appeared huge upon his space deprived shoulders and body. The face drawn and tight like he had spent all his life on sunny beaches. But any feelings of sorrow she might have had were immediately banished by his obvious, but slightly underplayed gusto. His eyes were shining. There was an air of expectancy about him.

It contrasted with the air of reserved calm that Surendra was trying to exude. But she could not hide the excitement in her eyes. The two of them infected the others and all their

thoughts focused on the imminent meeting. Surendra revealed to Rameses and Gaia that the dark cloud had come to an almost immediate stop at about a hundred thousand kilometres away. There had been no apparent sign of any deceleration. No apparent effect on the structure of the cloud, despite the massive forces involved in stopping it. A new message had been received:

OPEN LOADING BAY DOOR FACING US.

THE PROBE WILL ENTER.

ONCE INSIDE CLOSE DOORS AND REPRESSURISE.

WE WILL MEET THERE.

TARA.

"The probe is on its way," Surendra informed them. "Sensors estimate arrival in thirty minutes. We can actually see the probe for the first time, even though it is surrounded by some of the dark cloud." She paused for breath. They smiled at her. She gave them one back. "The loading bay is being prepared now. It will be equipped to transmit everything that happens, via the communication satellites, direct to the Supreme Leader and the World Council on Earth. Of course, the time delay will operate but they will see it almost live."

At that moment technicians came in and began setting up monitors for viewing the loading bay. Surendra ignored them and continued.

"The following people, only, will be in the loading bay to meet... ah...our visitors. Myself, Rameses, Gaia, Xiang-Xo and Captain Severn. Everybody else can watch from here. Mars base will also be able to view proceedings."

A general murmur spread. The room was filling with all the station staff. Surendra led them to the loading bay. As they pulled themselves one-way, excited station crew expertly moved in the opposite direction. There was more than one look of envy; but also, expressions of concern and trepidation. Gaia felt excitement, but now that it was about to

come to it, her stomach tightened. She fought back a ripple of nausea. She had felt her gift get stronger when they arrived at Mars. Now as they moved towards the loading bay it seemed to grow stronger again. She could see the image of the approaching probe. She could feel the presence of what must be Tara and the Prokaryotes. Around her the feelings of her companions were transparent. She could not understand Chinese, but Xiang-Xo's excitement was evident. So too was Rameses and Severn's emotions. A sense of the need to protect emanated from Rameses. But Surendra's thoughts were the most revealing. Excitement, duty, protection, orders, alternatives. Gaia was shocked for an instant. But then a feeling of calm descended upon her. There was nothing to worry about. The probe had entered the loading bay.

"Everything OK?" Rameses asked her, a curious look on his face.

"Yes," she smiled. "No worries. It's going to be alright."

"Yes," he agreed. "I feel it too."

They waited outside the airlock to the docking bay. A description of what was happening the other side came from the speakers set in the walls.

"Probe has manoeuvred itself inside the docking bay. Some of the dark cloud surrounds it still. No obvious propulsion system apparent. It has settled on the ...whoa! What the fuck! Sorry sir!" All over the ship the people suddenly experienced gravity. They were all dragged down to what could now be called the floor. Everybody fell with the force of about Mars' gravity. Curses and amazement came from the speakers to match those of the party outside the airlock.

"Probe settled on the floor. Loading bay doors closed. Re-pressurisation beginning."

Then after a few minutes. "Re-pressurisation complete. Airlock door opened."

Surendra walked in a little shakily. The others behind with Severn struggling to cope with the sudden force of gravity on him. He staggered forward with Xiang-Xo's help. But

eventually just sat down. The probe was five metres in front of them. It did not look like it had been beyond the solar system and back. There were a few marks of some kind. But otherwise it appeared ready to set off. Underneath it was a layer of utter darkness. Nothing could be seen through it. It was not clear if the probe was floating on this tiny dark cloud or laying in a pool of it.

They waited. Surendra talked into her comlink. Then without warning a panel on the probe slid onto the floor with a loud metallic ring. The probe began to open up, slowly. Rameses realised it had been adapted to do this. As the two petals of metal unfurled the inside was revealed to them and the cameras. A gasp could be heard from the speakers. Everyone in the docking bay stared in astonishment. The smile left Xiang-Xo's face. There, with no room to spare, was the girl. Tara. She was motionless. She seemed to be part of the probe. They could not see where her naked body ended, and the probe began. She was impossibly young and small. She had no hair at all, but otherwise looked exactly like her photographs. There had been no deterioration. No growth. There was no change. She is completely unchanged, Gaia thought. After all these years. All this time. No hair. That was it. But as she scanned the tiny child's form again, she picked up a slight sheen to her skin. A barely detectable silvery metal glisten caught by the lights.

Tara's eyes were slowly adapting to the lights. The flickering of her eyelids the only physical movement her body produced. Then her eyes opened, and she looked about her. As much as her fixed position as part of the probe would allow. She took in the loading bay and the cameras and speakers. Then one by one she gazed at the people before her.

"Welcome," Surendra spoke, hesitantly. Then with a steadier voice, "Welcome to space station Aries. Welcome on behalf of the Supreme Leader and the World Council." Then almost as an afterthought, "Welcome from the people of Earth."

The child said nothing but slowly looked them all up and down. Later they would all report that it felt like an appraisal. A test for danger, friendship, openness, a check on intentions. The child gazed at Gaia and slowly a smile formed on the infant features. Gaia only told Rameses the whole message she picked up from Tara; mind to mind. Gaia was recognised and her enhancements, which had been sensed previously, strengthened. Gaia later told Rameses it felt like a tightening behind the eyes. Then a wave of light-headedness swept over her and was gone. She did not feel any different. Not at once.

"It is so long since my eyes were open; let alone so close to such a bright light." The child spoke, but it was no child's voice. It was the voice of a mature woman. Older by far than the physical form from which it came. It had that calm and slow sound that said self-confidence. A slight mechanical nature to the tone. Rameses remembered how in the files she had been described as a true child prodigy. How her, really it was freakish, development and manner had upset many people. He could see it as she spoke more.

"So long, too, since I needed to speak to anyone. I hope you can understand me?" they nodded. "Sorry if the sudden gravity was a shock but I felt it would be more comfortable for you."

"How did you do it?" it was Xiang-Xo. The smile still absent. A burning interest.

"Put simply, for now, dark matter," Tara replied. Much of the dark cloud that we have travelled in is made of dark matter. Positioned in the right places it can simulate the effect of gravity on this station."

"So just this small amount," Severn uttered from the floor, pointing to the dark layer surrounding the probe. "Is enough?"

"This and other parts around the station." Tara answered. Suddenly a thought occurred to Xiang-Xo.

"So, what effect will that vast cloud out there have on things?" he asked.

"Good question," she smiled. Rameses felt it was a slightly patronising smile. "To some extent the dark matter can be, for want of a better expression, turned off and on. At this moment it is having a slight effect on the planet's orbit. And of course, everything in orbit about it. But in the scheme of things this is not a problem."

She sensed that the female leader of this group was still very wary. She was still expecting trouble of some kind. She constantly whispered into her comlink.

"We see that this lady is a descendant of our old ally Woodend." She began talking to Surendra. "We also realise it was unrealistic to expect his survival after so long. Time, and decay, are not problems for us. You are the leader and spokesperson, please introduce us to your company."

Surendra obliged. Tara acknowledged each of them. All of them felt that she knew a lot about them already. Whether Tara had accessed Gaia's memories or merely looked into their minds was not clear to Gaia.

"Your grandfather was a great help to us when we crashed onto your planet." Tara said to Gaia. "He had a great knowledge and through him we were able to learn much about Earth and humans. We are glad he lived a good life after we left." Then looking at Surendra again, "We will have to update ourselves on your progress. A suitable information access machine must be made available to us. Now let us get down to business." At this they all sat down. They were all now level with Tara's position, eye to eye.

"A great catastrophe is coming. It started at the galactic core. It will reach this area of the galaxy within your lifetimes. Earlier at current estimates. We are aware that you know of this impending doom. It is beyond your present capabilities as a civilisation to escape your destruction. You may make plans, but they will be in vain." She paused.

"Do you know what caused this?" Surendra asked.

"It does not matter," Tara replied. "Knowing what caused it will not help you escape. It is not the first time since the galaxy formed that this has happened. Nor is it likely to be the last."

"Did you survive the last one?" Gaia asked. She knew the answer almost before it was given.

"We were not in this part of the galaxy then. We came after. Some of our kind believe we can survive, and they have stayed out there between the stars. But the rest of us think that the only sure way to survive is to get out of the way. We could do this on our own, we think. But if we join with you our chances would improve." Tara glanced from one to another of them and into the cameras. She had felt a slight shudder in some of them at the word 'join'.

"Understand this, we can help save enough of humanity and what else you want to take with you from your home world, to enable you to survive elsewhere in the galaxy." Tara waited for the significance of her words to sink in.

