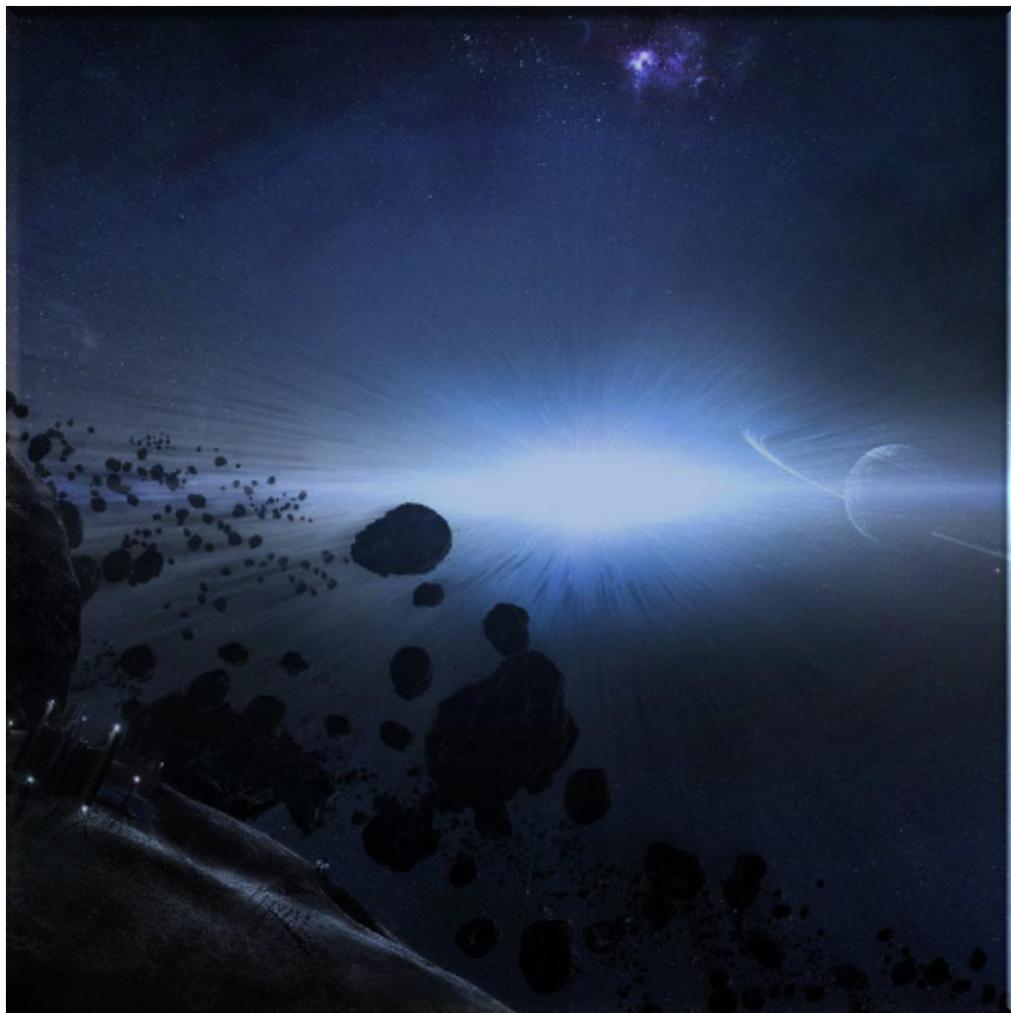


The Anomaly

Volume One

The Battle for the Known Unknown

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Chapter One Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

A space ship. One of the largest in the solar system. Twelve kilometres long. Two kilometres in diameter. A wonder of 32nd Century Technology.

Perhaps two thirds of the ship's volume was dedicated to the engine and fully ninety percent, whether in the passengers' segments or in the engine rooms, was composed of water. This was mostly in liquid form and stored at a phenomenally high pressure. From outside the ship resembled a huge cylinder along which were arraigned portals on which smaller craft could dock. Ahead of the space ship, extending a kilometre or more, was a elongated cone that tapered to a rounded point. Like all space craft, it was constructed from the debris of shattered asteroids and comets.

This massive vehicle was travelling through open space at an astonishing speed, perhaps as much as a tenth the speed of light, at a trajectory that was roughly perpendicular to the ecliptic plane. It took nearly a week for the light from the sun to reach the space ship's surface. So fast and large was the space ship that it was obliged to travel at least a light day distant from the Solar System's traffic lanes that were too congested to accommodate such a hazardous vehicle.

Paul sat in the artificial twilight on a wooden bench in his garden. The flowers had closed their petals for the night, whilst above his head an oak tree cast a shadow directly over him. He was mesmerised by a hedgehog's slow meander across the lawn. Other than the dim illumination from above, the only light that shone over the garden came from the upstairs window of his villa. Some of the other houses scattered

about in the nearby lanes and paths on this level also had lights streaming from the rooms.

Paul cherished the quiet and solitude of the late evening. He enjoyed watching the moths batter against the windows of his home. He delighted in the sound of owls hooting in the distant parkland trees. Sometimes a fox or badger would wander into the garden and frighten the cats that shared his home. And he somehow found great solace in musing on the facts and figures about the space ship in which he was travelling.

It was difficult to believe that this suburban quiet was bound above (or below, depending on one's perspective) by layer upon layer of onion-like levels of curving landscape much like the one in which he lived, with a sky never more than fifty metres above his head. His feet were pushed outwards by centripetal force in the direction of the empty infinite void. But artificial tranquillity in a wholly artificial world was what Paul had mostly known all his life. The notion of living on a huge ball of rock in space was as alien to him as being bound by such an object's gravity.

The habits of solitude that had once principally governed his life were hard to break. He could no longer follow a rhythm that was entirely of his own choosing now that he had to adapt his life to that of his recently wedded wife. It was she who was waiting for him in their shared bedchamber from which shone the light that illuminated the garden. Paul stood up and strolled slowly over the well-trimmed lawn beside the birdbath and the ornate bower and savoured the sensation of grass under his bare feet.

He was naked. This was also a relatively novel sensation. Ever since he'd

began sharing his body with his wife, it seemed much more natural to remain undressed while at home. This was especially so because Beatrice rarely encumbered herself with more than the minimum of clothes, whatever the company and wherever the occasion. His penis was already twitching with excitement at the prospect of sharing his bed with a wife whose passion for sex exceeded that of any woman Paul had ever known in his long life. Her hunger for sex was almost unnatural despite the fact that Paul had seen no evidence that she'd ever supplemented her libido with drugs or DNA enhancement. This wasn't so true of Paul, however, who needed as much help as he could find to be able to cope with the incessant demands from the woman he loved so very much.

Paul walked towards the patio doors which slid open as he approached and then strode across the living room towards the lavatory, past the ornate sofa and the shimmering holographic wall paintings. He hoped that the strain of arousal wouldn't present to much of an obstacle to his rather more pressing need for a piss. As he walked, the lights shone in each room as he walked through and dimmed as soon as he left. He sat down on the toilet bowl and contemplated the rather inconvenient fact that human progress hadn't yet eliminated the need for excretion.

There were so many things that just could never be changed.

It sometimes puzzled Paul that Beatrice had such disciplined bowels that he'd never once seen her go to the toilet. Perhaps she'd benefited from bodily enhancements that were rather more sophisticated than those Paul had elected for.

She was a wonderful woman. In his imagination, he could see her long legs stretch out over the mattress while he sat down on the toilet seat and felt the blessed

release shoot onto the porcelain and splash into the water below.

“Are you coming to bed, sweetheart?” Beatrice called out to him in that soft and sultry voice in reply to which his reciprocal response very nearly stopped the flow of urine. “I’m *so* tired of waiting.”

“Almost ready,” grunted Paul as he washed his hands in the sink and examined his reflection in the mirror.

He still didn’t know what it was about him that made her love him. And love him she did. Or he was pretty sure she did judging from the unfeigned passion of their lovemaking. You couldn’t pretend that—at least not so often and so unrestrainedly. In all his years, he’d never imagined that sex could be quite so ecstatic. When he fucked Beatrice, his penis was engulfed and gripped in a deep warm moistness while her entire body twitched with irrepressible spasms, her skin erupted with perspiration that slid against his own and her cries of ecstasy were out of proportion to Paul’s rather modest thrusts.

Without the benefits of modern science, how could he ever hope to match, or even keep up with, the demands she made of him?

The man whose reflection Paul could see in the mirror was well-chiselled and muscular. He had a smooth torso and a prick already proud and confident. His long thick hair cascaded in brown whorls over his shoulders and curled over his nipples. Paul pursed his mouth, flashed his brilliant white teeth and wiped his brow with the back of his hand.

He was a handsome imposing figure. In another age he would have been considered a true Adonis. But in this day and age there was nothing about him that

made him stand out from the crowd. But this didn't prevent Paul from admiring himself. He was at the peak of physical perfection. He was the perfect match for the beautiful, long-legged, long blonde-haired woman who was his wife of not much more than a year.

And what was still a matter of wonder to Paul was that this Adonis who could only be him was more than eighty years old.

Chapter Two Godwin - 3749 C.E.

“Frankly,” said the consultant as he hovered cross-legged in the air beside Paul, “you’re not doing especially well for a man of your age.”

“What do you mean?” Paul asked nervously.

The doctor consulted the holo-manual at eye level by his side. “You’re nearly eighty years old, aren’t you? That’s an age that might once have been considered relatively old. We would normally expect someone of your age to be perhaps thirty to forty percent bio-plastic. But you are very nearly seventy percent. That’s a shocking percentage. I’m fifty years older than you and I’m barely over the fifty percent mark.”

Dr. Patel looked nothing like a man half a century older than Paul but, except in the genuinely young, appearances were a very poor guide to age. Like Paul, he was well-built with a healthy sheen to his light brown skin. His straight black hair flowed over the shoulders of his silver suit.

“You lead an extraordinarily sedentary life, don’t you?” the doctor remarked. “Most of my patients do rather more exercise than you, I should say. I don’t think I need to do further analysis for evidence of lack of exercise. You have all the advantages of an artificially fit frame and yet you do nothing to maintain it.”

“What’s wrong with that?” asked Paul, knowing full well the reply.

“Life expectancy is generally determined by how long you can maintain a reasonably high proportion of your biologically determined mind and body. However much DNA coding can be tweaked to lengthen life and however advanced the technology to replace or reanimate worn parts, once you are less than ten percent

biological your life expectancy is, to use a phrase, in the hands of the gods. Your systems could undergo catastrophic failure at any time and you would then die. This is especially likely if you have a low proportion of native neurons. That, however, is one area where you aren't doing so badly. Not better than average, but not far short of it."

"And when I get below a certain level of neuron activity...?"

"Plastic neurons are less stable than the biological variety however much your memory or capacity for logical reasoning can be enhanced. You should be grateful you were born with sufficiently high synaptic proficiency that you have neither required nor requested any significant enhancement. But don't be complacent. The human being isn't the brain alone. The body is rather more holistic than that. When the overall quality of your physical system dips below a certain level of biological stability, there is a corresponding dip in neuron longevity."

"What are my chances, doctor?" Paul asked.

"Not good, I'm afraid," he remarked. "It may well be that you've already expended two thirds of your total life expectancy. Or to put it more bluntly, I'll be surprised if you live for as many years as I have."

"Do I need more biophysical augmentation?"

"Sadly, yes," said the doctor. "To compensate for your lack of physical exercise, you will most definitely require further muscle enhancement. Furthermore, we'll need to regenerate what little is left of your biological liver and I think, to be on the safe side, you'll need a total refit of your bone structure. It's getting somewhat rigid and fragile."

“Again?” Paul moaned. This would be his third skeletal refit in two decades. It was the most time-consuming and unpleasant regenerative treatment he’d ever endured. It was worse than ocular replacement, testicular enhancement or cuticular re-engineering.

“You don’t want to suffer from lumbago, do you?” the doctor asked.

“What will all this treatment do for my life expectancy?”

“It won’t prolong it,” Dr. Patel admitted. “But the alternatives aren’t good. Be grateful that such treatment is possible. I wouldn’t like to live in one of those rogue colonies that don’t practice regeneration.”

“Like Hubbard?” Paul guessed.

“Or for that matter Rapture, New Kabul or Aleph,” continued the doctor from his elevated position by Paul’s shoulder. “The poor souls who live in those communities have miserably short lives and if you look at them... their bodies are scarcely advertisements for the supposed virtue of turning back the clock on progress, are they?”

“I guess not,” agreed Paul, who nonetheless had some sympathy at the moment for those who’d never had to undergo the pain and inconvenience of a skeletal refit.

“So, why is it that you lead such a sedentary lifestyle?” asked the doctor. He consulted his holo-manual. “You’ve opted to work, I see. Good for you. But what is *data mining*? It’s not an engineering or geological occupation, is it?”

This was a joke. There were no natural rocks on Godwin and the nearest sizeable celestial body was several light hours distant. Paul smiled, though he was too

anxious about his imminent skeletal refit to fully get into the spirit.

“There’s a technical aspect to it,” he answered. “Basically, I devise and implement algorithms to uncover patterns in the vast repository of historical data that is stored throughout the Solar System.”

“Surely that can all be done by machine,” remarked the doctor. “The statistical analysis that’s used to understand crop yield and to predict turbulence on the financial markets: isn’t that all done automatically?”

“Well, yes,” Paul admitted. “But there’s nearly two thousand years of machine-held data and much that was never transferred to digital form from the millennia before. The earliest machines stored data in magnetic polarisations, laser-beamed dots and silicon. There is no simple way to collate and analyse all that ancient data without knowing how it was physically stored and organised. Most of the more primitive media wasn’t designed to survive more than even a few decades, let alone two thousand years. You have to use a lot of ingenuity to regenerate data from compact discs, nano-carbon tubes and the like.”

“I see,” said the doctor. “And what use is all the data you extract?”

“To be honest,” Paul confessed, “most of it is only academic interest, though I did make some interesting finds regarding twenty-first century pornography that surprised a lot of people. It was a lot more prevalent than you’d imagine from reading the standard texts on the subject.”

“I’m sure it was,” said Dr. Patel who was rapidly losing interest. “Well, I’ll try and get you booked in for treatment. It’s a busy schedule as you might imagine, but with a bit of imaginative ‘mining’ of my own I’m sure I can come up with some

acceptable dates.”