"Many of your people will need to have one of us within you. This will be necessary for the work to be completed in time. Certain developments will have to be made."

"How do you propose to achieve this?" Surendra questioned.

"Not only is there dark matter in the Universe, as you have long suspected. But also, there is an energy that space itself has. You have ideas about it. Negative gravity is one, we believe. But you do not understand it, or how to manipulate it. We do.

"We have brought enough dark matter into your system, and there is more available, to propel ships away from this threat. And it can be done in time with the cooperation of your kind and the entire resources of your planet, and other worlds like the one below us. There are many details that need to be worked out. Together, your scientists and some of us will, make it happen.

"But where can we go?" Surendra again.

"The precise destination is one of those things that will have to be determined and agreed over time. But the general direction needs to be out of the galactic plane. Above, or below. Out to the very edge of the galaxy away from the danger. It will pass, waning in its power, harmlessly below or above. We may even decide to travel to one of the globular clusters that orbit the galaxy. We know they are certainly far enough away from the danger."

"But it would be an engineering problem on a scale never seen before," Xiang-Xo said in amazement at the thoughts he was having.

"Or ever would be seen again," Tara retorted. "We anticipate a lot of construction happening in space around the planets: Mars and Earth; also, the Moon. These ships would be moved, nearer the time, to the Earth. They would then be filled with what will be the remnants of the life of Earth.

'But also, great ships will have to be built on the surface of the Earth. They will be many kilometres wide and reach high into your skies. When the time comes, they will be launched using the energy of dark matter. The surface will be devastated in their wake. The planet's orbit will change. Once beyond this system we will use the inherent energy of space itself to propel the vast armada of ships carrying the survivors of the Earth.

'Even travelling at speeds, you can only dream of at present, it will take some years to reach our destination. The Prokaryotes will help humanity and the creatures that will need to go with you. We can put you into stasis. You can wait, unchanging, until we arrive at a new home prepared for you.

'Some difficult decisions will have to be made in the future.

Who will be taken?

Who will be left behind to die?

What other lifeforms will accompany you?

What records to take with you? How will you remember your original home?



What resources will you need?

Remember everything you use now can be found in space. You will need processing ships. The raw materials are out there waiting for you. Better to make what you need as you go along, rather than try to overload yourself at the beginning."

Tara looked around again. "There is much to do. But there is time. We await your decision. Do you want salvation? Or will you let galactic doom swamp and extinguish you?"

"There is a time delay on our communications." Surendra responded. "I am authorised only to wait for the response of my leader."

"We understand."

During the many minutes that followed they all thought of questions they wanted to ask. As Tara spoke, they all were able to see the vision of the future being described. As they waited, the hope shared among them, and aboard the station, was that Cerro would agree. Some doubts about an obviously symbiotic relationship with this lifeform were eased by the appearance of the child. Besides, the choice was life for some or death for all.

"I shall answer all your questions as well as I can later." This time the voice came from the child and not the Prokaryotes inside her. They have decided already not to enter any human without their permission." As she said this Gaia thought she detected a different feeling from the child. She still emitted hope and confidence. But there was a tinge of almost sadness too.

Eventually Surendra received the acceptance of the Supreme Leader of the Prokaryotes' offer.

"On behalf of humanity I am authorised to accept your offer."

Tara smiled. Everyone relaxed audibly.

"You must come to Earth as soon as possible," Surendra finally stated.

"Yes. It will be interesting to see your world once more."

*Preparations. Symbiosis.*

The dark matter stayed in position around Aries. The station crew revelled in the unnatural gravity. Tara and the probe remained in the loading bay. She informed them that she was in the process of being detached from the probe. It would take a little while. The dark cloud moved closer to the station increasing its gravity once more. The presence of gravity was not without its problems. Aries had been designed with no regard for up or down. Some lockers and controls were now awkward to get at. But the crew persevered. They looked forward to a better physical condition. Some of the dark cloud broke off and moved to a position where it could alter the orbit of Mars. The Prokaryotes had decided that by moving the orbit of Mars slowly, but surely, closer to the Sun. The average surface temperature of the planet would rise, making working conditions more tolerable. In the years to come Mars would be ripped open to provide raw materials for the great project.

In the hours immediately following the first meeting with Tara, Surendra was in constant contact with Cerro and the World Council. Similarly, Xiang-Xo communicated with his leaders in China. Rameses, Gaia and Severn kept a vigil with Tara in the loading bay. But it was not an exercise in caution, more a pursuit of knowledge. Tara answered their questions. She told how the Prokaryotes kept her alive within the probe. How her physical state could be preserved. They had adapted her to survive even in space itself. Airless and so very cold. They had not decided whether to allow her natural growth to resume in the years ahead. She told them of her existence in the vast interstellar molecular clouds where the Prokaryotes lived. How they could sustain themselves from the radiation that pervaded all space. She told them that they were an old lifeform. But not the oldest, not by a long way. They had been placed near the solar system as gravitational collapse began the formation of it. If they knew who or what had done this, then the information was not available to Tara. It was not long before the humans could make out when the voice answering them was more the

prodigy Tara, or the Prokaryotes. The Prokaryotes told them in more detail of the plans that would be put to the World Leaders. Particularly of the need to join many humans with Prokaryote members. The contact between them was now of a good enough quality that Rameses and Severn knew who they wanted first. They were comfortable with the thought.

Surendra returned from her briefing with Cerro. She was walking much more easily.

"The sensible thing to do," she began, "is to take Tara and the Prokaryotes aboard 'The Ray of Hope' and return straight to Earth."

Tara nodded. Her head had been freed from contact with the probe.

"But it would be difficult to take the probe as well."

"Not a problem," Tara responded. "In one hour, I will be completely free of the probe."

"Good. That is one problem taken care of." She now considered Rameses, Severn and Gaia. Would they or wouldn't they, she thought.

"Cerro wants some of our people joined with the Prokaryotes as soon as possible. We must see what happens to them, if anything at all. After all we have only the experience of your grandfather to call on, Gaia. On the trip to Earth these people will have to be monitored. We are cautious creatures, Tara."

"We know this."

"So, to start with..." she did not have chance to finish.

"You want some volunteers," Gaia interrupted.

"Well, not exactly," Surendra said uneasily. "It is more an order. The three of you are ordered to be the first of the human-Prokaryote combinations."

"We were going to volunteer anyway," Gaia spoke for all of them. The men nodded their agreement.

"I shall not be taking on a Prokaryote." Surendra relaxed more now. "I will monitor Rameses and Gaia on the journey home. You Severn will be monitored by station and Mars

personnel." She paused, no comment from any of them. Her orders included the use of deadly force, if any threat to Earth occurred. She must be prepared to kill them.

"Will any of the dark cloud be accompanying us?" she asked Tara.

"Yes."

"Are the rest of the Prokaryotes within the cloud?"

"Most of them. But not all of them. Some will stay here. Others will go to the Moon. Some are yet to arrive in the inner system. They will take up position between the orbits of Mars and Earth eventually."

"I see," Surendra was thoughtful. "When we travel to Earth will the dark cloud surround the ship, as happened with the probe?"

"Do you want gravity?" Tara asked. "Would you like to feel the power of the dark matter? We can get you to Earth much quicker than your propulsion systems will allow."

"Well, yes, to both questions." Surendra seemed pleased. "Proof of the feasibility of your dark matter will go a long way to ease doubts at home."

Gaia could see through Surendra. If she thought, she could harm them in any way once they were joined. Then she, and Cerro, had obviously not understood the changes that had occurred to Woodend. The Prokaryotes, through their long association with Tara, could now enhance them to a greater degree than they achieved with the old man. She did not have a Prokaryote in her, yet, even so Surendra's thoughts were clear. Once they were joined, there would be no turning back. Good as she no doubt was. Surendra could not hope to defeat an infiltrator with a Prokaryote looking after him. The option of destroying 'The Ray of Hope' with the nuclear weapons she carried, hidden. Thinking that the explosion would destroy the accompanying Prokaryotes also. Well even if they could detonate the weapons, which would never happen, the dark matter cloud would merely absorb the energy of the blast. The

Prokaryotes would use whatever energies available for their own needs and the rest would be re-emitted into space.

"When you are ready, we will transfer to 'The Ray of Hope'. I shall stay to watch the joining and then report to Cerro and make the arrangements." With that she stepped away from them. Moving nearer to the airlock. Gaia sensed her trepidation.

Tara smiled at Gaia, they agreed about Surendra.

"It is fitting that the descendent of Woodend be the first. Then your man Rameses. Then the Captain." The significance of her words was lost on Gaia and Rameses at that moment.