Paul was feeling dazed at the prospect of further regenerative treatment when he left the doctor’s surgery. It had got to be rather too frequent and it was increasingly difficult to recuperate from its affect as he got older. Nevertheless, he was sure it was a price worth paying. After all, he was superficially still as fit and healthy as he’d ever been. His research into ancient computer records only confirmed to him how very lucky he was. Not for him the degenerative diseases or visible aging of earlier centuries.

Paul understood that Dr. Patel, like most people he’d ever known, considered his archaeological research into the stored data of earlier centuries to be a total waste of time. After all, what could people in those ancient years teach people of the 38th century? They used to live rather less than a hundred years. For centuries they were restricted to only one planet. And for much of that time they acted in denial of the impact of their actions on this same planet. However it wasn’t so much what people in the past thought they knew but what they collated and didn’t understand that Paul found to be most interesting. These earlier societies didn’t have the means to fully analyse the vast volume of data, measurable only by impossibly large numbers, at their disposal. There was also the fact that the most interesting data had been classified as confidential by government agencies for sometimes several centuries.

At the moment, Paul was investigating a curious phenomenon that has been observed in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries which at the time was known only to these secretive government agencies. Typically, they were totally ignorant that other agencies, sometimes belonging to the same nation states, had gathered data on

the selfsame phenomenon.

Paul would normally travel the five kilometres or so back home by sky pod, but today he decided to take the doctor's advice and have some exercise. It wasn't that he wasn't fit and healthy. Indeed, if he wanted to, he could probably run a circuit around the circumference of Godwin, but such exercise was wholly out of character for him. He arched his head up to look at the sky, where five kilometres above was the colony's central hub from which radiated the light and heat that kept the community alive. If he chose to, he could run to the other side of that hub in just three or four hours and his head would then point down towards the ground he was currently walking on.

The walk home was along the shore of one of Godwin's many lakes. A third of the colony's habitable surface was composed of lakes on which floated islands where a tenth of the colony's population lived. One thing in relative abundance in the Outer Solar System was water. This was extremely convenient for the colonies in the Kuiper Belt as it was one of the handful of things that was absolutely necessary for life to exist. It was stored as ice in the two hundred metre shell between him and the outside of his cylindrical world where it was part of the protective shield between the colony and the incredibly low temperatures of Outer Space. It also housed the colony's administrative functions which were mostly managed by robots.

Like every day of every year, it was a mild temperate day troubled only at the exact same time of each day by rain that sprinkled from the hub above. As Paul idly gazed at the boats bobbing about in the lake, he was careful to keep to the path and not stray onto the grass. Although such carelessness wasn't illegal—nothing was

illegal on Godwin—it could invite severe reprimands from one of the many self-governing syndicates. Every blade of grass, every leaf on every tree, and every one of the animals that roamed or flew about in Godwin's cylindrical interior was precious and was maintained with extraordinary care. The colony was several weeks, even months, of space flight away from the next nearest source of replenishment.

Paul often wondered what it would be like to live on a planet. He'd not once left Godwin in all his eighty years and for the most part he was disinclined to ever do so. Most planets were inhospitable places with either too much or too little gravity. And, as if gravity wasn't enough of a problem, there was the hostile climate and lack of breathable atmosphere. Even though Paul's archaeological studies were principally focused on humanity's earthbound days more than fifteen centuries earlier, even that was on a planet that was mostly too cold or too hot, too wet or too dry, for anyone to live in quite the predictable comfort that Paul took for granted.

He passed many houses along his route home and many were pretty much the same as his. Most were three or four stories high and, unless occupied by a family, had just a single apartment on each floor.

His perambulation took him through a glass tunnel which wound through one of the forests that were as necessary as the lakes to the ecological balance of the community. Although barely a kilometre in length, this was the most memorable part of his walk. Here he could see elephants, lions and antelope in a tiny microcosm of wilderness. None of the animals who lived fifty meters beneath him were aware that their lives were circumscribed within the bounds of a long pencil-shaped structure, revolving at a precisely defined rate, almost as far from their original homes as was

possible in the inhabited Solar System. And the colony was itself a very long way indeed from the Solar System's final frontier. And beyond that, only robotic craft had ever ventured very far and humans hardly at all beyond the bow wave of the heliopause, well within the orbit of the Oort Cloud's furthest speck of dust.

There were no prescribed hours to Paul's working day. His was work he could pursue whenever and for however long he wanted. Sometimes he would spend days at a time, pepped up with artificial stimulants, cocooned within the university campus following a train of investigation until he finally had to succumb to nature and retire home for sleep. Equally as often, he might not visit the university for weeks on end while he either underwent regenerative therapy or just didn't feel sufficiently bothered. His wasn't an occupation that demanded constant attention and he often felt that because it was such a solitary pursuit of so little measurable significance to anyone else in the colony he could easily abandon it altogether and no one would notice.

Today, however, he felt rather more like recreation than work. And what better recreation was there than to return to the virtual world that had become his greatest obsession when he wasn't data-mining and to which he must be its most frequent visitor, at least within the confines of the Godwin colony.

Everyone on Godwin had access to the countless virtual worlds in the Solar System, given the constraint that the colony was several hours' transmission from Earth orbit where most such universes were devised and from which they were broadcast. Most people only dipped into these virtual worlds on an irregular basis, if at all. But Paul was an addict. He'd lived a substantial slice of his life in virtual space

ever since he was a moody reclusive teenager and this was a habit he'd never been able to shake. The virtual universe he'd stayed most loyal to and which consumed the highest proportion of his waking life was the obscure but still intermittently enhanced Nudeworld.

What it was about this particular virtual world that captivated him, Paul didn't know. His psychoanalyst, on the few occasions he saw her, told him that it was a critical key to his personality and asked him many questions about his fixation on a virtual universe that was nothing more than a representation of the 33rd century, when it was first launched, different only in that nobody wore clothes.

"It's the delicious oddity of it," he explained.

"Odd, it certainly is," Dr. Mkose agreed. "But to follow the same game for over sixty years and in a universe so different from today: that's what's most strange. If nudity is your kick, and there are no laws proscribing it, then why not pursue it for real? What's so great about a time five centuries ago when Godwin hadn't yet been founded and when capitalist economies had their last renaissance after centuries of obsolescence? It just seems bizarre."

"I like the way that century harked back to the early days of the industrial revolution, from Adam Smith to the days before climate change dramatically changed the Earth's economy for the next few centuries. It was an exciting time when stock markets opened again, when people took to wearing blue jeans and listened to ancient music like dubstep, opera and jazz, and when there was a craze for two-dimensional visual entertainment."

"Exciting it might have been," said the psychoanalyst, "but it was

retrospective even then. Wouldn't it be better to actually engage in a virtual world set in the actual time that was celebrated? Why not enter a world of traffic chaos, nuclear bombs and rising sea levels, rather than its later idealised shadow?"

"I don't know," Paul sadly admitted. "I guess I'm less attracted to the reality of those days than its later reflection. Rather like the United States of America was an idealised vision of Classical Rome and Greece, or the way Neo-Communist Canada was to the Soviet Union, the later manifestation was somehow rather better than the original."

Dr. Mkose had no opinion on such socio-political musing. Her brief was to understand why Paul should find consolation in an imaginary world rather than the real one around him. Obviously, she couldn't tell him that his chosen leisure-time activity was in any way wrong. That would be wholly out of step with the anarchosyndicalist ideology of Godwin (although disagreeing with the colony's ideology was also perfectly acceptable). It was Paul's mental health that was her concern. She could have analysed the data on his neuron chart but hers was a profession that would only describe behaviour as abnormal or unbalanced if it caused Paul any visible distress. And this, it was clear to everyone, was not the case.

Whether she liked it or not, Paul wasn't unhappy with his chosen lifestyle and immersing himself in the real world wasn't going to make him any happier.

When he got home, almost the first thing Paul did was step into his virtual portal, let it strap him in and then surrender his consciousness to the artificial constructs that had been devised so many centuries before he was born.

"Awake at last!" exclaimed Blanche, his virtual lover in this bizarre universe.

“You’ve been dozing for days.”

Paul nodded. Like so many avatars in this capitalist-engendered universe almost the first thing she said was a reprimand that he’d neglected his obligation to return to this virtual world. Perhaps in the days when such virtual worlds were associated with economic indicators (as they still were for a quarter of the Solar System’s population) it had been necessary to build consumer loyalty to the product. In Godwin, it was a quaint relic of an age when such things were thought important.

One way of knowing whether the avatar you interacted with was real or simply a programmatic construct was by observing his or her sleeping habits. Real people tended to drop in and out of wakefulness in Nudeworld according to their real life commitments. Only the truly obsessed, at a level far greater than even Paul, could engage in this world for a full waking day. The virtual avatars, however, had a much more predictable rhythm. If they possessed anything other than an artificial intelligence they might have found it strange to observe people in their midst who came into wakefulness at irregular intervals and stayed awake for barely two or three hours. There were many people dozing in Nudeworld, especially as its popularity in the Solar System waned, as sleep was the designated state of anyone who wasn’t currently active.

“You look lovely today, Blanche,” said Paul as he admired his lover of so many years. And indeed she did. Although she was an artificial construct that could have looked exactly as perfect as Paul would like, she was designed to appear natural to someone from the 33rd century. People in those days had rather less sophisticated regenerative surgery at their disposal. Her skin had slight imperfections, her teeth

were ever so slightly uneven and her eyes were slightly too far apart.

But Paul loved her.

In truth he loved her more than any real woman he had ever known. She was also, of course, naked. Everyone was naked in Nudeworld: however absurd and impractical it might seem. There were real communities within the Solar System—apparently growing in number—who practised naturism as a way of life, but Paul never expected he'd ever be able to visit such places for real. The Solar System had a huge extent and space travel was a luxury few people in Godwin had the opportunity to enjoy, unless the expense of it was deemed to be in some way for the greater good of the colony.

“You look beautiful, too,” said Blanche with a broad grin on her face. “What do you want to do today? There’s an exhibition of paintings at the gallery. We could watch a movie. Or we could go for a walk in the park.”

All these options were rather more exciting than they sounded. In each case, the activity’s pleasure was enhanced by the fact that everyone would be unclothed. The paintings in the art gallery, for instance, might consist of paintings by real life artists such as Rembrandt, Gainsborough or Cocker identical to the originals except that not one stitch of clothing troubled the models they painted. The movie might be a classic from any era, the twentieth or the thirtieth century, and these too would be wholly nude. And as far as the voyeuristic pleasure of a walk in the park was concerned...

“All I want to do,” Paul said in a heartfelt voice, “is to make love to you.”

And this, of course, they did.

None of the women to whom he'd made love in the real world was nearly as satisfying a lover as Blanche. None of them were as uninhibited. None were as responsive to his need for love nor so unconditional and unselfish in their giving of it. The software that governed Nudeworld had actually improved the experience of lovemaking to a level that the pleasure he got from it was more addictive, more satisfying and more easily available than he'd ever found in the real life equivalent.

Blanche took his penis—a somewhat more impressive version of his real one—and slipped it into her mouth. Her hands stroked testicles that were both hard and tender in equal measure. Her head bobbed up and down as she stimulated his penis towards an erection that strained the taut muscles of his stomach and was no doubt in the same state as his real penis in the comforting grip of the virtual portal.

When he smelled Blanche's skin or nibbled her nipples or chewed at her odorous vaginal lips, these were sensations that were more real than real, as the software was designed to be. She felt so solid, so actual, so very real that Paul's pleasure was marred only by the nagging knowledge that he could never wholly forget that Blanche was in truth nothing more than an avatar in a virtual world shared across the Solar System by many millions of people.

When their lovemaking eventually progressed to full-blown fucking, which as usual was after about ten minutes, this itself was a pleasure that exceeded anything in Paul's real life. His only regret was that he'd been so busy recently at the university in the throes of research that he'd neglected Nudeworld for so long. The strong odour of sex that assailed Paul's nostrils was so perfectly simulated that the real smell of sex seemed paltry in comparison.

Blanche was an energetic lover given to cries of ecstasy in response to Paul's relentless pounding and who didn't mind at all when, following the convention of virtual world sex, he followed vaginal sex with the anal variety and climaxed by ejaculating on her face and mouth. Very few women in real life enjoyed such a routine in their romantic conjugations, but here in virtual space there wasn't a single woman who didn't accept this as the fulfilling climax of a session of carnal pleasure.

"Now what shall we do?" asked Blanche with semen still dripping down and off her chin. "Do you want to make love again?"

In one sense Paul did, but he'd exerted himself so much that he wasn't sure his real life counterpart could cope with the strain. The feedback mechanism of the virtual portal ensured that his energy levels and vital requirements could never be neglected. In the first few centuries of virtual world simulations, there'd been many celebrated incidents of people who'd starved to death by remaining in the virtual world for longer than their biological functions could cope. Since then, the software developers had built mechanisms into cyberspace to ensure that the real people were kept fed and watered.

"I fancy a drink," said Paul. "Let's go to the pub."

There was no alcohol or drugs of any kind on Godwin. There was no law proscribing it, but like anything for which there was no perceived need there was also no corresponding supply. Here in Nudeworld, Paul could get drunk as often as he liked while knowing that there was no real life hangover to contend with and that his drunkenness would evaporate as soon as he disengaged himself from the world.

"Sounds like a good idea," said Blanche who very rarely disagreed with any of

Paul's suggestions. These had in the past taken him and Blanche up in a space ship to the nearest adjacent settlement remarkably like the one they'd just left, up a tall mountain that they ascended by an archaic helicopter, and even by boat across an ocean that was a mere three kilometres away. Going to the pub was no big deal, even though the nearest equivalent in Godwin was a fruit juice bar half a kilometre from his home. Paul's real body would gain the same sustenance as his avatar, but while he appeared to be chewing on deep-fried chicken wings and hamburgers the real Paul would be chewing on rather more wholesome vegetables and fruit. While his avatar was sinking an unwholesome series of beers and vodkas, nothing alcoholic at all was being inflicted on his real-life liver.

The hundred metre walk to the Technician's Arms was a voyeur's paradise. None of the men, women or children that Paul and Blanche passed by wore any clothes. But for Paul the true oddness wasn't so much the nudity but the frozen-in-time representation of a capitalist world in what was presumably meant to be in Earth or Venus orbit. Above their heads was a rush of flying vehicles that transported people to destinations that could be more than a thousand kilometres away. There were shops with windows, although none of them were selling clothes.