Gaia approached Tara. The child used her finger to somehow cut her palm and Gaia's palm. Blood showed. Then they clenched hands and their blood mingled. The Prokaryotes knew the best entry point was through the bloodstream. They could get to the control centres of the human much quicker that way. Any method of entry inside the body would do. But it took longer to get to the important points. Gaia withdrew. Rameses and then Severn followed suit.

Surendra watched them carefully. The cameras, which had never stopped recording, captured the event for the observers on Earth. Gaia more aware than the other two of what would happen, watched the cut on her palm close and disappear. She had expected it. The others were pleasantly surprised. Then the Prokaryotes introduced themselves to their hosts. They assured them of their protection and of their control. It was made clear to them of the limited extent of their freedom to act independently. But the benefits of their symbiosis were also outlined. They were there now. They could not be removed. Always a presence in the mind with the ability to control every single process in the body: biological, chemical and electromechanical.

We will survive. Prokaryotes and humans. Voices in their heads. The hosts realised that they could communicate with each other through the Prokaryotes. They shared thoughts and

smiled acknowledgements at each other. The looks they gave Surendra did not betray their knowledge of her thoughts and orders. They merely beamed assurance and security to her mind. She, unknowingly, responded to the will of four active Prokaryotes.

"I see everything is fine. I will go and organise things."

"I must return to Mars." Severn said out loud. "Mine wants to see and experience the planet. I'll take the next shuttle." He left. The change in his gait marked.

"Friends, I am ready to leave the probe." They turned to Tara. She eased herself off the metal plate that had supported her human frame for so long. Naked, she lowered herself to the floor. They moved to help her, but she waved them away. Slowly, very slowly, a body that had lain dormant for so long began to function again. She held her hands out to them. They clutched at one another.

"You know," a child's voice, surprisingly, cracking, "mother did not want to put me in there." A single tear slid from one eye. "They made her do it."

Gaia ached at the pang of humanity suddenly exposed in Tara.

"I know." She responded and hugged the young child to her chest. Rameses put an arm round them both. The Prokaryotes did not interfere. It was their way of showing them that the humanity of the hosts would not be completely submerged.

The long-term strategy of the Prokaryotes was indeed to ensure the survival of humans. This would be achieved even if humans had to be forcibly joined in the process. The completion of the task would be achieved in the next ten years. Then the journey to escape would begin. A new world would be found for the humans. Those who no longer wished to be joined in partnership would be allowed to be free of their Prokaryotes. But the Prokaryotes expected many to not want to break the relationship. They would see the opportunities that the symbiosis offered. The comparative immunity to danger. The increased lifetime. Only some form of violent death to fear; like a spaceship blowing up or

being fried beyond help by a laser. True, some of their own kind would return to life between the stars. Many had no wish to join with any other lifeform. But the existence of a Prokaryote-human combination would offer an alternative. Some Prokaryotes looked forward to being able to explore the galaxy other than inside blocks of raw matter. But with the combination of Prokaryote-human senses, instead of waiting for the galaxy to come to them, as they had done for countless time. They would go to see the galaxy. But first the saving of the humans from total destruction.

*Severn on Mars. Return to Earth.*

This is going to be bloody brilliant! Captain Severn thought to himself. Not to the thing that was part of him. He had instantly warmed to the prospects placed before him in his mind. The chance to live longer. The chance to be involved in the salvation of humanity. But more than that. The chance to go beyond the solar system. To explore. To see what was out there. His Prokaryote had given him tantalising glimpses of the wonders they could see. But also left him in no doubt that there was more than the thing even knew about. It was just as interested and excited in the future. Only ten years or so to get preparations ready. Not long to wait, and plenty to keep them occupied.

The shuttle crew knew Captain Severn well. They watched him all the way down to Mars base. They had been on Aries and they had seen what happened in the loading bay. They realised what Severn had done. But he appeared the same as normal. Smiling, joking and looking forward to a stay on Mars base, and of course some time at his bolt hole. The usual colourful language that made people uneasy; those who were not used to him. He assured them he was alright. Felt great. You must try it when you get the chance.

But he did not tell them that they would not get the option. The Prokaryotes had lied. Some humans would be joined as a matter of course. The important ones. People who had crucial roles to play in the grand design. Wherever they were. Everyone off-world was deemed important. Everybody on Mars and the Moon would join with the Prokaryotes, as would the orbital station personnel. Before Severn had boarded the shuttle, he had introduced Prokaryotes to the water recycling system of Aries. He would do the same, when the opportunity presented itself, to the water supply of Mars. They could monitor him all they liked, as the shuttle crew were doing, but they did not understand how the Prokaryotes functioned. They would soon!



The Prokaryotes fully intended to relinquish their hold on these people once the safety and re-establishment of humanity had been achieved. However, they did not think many of the space workers would go back to mundane human life. This cohort of humans was expected to produce many willing and lasting converts to the Prokaryote-human symbiosis.

On arrival at the base Severn was summoned to the Commander's office. The base's Chief Medical Officer examined him. They questioned him at length about the changes that were happening to him. The base personnel had marvelled at how well he was walking on the planet surface. How he seemed to be healthier. That there was more of him. People had playfully felt his biceps on his way to the office. But it was more illusion than reality. The Prokaryote had stopped the body losses and in a short time, it would start to restore some of these.

Given the all clear and a warning that he would be observed until orders from Earth changed, Severn went to his quarters on the base. There the simple act of relieving himself began the contamination. It would not take long. The Prokaryote wanted to see Mars for itself; well through Severn's eyes. Its job was to start the surveying of Mars and to learn all that the humans knew about the planet. It would begin to formulate plans for the wrenching of its riches to the cause.

Severn went to the landing bay and accompanied by a security officer took a shuttle for a flight around the planet. He notified Mars control that he would be spending some time at his 'home' at the end of his flight. On board the shuttle Severn and his guard sat strapped in their seats side by side. Once off the ground Severn sneezed twice, suddenly. He apologised profusely to the guard who was unmoved and wiped at his face with a tissue. The Prokaryotes entered through the nose. They could survive for a while outside a host; but on planets like Earth where the atmosphere protected from the radiation of space, they needed to get inside something quickly. Once there, whether it was living or inert, they could

manipulate chemistry and energy to live. Mars was open to radiation more and they could survive longer. However once some of them had been released by Severn's sneeze, they soon found their way into the nasal membranes and into the bloodstream.

As Severn banked the shuttle and set a course for the south pole, he was not alone. He smiled at the guard. It was as if he smiled at himself. Mars control kept them on their screens throughout the flight. Eventually the shuttle dropped slowly into the crater. Severn and the guard put their surface suits on and prepared to leave the shuttle. As they had achieved with Tara, eventually, the Prokaryotes could adapt the humans physically. They could make the need for breathing redundant. There were other ways to release or produce the energy for life. But it had been decided that the ability to breath an atmosphere would be maintained. Only the hosts who would be a permanent home to the Prokaryotes would be adapted in this way. The process was beginning inside Severn.

On leaving the shuttle it was only a short walk to the crater wall. About forty metres above them a small platform jutted out from the wall. Severn operated the jetpack and rose up to the platform. He landed and entered the outer hatch. The guard followed immediately after him. There were three hatches to get through. Each one with a purpose: to remove dust; remove static charge build-up; to leave surface suits in. Finally, they emerged into the living rooms. They were now thirty metres inside the crater wall.

The guard, thinking for himself, could see that the stories about Severn's crater home were true. It did not lack for anything. He had a water and air supply fed by great tanks and many cylinders. These were placed around the living space, cleverly incorporated into the walls. The walls were the actual rock of the crater. Solar panels set all around the crater ensured power wherever the Sun was in the Martian sky. But there were also other power sources including the latest fuel cells. Comlinks led to the surface and picked up all signals in the Mars vicinity; Severn could even contact Earth and the Moon from here. Panoramic views of

the surface area were available and the ability to focus on any objects of interest. There was a direct link to Mars control: audio and visual. They reported in. The supply of recreational machines and material easily matched what Mars base had to offer. The guard and Severn chose something to eat from the large food stocks. The Prokaryotes were communing. Severn and the guard said little to each other.

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On board 'The Ray of Hope' Tara, Gaia and Rameses were under constant surveillance. Surendra, the pilot and Xiang-Xo took turns at manning the observation panels. Every move of the Prokaryote hosts was monitored and recorded with all the data relayed to Earth in real time. Xiang-Xo had been ordered by his leaders not to be joined until more information had been obtained. Certainly not until they had returned to Earth. However, from his conversations with the hosts and from his observations he was beginning to wish he had joined. He communicated constantly with his superiors. Surendra and he had a comlink which was permanently switched on. They had both been ordered to leave it so, for the duration of the journey. If anything happened to them, then the watchers on Earth would know immediately. Well, immediately the signal reached Earth.

Gaia and Rameses spent the time quizzing Tara more about the nature of the Prokaryotes. They were able to receive answers from their own Prokaryotes, but somehow it meant more when it came from Tara. (The Prokaryotes, although not fully understanding, played along). The only sure thing they knew was that the information on the Prokaryotes was not complete. They were keeping many things from their hosts. It was clear though that all the Prokaryotes

were linked together in some way. The multiplicity of their cell-like nature allowed them to spread out, for example, when some of Severn's spread to the guard.

Were, then, their Prokaryotes similarly related to Tara's?

Not in this case. There are three separate Prokaryotes here.

So, a host could carry more than one?

Yes, many more.

Is a Prokaryote just one, or is it a collection, of the smallest parts?

Both.

Helpful. Where did you come from originally?

It is not known exactly.

What did you come from?

We have always been like this. You were like us once.

What's the meaning of life?

We know of no meaning. But existence is important.

That was a joke.

We see.

Is there a God?

Is this another joke?

Yes and no.

There have been other lifeforms before us.

Why are you doing this? You can survive on your own?

It went on like this for some time. But the humans thought they could perceive certain facts. The Prokaryotes believed that some older intelligence was responsible for their existence and had placed them in the galaxy. They were also responsible for the development of life on Earth. The Prokaryotes were first. They had a custodial feeling for the life on

Earth, it appeared. They admitted to the benefits that joining with humans would bring them. The only other truly sentient life in this area of space. Who knew what developments lay ahead for the humans? In combination, the Prokaryotes could walk on planet surfaces that presently proved dangerous. Humans could now join them in exploring the galaxy, and perhaps search for the earlier intelligences. They would use humanity. There was no doubt about this. Although they could not, or would not, say exactly what they knew about it, but it was obvious that humanity had not finished developing yet. They would now be part of it.

Encased in a dark cloud of its own 'The Ray of Hope' was propelled at fantastic speed to Earth, accompanied all the way by a greater impenetrable cloud. The ship and the dark cloud were tracked by Earth's sensors and Cerro made ready to receive Tara. Deep down she had misgivings about the Prokaryotes and this creature Tara. The girl was even more freakish than the reports made out. Could she really accept this representative of an alien life? Well, none of the best scientists on Earth could come up with any plan that could assure the survival of at least part of humanity, that these things say they can. She had to meet them. Ten years, or so, and they could escape. But what would be the real price?

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Surendra was ordered to bring 'The Ray of Hope' into orbit; but not to dock with the orbital station. After a few orbits the command came to land the ship at the WECO. A few eyebrows were raised aboard the ship. Cerro's reasoning ran along the lines that if they were speaking the truth, then the Prokaryotes and their dark matter could easily lift the ship back to orbit. Tara smiled and confirmed it was not a problem.

Surendra surrendered control of the craft to the landing computers and the Prokaryotes experienced the anxiety of their hosts. The ship was only meant to attempt this in an emergency. Trackers on Earth followed the ship's course closely. They also noticed that the dark cloud had split up with a patch headed towards the Moon at great speed, while another patch surrounded the orbital station. In fact, any orbiting satellite and craft that was manned found itself in the embrace of a piece of the dark cloud. As 'The Ray of Hope' cleared the cloud base, signals reached Earth from delighted orbital personnel; the sudden gravity was most welcome. As 'The Ray of Hope' landed on WECO's extended runway the Prokaryotes were penetrating the orbital satellites. By the time Rameses emerged and waved at the welcoming party the conversion of all the humans in orbit was complete.

Introductions were made. Surendra rushed on ahead in a small hover vehicle to report to Cerro. Xiang-Xo was met by Chinese officials. Talking excitedly to each other, and supporting Xiang-Xo, they set off after Surendra. Base guards surrounded everybody. Gaia and Rameses were pleased to see Black and Dacourt again and they greeted them warmly. Black and Dacourt, however, somewhat wary, kept a discreet distance. The guards were tense. They looked suspiciously at Tara as Gaia held her in her arms. The Prokaryotes in combination with their hosts exuded a feeling of calm and trust. Tara asked to be put down. She felt the ground beneath her feet and walked a few steps very cautiously.

"It is good to be back home," the child speaking. She beamed a broad grin at the people. A softening of their stance was discernible.

"I know the Prokaryotes are helping," Gaia said aloud. "But it still feels really strange. My arms are heavy. It's difficult to lift my legs. Someone switch this gravity off, please!" There was silence for a second, then one of the officers laughed. The rest joined in and Black and Dacourt came closer. Rameses assured them it was safe. Soon it was more like old

times. The staff put them in another hover car, and they set off for the meeting room. They swapped news on the way and the hosts found themselves doing most of the informing.

Within minutes they were descending in the lift to the chamber. At the same time the patch of dark cloud reached the Moon. As they took their seats elements of the cloud swept over the surface of the Moon and the orbiting craft. As Cerro prepared to welcome Tara the conversion of the Moon was nearly complete.

"Welcome to Earth, again." Cerro was not going to mistake the thing before her as a child.

Tara spoke as a Prokaryote, "Thank you. It is strange, but we feel glad to be back."

Rameses noticed Black and Dacourt glance at each other. He sensed their unease.

"You must understand our concern about yourselves and your abilities," Cerro began. "We are afraid of the coming destruction. But also, we fear you and your intentions."

"We understand. We have given some thought to how we can persuade you that we mean well. Both sides will need to trust each other."

"Yes, that much is obvious." Rameses detected Cerro's fears as she spoke. "Your plans for saving a remnant of humanity, and other life on Earth, have been studied by our best brains. As much as we understand all the processes you refer to, we can find few faults. The scale of everything is beyond our grasp. There will have to be amazing and many sacrifices. Most of the people presently alive will not be able to come. There are billions of people on Earth. But your plans, brilliant as they are, allow for a couple of million only to survive."

"Yes. Correct. Enough people will survive to ensure the continuation of humanity. Wherever we choose to go." Cerro was not convinced the 'we' meant humans and Prokaryotes; and not just the Prokaryote 'we'.

"We sense your concerns Supreme Leader and those of your Council. Also, the others." Tara looked at them one by one, including the Chinese delegation. Rameses noticed

Astolpho quickly look away. His Prokaryote was involved in the effort being directed at the leaders. He gave a quick look at Gaia. She, too, was free from their direct hold temporarily.

"There are difficult decisions to be made. We believe you to be the kind of leader who can make those decisions. We will not interfere. Only, in matters relating to the success of the great plan, will we intervene.

"You are right to fear us and the control we will have over you. Indeed, the control we already have over you."

A nervous shifting and murmur around the chamber. Rameses knew things were getting to the crunch.

"If we wanted to, we could force you to comply with our plans. Even as we speak, we have control of all your off-world installations and every person out there."

Cerro looked sharply at Tara. The muttering in the room grew.

"If your communications operator would check. You will find this to be true. Listen to the message."

Cerro nodded at the man. There followed a minute or two of growing tension as one by one signals confirmed Tara's claim. Hands tightened on weapons. The Prokaryotes remained confident.

"However, if we do not reach an agreement here today. We will return control to you and take only those who wish to stay with us. Your biggest fear is that we will not give up our presence in your bodies when the task is completed." Cerro nodded.

"A demonstration is needed."

Gaia and Rameses felt their heads jerk back and their mouths open. Then they felt the Prokaryotes leave them. Their heads fell forward.



"We can manipulate all forms of radiation." Tara continued. "My fellow Prokaryotes have left their hosts and allow themselves to be visible to you. Gaia and Rameses have been released from our control."

Both Gaia and Rameses looked up and saw a faint mist-like vapour before them. They were free of the Prokaryotes and gazed at each other.

"Rameses report!" Cerro ordered.

"It is true. We are free of them."

Tara spoke then in a voice that silenced the room.

"The choice for Gaia and Rameses is simple. As it is for your people. You can stay as you are, free of our influence - we will not force people on Earth - or you can join with us again. Make your decision soon. My fellow Prokaryotes will not survive in their current state for long. But they will not try to find another host or seek security within matter. They are prepared to give up life to prove our case. We cannot remember when one of us last lost their life. We do not die, as you do, in our home between the stars."

Tara turned to face Gaia and Rameses. They looked at each other while the room hushed. Gaia held her hand out to Rameses and he took it in both of his.

"I am free of the Prokaryote," she said quietly, "and I am aware of the options open to me." She paused. "Supreme Leader I would rather have the control of the Prokaryotes and know that I will survive the terrible times ahead."

"Me too."

The faint mists shot towards them and rushed back into their mouths and up their noses. Once more their heads were jerked backwards. Then slowly their heads dropped, and they smiled at each other.

"But this is not all." Tara spoke to Cerro as she slowly walked towards her. "We know that it is possible for you to destroy us in this room. It will not be easy, but you might

manage it. It would not affect our plans to save some of your kind. However, again, we want you with us, working together, Prokaryote-humans and, this is important, humans not joined. This is the way forward. Alone, we cannot see all the problems that will crop up. Alone, we know we will not be able to find all the solutions. To make it work and to be most successful, it is essential we all work together."