In Godwin there were no shops, everyone was a pedestrian and there were no distances greater than a hundred kilometres.

Eventually, Paul and Blanche entered a pub whose doors opened to a dimly lit interior where several people were already drinking and where an androgynous android was serving drinks. Naturally, this android was naked like everyone else.

Or almost everyone else.

What startled Paul was that no one else seemed to notice this. Not even Blanche. There at the bar was sat a man who was nursing a glass of whiskey from which he took the occasional sip. This in itself was no matter of concern, but this man was fully clothed. He was dressed, in fact, in a very realistic facsimile of a twenty-second century suit, even down to the neck scarf and thick cotton trousers.

What was more startling still was that this man seemed to be old. Old people were everywhere in the 33rd century, just as much as in the 38th but they never looked old. And this man had definitely aged. He had grey hair and a lined face which framed a peculiarly wise and serene expression.

In all his life, Paul had never seen, either in the real or virtual world, anyone who looked to be more than a biological age of about twenty-nine. And this man's apparent biological age must have been at least sixty.

Chapter Three Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

“It’s beautiful here, isn’t it!” exclaimed Beatrice who squeezed Paul’s hand in hers as they walked through a park not far from their home on the Intrepid’s outermost level.

Paul squeezed her hand in return. He gazed lovingly into her eyes. What he wanted to say was that the park was nothing like as beautiful as she was, but although she was his wife and they made love so often together he still didn’t find it easy to say such things to a real woman. This was odd because he had less trouble in expressing himself so freely to the avatars in Nudeworld.

“Yes,” he said, “even if it is *very* 32nd century in style.” He was referring to the quaint statuary of naked women that were scattered between the bushes and trees in a park that evoked the baroque style of an age that celebrated geometric perfection.

“And what’s wrong with that?” remarked Beatrice as she rubbed her thumb along Paul’s knuckles. “This space ship was the ultimate in technology then and it’s still pretty advanced now. I just love the lawns, the villas and the water features. They don’t make space ships like this any more.”

Paul’s thoughts weren’t really focused on the landscape around him. He gazed fondly at his wife who was dressed as always in the bare minimum that convention allowed. She wore nothing more than a skimpy thong and plasters that covered her nipples but hid nothing of her impressive bosom. Despite the fact that so many women in this day and age had their bodies enhanced in the most peculiar and erotic ways, there was something especially beautiful and sensuous about Beatrice.

“Look at those bluebirds flying over there,” she said with a chuckle of delight.

“See how they spiral and circle around each other. Look at the butterflies on that flower bush. Aren’t they so *very* delightful?”

Another characteristic of Beatrice’s that captivated Paul was her undisguised passion for the beauties of the Solar System. It was almost as if she’d only recently discovered them.

They strolled by a copse of leafy trees where a small fallow deer had been grazing just before they approached. All this seemed so natural that it was often easy to forget that the climate was controlled from the roof not many metres above the height of the tallest trees.

“There’s no one here!” exclaimed Beatrice with delight. “We must be the only ones in the park today.”

Paul knew exactly what his wife was implying and the result pressed against the crotch of his loose rope-belted trousers. She turned to face him, her full round bosom up against his chest. She pressed an open palm over his erect penis under the fabric.

“There’s absolutely no one here,” she remarked.

Paul surrendered himself to the inevitable. They’d already made love this morning and many times during the night before but there was no limit to Beatrice’s desire for Paul’s cock. And he was equally excited by the prospect of once again entering Beatrice’s obliging vagina.

Although the grass was neither as comfortable nor as accommodating as the mattress in their marital bed, there was a vicarious pleasure in making love in the open air. Small insects and mites scattered away while Paul thrust in deep and hard,

all their clothes discarded with the peculiar exception of Beatrice's nipple-plasters. However much Paul enjoyed his liaisons with Blanche, there was something special about making love to a real woman. The sensations of Beatrice's warm perspiring body might not have the hyperreal qualities of Paul's virtual lover (to whom making love now seemed rather like infidelity), but the human sensation of her flesh and the less absolute tightness of her vaginal grip enhanced rather than distracted from Paul's pleasure.

Although Beatrice would have been quite happy if their lovemaking culminated in anal sex and facial ejaculation, it seemed more natural to Paul to release his semen inside her and for the couple to lie down together on the grass under the sheltering shadow of an apple tree. The warmth in the air was generated from the ship's engines. The slight breeze that cooled the lovers' bodies came from the ship's revolutions.

"I love you," said Paul, who was only able to express the emotions that raged inside him when he was in a state of post-coitus. "I love you *so* much!"

"I know," said Beatrice as she peppered his face with kisses. "And I love you too!"

Even now Paul wasn't convinced. How could a woman so skilled in the ways of love, who could and, in fact, once did make love to anyone she chose, be in love with someone like him? He was such a social inadequate who relied rather more than he'd care to admit on his wife's sophisticated social skills when in mixed company. Just what was it that made her love him so much?

"Excuse me," said a voice from a few metres ahead of them. "I hate to

interrupt but the captain has requested that I come to fetch you. She would like to see you in her office.”

Paul turned his gaze upwards, suddenly ashamed of his nudity. This wasn’t a characteristic he shared with Beatrice who made no attempt to hide her crotch. A trickle of recently ejaculated semen was still visible on the inside of her open thighs.

The voice belonged to Colonel Vashti, who was one of the military officers stationed on the Intrepid. She was dressed in an army uniform that Paul thought made her look more, rather than less, sexy, although she was much more handsome and muscular than pretty. She was a tall brown-skinned woman with a bosom much the same size as Beatrice’s. Her khaki uniform was pulled tight around her waist and her similarly tight leggings trailed from the puff of her waist to just above her knees.. Her face exhibited a curious mix of racial identities that suggested Asian ancestry. Her lips were full. Her cheeks were high. And her long jet black hair was tied back in a plait down her back. Although undoubtedly a woman, she had a slightly masculine bearing.

She stood in front of the pair and betrayed no sign of embarrassment. Although her home on Mars was most famous for its military culture, perhaps it was also sexually liberal.

Beatrice strapped her thong about her waist while Paul took rather more time to fight his way back into his underpants, trousers and loose shirt. He wished he’d known sooner that this summons would come so that he could dress more formally, but he knew such concerns wouldn’t bother Beatrice.

The lovers walked with the colonel towards the nearest portal which was just

beside an open-air swimming pool several hundred metres away. The colonel's strides were so long that Beatrice had to run to catch up with her.

"So, it's Mars you come from," she said to the colonel. "Is it true that the whole planet is at war?"

"Almost the whole planet," Colonel Vashti said with a sad smile. "My nation, Agathadaemon, belongs to the Mariner States Union and we've been in a state of war with the Polar States and their colonies for several centuries now. The conflict is as intense now as it's ever been."

"Isn't it appropriate that the planet named after the God of War should be the most warlike in the Solar System?"

"Appropriate, maybe," Colonel Vashti agreed. "But probably also unavoidable. The planet was the first to be properly colonised back in the 22nd and 23rd centuries. In those days, Earth was governed by nation states that employed their military for hazardous missions in space. So it's no surprise that the governments that came to dominate Mars should be of a military nature."

Paul caught up with the two women. "I've never been to Mars," he said. "It must be weird to live on a planet with such low gravity."

"It is only a matter of what you get used to," the colonel remarked. "My home is on the surface of a planet rather than inside a hollow cylinder. It's just as peculiar to live with your head under an artificial ceiling and with your feet facing outwards to the emptiness of outer space."

They entered a circular pod whose doors slid open both vertically and horizontally. Inside were chairs, a low table and a holographic wall display that

showed whatever the passengers might choose but which was now displaying a view of the space outside. The doors slid close behind them when they sat down and a voice in a slightly archaic 32nd century accent asked them where they wanted to go.

It was dangerous for any free moving object to travel fast within the confines of the space ship. The journey took long enough for Paul to admire the view of deep space, while Beatrice chatted to the colonel about Martian customs.

It was less than two weeks since Paul and Beatrice had arrived on board the Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid. It had taken well over a month to travel from the Solar System's ecliptic plane to dock after travelling in a series of rather smaller and less well-appointed space craft. None had sufficient space for forests, lakes or luxury villas. At the start of their journey, it was the planet Earth and the Moon that first vanished to dot-like proportions behind them, but now the Sun itself was getting steadily smaller. It was still by far the brightest object in space and appeared to be many times larger than it was from the far distant Godwin colony.

The many concentric levels of the space ship revolved around each other at different rates to maintain a force of one standard gravity on their surfaces. There was no direct link from one level to another except at the transparent interconnecting posts spaced half a kilometre apart. These moved constantly in relation to the ground and were the most hazardous objects on the space ship. The pod carried the passengers through a series of tubes in the floor space between the levels and didn't stop or pause until it reached its destination. And this was at the heart of the space ship where the captain and crew were stationed.

This was the section of the Intrepid that most resembled the majority of space

ships that flew across the Solar System. It was generally utilitarian in design and made no attempt to be like the space colonies where most people in the Solar System lived. The captain's office was surrounded by an extensive network of rooms with relatively low ceilings interconnected by corridors. This would once have accommodated a ship's crew of several thousand people, but modern technology had reduced the number of necessary human staff to a fraction of that number. On this mission, however, it now also housed a few thousand military personnel.

Captain Kerensky was probably well over a hundred years old but she looked exactly as old as everyone else. She was a slender woman, with pale freckled skin and a totally shaven head. Despite her rank and official bearing Paul was immediately attracted to her. However inappropriate it might seem, a woman in uniform held a bizarre sexual fascination for him. This was probably because in Godwin there was no institution such as the military and nobody ever wore a uniform of any kind.

The captain wore the livery of a space officer of the Socialist Republics of Saturn. This was pale purple, tight around her bosom and buttoned up to her throat. Like Colonel Vashti her trousers tapered to above her knees to display her calves and smart functional shoes. She was standing as the colonel escorted the two civilians into her office. She extended a hand towards Paul, who had only recently learnt about this peculiar custom of shaking hands that was still practised throughout much of the Solar System. He shook it with none of the captain's firmness of grip, unlike Beatrice who showed once again her skill at adapting to the customs of other cultures, (even though she didn't understand the conventions of modesty that some cultures insisted on).

“It's a splendid ship, captain,” Beatrice said. “You must be very proud to be

its commander.”

“It is,” said Captain Kerensky agreeably. “It was a wonder of its time. In fact, at one time it was the flagship of the Interplanetary Union. We were lucky that any long-distance ship was available at all and fortunate indeed that it should be such a venerable vessel.”

“Would none of the more modern vehicles have done?” wondered Paul. This thought had troubled him ever since he’d first passed through its quaintly old-fashioned entrance port.

“None could be taken out of service given the short notice,” said the captain. “But let’s not stand on ceremony. Please sit down.” She gestured towards some leather sofas and waited until everyone else was seated until she also sat down.

Like everything else in the room, the furniture was chosen to suggest authority and status. This was rather wasted on Paul who still didn’t understand its significance. Everything was just a little more splendid than it needed to be: from the thick carpet to the mahogany desk and to the massive holographic display of the constellations that towered above and behind the desk.

“It’s true that a more modern ship might have been better equipped,” said the captain, “but there aren’t that many ships circling the Solar System in this plane at any one time. And there are even fewer that can survive without being restocked for as long as this will have to. Space ships such as these were originally designed as a prototype for interstellar travel.”

“And can’t they do that now?” Beatrice asked. “Surely this has everything you need to get to the next stellar system in comfort.”

“It will take us three years to get beyond the Heliosphere and we’d still only be a fraction of the distance required to get to, say, Proxima Centauri. That would be a colossal cost for a one-way journey with no foreseeable economic benefit for hundreds of years. Only an optimistic century like the 32nd could contemplate such extravagant expenditure that was well in excess of the economic turnover of most states or colonies within the Solar System. Even a socialist republic such as mine would find it difficult to argue for the benefits given the time it would take to recoup the expense.”

“Surely the wealth of knowledge alone would make it worthwhile?” argued Beatrice.

“We’ve sent enough interstellar probes over the centuries to answer that question,” said the captain with an amused smile. “There’s more than enough to handle in one Solar System. Unless you could cut the communication time to rather less than that determined by the speed of light and reduce the times to arrive to less than a lifetime, I can’t believe that any government—whether capitalist, anarchist or socialist—could take such a huge gamble at so much cost for so little gain.”

Captain Kerensky paused to signal that she’d imparted all the wisdom on economics and politics she was willing to give.

“The Intrepid is full of army personnel, as you know,” said the captain. “They’ve been dragooned from all corners of the Solar System: from Mercury to Uranus, from the Kuiper to the Asteroid Belt, from moons, planets and space colonies of every kind. A multinational force of this size of nature hasn’t been gathered together under the command of the Interplanetary Union for decades. You’d expect

such a substantial effort to have a fairly well-defined end. This might be for peace-keeping, or it might just be for show. The endeavour for which I've been given the privilege of being captain isn't like that at all. Amongst the thousands of passengers on this ship there are fewer than a thousand civilians and most of those are scientists. And then, Paul Morris of the tiny Godwin anarchosyndicalist colony, there is you."

The captain paused for effect.

"Why are *you* on an expedition to beyond the Solar System in a direction to where we know there are no planetoids or asteroids? What is the purpose of *your* passage on the Intrepid?"

"Don't you know?" asked Paul, who assumed that the captain above all would have the answer to a question that still plagued him.

"Beyond minimal instructions that you should be afforded customary care and attention, nothing at all," admitted the captain. "And, of course, that such courtesy should extend equally to your delightful wife, Beatrice Canopus. Such a lovely name!"

She smiled at Beatrice with rather more warmth than she did Paul. His near naked wife was curled close to her husband, an arm over his shoulder and a hand clasping his.

The captain addressed Paul again. "You are, no doubt, under instruction to keep secret whatever role you have in this mission. I shall make no effort to extract from you why you're here, but I'll admit that it troubles me and no doubt the other officers on this ship. From what you know, can you tell me whether you expect there to be a military engagement on this voyage? Is there anything you can tell me about

our destination in the middle of as much nowhere as it is possible to travel within three years?"

These were yet other questions which were not asked that troubled Paul at least as much as they did the captain. It wasn't the first time since he'd left the relative comfort of Godwin that he'd felt like an utter fraud. Paul was nervous. What could he say? He was at least comforted by the fact that his very real ignorance would almost certainly be interpreted as convincing subterfuge.

"I don't know the answer to any of your questions," he replied. "My specialist discipline is data mining. I try to make sense of data that is freely available and has often been around for millennia rather than centuries. I'm sure there's someone who has a good idea why the Interplanetary Union is going through all this trouble and expense, but that person isn't me."

"Well, you *would* say that," said the captain with a sigh. "I apologise for trying to break your cover. But be aware that I disapprove of being engaged on a mission with such an ill-defined purpose. It isn't fair on the service personnel of whom I'm in command and it isn't fair on the passengers of the space ship whose safety and security is my paramount concern. You do appear to be a key person in all this and I still don't understand why. Are we hunting aliens? You must be aware that there are few people on this ship who don't believe we're going to be privileged with the first ever encounter with an alien intelligence."

"I've thought that, too," said Paul. "But no one's yet come across any convincing proof that they exist. The only evidence we've had of alien life so far has been microbial and not very inspiring."

“Don’t I know it!” exclaimed the captain, who’d lived on one of the few parts of the Solar System where extraterrestrial life was known to exist. And very unimpressive it was too. Ever since it had been proved that there was indeed life on Mars and that it was never more than a few microns in width, all subsequent discoveries of alien life had been fairly disappointing. Except, that is, to those who were excited by microbes.

Captain Kerensky decided that she’d learnt all she was likely to from her interrogation and steered the conversation onto more mundane matters.

“I trust that you’ll enjoy your stay on board the Intrepid,” she said. “There are many delights on offer that I don’t know whether you’ve yet sampled. There’s a beautiful waterfall garden on level 17. There’s a holodeck on level 23, but it *is* very 32nd century and the virtualisation is very retro. However, as a kind of archaeologist you might quite like that sort of thing. The crew on the Intrepid are organising some entertainments and sports which you are welcome to either participate in or watch.”

There was no way that the captain could convincingly paint the voyage as a pleasure cruise, but Paul appreciated her attempt. He was pleased that he was being looked after, but all he really wanted was to spend time with his wife and, when not with her, back in the comforting embrace of Virtual Reality. Sport had never interested him. Most art and entertainment passed him by. And it was unlikely that, with the transmission gap between the space ship and the rest of the Solar System increasing with every day, that he could satisfactorily conduct any meaningful research.

Paul rather expected Colonel Vashti to escort him and Beatrice back to the

outermost level, but it was actually a Saturnian corporal who had that honour. He had painted nails and thick lipstick and was rather more amiable towards Paul than he was comfortable with. Saturnians were famous throughout the Solar System for their sexual predilections, but Paul had never contemplated anything other than a heterosexual lifestyle.

“So, what do you think?” Captain Kerensky asked the colonel when they were alone.

“Probably much the same as you,” Colonel Vashti admitted.

The captain sighed. She was genuinely concerned about the welfare of the people in her care. Whatever dangers she and her ship were to encounter she’d be happier if she had a better idea of what they might be.

“Paul’s wife is an entrancing woman,” she continued. “He’s a very lucky man. She doesn’t seem like the sort of person I’d imagine would come from Godwin. What do you know about her?”

“Very little,” admitted the colonel. “She seems harmless enough. If she wasn’t married to the Godwinian and if he wasn’t considered vital to the mission, I doubt very much that she’d be on this ship.”

“Is it true that she was once a prostitute on Ecstasy?”

“The records are very sketchy on exactly what her profession used to be. All we know for sure is that she used to live there. And if there’s anywhere in the Solar System whose records are less than adequate, it would be Ecstasy.”

“Indeed!”

The two paused, but there was a tangible excitement in Captain Kerensky’s

breath. Her gaze embraced Colonel Vashti from her crotch to her bosom.

“Shall we retire to my quarters?” she said at last.

“Gladly.”

It was a short walk down the corridor to Captain Kerensky’s palatial suite. When the ship was built such a space would have seemed appropriate for a captain, but Nadezhda Kerensky was sufficiently imbued with the egalitarian ideals of her culture to find it rather overblown.

As soon as the door closed on the two women, they stumbled into the captain’s bedroom. They pulled off one another’s clothes with passion in every faltering step, their lips pressed together and their hands around each other in the rising heat of mutual passion.

“I’m still not sure about this!” exclaimed Captain Kerensky as she pulled down her underwear to reveal a crotch as shaven as her head.

“I don’t see why not. You’ve been married many times before.”

“And divorced as often. Married life and being captain of a space ship in the Kuiper Belt don’t mix very well. But it’s the sex that bothers me.”

“Because we’re both officers?”

“Where else can I find passion? My ex-wives were all I really needed, but none of them could stand the loneliness of such long separation.”

“So what is the problem?” asked the colonel as she revealed her own shaven crotch.

“*This is!*” said the captain. “It’s not something I’ve ever known so well before.”

Captain Kerensky held up the colonel's fully erect penis by the testicles in the cup of her hands.

"This was just not what I ever expected from the woman I love!" she exclaimed, but nonetheless licked her lips in anticipation from the pleasure it would give her.

Chapter Four

Godwin - 3749 C.E.

Once again Paul had failed to notice the time passing while he'd been working in the laboratory. He couldn't be at all sure when he glanced at the clock on the wall with its antiquated twelve-hour period clock whether it was ten o'clock in the evening or ten o'clock in the morning. It would be a trivial matter to find out for sure, of course, but he somehow rather liked being in ignorance.

All around him and scattered on the tables and floor was a bizarre array of mostly archaic computer hardware, much of it almost as antique as the first ever electronic timepiece. And what wasn't held in peculiar beige boxes or crunched into opaque cylinders of semi-conducting metals or nanotubes was accessible by exotic connection devices to machines stored elsewhere in the university. It was often joked that Paul was proprietor of the most extensive museum of ancient computer technology in the Kuiper Belt, and although this wasn't totally true (there was a rather more extensive one on the Dawkins colony), this collection did at least have more than curatorial value to Paul.

None of the ancient hardware Paul had assembled had real value as antiques. They were all facsimiles assembled on Godwin from templates purchased from the virtual emporia in the Solar System that specialised in such peculiar interests as Paul's. One of his greatest pleasures, in fact, was to log in to any one of these remotely based emporia. There was a convincing rendition of an antediluvian warehouse of the kind that once served as retail outfits in the long distant age of profligate vehicular transport when such places were located many kilometres away

from wherever anyone actually lived. Paul would spend many happy hours studying ancient kit that was sometimes equipped with long copper cables and noisy fans. And here in his laboratory he was surrounded by exact copies of these electronic devices that operated at pitifully slow processing rates, measurable in gigabytes and gigahertz rather than the more familiar yottabytes and yottahertz used by information scientists in the 38th century.

Although Paul had already published the preliminary findings of his research, there was still much more work required on the massive volume of data he'd discovered of the mysterious anomaly whose existence he'd located in the first few centuries of the third millennium. He was convinced that he'd stumbled onto something very noteworthy. So much so that he imagined it might even be the springboard into more detailed archaeological research of other ancient mysteries.

"Don't you ever get any sleep?" asked Professor Hofstadter who wandered into the laboratory and startled Paul out of his reverie. "You've been here for days!"

"It's just so absorbing," Paul admitted. "I've just been studying some data from the late twentieth century. They're difficult to decipher as the data's stored on an array of proprietary hardware that uses several different encoding standards, but I think there's conclusive proof of government research into deep space anomalies at that time."

"Fascinating," said the professor, who was a man even more careless of his health and appearance than Paul. He had so often postponed his regenerative treatment that there were lines cracking around his eyes like crows' feet and his skin was beginning to look unhealthily fragile. "However, there's a report of a situation in

your lab that's causing the security systems some concern. I'm sure it's nothing, but I thought I'd mention it to you."

"What kind of situation?" Paul asked with alarm. Normally his research attracted no attention from anyone at all and he was convinced that only a few eccentrics in the Solar System ever read any of his countless publications.

"I'm not sure I really know," the professor admitted. "I've got the holograms here, so you can see what the security cameras saw and draw your own conclusions."

Professor Hofstadter sat in a hoverchair just by Paul's and invoked a holographic film image that showed Paul huddled over an antique flat screen with the rest of the laboratory behind him. All of a sudden there was a flurry of movement as lights flickered on the machinery about the office and several apparently random items shifted about. And then, after less than ten seconds it was over.

"A gust of wind? A malfunction in the climate control systems? A fault in the computers' primitive processing systems?" speculated Paul.

"You'd think so, wouldn't you?" said the professor. "But when played at a slower frame rate, there does seem to be something methodical about it." He played the sequence again, this time at such a slow rate that the ten seconds stretched out to nearly half an hour. Neither Paul nor the professor had the time or patience to watch more than a fraction of it but it did appear that an invisible force was carefully examining a range of equipment, picking up discs and crystals and then putting them down. There was even an uncomfortable few microseconds where there was a flurry of slow-motion activity just by Paul's shoulder. "You didn't notice anything, did you?"

Paul shook his head. “It’s weird. Perhaps it’s just one of these bizarre apparitions you hear about. Like that unicorn on Venus. Or that floating monolith in Jupiter orbit. Just one of those peculiar things that no one knows what they are.”

“Maybe,” said the professor thoughtfully. “But why should such a thing happen in your laboratory? It *is* after all the same kind of weird thing you’re doing research into. Could there be a connection, do you think?”

“I don’t see how. What I’m studying happened over fifteen hundred years ago. And whatever it was, there doesn’t seem to be any record of anything after about 2367 C.E. It sort of just disappears from the records at that point.”

“And just what is this anomaly you’re researching, Paul?”

“I’m not sure. It’s somewhere off the ecliptic plane. And scientists in those days didn’t have the means to get a close look at it.”

“They had some fairly high resolution telescopes, didn’t they? They were able to identify exoplanets by the start of the 21st century and telescopes got steadily more powerful over those centuries.”

“It was all hypotheses. No one had a real idea. There was a lot of debate about whether it was a natural phenomenon or some kind of alien intelligence. They never got a precise handle on it.”

“And then it just vanished, I guess?” asked the professor.

“As far as I know.”

“Well, it’s possible that what was observed was just a strange coincidence and nothing more,” Professor Hofstadter remarked. “However, keep alert and don’t be surprised if Systems Security gets a little more intrusive. There have been a few

apparitions reported near Godwin lately—nothing at all as bizarre as those reported elsewhere in the Solar System—and inevitably the syndicates are beginning to get worried. There *are* people in the Solar System who for various ideological reasons would dearly like to see the economic and social failure of a colony based on anarchist principles. The very existence of a corner of the Solar System that doesn't use money and doesn't have a government is a kind of affront to them. So we must remain alert, although there's no evidence at the moment that there's anything specific to be alarmed about."

"I'll report anything I see," said Paul.

"That's if you ever take your eyes off from your work for more than ten minutes!" remarked the professor. "Look. You *must* take a break. Go home. Get some sleep. It'll do you a power of good."

Paul nodded. His concentration had already been fatally disrupted. "I'll do just that. I'm not sure I was getting very far with what I was doing anyway."

However, after a deep and rather long sleep in his own bed, Paul didn't feel inclined to return to the lab. When he was away from the lab, the pull of research was less compulsive and he now just wanted to escape from it all. And where better to retreat than back to Nudeworld.

"Goodness!" said Blanche on his return. "You certainly *do* like to sleep!"

She wasn't referring to the Paul's real-life sleeping habits of but to his absence from the virtual world. Paul inevitably felt guilty for having been absent for so long, as he always did. How could he have been so thoughtless to his virtual lover? He made up for it, of course. And after so many weeks of celibacy, his carnal desires

required a great deal of compensation. And Blanche showed just as much undying love for him now as she had when he was last in Nudeworld.

“What shall we do now?” asked Blanche, while Paul’s virtual semen dripped down her chin and onto her abundant chest.

“I think we should visit the Technician’s Arms again,” said Paul. “I’d love a drink.”

“What an excellent idea!” Blanche exclaimed who, unlike real-life women of Paul’s acquaintance, was immediately ready to leave.

It was dusk in Nudeworld, although it was just after midday in Godwin. The ancient rhythms of this virtual world were wholly independent from those set on the colony which, for historical reasons, were synchronised with a diurnal sequence known as Eastern Standard Time. When Paul was younger, he’d assumed it had something to do with the Earth’s Orient and was disappointed to discover that it was related to the daily cycle of the eastern seaboard of the North American continent.

The reason Paul wanted to revisit the bar was that he’d been wondering whether he might see once more that strange avatar of an old man. It was unlikely, of course. If the avatar belonged to a real person the probability of that person visiting Nudeworld at the same time and in the same place as Paul was extremely small. However, Paul was oddly gratified to see the avatar sitting exactly where he’d been the last time Paul visited Nudeworld. He was sat on the same barstool chatting to a naked barmaid and appeared to be drinking from exactly the same glass of red wine.

In the real world and in the distant past, the sight of a fully-clothed man who exhibited the signs of a biological age that Paul guessed to be something like fifty or

sixty years wouldn't have attracted anyone's attention. But here in a bar with half a dozen nude people all perfectly proportioned and totally unconcerned about their nakedness, this was a peculiar sight indeed. Furthermore, in such a real world Paul would never have the courage to approach a complete stranger as he did now. Nor would he have been so careless as to leave his lover unattended for any length of time without a drink or other distraction.

"Hello," Paul said boldly to the gentleman and sat down on the antiquated barstool beside him. "I've seen you here before. What's your name?"

Paul had never been very good at introducing himself but in Nudeworld his unsubtlety was never remarked on.

"Well, good evening," said the gentleman in a well-articulated voice. "It's Paul, isn't it? My name's Virgil. Like the Roman poet celebrated by Dante. It's a pleasure to meet you. Can I get you a drink?"

"Erm," said Paul who usually just asked for a beer but was sure he should demonstrate rather more sophistication. "I'll have what you're having."

"A Merlot, then," said Virgil, gesturing towards the barmaid who nodded in reply and poured out another glass of the peculiar red liquid. "Excellent choice."

"You're an avatar of a real person, aren't you?" asked Paul. "You're not just a virtual person. You're real."

"Well, I most certainly feel real," said Virgil with a smile. He picked up his glass and chinked it against Paul's. "Cheers."

"But I mean really real," persisted Paul. "Where do you come from?"