The Prokaryotes were putting an enormous effort into their persuasion. Gaia and Rameses felt the exertion in their minds.

"Since my return from your planet within this child's form we have studied you. I have advocated contact between us; now the galactic disaster has forced our hand. I am the nearest we have to a leader and I have told my fellow Prokaryotes of how important it is that we form a relationship with you. I, too, am willing to give up my life. If you are not persuaded Cerro, then I will cease here. Will you trust me? Let me show you?"

Cerro stared at the child with the unlikely voice. At first, she did not understand, then it came to her. Doubt and fear flooded her mind.

"I promise you I will leave you. You must definitely be unaffected if you are to lead the world through the years ahead."

Cerro looked uncertain. Suddenly Tara's head jerked back and the Prokaryote she was hosting, emerged. It hovered in the air. Cerro stared at it. The room was completely silent.

"OK." Cerro gripped her chair as the Prokaryote entered her. Everyone stared. Nobody was looking anywhere else. The expressions on her face varied as the Prokaryote took her through the future. It showed her how to manipulate the dark matter around 'The Ray of Hope'. She saw it rise from the ground and head for orbit under her control. She laughed at that. The room mumbled in surprise. Then the mist left her and hung between Tara and Cerro. The child had not moved or said anything.

"Some of us will survive. I agree." Cerro finally proclaimed.

The mist returned to Tara. "Good," she said. But it was lost in the tumult of noise that rose around them. Not all of it was favourable. However, the Prokaryotes were happy. Gaia and Rameses felt intense pleasure. It was like, you know, well, they glanced at each other and giggled.

### *The Early Days.*

It was amazing how very little knowledge of events came into the public domain. Naturally, with the Prokaryotes in control of all the people who worked in space, no news came from there. The oppressive security on Earth helped, as always, to contain any leakage of information. There was some debate about when and how the people of the world would be told of their doom. The Prokaryotes wanted to delay for as long as possible. Although it would compromise their plans slightly. However, Cerro and the council leaders disagreed. They had more confidence in the eventual reaction of the populations. Cerro and her advisors won the argument. The announcement would be made sooner than later. But preparing for the broadcasts that needed to be made took time.

When the time came, and all around the world the news sunk in. There was a short period of disbelief; people rejected the information. Soon, however the realisation that this was happening gathered momentum. The security forces all over the controlled world had been fully briefed just before the news was revealed to the general population. They had also been told of the priority they and their families would have in the future. Cerro and her council gave orders for the security forces to take a non-active role. Initially they stayed mostly in barracks and performed mainly surveillance duties. Cerro reasoned that the way in which people coped with the news would be an early opportunity to judge them.

When the period of incredulity was over several different reactions manifested themselves across the developed world. Many people were positive, they volunteered to help in any way they could. Many of these people already worked in some aspect of the system, they embraced the Prokaryote plan and they willingly became hosts. This did not guarantee their place on the great ships, but it would certainly help; even if they did not make it, then their

children might. The reality that they would not all go was understood. Most of the people presently on Earth would be left behind to perish.

Another large group of people took a different approach. They surrendered to the inevitable, the coming doom was unstoppable. They prepared for their end and retreated from the society that began the task of producing the great ships. The authorities let them go their own way. They only asserted their control when a dispute over resources occurred. When this happened, the authorities did not hesitate in their ruthlessness. Some of this segment of the people developed new religions, while older established creeds revived, and people trusted to their Gods and beliefs. Two groups came to prominence: the traditionists and the sustationists.

The traditionists followed, largely, the original mainstream religions and they put their trust in God. But just in case, they made plans to try and survive the coming storm. Around the world various schemes were devised to save the faithful. Typical was the building of huge refuges deep underground. Here they would survive as the planet was ravaged above them. Measurements of the coming shockwave suggested no appreciable decrease in its intensity. But they ignored this and continued anyway. God would save them. Trust in faith.

In a twist to this line of thought many people could not face the years ahead and mass suicides began quite soon after the global announcement. Whole communities around the world wiped themselves out. Cerro and her fellow leaders did nothing to prevent this and in some cases, they actually encouraged it; one way of reducing the numbers.

The sustationists also believed in a God. But their emphasis was more to the sanctity of all life. They did not think that humanity had a priority. The Earth had been in existence to promote life and it just so happened that humans developed as the most intelligent. They could have been wiped out before. Indeed, might have done the job themselves, and if they had, then some life would have remained. It would then develop. Only if the planet was

destroyed utterly would the Earth fail in its job as a place for life to develop. They decided to let it be. What would happen, would happen. Either the Earth would be utterly destroyed and all life with it, or, just maybe, some life might survive amongst the wreckage.

The Prokaryotes were revered by the sustationists as a higher form of life. They welcomed them. However, they took no part in the preparations for the escape from Earth. Cerro and the authorities mostly ignored them all. But the Prokaryotes took an interest and infiltrated all religious groups. It did no harm to keep an eye on them, just in case. Some of the Prokaryotes who had no desire to leave decided to take hosts among these humans. They would stay with them and see what happened when the end finally came. After all, if any form of life was likely to survive in the smashed up remains of the solar system it was the Prokaryotes.

Another side to the human character showed itself quite soon after the announcement. Thinking that the security forces were not going to take any action, some people tried to avail themselves of whatever luxuries they could grasp. If they were all going to die, then they might as well have whatever they could get their hands on in the meantime. Looting and rioting broke out in many towns and cities. Cerro let it go for a short while, long enough to identify the people, long enough for the other people to appreciate law and order. Then she unleashed the security forces. Around the world millions were eliminated. Another method of culling the human population.

A year passed, and the Prokaryotes had the necessary control over key people and resources in place. The detailed plans for the completion of the project were agreed. It would now need organising and building. There were many important decisions yet to be made and Cerro was aware of this. She, alone, of the humans, was privy to the entire plan. She was already considering the fateful choices ahead for humanity. She was surrounded by a Prokaryote enhanced personal guard and her advisors were a mixture of human-Prokaryotes

and normal humans. Tara rarely left her side. Together they plotted the future. Cerro decided from the beginning that she would not go in the great ships. Her kind of leadership would not be right for the remnants of humanity that managed to escape. She often gave thought to a successor in the years that followed.

### *The Early Years.*

At first Rameses thought his active duty days were over. In the first year he helped with security, in general, on the grand design, spending most of his time at WECO. After the announcement was made to the world, he took over control of the infiltrators. Their role was now to ensure no interference in the project from the developed world; the undeveloped world was left to itself. There would be no input from there; unless something or someone specific was needed. When that happened Rameses organised the operation. One specific mission involved grabbing a world-renowned biologist from the jungles of south east Asia. The biologist had been studying the recovery of fauna and flora after the Great Gamma Ray Burst. He refused to answer the call to join the project, so Rameses and his team went and found him. Still not keen to join them he had to be converted by the Prokaryotes. Usually the Prokaryotes hoped the humans would join them willingly, but this was not always the case. If the person concerned was considered too essential to the project, then they were 'fitted' with a Prokaryote. Some of them would have the choice to discard their control when the time was appropriate. Others were destined to be part of the even greater plan.

Rameses had taken over from Jürgen Black. Although Black had refused to be a host, he was one of the foremost planners and had responsibilities around the world. He reported to Cerro and Tara and he led the wholly human element in the scheme of things. Like Cerro he had decided to not take the great ships to safety. They would end with the planet. Dacourt, at first, was suspicious of being a host. She constantly watched Tara and particularly Gaia. She questioned Gaia at length, and often about the association with the Prokaryote. The Prokaryotes had quickly realised the worth of Dacourt as Black's natural successor. But with time they also realised that problems could develop with hosts who were not willing to join. They needed more attention to keep under control. In a few there had been a deterioration in



the host's condition and even the Prokaryotes had failed to limit this failure in the symbiosis. Secretly they were not unhappy about this. It confirmed to them that there was within the humans something extra, something that could make their symbiosis even stronger when both parties wanted it. The humans were a lifeform destined for a greater future than the Prokaryotes could foresee. As a result, the Prokaryotes wanted a Dacourt host, who was happy to be one. The softly-softly approach eventually proved successful and Gaia, Rameses and Dacourt became an integral part of the Prokaryote-human Corps that was slowly ensuring the completion of the great project.