"What a question!" Virgil exclaimed. His face crinkled in an amused smile

that seemed appropriate on a face that wasn't nearly as bland as that of most people Paul met in virtual space. "Like you, I come from outside the borders of Nudeworld. But whether I'm *real* in the sense that you're *real* is a truly metaphysical question. How real is real? Isn't your delightful friend *real*?" He smiled at Blanche who was sitting patiently at a table, wholly unconcerned at being unceremoniously ignored. "And the avatar you inhabit in Nudeworld? Doesn't that seem *real* too?"

Paul frowned. This wasn't the sort of discussion he normally had in Nudeworld. Nor for that matter in Godwin. Philosophy wasn't his area of proficiency.

"When I say 'real,'" Paul persisted, "I mean that you have an independent existence beyond Nudeworld."

"Well, I most certainly have," smiled the gentleman. "But enough of me. Tell me about yourself, Paul. Where do you come from? What do you do? Or are you like so many people one meets in Nudeworld whose life beyond is a mere shadow of their life in this delightful, but utterly eccentric, universe?"

Paul was more than happy to talk about himself. His opportunities for doing so in Godwin were very limited as most people got visibly bored by the tendency his conversation had of becoming just another unending monologue. He wasn't especially adept at social interaction at the best of times. But Virgil showed no sign of boredom as Paul recounted his recent visits to the computer emporium whose physical base was somewhere in the Asteroid Belt and appeared to be fascinated by Paul's digression into the obscure operating systems extant in earlier centuries.

Although Virgil must have been an avatar (who wasn't, after all?) he seemed bizarrely more corporeal than an avatar should be. His eyes were a sparkling pale blue

that maintained a steady gaze. His clothes were rendered in fabulously intricate detail and yet there was nothing remotely ostentatious about them. Paul decided that the real Virgil must be using a very advanced plug-in to emulate himself in Nudeworld.

“So tell me, Paul,” said Virgil after a while, holding up a glass that however much he supped from never got any less full. “Do you ever have that feeling that you’re at the centre of the universe and that everything around you interacts with you for a purpose?”

“It’s not a question I’ve ever considered.”

“It’s something that’s engaged philosophers for millennia. How much do you know? Just how much of your life is pure accident? How much has already been determined? Have you never thought that everything you’ve ever known, whether in Godwin or Nudeworld, is there for your benefit and yours alone?”

“Never.”

“Solipsism it’s called,” Virgil continued. “It’s a kind of egocentric view of the world. And do you really believe the universe continues without you when you’re dead?”

“Of course it does,” Paul replied. “What else could happen?”

“You tell me,” Virgil smiled. “Can you be sure of even something as simple as that? When you ask me if I’m real, perhaps you should also ask whether anything anywhere is real. Perhaps *nothing* is real. Except you, of course.”

“What a mad idea!” Paul exclaimed, already looking forward to the relative comfort of the concrete, unmistakeable reality of the Godwin colony and the things that were so certain to him there.

However, he didn't really want to leave the delectable Blanche quite so soon so he decided to tarry a little longer in Nudeworld. In any case, he'd noticed an advertisement for an all-woman netball match which he thought he'd like to see. It wasn't that he was particularly keen on netball, or any other sport for that matter, but for the same guilty reason as he rather enjoyed the kinkiness of a world of totally nudity he was attracted by the prospect of watching naked women running around a netball pitch in only their shoes. Not surprisingly, Blanche, who'd never before expressed any enthusiasm for the sport, was more than willing to accompany him to the stadium.

It was more than a day later when Paul at last disengaged himself from the pleasures of Nudeworld and, feeling slightly bruised and groggy, returned to the real world. The first thing he had to address was the ravenous hunger that the food he'd eaten in Nudeworld hadn't fully satisfied.

It was several days later that Paul at last decided to drag himself away from the lazy pleasures of home life and return to the lab. However much he enjoyed immersing himself in work, he also loved the luxury of doing nothing very much at all. He was sure he could do something more constructive with his spare time, but Godwin wasn't a large colony and he'd more or less exhausted every sightseeing possibility in his eighty years there.

It was a pleasantly warm day, as every day was, and Paul was determined to make an effort towards addressing his lack of exercise. He chose to walk to the university by a slightly circuitous route through Erewhon Park. This was one of many parks that helped to generate the ecological balance that was vital to the colony's

survival. It was large enough to hold two square kilometres of tropical jungle, a pleasing array of artworks and several park benches on which he could rest to prolong his walk. Paul wanted to feel fully relaxed before he once again tackled the intricate algorithms he was devising to extract what he wanted from all those petabytes of ASCII and EBCDIC data.

“Well, goodness!” said Professor Hofstadter who was seated on a hoverstool outside the main doors to the university and had evidently been waiting for him. “Your timing was impeccable. You couldn’t have chosen a better time to be away.”

The professor wasn’t given to sarcasm, so Paul understood that his comments were meant kindly and humorously. He also guessed that they must have been said to prepare him for some important news. It was a long time since anything much had happened at the university and on the last occasion that was when one of the nanotechnologists’ experiments had gone badly wrong and an enormous swarm of nanobots had to be exterminated. Since their coding was to fluff up woollen clothing this was a fairly benign threat to anyone who wasn’t wearing wool, but a considerable nuisance to those who did.

“What’s happened this time?” Paul asked. “Nothing serious I hope.”

“Well, I’m afraid it is. And what’s worse, it’s directly affected your lab and, I’m sorry to say this, your research.”

Acts of terrorism, though rare, were not unknown in the Godwin’s history. After all, the foundations of anarchism were not unconnected with such acts in its earliest history. Consequently, the syndicates were generally relaxed about it and accepted that such things were inevitable in a community of several million people.

However, this particular incident wasn't quite like any that had ever happened before.

Paul studied the holographic film of the incident over and over again, first when it was shown to him by the professor and many more times later when he was summoned to the chambers of the Godwin's Security Syndicate.

A woman had wandered into Paul's laboratory, which in itself was unremarkable. Not one corner of the colony was out of bounds to anyone. This was more as a matter of principle than because everywhere in the colony was especially safe or habitable. There were plenty of incidents of people being mauled by lions in the game reserves or getting lost in the huge airless zones in the colony's engine rooms. But what was remarkable and had caused the closure of a substantial proportion of the university was that within less than a minute of the woman entering the lab, she suddenly disintegrated into an explosive cloud of smoke and flame that took with her the whole of the room and its contents. The explosion blew holes through the walls that spread the havoc to the adjacent rooms and laboratories. And not quite immediately but soon enough the ceiling collapsed and a pile of fresh rubble fell into Paul's lab from the floor above.

Before she blew herself up, the woman opened up her arms in an open embrace and uttered some words that Paul couldn't quite make out and certainly didn't understand.

"Was it Chinese? German? I just don't know," asked Paul when he at last got to meet the Chief Security Advisor in the Dean's office.

"It was Arabic," said the Chief Security Advisor. "You're clearly not a linguist, are you?"

“So, what did she say?”

“*Allah u Akhbar!*” said the Advisor, consulting his holographic notes. “It means ‘God is great’. It’s some kind of incantation used by the Muslim religion.”

“I didn’t know that Muslims were in the habit of killing themselves,” said Paul. “Isn’t it meant to be a fairly peaceful religion?”

“It is,” said the Dean who was sitting cross-legged on his desk. “Though there have been periods in its history when its adherents practised a kind of suicide terrorism. Most significantly in the 21st century. But even in those distant days, it wasn’t widely practised.”

“But why blow up my laboratory?” wondered Paul.

“We rather hoped you might explain that to us,” said the Dean.

Paul wasn’t really able to help either the Dean or anyone else in the long series of interrogations he underwent for the rest of the day and, as it happened, sporadically for many days and even weeks afterwards. He was as ignorant as anyone as to why his laboratory should be targeted. He didn’t experiment on live animals. His work was in no way disparaging of any religion, culture or ideology. He didn’t belong to a clandestine organisation and, as far as he knew, he had no quarrels with anyone.

“We believe you,” said a representative from the Special Operations division. His syndicate managed all external threats and these usually only extended to rogue meteorites and accidentally introduced microbes. “But it *does* seem strange. Your work appears to have excited a lot of interest from outside the colony. It *is* mostly theoretical research, isn’t it?”

“Well, nothing I’ve done has ever excited anyone’s interest before,” admitted

Paul. “I’d always considered my research was of more historical relevance than being especially pertinent for the 38th Century.”

“Well, you’ve done precious little research on any period after the 26th century, that’s for sure,” agreed the Special Operations Officer. “You’re sure you don’t recognise the poor misguided woman who killed herself?”

“I’m not aware of ever having met her.”

“Not in your extracurricular activity? No online interaction? No virtual dating? Nothing that might explain a grudge she might have against you or your research?”

“Nothing at all.”

“Fatima O’Leary she was called. Does the name mean anything to you?”

Paul shook his head. “I’m sure I’d remember a name like that.”

“She wasn’t christened Fatima. She was originally known as Esmeralda. She converted to Islam a couple of decades ago. The evidence we’ve gained is that she had a crisis of faith and has been in frequent communication with Islamic cells from other colonies. The one she had most contact with is the Muslim Sisterhood of New Mecca. That’s a colony in the Asteroid belt which despite its name is actually rather secular and where only a minority are accounted to have a religious faith of any kind. Of course, when it was founded fifteen hundred years ago that was a different matter, but Islam, like all religions, has become increasingly inconsequential over the centuries. You’ve never shown any interest in religion, have you? Not that there’s anything wrong with that, if you have.”

“Religion. Politics. Nothing like that has ever interested me at all.”

“That’s what we thought,” admitted the officer. “But I had to ask.”

“So, do you have any idea why Fatima killed herself?”

“I’m afraid we don’t have any concrete theories at all,” said the officer. “The most likely is that she, or rather her contacts in New Mecca, took exception to some aspect of your research. Naturally, the strict rules in Godwin on privacy and personal freedom means that we don’t have any real evidence of what that might be, but the rather less fastidious intelligence agencies on New Mecca will no doubt uncover rather more than we can. What we do know is that her communications with the colony involved the use of massively secure encryption protocols that consumed a disproportionate amount of computing power.”

“It *does* sound very mysterious.”

“Well, I must express some sympathy to you and for your research. It must be totally lost now. Everything in your laboratory was incinerated.”

“Not at all,” said Paul, holding up a data crystal. “I kept a copy of all the data.”

“You can’t have all of it in just one data crystal,” said the officer. “Those things barely hold even an exabyte of data.”

“There wasn’t that much data around in the early years of the Solar System. In fact all the data that existed on the internet, as it was called in the 21st century, was rather less than what’s required to render a single moment in virtual space. I have other copies of the data stored in off-colony repositories throughout the solar system.”

“Not very secure, is it?” remarked the officer. “Anyone could get hold of it.”

“But that’s the idea of my kind of research,” said Paul. “It’s not meant to be secret. It’s publicly available and accessible to anyone who’s got an interest in it.”

“Hmm!” said the officer with a frown. “I’m afraid that while our investigations continue that is one state of affairs that won’t be allowed to continue.”

Chapter Five Mars - 3752 C.E.

The gust of wind that blew over the red soil picked up a fistful of red dust and brushed it against Colonel Vashti's visor. Through the scattered grains, she was able to admire a landscape that was both splendidly barren and untidily littered with the detritus of war. A tank that had sunk inside a crater was weathered by wind rather than rusted by oxygen, even though it was many centuries since it had been attacked. The burnt out hulks of space craft were scattered about the cliff edges above her. They were splattered by ice that had been thrown up from the permafrost by their ancient impact. Fragments of metal and plastic were further evidence of the many battles, often fought with crazed ferocity, to claim possession of Martian soil that had never been surrendered and never securely taken.

“Oh shit!” yelled the colonel as her visor was suddenly caked with red earth that came not from the wind but from a nearby ground explosion. It was followed by another that was much closer. In fact, too close!

The world around the colonel disintegrated into fragments and a cloud of evaporated Martian soil rose in a mushroom shape directly above her head.

“Colonel! Colonel!” yelled her fellow soldiers when the pounding of missiles from over the horizon finally abated, leaving the spot where she'd been standing nothing more than a fresh crater on the scarred planet's surface. Vashti's patrol expected to find nothing more than a shattered limb or the fragments of a molten space suit.

A figure emerged from behind the shadow of the centuries-old mangled tank.

It was Colonel Vashti, her suit intact and her communications systems functioning perfectly well.

“That was close!” she said with a smile that wasn’t at all visible through the red dust that coated her visor. She strode towards her companions who were still shaken by their proximity to the carnage. “The Polar cunts must be stationed nearer than we thought.”

“The fuckers!” said Corporal Krishnamarti bitterly as he brushed the dust off his visor. “If I ever get one of those cunts within range of my phasar then there’ll be a shitload of fucking Polar corpuscles pasting the soil.”

“It couldn’t make it any more red than it already is,” Grenadier Khadija joked as she cocked her massive missile-launcher over her shoulder. “Anyway, I reckon this planet’s a lot more fucking red now than it was when the first colony was founded. We’ve been spreading this fucking hole with enough Polar corpuscles to give those Martian microbes a real feast of iron.”

Colonel Vashti strode across the Martian plain—if such a word correctly described the bounce that accompanied her step on the low gravity highlands. She held her laser rifle nozzle-downwards while crystals of Martian ice clung to her boots. Although the soldier’s space suits were as thin as modern textiles allowed, the volume of nano-particles that filled the inside shell made her seem almost obese, as it did the other soldiers. A single microscopic rip through the fabric, however tough and self-mending it was, would spell instant death for any one of them. If the low temperature wasn’t enough to kill you then the poisonous carbon dioxide atmosphere most certainly was.

“We thought you were a real goner, sir,” said Grenadier Khadija when the colonel had caught up with her patrol. “It looked like that fucking missile had done it for you.”

“It was *fucking* close, grenadier,” admitted the colonel. “But Mariner military training is second to none. No bastard missile can fucking beat that.”

“Fuck yes, sir!” agreed the sergeant. “Those Polar cunts should be shitting themselves. In fact, I bet the fuckers already are.”

The three soldiers bounced their way back across the plain, mindful that they were not yet by no means in the clear. They kept as much as they could to the shadows of the billion-year old crater edges that were still rather grander than anything thrown up by conventional weaponry. They were relieved to discover that their space shuttle was still intact. Its chameleon-like exterior had camouflaged it well against the red planet’s soil, but it was still wise to be prudent. Polar scouts would still be on the lookout for the distinctive plume of a rising space craft. Once the company was inside, Space Pilot Sadiq elevated the shuttle above the surface slowly enough to raise minimal dust disturbance.