Gaia, for her part, took over the supervision of the astronomical data that was needed to inform the plans. This data included checking on the progress of the shockwave; and the devastation left in its wake. Although it was never made public and was in fact one of the greatest secrets kept by the Prokaryotes for many years after. There was evidence during the last year of the project that the shockwave was finally abating in its intensity. It would still be fatally ruinous to the solar system. More importantly Gaia controlled the accumulation of data from all the great telescope systems on Earth, off-world and in space, that searched for a new home. The search was endless and would last right up to the final days of the grand plan. No firm decision had to be made before they were ready to take off. The search was directed at the edges of the galaxy above and below the solar system, up to a thousand light years either way. Also, the search parameters included study of the Magellanic clouds outside the Milky Way and the globular clusters that orbited the galaxy within the vast galactic halo. These last two options represented a much greater journey to escape the doom. Well before they would reach the galactic edge the shock wave would have passed beneath them. The search centred on habitable planets sited in stable star systems with no nearby stars ready to go nova or supernova and no black holes in the vicinity. Planets where the

signature of water and oxygen were strong. They also watched and listened for the possible signs of alien civilisations.

Travel time was not a worry for the Prokaryotes. Ten years, a hundred years, a thousand years, or longer, it was of no concern to them. Methods would be developed to keep their human cargo alive in stasis of one form or another. Once the great ships had left the solar system, whichever direction they were going in, and the near light speeds achieved, a relatively small number of people would be required to run the necessary ship controls. These individuals would almost certainly have to be Prokaryote-humans due to the likely long journey time. Normal humans would die after a natural lifetime aboard the ships on the journey. The Prokaryotes were aware of lingering doubts amongst the humans and made plans to recruit families who would be willing to endure these conditions, knowing that their children's children were likely to see the new Earth. They would live and die amongst the select, undying, Prokaryote-human crews, keeping a watchful eye on the remnants of humanity stored in stasis in the great ships. Able to contribute, if necessary, to any decisions that might have to be made in transit. Most of the Prokaryotes would be engaged in maintaining the stasis conditions of the life that would be saved from the destruction of the Earth.

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Once the plans were agreed and feasible time deadlines assigned to every aspect of them, the Prokaryotes and humans began to develop and build. Even though the Prokaryotes had made allowances for most things, problems did arise from time to time. As anticipated the solutions were often found only by the humans working with the Prokaryotes. This

awareness that the Prokaryotes were not all-knowing slowly permeated the humans working on the grand design. If the Prokaryotes felt this would be perceived as a weakness by the humans, increasing their doubts in the project, then they were surprised at the reaction of many. It had the effect of empowering them, somehow. A new wave of conversions followed as people realised that the Prokaryotes needed them to make the symbiosis function most efficiently.

The resources of the planet were stripped to build the great ships. Slowly they took shape at various places around the world. A hundred vast behemoths grew upon the face of the Earth. The size of small towns, they straddled flat land, rising taller than a skyscraper, their tops lost in the clouds. It was computed that when the dark matter lifted them into space the effect on the Earth would be to alter its orbit. Even if the Earth, by some unforeseen miracle, survived intact, it would be in a different trajectory around the Sun. Assuming the star itself was still there. Would it be colder, or hotter, or perhaps both during a different year?

The debate started on what should be taken with the survivors of humanity. The room was finite. The ships could be adapted to reproduce the many different environments that Earth had. The Prokaryotes developed a method of keeping a huge bank of embryonic life in store. There was the chance to store many seeds and spores of great numbers of plants. The need to arrive at their destination with not just extremely young lifeforms, but to have a range of ages of all forms of life that they would take with them. On arrival they would need mature plants and animals for food and materials. It could be that when they reached a suitable planet the great ships would have to stay in orbit, perhaps for years. The planet would need to be thoroughly examined and made ready for the life in the ships; and not just for the humans. This might take years. On the journey the stocks would be kept at a reasonable level to maintain viable populations like a just ticking over factory with spare capacity. When

required it would increase productivity. Maybe some of the ships would land on the new world and begin operations from there.

There would be enough to do once they arrived. But before they would leave hard decisions would have to be made.

Just who would go?

What creatures and plants would never be seen by human eyes again?

What was necessary, or rather, vital?

What was expendable?

This applied to the humans also. Cerro and her advisors would decide which people would go.

Who would be useful, or essential to their survival on the new Earth?

Who would not be as useful?

What did they need to have to be a representative sample of all humanity?

Or should whole sections and races just be left behind, or wiped out beforehand?

These dilemmas did not concern the Prokaryotes as they had made sure that a suitable number of humans had been joined well before the expected date of departure. It was obviously in their interest to see a strong human strain taken aboard the great ships.

But they trusted to Cerro to make sure this happened. Cerro and her advisors drew up a list of the considered qualities and began the process of selection. At times whole communities were eradicated. A culling of those that would not meet the criteria was executed throughout the preparation years; particularly when the people concerned were considered to be too unstable to cope with the eventual rejection.

Vast data banks were filled with as much of the knowledge of humans and the Earth as possible. The history, the geography and geology, the sciences and technology, the arts and languages, everything they could cram into many different information storage systems; for

redundancy sake. The Prokaryotes took a further precaution. They already knew of the phenomenal storage capacity of the human brain. They produced a special Prokaryote-human whose prime function was to assimilate all the knowledge of the Earth. Many of them laboured for many years recording the information in their Prokaryote enhanced memories. These memories could be passed to another Prokaryote-human quite easily if necessity required, although a suitably prepared one was preferable. Thus, the survivors would have the accumulated knowledge and experience of their ancestors to help them in the future.

## *Gaia and Rameses.*

During the early years there were times when Rameses had to be away from WECO. He organised many missions and lead some of them. Often, he would talk to Gaia about the jobs after their completion, however, some he would not talk about. Their Prokaryotes communed together but Gaia was excluded. She knew better than to push it with Rameses. If he did not want her to know, then it was probably for the best. From the rumours she heard, she could guess, and she did not think she wanted to know the details. Despite the efforts of the Prokaryotes Rameses often felt a barely contained horror at some of the duties expected of him. He was no stranger to killing. Surviving as long as he had, as an infiltrator, meant that he could kill when necessary. However, it had always been small numbers and usually a kill or be killed situation. During the early years he often had to arrange the death of whole communities of people all over the world; massacres and genocide, it would have been called in a previous era. Nevertheless, with the same diligence to duty that he had exhibited as an infiltrator he carried out his orders.

Whenever they could, Gaia and Rameses spent time together. The seeds of their relationship had been sown before their joining with the Prokaryotes. The interests of the Prokaryotes and the greater plan would be served by a lasting relationship between them. Despite the urging of their Prokaryotes, Rameses and Gaia resisted making love until they felt absolutely ready. Of course, it happened while they took a break in the beloved mountains of Rameses. He hoped that the new planet had mountains and that it snowed there; Rameses would set up the first skiing resorts. Gaia determined that the first time they made love on the new Earth; it would be in the mountains. She just knew it would have mountains and it would have seas and forests and plains and rivers. It would be a new Earth.

In line with the wishes of the Prokaryotes Gaia and Rameses did not have any children. Only the traditionists and sustationists continued to have babies regardless of the certain end for the Earth. The couples who were working on the grand design had another option. They could produce a fertilised egg between them that would then be placed in stasis. Eventually these early embryos would be stored on the great ships. When the time came, they would form the basis of the first generation of the new world. Many of the parents would not make it onto the great ships but their offspring would. Those who made it onto the ships could decide whether to have the babies the old-fashioned way with the embryos returned to the mother's womb. Or they would develop in the more popular way of recent years.

Gaia would have her children the natural way when they arrived at the new world. She and Rameses had three children in storage: two boys and a girl. They knew from the beginning that they were going on the ships and they made what plans they could. The Prokaryotes felt it was unnecessary; but they humoured their hosts. The girl had been conceived at Woodend's old church-house which seemed appropriate to them. They spent quite a lot of their spare time there and it enabled them to visit Gaia's family. None of them would qualify for inclusion when the great ships set off; this, despite being farmers and Gaia's obvious importance to the Prokaryotes. Gaia's mother was very stoical and philosophical about the end. It took a little while for her to come to terms with the truth about the Prokaryotes and that her daughter was possessed by one of them. The fact that her father had been right all along was also hard to bear, there were feelings of guilt and regret, but eventually she settled into a state of acceptance. She did not appreciate, or would understand, the role the Prokaryotes played in that.

The Prokaryotes were very fond of Woodend's old house. Even Tara made a pilgrimage there on one of the few occasions she left Cerro's side. It became shrine-like to them. Parts of it would be taken aboard one of the great ships that were nearing completion on the Downs

of England. It would never be forgotten how the symbiosis between human and Prokaryote had begun.

At last, the time came for the final farewells. The emptiness that Gaia and her mother felt surprised the Prokaryotes. They thought they knew the depth of human emotion: the many and uncontrolled tears; the sure knowledge that they would never see each other again. Yet the resilience of the human spirit impressed. For beings with no apparent emotions it was a taste of what the final days on Earth would mean to all humans be they normals or hosts. Further thought was given to cope with the future feelings of guilt and regret that all kinds of humans would experience.