“So much for a routine patrol!” remarked the pilot as the crew slid open their visors. “The fuckers did have to wait for today to do firing practise.”

“We really thought we were one man down,” remarked the corporal. “You were fucking lucky there, sir.”

“I guess I’ve got a charmed life, soldier,” Colonel Vashti agreed.

“You can say that again, sir,” agreed Grenadier Khadija. “I heard you were the only one who survived the Sinus Meridiani Massacre. There wasn’t a fucking scratch

on you!"

"As I said, corporal, I was just lucky."

The soldiers eventually arrived back at the welcoming protection of the Tithonium IV Dome in the Agathadaemon Colony. Here they could at last remove their space suits in the quarantine area before entering the mandatory chemical showers. They were all naked under their space suits and this was the first time that Pilot Sadiq had seen or even known of Colonel Vashti's unusual assets.

"Fucking hell, sir!" he exclaimed. "That's one big fucking cock you've got there."

Colonel Vashti held up her penis that was still slightly tumescent after the excitement of her near-death encounter. It was a splendid enough asset on a man, but especially prominent on a body that showed no other obvious sign of masculinity.

"It was a foolish mistake," she said with uncharacteristic honesty. "A long, long time ago."

"You never felt like doing something to change it, sir?" the pilot asked. "You know, return to... return to whatever you used to be?"

"I've got kind of fond of it, corporal," Colonel Vashti replied. "It's become a part of me. And, anyway," she continued with a sly smile, "it's been a damned good friend."

"I guess, sir," said the pilot who suddenly felt shy. It was clear to the colonel that his interest in her penis was unlikely to get much greater.

The colonel and the other soldiers zipped themselves into their standard military fatigues and strode back to their separate quarters. Whether enlisted or officer

class, their red-brown uniforms were much the same. Rank was only indicated by the epaulettes on the shoulders and the stripes across the chest. However, as commanding officer, Colonel Vashti had the duty of dictating a report on their patrol.

The path to her quarters was a tree-lined avenue under the missile-proof silos where the soldiers were quartered. Above her head was the last line of defence from incoming attack. It was a massively thick dome that only a nuclear warhead could penetrate but which also kept out all natural light from a Sun that was two thirds of its apparent size as seen from Earth.

The doors to her dome-shaped quarters slid open as she approached and the lights came on automatically. Her room was spartan. There were no holographs of family or friends to humanise it. There were none of the sentimental reminders of a civilian life that most soldiers, especially female ones, gathered about them. When the colonel had finished dictating her account of her company's patrol, which she did with extraordinary precision and detail, she didn't choose to listen to music or watch a holographic movie. Instead, she promptly began studying news stories and academic articles on a wide range of subjects, of which few were of even a remotely military nature.

What attracted Vashti most were the accounts being reported by many news agencies of the bizarre apparitions across the Solar System. These were usually classified as entertaining stories of only humorous interest. There was an account of a huge cloud of blue butterflies that appeared on, of all places, the surface of the moon Umbriel around Uranus. It was recorded on surveillance cameras but disappeared within seconds of being sighted. There was an account of a mysterious space craft

observed during a routine scan of the Oort Cloud that again disappeared within moments. There was the amusing news story from Earth of a mysterious reptile, possibly an elasmosaurus, seen in an African lake which was attributed to ancient superstition and the affects of too much alcohol. These were the stories over which Vashti paused the longest, before she followed rather less sensational stories about temperature anomalies in the Asteroid Belt, the discovery of yet another interstellar planetoid, and holographic images taken by robotic probes around the Proxima Centauri stellar system.

Vashti's concentration was suddenly broken and she dragged her eyes away from the holoscreen. A moment later, the security camera for her quarters displayed the holographic image of the woman standing outside her door. It was Vashti's current lover, Mia. She was a civilian who worked as a virtual landscape designer for the Tithonium Broadcasting Corporation.

“Hiya, Vash!” the woman exclaimed with a huge grin on her face. “I know you’re in there. Open up!”

“Come in. Come in,” Vashti said as she let the door to her quarters slide open.

Mia was a black-skinned woman with short hair who wore a flowing white skirt that trailed behind her and which was lifted off the ground by a hovering cloud of nano-particles. Her outfit was designed to emphasise her waist and the perfect proportions of her relatively small bosom. She wore a luminescent blue collar around her neck that held all the holographic communication devices and entertainment consoles she needed to keep in touch or to be entertained.

Mia noticed that Vashti was still wearing her military fatigues. “You’re not

still on duty are you? Khadija told me you'd finished for the day."

"Well, I've finished active duty anyway," said Vashti. "I'm still on call, you know, but it's not often that I actually have to do anything."

"Right," said Mia with relief, who without any more prompting let her clothes slip off her to reveal a slim charcoal-black body and an ornate holographic tattoo of a white rose on her shoulder. "Then I guess we can do nothing together. If that's what you want...?"

"Don't be foolish, sweetheart," said Vashti who disrobed herself rather more slowly. When she tugged off her trousers her penis was revealed in all its erect splendour: the foreskin pulled back by the engorged glans.

"If I didn't already know you were a soldier," said Mia with a smile as she kneeled in front of Vashti's crotch, "I'd have guessed it from how you're always standing to attention and ready for action."

Although Mia was a woman who generally preferred other women, she had an especial fascination for Vashti's cock. She greedily enveloped it in her full purple lips and with mouthfuls of spit she was soon pumping it in and out of her eager mouth. All the while Vashti gasped with animal grunts from the physical pleasure of her lover's oral ministrations.

Vashti also knew how to please Mia and she knew what gave her the most pleasure. So she let forth a splurge of semen over Mia's face, onto her small puffy-nippled breasts and into her eager face. Mia had developed a taste for semen. She'd never tasted it from a man's penis but she relished what she'd sampled from Vashti's.

"Does a man's sperm taste as good as a woman's?" Mia asked as she let the

semen trickle down her throat and licked off as much as she could from her chin.

“I’ve only tasted men’s,” admitted Vashti. “But I imagine it tastes exactly as good. You ought to try some time.”

“Uuughh!” Mia exclaimed. “I would if there were only more men who looked like you. But how could they be unless they’d had a sex change and then they wouldn’t really be men any more. Were you ever a man, Vash?”

This was a question like many others of a similar nature that Vashti felt obliged to evade. “Not really, sweetheart. I’m as much a woman now as I’ve ever been.”

“Well, the surgery was a fucking miracle, that’s all I can say,” said Mia who stood up but whose face was still only level to Vashti’s bosom. “I just wish there were more people in the world like you.”

“And more like you, sweetheart,” said Vashti. She gripped the back of Mia’s head and peppered her face with kisses which built up to a crescendo where her tongue plunged as deep inside her lover’s mouth as it was possible for it to go without choking her. The two fell together onto the thick carpeted floor and were soon coupling groin to groin, Vashti’s penis alternating between the wet embrace of Mia’s slippery vagina and the tighter but still accommodating anus that was functionally similar to, but materially different from, the many male anuses Vashti had enjoyed.

Vashti had skills beyond those of the average lover. She knew how to continue her lovemaking for an inhuman length of time. She could bring Mia to orgasm after orgasm whilst ensuring that the next one was stronger and more intense than the one before. Their mutual perspiration lubricated the passion of their grappling bodies. Mia

raised her torso above Vashti and thrust her groin back and forth on her lover's prick while she supported her weight on her long slim arms. Her holographic tattoo shimmered against the images projected from Vashti's holoscreen.

The two lovers were still locked in carnal embrace, Vashti above her lover and her buttocks still in steady rhythm, when there was a sudden break in the ambient landscape of gentle Martian hills that Vashti had chosen to accompany their sport. This relaxing vision was replaced by the full length avatar of General Xian-Ping with his shaved head and markedly penetrating blue eyes.

“Colonel, please stop whatever you are doing. I would like you to come to my office immediately.”

“Yes sir!” said Colonel Vashti, who immediately stood to attention with her penis erect and with Mia's vaginal juice still dripping from its tip.

The general's avatar evaporated and to Mia's evident disappointment the colonel's penis swiftly shrank to less impressive proportions.

“Duty calls,” said Vashti sadly.

“Oh shit!” said Mia even more regretfully. “Does it have to?”

It was unusual for a soldier to be summoned to meet his or her commanding officer in person. The communications systems were secure enough that it would normally be sufficient for Colonel Vashti simply to request Mia to leave while she spoke to her superior officer. This was clearly not a routine call, but for Vashti it wasn't totally unexpected.

General Xian-Ping wasn't the only one waiting for the colonel in his office. He was accompanied by two other officers of similar rank.

“Your services have been requested by the Interplanetary Union, colonel,” the general announced. “I needn’t remind you that this is not a normal request or one that is made often. You will have command of several hundred combat soldiers on a mission that is of the utmost sensitivity and about which you must not tell anyone.”

“Yes, sir,” said Colonel Vashti, who stood rigidly to attention.

“I haven’t been given many details about the mission, but I have been given the duty of telling you as much as I know. You will be in command of military forces that have been gathered together from all corners of the Solar System. The soldiers you will command come not only from the Mariner colonies but as far afield as Mercury, Uranus and the Kuiper Belt. Given the nature of this expeditionary force, it is likely to include soldiers from the Polar colonies. You are under strict instructions from the Interplanetary Union to treat these bastards with equal preferment as all other military personnel. This is an international force and for the purposes of this mission—however difficult this must be—you must pretend to be impartial to the nationality of the soldiers in your command. Nevertheless, it goes without saying that if you should by any means receive classified information about Polar military activity—and it is not for me to dictate how that should happen—then that information must be passed by secure channels to Mariner Intelligence. This aspect of your mission is not part of your duties as an officer serving the Interplanetary Union, but it *is* expected of you as a loyal servant of the Mariner Federation.”

“Yes sir.”

“You will not receive a more complete briefing than this of the service that the Federation expects of you and I expect you to exercise discretion at all times. I trust

you understand this and will not fail your people and your President.”

“I understand, sir, and will comply.”

“Your mission will take place on a space ship that has yet to be commissioned and may even be a civilian vessel. I have not been told exactly what the destination might be, but I believe it could well be beyond the Heliopause. It may even be beyond the Solar System’s magnetosphere. There will be other officers of similar rank to you, but day-to-day command of the operation will be with the ship’s captain. This hasn’t been confirmed, but I believe that the captain is likely to be from either the Saturn or Earth systems as these are the two pre-eminent powers in the Interplanetary Union.”

“Yes sir.”

“I don’t know why you’ve been chosen, but the request to enlist you on this mission has come from the very highest level. There are many other officers of equal rank to you in the Mariner Federation with equally distinguished service—although none with your peculiar anatomy—but you are the one that has been selected. Naturally, the Mariner Federation is gratified that no Polar officer has been given the same distinction. That’ll give those Polar bastards pause for thought, don’t you think?”

“Yes sir. Without a doubt.”

“Good. Good.”

“Yes sir.”

“We don’t know for sure what this mission’s purpose is. I’ve been told that this information will not be declassified until the space ship returns from its mission. However, we do have some hypotheses. The principal one is that the mission is

related to the discovery of an alien extrasolar civilisation. It has long been suspected that such civilisations exist and there is evidence that appears to indirectly confirm this. I'm not surprised that our intelligence agencies would speculate that a journey to such an absurdly remote part of the solar system is connected with the possibility of making such a first encounter. Furthermore, this is consistent with the growing evidence in recent decades of unusual events and apparitions for which there is as yet no agreed explanation.”

“Yes sir.”

“There are countless conjectures as to how an alien civilisation might manifest itself. Of course, we don't know whether such a civilisation is hostile or friendly. If it happens to be hostile, I expect you to immediately provide this information through secure channels so that the Federation has a good chance of defending itself. That is understood, colonel?”

“Yes sir. Absolutely.”

“There are other hypotheses other than the one relating to alien intelligence, of course, but currently that's by far the most convincing. It's possible that this civilisation might not even be organic. It might be mechanical, nano-particulate, ethereal or organised in some mysterious way that even now no scientist has anticipated. It may even be an extinct civilisation that is sending emissaries beyond its own time. We must be prepared for anything.”

“Yes sir.”

“Of course it may not be an alien threat at all. You could be working on a mission to combat terrorism. There are vicious elements amongst the rogue states that

stubbornly refuse to acknowledge interplanetary law. It could be that religious fundamentalists or extreme ideologues are plotting mischief on a massive scale. It could, of course, be something entirely different. Whatever it is, we expect you to observe your duty to the Federation above all other imperatives. Is that understood, colonel?"

"Yes sir. You can rely on me."

"Good," said the general. "Your preparations for duty begin immediately. You will leave the Mariner Federation tomorrow and you must not tell anyone where you are going or that you are leaving at all. You will be detailed to go on a routine patrol rather like the one you went on today. The difference is that you, and the other soldiers on your detail, will not return. The story that will accompany your disappearance will be that you were lost in action and presumed dead. You do understand, colonel? You must tell no one, including your lover, Mia Nkome," the general made a show of consulting the holographic display at his elbow, "that you are doing anything at all out of the ordinary. I don't need to emphasise, I'm sure, how much we expect your total discretion."

"Not at all, sir."

"You will be taken to an off-planet centre where you will serve under the direct command of the Interplanetary Union. This is international territory where the state of war between the Mariner Federation and the Polar Republics is not effective. Normal hostilities will cease, although you know and I know, of course, that your highest duty will still be to preserve the hard-won way of life of the Federation. Do you have any questions, colonel?"

“None, sir. I shall serve the Interplanetary Union and the Mariner Federation to the best of my abilities and remember always to whom I owe first allegiance.”

“Well said, soldier,” said the general, allowing a smile to crack across his inscrutable face. “You are dismissed.”

“Thank you, sir,” said Colonel Vashti. She saluted his senior officer and turned about to leave his office.

At last, Vashti thought to herself, as the door slid behind her. Now her real mission in the Solar System could begin in earnest!

Chapter Six Godwin - 3750 C.E.

“How many incidents have there been now?” Paul was asked.

“A few,” he answered.

“Six, in fact,” said the dark hued security officer who’d flown in from the Interplanetary Union’s administrative offices near Pluto. “Three reported at the university. Two between here and your home. And one that destroyed your home; or at least most of it. Three explosions and three attempted assassinations. And you really have *no* idea who it could be?”