Dacourt, Gaia, Rameses and others constantly tried to increase their knowledge of the Prokaryotes. They tried to find out about how many of them there were. Did they feel anything? How did they reproduce? Did they reproduce? They were told very little information. Promises were made to reveal more on the journey and when they got to their destination. Many hosts however agreed that their perceptions suggested that many more of the Prokaryotes had stayed out in the interstellar medium and while the Prokaryotes appeared to not have a system of reproduction, they were constantly fascinated by the myriad ways in which life of all kinds procreated on the planet.

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As the time for completion of the building and equipping of the great ships neared, a problem developed. Rameses had been aware for some time of a growing suspicion among some of the Prokaryotes. The apparent uniformity of purpose began to show a few cracks. Tara and Cerro became concerned and Rameses and other security chiefs in the western world were



ordered to increase their surveillance of the Chinese Prokaryotes. Ten ships in total would eventually lift off from the far east carrying entirely oriental humans. Tara, aware of the unexpected effects of the joining between Prokaryotes and humans, was worried. The disquiet grew when the discussions started to decide the destination of the great ships. There were equally good possibilities for a future new Earth; either side of the galactic plane. The distances were comparable, so the travel time was not significantly different. The statistical chances of finding an Earthlike planet were similar. There was slightly more raw materials available one way with more gas clouds and more interstellar molecular clouds and more chance of finding the range of elements that would be needed. But it was not a big difference. The great ships were designed to pick up materials from space as they travelled. Like the great whales in the oceans of Earth sifting plankton from the water they swam through, the great ships would gather hydrogen and oxygen and other organic materials from the clouds while metals would be extracted from the dust.

When the final decision was made in full consultation with humans and Prokaryotes Cerro and Tara felt that the Chinese Prokaryotes were not in total agreement. Rameses could hardly believe the final mission he was given. The order came soon after the destination of the great ships was set. It would be a dangerous job. When he was away even Gaia's Prokaryote could not hide its fears from her - there was not much time before the time set for departure. To the great relief of everyone, Prokaryotes and humans alike, Rameses was successful. At the cost of some of his best people they had brought out of the far east many Chinese who were quickly placed under stasis inside one of the great ships. The last use of WECO's resources was to ensure a Chinese element in sufficient numbers amongst the western world; ironic when for so long they had been used in operations against the Chinese power.

*Severn and the off-world preparations.*

"Bloody great! Now crash the ship into the crater for an encore!"

"Sorry, Captain," a worried voice, "I'll get it right next time."

Captain Severn grunted. "You have got a few more months to make the grade, pilot." The significance of the fast approaching departure date was not lost on the young pilot as he brought his ship around. He had to complete this part of his training without the assistance of his Prokaryote. Banking the craft, he set off to begin the run again. This time he negotiated the weaving and undulating course properly. At a frightening speed he tore through gullies and over craters, in and out of volcanic calderas and barely metres above old riverbeds. The young pilot shot out of the last gorge and did a loop the loop.

"Whaarr! I bloody well did it!" the pilot cried out in delight. "I passed the bastard test!"

"That's quite enough, pilot!" these young pilots were picking up bad habits.

I wonder where they get that from? Sardonic thought from his Prokaryote.

"That was better. Well done."

"Thank you, Captain."

"OK pilot. Exercise complete. Return to base."

"Understood, Sir!"

It does look like we will have more than enough good pilots, Severn thought.

Yes, we will have enough for the journey. Enough for the colonisation of your new world when we arrive. But you will have to start to train new pilots soon after we get there, the Prokaryote reminded him.

That is something to look forward to, Severn sarcastically.

Yes, I know you are looking forward to it.

The training school for new pilots was based on Mars. It was only one of the many projects that Captain Severn was responsible for. He preferred to be out in space; stuck here on Mars supervising the school was his least favourite job. They had been training pilots for years. It took time, even with Prokaryote help, to get them to a suitable standard. Many pilots would be needed for the journey, not just to help control the great ships, but to fly the other ships that would form part of the great fleet of salvation. Although each great ship was designed to be self-sufficient, there would still be supply and resource ships, scout ships and warships would fly in escort. Who knows what was out there? Severn felt the Prokaryotes had very little idea what they might come across on the journey. He had managed to get just fragments of what could only be called myths from his Prokaryote. They would probably get blasted to pieces by the first advanced aliens they came across. His Prokaryote admitted to dubiety.

Even before Cerro's agreement to work with the Prokaryotes, they had begun operations. Mars base personnel worked with the crews of the asteroid deflectors. Their immediate task was to bring some reasonably sized asteroids to the surface of the planet. These asteroids had been coughed up by the dark cloud and brought with the help of dark matter manipulation to the planet. The dark cloud would, during the years, provide many different useful resources. Not least of which was enough water to produce a small ocean in the northern hemisphere of Mars. This ocean was maintained due to the new orbit that Mars was following. This orbit brought an increase in surface temperature that thawed the permafrost of Mars. This in turn produced a melting in the subsurface ices. Liquid water seeped to the surface of Mars and stayed there for the first time in billions of years. Gaseous carbon dioxide, hitherto trapped below the surface, leaked into the atmosphere which further helped to raise temperatures.

The metal rich asteroids complemented the mining on Mars. It was enough to ensure the construction of a great ship on Mars. They were also able to send materials to the Moon and

Earth to supplement their stocks. The new climate provided an opportunity to try growing plants on Mars. At the time of departure, a greenish yellow colour had replaced the original red on some parts of the planetary surface. Much was learnt about growing plants in a carbon dioxide atmosphere with different conditions to Earth; all useful knowledge for the future.

The Moon base designers were soon working on completely new ideas for spaceships. Their efforts would result in the kind of ships that the young pilots had to fly. The Space Corps expanded its numbers greatly as new recruits flooded in, willingly joining with Prokaryote hosts. The lure of a future in space easily outweighing any doubts they had. The increased numbers worked to man the greater frequency of shuttles between Earth and the off worlds. A great ship was slowly constructed on the lunar surface. The Space Corps would provide the clear majority of the crews that would run the great ships on the journey. The Prokaryotes also began to slowly adapt them physically. In the last year on Mars it was possible for them to move about without care for oxygen or temperature. These adaptations were kept secret from the humans on Earth. Only a few, such as Gaia, Rameses and Dacourt knew about and underwent the changes.

The activity on the bases and orbital stations was all directed at making sure the grand design was ready on time and that the ships would be run by the most efficient and experienced staff. Just getting to the new Earth was one thing but surviving and eventually developing afterwards, this was the responsibility of the Prokaryote-human Space Corps. Of course, once the new Earth was established and the humans settled into their new environment, then would begin the exploration of the area of space they occupied. Perhaps, an age from now, they might come this way. It would be interesting to see what happened to the ancestral system.

There were times when the Prokaryotes became frustrated with their hosts. The ideas they had were not always feasible. Some took longer than they thought to put in place. But

generally, progress was made, and deadlines achieved. Only once did Severn experience real disappointment from the Prokaryotes. It occurred as the deep excavations were taking place on Mars for minerals. The Martian climate was changing slowly, and they were digging into and through the permafrost. Severn and others began to get a feeling of expectancy from their hosts. Other tasks were put on stand-by while many of them watched the work. At a certain level they came across a layer of fossilised Martian bacteria. Long since dead, as all Martian bacteria found to date was. Severn realised that for some reason the Prokaryotes had hoped they would find living examples of Martian bacteria. It did not happen. Severn, along with many Space Corps people, had been given the same bacteria that Rameses had. The Prokaryotes saw the sense in having help from some of their earthly kin. The bacteria served a useful purpose and the Prokaryotes were working on adapting and using other strains to improve the human condition. They had helped to destroy all the particularly unpleasant and deadly bacteria and viruses that plagued humanity at that time. They allowed enough to survive to ensure the human immunity system did not go into decline from lack of use.

Captain Severn spent as much time, as he could, testing the new spaceships. He had passed control of 'The Red Star' to SFP. Her duties were mainly to help train new Space Corps recruits which meant she still went on missions into the asteroid belt. Severn and all the Space Corps worked on the great project secure in the knowledge that they all would be on the great ships when the time came. During the years of preparation Severn did not meet Gaia, Rameses and Tara in person. He often talked to them on the comlinks however and kept in touch with the progress on Earth.

Near the appointed time he picked the crews that would run all the great ships and they reported to the Earth orbital stations ready for transfer. He did not have control over the crew who would man the Chinese ships. Throughout the preparations Xiang-Xo had worked alongside him in training the Chinese pilots. They had not mixed with the other trainees.

They left earlier for the recently built Chinese orbital station and Severn and his Prokaryote lost contact with Xiang-Xo. Their reports to Cerro and Tara contributed to the concerns being felt as departure day approached.