“None,” admitted Paul. “I didn’t know I had any enemies. And I didn’t know that my research would ever upset anyone.”

“These incidents are almost certainly associated with the publication of your research,” remarked the officer. “Did anyone ever suggest to you that it might excite unwelcome attention?”

“Not at all,” said Paul. “No one’s been interested in my research before.”

“Understandably,” admitted the officer, as he studied his notes. “*Blogging and Personal Websites in the Twentieth to Twenty-third Centuries. Twenty-first Century Pornography. The Pattern of Movie Downloading Habits in the Twenty-second Century.* These are truly academic pursuits. What attracted you to analyse ancient military and government records regarding the Anomaly?”

“I just came across a reference to it in a printed file when I was researching conspiracy theories and was fascinated by it.”

“And did anyone inform you that the Anomaly has reappeared in the last

century?”

“No. Has it?” asked Paul for whom this was genuinely unsuspected news.

“Yes,” said the officer. “And in exactly the same location in the very same unpromising corner of space.”

“It has?”

“Yes. And do you have any idea from your research what this Anomaly might be?”

“Well, only what the records say. And none of them are very forthcoming. It’s a kind of a presence of absence, as far as I can tell. It’s a kind of black nothingness that exerts no electromagnetic or gravitational force. It simply blocks out the starlight from behind. Some records speculate that it might be dark energy or dark matter or something like that.”

“Well, we know enough these days about the physical components of the universe to be certain that it isn’t either of those things,” said the officer, “although ‘dark’ it most certainly is. Were there any records that you read, and perhaps not thought worth including in your reports, that associated the Anomaly with other incidents in the Solar System?”

“Like what?” Paul wondered.

“Well, like, for instance, alien space ships or alien encounters of any kind?”

“There’s a lot of documentation on things like that,” Paul admitted, “but no positive correlation. You must remember, though, that in the early part of the third millennium there was a great deal of speculation about aliens and most of it was total rubbish.”

“Only most of it?”

“I guess so,” said Paul. “Possibly all of it. I don’t know. Perhaps if there’d been more truth to these speculations in the last thousand years or so, something more would have been made of them.”

“You *have* heard of the peculiar apparitions reported across the Solar System, haven’t you?” remarked the officer. “The things that appear for a short period of time and then vanish. Like, for instance, the knight in armour that appeared briefly near Neptune? Or the floating telephone box in the Kuiper Belt? Or the swarm of pterodactyls over the Moon?”

“I assumed they were just nonsense dreamt up by the news media,” said Paul. “Odd, but not at all proven.”

“Were there any such events recorded in the twenty-first and twenty-second centuries?”

“Well, lots,” admitted Paul. “But none independently verified.”

“And no connection was made between them and the Anomaly?”

“Not that I know of. Nothing that was preserved in the records.”

“I see,” said the officer thoughtfully. He gazed at his notes, which even Paul could see was determining the nature of his questions. It was unusual for a representative from the Interplanetary Union, especially an intelligence officer, to travel such a very long way to a remote space colony like Godwin. And even more so with the express purpose of interrogating someone like Paul whose activities wouldn’t normally attract any but the most cursory attention from beyond the University.

Then again, he was at least as worried and upset as anyone else by the peculiar

incidents that had been following him around. There were two occasions when he'd nearly been killed. The first by a burst of laser fire he'd only avoided because he'd bent down to straighten a shoe that he'd put on rather carelessly. The second by a knife attack that was intercepted by the security officer that had been assigned to him after the explosion in the laboratory. And the replacement to the laboratory hadn't lasted long until it was gutted by an unexplained fire. The worst, of course, was the malfunction in Paul's domestic systems where the nanobots went utterly out of control and instead of cleaning the carpets and removing dust started dismantling the entire house so that it was now totally uninhabitable. If he'd been in bed rather than immersed in Nudeworld, he might have been smothered by over-zealous nanobots and reduced to the same small specks of dust that was all that was remaining of most of his home.

“Well, the fact that there you've now provided conclusive evidence that the Anomaly isn't just a recent phenomenon has attracted considerable attention,” elaborated Special Officer Fitzwilliam as he held a holoscreen up toward his eyes. “It has eliminated some theories of what the Anomaly might be, as well as stimulating rather a few new ones. It has upset some people while providing welcome evidence for others. What it's most definitely done is absolve responsibility from any currently existing human agency unless you either postulate the possibility of time travel or a more advanced technology in the twenty-first century than anyone's ever imagined. You saw no speculation about time travel in your research, did you? That, rather than being contemporaneous, the Anomaly might be an incursion from a later epoch?”

“No,” said Paul. “Even in the twenty-first century it was believed that time

travel was a strictly one-way affair. And like notions of travelling faster than light or creating real rather than artificial gravity, that seems even less likely nowadays than it might have done then.”

“That doesn’t stop science-fiction authors from incorporating such concepts into their fiction though, does it?”

“I don’t see that that’s relevant. I’ve studied the maths. Time travel is about as possible as reincarnation and fairies.”

“But people believe in those as well, don’t they?” remarked the special officer. “However, I’m not here to indulge in idle speculation. I shall spell out the facts to you as we see them. You’ve been doing independent research into the Anomaly which has come up with the surprising and totally unexpected result that this phenomenon was positively identified over a thousand years ago. You and your research have attracted the unwelcome attention of some as yet not positively identified individuals and organisations. And your life is in danger. Whether you like it or not: so too is the life of many people at the University and on the colony of Godwin. It’s not at all inconceivable that after having failed to eliminate you or the fruits of your research by conventional methods, these unknown individuals or organisations might decide that the easiest and most conclusive way might be to destroy the entire colony. It doesn’t take more than one particularly crazed individual with access to an antimatter device to reduce Godwin to nothing more than a cloud of fundamental particles. Even this far out in the Solar System, that would have an impact on colonies many light minutes away. A stream of naked quarks or leptons could seriously aggravate systems even as far away as Pluto.”

“It doesn’t sound good,” admitted Paul.

“It doesn’t, does it?” agreed Special Officer Fitzwilliam. “It is your misfortune, in a sense, to live in what must be the most insecure and easily infiltrated colony in the whole Solar System. Indeed, it has been extremely exasperating simply to identify someone who possesses what might resemble a position of authority in your colony. It seems that apparent seniority and responsibility carry very little actual executive power in Godwin. Even your ambassadors and consuls in the Interplanetary Union are unable to identify an individual in your colony whose decision-making capacity is beyond that required to perform their job. If there was ever a war involving your colony, I doubt that Godwin could make even the most basic strategic or tactical military decision.”

“Anarchists have no conception of war,” said Paul in defence of the guiding principles of his home colony.

“Nor any likelihood of surviving one,” remarked the special officer grimly. “However, the Interplanetary Union has responsibilities for all its member states, even one whose representatives are as unpredictable and eccentric as yours are. There is no discernible pattern to the policies your representatives support. Those who represent you appear to have been elected on the basis of their desire to serve rather than because anyone especially wanted to be represented by them. Your representatives more often vote against each other rather than act as a common block. Nevertheless, we are duty-bound to protect your colony and the individuals within it. Including, it has to be said, you, Paul.”

“And if I didn’t want your protection?” wondered Paul more in the spirit of

intellectual curiosity than disagreement.

“That’s your choice, but the Interplanetary Union might very well exercise its right, which none of your citizens can exercise, of protecting the whole of the colony against the wishes of individuals within it.”

“I see,” said Paul, who had only the vaguest notion of what might be the common good but was sure that there might be some strong arguments in its favour.

“There is a mission to intercept the Anomaly which has been set up with the highest authority and, although this appears to have no meaning on Godwin, the utmost secrecy. We would hope, but cannot, of course, enforce that you would respect this secrecy and tell no one. And I mean absolutely no one. Whether or not it’s a decision I agree with—and I am in no position to voice an opinion—it has been decided that you should participate on this mission.”

“Of what possible use would I be?” wondered Paul. “I’m a researcher. All my research material comes from within the Solar System. I’d be less use in deep space than I would be here.”

“You may ask,” smiled the special officer in apparent sympathy. “I can’t see you doing much useful research when you’re travelling several light weeks, if not months, from the ecliptic plane. But the decision has been made and if you decline, which you have every right of doing, the significance of the mission might well override your normal rights. It *is* a mission of the highest importance and any excuse for not participating might not be viewed with the usual indulgence.”

“And what is this mission intended to achieve?”

“Well now, you’re asking me a question for which my security clearance isn’t

nearly high enough for me to answer," admitted Special Officer Fitzwilliam. "However, I am authorised to use my discretion to ensure that you participate whether or not I agree with the decision that you should. I simply hope that you'll agree to embark on the Space Ship Byzantium which has been diverted from its standard course for the express purpose of picking you up."

"I see," said Paul who was slowly getting accustomed to the notion of a future that was at odds with anything he might have planned for himself.

"You mustn't tell anyone why you'll be leaving the colony on the cruiser," said the special officer, "nor, if possible, that you'll be leaving at all. If asked, you should say that you're attending a conference on twenty-seventh century quantum computing at Sucette in the Uranus orbit. This convention is dull enough that your attendance there would be wholly plausible. However, judging from our records, you have so few friends and an even smaller family that it should be fairly easy for you to avoid the need to divulge even this much information."

"I suppose you're right," said Paul, a little sadly.

Nevertheless, ever since his home had been reduced to dust there was little on Godwin to persuade Paul to remain. He was now living in another house equally as well appointed but also a long and tedious shuttle bus ride from the University. It was at the furthest end of the colony, not far from the huge wall that marked its abrupt perimeter. He had all the home comforts he'd always known, but his every step was now being observed and monitored by a coterie of Godwin's voluntary corps of security officers and the rather more officious ones from the Interplanetary Union that had accompanied Special Officer Fitzwilliam to the colony. Paul wasn't comfortable

at having his every step monitored nor by the ever-present sight of the sheer wall that separated the colony's furthest end from the emptiness of space beyond.

It was no doubt with the intention of lessening the impact of seeing the internal space so abruptly truncated that Godwin's designers had decided that the inside wall should be a huge mirror that gave the impression of a colony that stretched onwards forever in both directions, but Paul felt distinctly uneasy when he left his home to see his reflection and the reflection of his home only a few hundred metres away. And the constant presence of security officers around his home and in many of the rooms meant that he'd lost all sense of privacy.

It wasn't long until he was actively looking forward to his journey towards the heart of the Solar System; or at least as far as Earth.

Paul still had the opportunity to retreat to Nudeworld and he was comforted by the fact that such virtual worlds crossed the boundaries of time and space and was as equally accessible on Pluto and Earth as it was in Godwin or elsewhere in the Kuiper Belt.

It was sex rather than conversation that was uppermost on Paul's mind the evening after his interview with Special Officer Fitzwilliam. And sex, of course, was readily available when he met Blanche in the living room of his virtual home in Nudeworld. It took as little as no persuasion at all to get his virtual partner to lie on the luxurious carpet while Paul hammered away at her. And despite having set the sex settings for long and leisurely, he released his semen on her face and magnificent bosom well within half an hour. His penis was aching and his body bathed in perspiration, but somehow Paul was still not satisfied.

“Let’s go to a night club,” he suggested knowing that whatever he wanted to do Blanche would be equally as enthusiastic. Even if he’d suggested some truly perverse sexual activity, Blanche would obey his every whim.

“Which one?” was all she asked.

“The Nightcrawler,” suggested Paul. It was one where he had the most opportunity to find potential sexual partners other than Blanche, but jealousy wasn’t an attribute Blanche possessed (unless Paul had specified her to be that way).

Paul would never have gone to a night club on Godwin. He wasn’t particularly keen on dance music or, indeed, music of any kind. Those few times he’d been to a real life night club he’d felt very much out of place while his companions danced with frenetic disregard to the ferociously loud music. In Nudeworld, however, night clubs were places where Paul could indulge his voyeuristic inclinations and where, should he feel inclined, there was no resistance to any suggestion he made to a dancing partner; unless, of course, he accidentally chose the avatar of a real person who was unlikely to be impressed by Paul’s clumsy banter.

It was a woman with incredibly long silky black legs who attracted Paul’s attention and while Blanche sat patiently at a table with a glass of fruit juice he was soon stretched out on the dance floor and fucking this woman with even more fervour than he had with Blanche. This woman, whose name Paul never learnt, was a lean and lubricious fuck, who relished pumping her head back and forth on Paul’s erect penis. She invited him to spray his semen over her eyes and hair and hardly cared at all for the mess it made of her make-up. While the couple sprawled out on the velvety soft dance floor, the other dancers assiduously avoided trampling on them which was also

unlikely to actually happen in real life.

“What was she like, darling?” asked Blanche when Paul eventually returned.

“Was she as good a fuck as me?”

Paul was gentleman enough, even though it scarcely mattered to a virtual entity, to suggest that Blanche was by far the better lover. And with no hint of jealousy, she rewarded his gallantry with a kiss and a leisurely handjob.

Paul eventually tired of the flashing nights and throbbing music. He wasn’t even sure whether he was listening to the same piece of music now as that he’d heard when the couple arrived, although he knew that with well over fifteen hundred years of electronic dance music at its disposal the likelihood of the same tune being repeated was virtually zero.

Part of the programming that was essential in Nudeworld, as it was in all virtual universes, was that the biological needs of the real person behind the avatar should be addressed. There had been unfortunate incidents in the early days of virtual universes, even before they’d become especially realistic, when people had died from forgetting to eat and, most of all, to relieve themselves.

Paul made his way to the night club’s toilets where he was welcomed by a very attentive female attendant and where his normal bodily functions, relieved at exactly the same time in real space, functioned with astonishingly real effect and satisfaction.

When Paul emerged from the toilet he was confronted by rather more doors than he remembered there being on his way in. Slightly tipsy from the wine, whose affect was wholly virtual and would have no echo in the real world, he pushed at a

door which he wasn't certain was quite the right one. It led out into a grassy open space, much like a park in Godwin on a gloriously well-lit day. This puzzled Paul because it was the middle of the night. On the other hand, virtual worlds weren't bound by the same laws of physics as the real world so he didn't worry about it as much as he would if the same thing had happened during Godwin's diurnal cycle.

Paul always enjoyed sitting in parks. His most productive thinking had been done in the extensive parkland around the University where a herd of fallow deer wandered about amongst grazing kangaroos and the occasional reanimated diprotodon. The animals grazing in Nudeworld were peculiarly mundane given the designers' opportunity to populate it with anything they liked. Sheep and llama were all the distraction there was for Paul as he sat down on a wooden park bench, not at all conscious of his nudity or the drips of pale liquid from his penis onto the lush lawn.