## *Departure.*

Rameses stood on the bridge. Besides him was Gaia and Dacourt. Captain Severn was at the controls. Around them Severn's crew busied themselves with the last-minute preparations. Tara sat in a specially made seat nearby. They would take their seats next to her soon. The body of the girl Tara had not been allowed to develop over the years. The Prokaryote had decided that normal growth would continue to be arrested until they had safely arrived at a suitable new home for humanity. The silvery sheen to her skin was apparent, as the early morning sunlight flitted through the room, between passing clouds. She was expressionless. Her Prokaryote was observing their hosts and the other humans closely. All the Prokaryotes were on an alert now that it had, at last, come to the point of departure. They monitored the reactions. If there had been some lingering doubts about the finality of the next few minutes; they might surface now. It was also good information on the human psyche for the future. This was it. No going back now; as if they had ever had a choice. What emotions would their hosts and the others have?

Rameses looked down. There, far below them, stood Cerro and her advisers. Many, many people had also turned up. Much more than Rameses had expected. They were not going on the great ships. Some of them had relatives aboard or had contributed embryonic life to the huge banks inside the ship. But many had just come to see them off. The last remnants of humanity that would soon begin a journey into space. A journey to escape the catastrophe that was rushing to destroy the Earth. A journey to find a new home, a new Earth among the stars. A journey that would take many, many years. A journey very few of them would witness. In the distance Rameses could see a vague blur; thousands more people watching. Across the developed world millions more sat in front of vidscreens. The single most significant event in the entire history of life on the Earth was about to happen.

"Can't bloody wait to be on our way," Severn severed the silence. The Prokaryotes waited for their hosts' reaction.

"Yes, you're right," Gaia sighed and walked to her seat. Dacourt merely nodded and followed. Rameses smiled at the Captain's typical statement, but he could not drag himself away from the viewing panels. He knew there were monitors above the seats. They could look back at the Earth as they were lifted slowly, but surely, off. His thoughts went back to the last days.

The ships had been finished and they were fully equipped. At WECO and wherever in the world they had been built the great ships stood magnificent and resplendent. Huge. They looked even more massive in real life than even the designs had shown. Each one larger than anything humanity had ever constructed. Giant cylinders. Rameses agreed with Severn; they were 'ugly buggers'. But their salvation rested in them. The ships' systems had been checked very diligently. To prove they would get off the ground a trial was authorised by the Prokaryotes. A sample of the dark cloud, residing near the Earth, was sent to the Australian ship. Vidcasts around the world showed how the dark cloud surrounded the great ship. Then as the Prokaryotes manipulated the dark matter the ship effortlessly left the ground. Slowly it climbed into orbit. Then the tests began to check how it would operate in space. These included using the more typical forms of propulsion that the humans had insisted on being incorporated in the designs. In case the 'dark what you call it? Stuff' failed at all. It passed with every system performing well within the correct parameters. The demonstration was completed with the dark cloud returning the ship to the surface safely.

The Prokaryotes had thought it prudent to have the more conventional human designed propulsion systems as well. They could use the dark matter; but they did not fully understand it. A fact that they did not reveal to their hosts. The Prokaryotes had instructed the humans in the use of it and explained how the energy of space itself would drive them once the great



ships were clear of the solar system. However, few human scientists could completely grasp the inherent intricacies. If, and they could think of no reason how, the Prokaryotes were removed or killed, then the humans would have to be able to find the way themselves. This was very unlikely, as was the likelihood that the humans would still be alive if anything happened to the Prokaryotes.

A month before the departure day disturbing reports reached Cerro and Tara. Rameses had brought the news to their attention. An uprising was being planned. Rogue elements of the security forces had caused discontent. Dissent flourished among some of those people not chosen to go and when the ships were ready, this frustration spilled over. The disgruntled, even with some security personnel and hardware, did not constitute much of a threat. Rameses delegated. He had had enough of the killing. This final desperate act by a passed over section of humanity was dealt with. Dealt with in the same way as all dissent had been dealt with for the last century or so. They were slaughtered to a man, woman and child. It was a last chance for those loyal to Cerro and the grand design to show their conviction. Rameses felt for the protesters. How would he have reacted if he had been told he was not going? How would any of them? To know that you had only a short time before it would end forever.

Wherever a great ship lay waiting an attempt was made to storm it. All over the world those that tried, died. The timetable was not delayed. Rameses and Gaia watched the loading of their great ship. They knew that inside, many Prokaryotes waited to put the cargo into stasis. Humans, animals, plants, all that had been chosen to be part of the future. They were all placed into storage of one kind or another. Many levels in the great ship were filled with all that would be left as a living record of almost five billion years of the Earth's existence. Dacourt's last job on Earth was to supervise the filling of the giant ark.

All the farewells had been said. Only the actual crews for the journey remained conscious. The minutes ticked away. Rameses could not see the ground below. The clouds had closed in. Suddenly a memory of a white-out on a skiing trip rushed into his mind.

"It's time, Rameses," Severn said firmly.

Rameses nodded and turned from the viewing panels. There had better be mountains and snow where we're going, he thought to himself. Then he said out loud, "otherwise I am going to be really pissed off!"

The others stared at him. Then their Prokaryotes transmitted his thoughts to them. They all laughed, and Severn smiled.

"Let's get this show on the road, Captain." Rameses was ready.

"Just a few seconds," Severn glanced around. All over the ship the crew were ready for take-off. Then in unison the great ships lifted off the surface of the Earth. A hundred of them, all around the world. It had been deliberately planned to try and limit the effect on the Earth's orbit. What for, was lost on most of them. Why worry about a new orbital path for the planet when quite soon it would not even exist anymore? The dark clouds enveloped the ships. They rose with little noise. The people left behind watched until they slipped from view. The great ships moved directly into space. Other spacecraft waiting for them in orbit, broke off and fell in line. They were headed for a point beyond the Moon where they would rendezvous with the lunar ship and a huge dark cloud waited for them. Severn and his bridge crew kept their eyes on the controls. The rest of them kept staring at the blue-white Earth falling away from them. They would never see it again. Gaia and Dacourt suppressed a sob. Rameses glanced at them. Tears were slowly making tracks down their cheeks. He looked around, many of the crew were quietly crying. Even Severn was overcome; he loudly blew his nose. Quickly many others followed suit. Rameses returned his eyes to the monitors. He found a tissue in his hand. Then he realised his cheek was wet from silent weeping.

Severn's Prokaryote sent the alert out. The whole Prokaryote-human crew snapped back their attention. Severn's monitors were showing the Chinese ships breaking formation. They moved away, their own dark cloud in attendance. No attempt was made to contact or stop them. As the main fleet plunged into the waiting dark cloud the Chinese were recorded to have settled on an opposite direction. The humans realised it had not been a surprise to the Prokaryotes. There would now be two sets of Prokaryote-humans loose in the galaxy. In the far future, would they come across each other? Would they develop on similar lines? Or would the divergence begin here?

The ninety-one remaining ships carried on inside the cocoon of the dark cloud. Each one held a million people in various stages of development. They reached the meeting with the Mars ship within a day and Severn communicated with some old friends. Now they were ready. Rameses knew that the speed they were already travelling at was far faster than any speed ever experienced by humans before. Except perhaps for Tara; but she had really been out of her human self, then. The dark matter cushioned them from any effects of high speeds and provided a gravity comparable Earth's. They changed direction and the speed increased as they left the solar system and headed into interstellar space.

Rameses did not understand it. Gaia said she did. Rameses was dubious about that. Dacourt certainly did not understand it. Severn tried to explain it to them again. Rameses wondered to himself, again, how the Prokaryote could not make him understand. The energy of space thing kicked in and they accelerated quickly to the speed set for most of the journey. A sense of achievement pervaded the ship. Even the wholly human families on board felt it. The crew went about their business with a satisfied smile.

"Well, here goes," Rameses said to Gaia and Dacourt.

"I've got things to do," Dacourt excused herself.

"Really?" Rameses was quizzical. Then he smiled knowingly at Gaia and winked. Gaia thumped him in the arm.

"Shut up, you!" she urged him.

"I really do have things to do," Dacourt was adamant. She left them.

"Well, I haven't, have you?" he asked Gaia.

"Not immediately," she replied.

He fell quiet staring at the view out of the panels. Stars. Stars everywhere. Almost all of them had planets, which, however, were completely unsuitable. They were headed for one that showed promise. You couldn't even see it yet, without telescopic aid. It would be many years before the naked eye could focus its light.

"I still find it hard to imagine," Rameses muttered, almost as if to himself. "A hundred years or more from now. We'll still be here on this ship. We'll be unchanged. We'll have hardly noticed the time. Or so they reckon."

"We've been through this," Gaia cooed quietly. She stroked his arm.

"I know." He sighed. "Do you know what the strangest thing is going to be?"

"What?" she already knew the answer.

"We will watch the babies of the families be born, live their entire lives and then die, and then their children, in turn, maybe."

"Yes, it will be strange," Gaia agreed.

"Bloody strange!" Severn interrupted. "But bloody exciting too!"