"How are you, Paul?" asked a kindly voice which Paul identified as belonging to Virgil whom he'd met several times now on the occasion he'd chosen to visit Nudeworld.

Paul was by now totally unsurprised by such encounters, although in real time he sometimes wondered at its oddity. Not only was the gentleman, by being fully clothed, completely out of place in the aptly named Nudeworld, it was peculiar that someone like him should become a regular part of what was essentially Paul's fantasy world. Perhaps the gentleman was the avatar of a real person. If so, then judging by the lack of time dilation, it must be someone who lived very close to Godwin, if not on the colony itself.

"I'm very well, thank you," answered Paul who was actually rather pleased to

see his elderly friend. There wasn't really anyone else, either in the real world or Nudeworld, with whom he could enjoy such intelligent and wide-ranging conversation.

“And that's despite all the incidents that have been troubling you?” remarked the gentleman referring to Paul's earlier conversations. Indeed, it was because of a long, rather intense conversation with Virgil that he'd been detained in the cocoon of cyberspace when his house was in the process of being demolished by malfunctioning nanobots. Had he disengaged from Nudeworld sooner then he might no longer be alive.

“I'm not going to be on Godwin for much longer,” confessed Paul, who'd already forgotten his instructions not to speak to anyone of the plans that had been made for him. “I'm going to be heading into deep space.”

“And why's that?” asked the gentleman. “Does your research involve foreign travel?”

“Not until now,” admitted Paul as Virgil sat down next to him. He was offered a glass of wine that his companion held out to him in a gnarled hand. “It seems that the Anomaly I've been researching has reappeared.”

“Has it now?” said the gentleman with a sympathetic smile. “And where might that be?”

“The same place, I think,” said Paul. “Just beyond the Heliopause.”

“That *is* a strange place for anything to be! Does anyone in the thirty-eighth century have a better idea than the scientists in the twenty-second century had of what it might be?”

“All they have is a better idea of what it isn’t,” admitted Paul.

The two men, one naked and the other fully dressed, sat silently in the shelter of a huge eucalyptus tree while sheep wandered by, far more interested in grazing than in the people resting in their midst.

“Do you think this Anomaly is restricted only to the real world?” the gentleman asked. “Could it ever appear in a virtual world like Nudeworld?”

This was a thought that had never occurred to Paul. “I don’t see how,” he replied. “Unless, of course, it infects the servers that house the virtual world. But it’s so far away from anything else that I don’t see how that’s possible.”

“So, it’s very definitely a thing of the material world,” said the gentleman. “Is it composed of real matter and energy?”

“Whatever it is, I don’t see how it can’t be,” said Paul.

The gentleman paused, as if in deep thought. “So as long as you or anyone else is in virtual space you’re safe from whatever evils associated with the Anomaly as long as the servers generating the virtual universes remain secure?”

“I guess so,” said Paul. “But I wasn’t aware the Anomaly could ever cause harm. Nobody knows what it is, but that doesn’t necessarily make it a bad thing.”

“Do you have an opinion on what the Anomaly is, Paul?”

Paul wasn’t a man given to theorising. He was far more interested in the how of things rather than the why. He could think of no answer to Virgil’s question.

“You don’t think it’s an alien intelligence, do you?” continued his companion. “Do you think it’s supernatural? Like a spirit or the manifestation of God or something like that? Do you think, for instance, that it’s an incursion from another

parallel universe?"

"I really don't know," said Paul at last. "But whatever it is, I'm sure there's a perfectly reasonable explanation."

"I'm sure that's true," Virgil agreed.

When Paul finally left the park and returned to the night club, where Blanche was waiting for him as if he'd not been away at all, he briefly contemplated whether he'd been wise to be so frank to the elderly gentleman about his forthcoming role in the mission to the Anomaly. Hadn't Special Officer Fitzwilliam been adamant that Paul shouldn't talk about it to anyone? After all, the avatars in Nudeworld very often represented real people.

However, Paul dismissed his worries. If Virgil was the avatar of a real person, how could that person possibly know that the Paul he encountered in Nudeworld was the same Paul who lived and worked as a researcher in Godwin?

Chapter Seven

Holy Trinity - 3750 A.D.

It was Wednesday on Holy Trinity. This was one of the two days of the week—the other, of course, being Sunday—that was designated an Energy Saving Day. Despite being in Mercury orbit and well bathed in sunlight from the nearby presence of the Sun, the Archdeacon and the Chief Pastors had deemed that the energy expenditure of the colony’s burgeoning population couldn’t be squandered on more than five days of daylight each week.

Isaac was tending the small garden plot outside his family’s apartment on the twentieth floor of the colony’s twelfth level. His wife was inside the apartment where she was taking care of three of Isaac’s seventeen children. The rest of his progeny were fully adult and lived with their own families elsewhere in the same condominium. Garden plots were allowed special dispensation in the dim dusk of the midday luminescence and an array of lights brightly illuminated each one. Below and above Isaac’s apartment was a towering sequence of other plots, all wholly enclosed within the condominium walls, where other householders were also tending God’s bounty. These plots were as necessary as all the other energy-saving and waste-recycling policies for the survival of a community whose population was approaching the physical limits of what one space colony could house, water and feed. Like all men in Holy Trinity, Isaac prayed for the successful construction of Revelation: the sister colony that would soon relieve the colony of much of the burden of maintaining half its population, until that too swelled beyond the bounds of what two colonies could support.

Isaac was nearly a decade short of the Biblical span of three score years and ten beyond which only the most senior Scriptural Officers were permitted the privilege of regenerative surgery and other forms of life prolongation. Although it was a sin to end a life prematurely, it was another sin of pride and vanity for those without special dispensation to have their lives artificially prolonged beyond the Biblical span. He rather dreaded the onset of old age that would plague him for what would remain of his expected life and from which there was little hope of early release.

Isaac bent down on his knees in the garden soil and prodded at the organic vegetables that were vital to his family's welfare. The meagre ration he earned was not nearly enough by itself. Although the congregation was generous in its charity to those unable to provide for themselves, it did so reluctantly and only to those in true need.

Through the windows that peered out through the dimness onto the congested tower blocks that dominated the twelfth level Isaac could see other householders and their wives and children bent over like him to care for the soil. The only other light than that emitted from these other garden plots came from the hover planes that occasionally passed by. These carried the Soldiers of Christ and important church dignitaries on their vital business. Isaac knew well what it was like to travel in such a vessel. He too was a Soldier of Christ and he took seriously his duty of enforcing civil order and scriptural conformity in the colony.

Isaac's wife, Rebecca, entered the garden dressed in a black ankle-length gown and with her untrimmed hair tucked out of sight inside her bonnet. She stood by Isaac's side as he bedded down a turnip. She waited silently until her husband

addressed her, for it would be a sin for a man's chattel to be so presumptuous as to speak first.

"The children are all gone to school, husband," she at last announced when Isaac raised his head and gave her permission to speak.

"God be praised, wife," Isaac said. "May the Lord instruct them well."

"Amen," Rebecca agreed. "Noah has been reciting the Holy Scripture this morning."

"And which text has he been studying, wife?"

"The Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians, Chapter Four, husband."

"Therefore seeing we have this ministry, as we have received mercy, we faint not; But have renounced the hidden things of dishonesty, not walking in craftiness, nor handling the word of God deceitfully; but by manifestation of the truth commanding ourselves to every man's conscience in the sight of God. But if our gospel be hid, it is hid to them that are lost," recited Isaac from memory.

"Amen," said Rebecca.

"But we have duty too, wife," Isaac reminded. "Recall the First Book of Moses: Called Genesis, Chapter Three, Verse Sixteen."

"The Lord said: 'I will greatly multiply thy sorrow and thy conception; in sorrow thou shalt bring forth children'?" asked Rebecca.

"Well, not just that, wife," said Isaac with a kindly smile. *"Thy desire shall be to thy husband."*

"May the Lord be praised and all the goodness he has bestowed," said

Rebecca, quite willing now to go forth and multiply with the help of her husband. Not that she could do so with anyone else unless they wished to be publicly stoned or, at the very least, banished. And since there was nothing but intense heat and certainly no atmosphere outside the colony, banishment resulted in more or less the same thing.

Husband and wife retreated to their sanctified bed in which they could legitimately consummate their duty: for duty it was. Isaac was forever mindful of the Proverbs Chapter Six Verse Twenty-five: *Lust not after her beauty in thine heart; neither let her take thee with her eyelids.* In keeping with the Lord's commandments, Isaac and his wife performed the duty for which he privately chastised himself for the pleasure he derived. He lifted up the capacious skirt that covered Rebecca's legs and thighs and pulled down the black underwear that protected her womanhood and, keeping his eyes averted, penetrated her with his aberrant beast. In all the years they had lived together as man and wife not once had Isaac seen his wife naked. That would be a sin. But it would also be a sin not to fulfil the responsibility, oft repeated from the pulpit, to multiply the numbers of those who worshipped according to the approved doctrine of the Lord.

God was great, but He was also stern. *Now when I passed by thee, and looked upon thee, behold, thy time was the time of love; and I spread my skirt over thee, and covered thy nakedness: yea, I sware unto thee, and entered into a covenant with thee, saith the Lord GOD, and thou becamest mine.* The covenant of the Lord in Chapter Sixteen Verse Eight of the Book of the Prophet Ezekiel was unambiguous. Procreation was the Lord's dictate, but lust was the curse visited on the sons of Adam for the Original Sin whose infraction seemed so light but the punishment for which

was a burden borne by every man and woman governed by the Holy Word.

Isaac's duty was done and Rebecca straightened her thick dress. Isaac buttoned up his trousers, ashamed of the lust that flashed over him at the sight of Rebecca's reddened face and the insipid smile that hung over her cheeks and lips. Sometimes he wished that the Archdeacon would sanction the libido-reduction drugs that were surely within the grasp of modern science for the treatment of those guilty of improper thoughts. But this, along with the unmediated pain of childbirth suffered by all women, was a reminder of the heinous crime of disobedience carried by Eve's descendants from the first days of the universe less than eight thousand years earlier.

If only more people were as mindful of the lessons of Holy Scripture as he was, thought Isaac, while he prepared to leave for his afternoon shift. He tucked his guns and batons inside the holsters around his waist, exchanged the tall black hat of civilian life for the peaked hat of his profession and strode forth from his apartment. As the elevators were also not in operation on a Wednesday, he had a very long descent down the stairwell until he reached ground level. He then walked to the Station of the Soldiers of Christ which was situated beside a modest chapel and an even more modest supermarket both of which his wife would later visit.

What sort of day would it be?

Every day for a Soldier of Christ brought varied and unpredictable duties. The day before he had assisted in the disposal of a number of women who had acted as whores, not by selling their bodies openly, which could never happen in the watchful neighbourhoods of Holy Trinity, but by membership of a secret network that advertised itself by mysterious signs and symbols. However, too many male visitors

to a single woman's apartment soon attracted attention, so this vice ring was identified and the culprits' lives summarily terminated. The Soldiers of Christ operated by the sanction of the Laws of Christ and the legal profession was only ever required for the more complex issues of property ownership and inheritance rights.

As the whores were stoned to death by the blunt missiles shot from the Soldiers of Christ's firearms witnessed, as was required, by all their neighbours, Isaac cursed again the wickedness of Satan that brought so many to temptation. One of the whores, a woman young enough to not yet require regenerative surgery, pleaded with Isaac to be merciful as he raised his firearm. And as she did so she quoted from texts in the New Testament that gave proof of Christ's mercy and tolerance.

I will not punish your daughters when they commit whoredom, nor your spouses when they commit adultery: for themselves are separated with whores, and they sacrifice with harlots: therefore the people that doth not understand shall fall.

Chapter Four Verse Fourteen of Hosea.

However, such selective use of the Holy Scripture was itself a sin. The Word of the Lord could only be corrupted by heretical interpretation. If that were not so, why were there so many who lived in colonies and planets throughout the Solar System whose interpretation of the Gospels was so much in variance to that known to be God's Law in Holy Trinity?

Isaac was more at ease when his duties in the service of Christ were not compromised by any qualms. The recent necessarily bloody disposal of a homosexual couple caused Isaac no misgivings at all. What could be more unholy than the sin of buggery? Nevertheless, Isaac was troubled that he would carry until his grave the

memory of the day when, fumbling with his wife in the dark, he accidentally penetrated the wrong orifice. Moreover, it was a while until either of them were sensible of the sin they had committed. Isaac thought only that his wife's vagina was tighter and less well lubricated than usual, while Rebecca was equally uncertain as to what was happening (and evidently observed too much her wifely duty to obey her husband). This was a sin neither offender discussed with one another. Isaac kept it as a secret between him and his Most Merciful Father.

Isaac also had no reservations when he amputated the hands of thieves or blinded those who had committed the sin of voyeurism. The punishment he meted out, as always prefaced by quotations from the Holy Scripture, were those prescribed by the Lord and it was his duty as a Soldier of Christ to so execute it.

"May the Lord be with you," said Isaac to the Duty Sergeant when he arrived at the station.

"And with you," replied the Duty Sergeant. "You have a change to the standard detail, inspector. The Chief Inspector would like to see you in his office. He is in attendance with a High Pastor."

"Just me, sergeant?" Isaac wondered. He was expecting only to be assigned his duties for the day.

"No, inspector," said the Duty Sergeant. "You will be accompanied by Inspectors Josiah and Esau. You have all been privileged."

"Thank you, sergeant," said Isaac. Although he was perturbed by this delay to his daily duty, he was honoured to be granted audience with the Chief Inspector and a High Pastor. Was this to be a reward for his labours in the service of Christ? Or was it

that he had in some way been lax or lenient in the pursuit of his duties? If the latter, what would this mean for his wife and children?

Isaac entered the office where Inspectors Josiah and Esau were already waiting. Like him they were dressed in the sober uniform of a Soldier of Christ. This was totally black except for the lustre of steel from the epaulettes and crosses that decorated the uniform. They all wore the peaked caps of their profession. Chief Inspector Isaiah wore the garb that befit his more senior rank. He sported a splendid cross over his chest that gave witness to the combat he had seen in the Crusades against the infidel in the Jupiter Asteroid Belt: a war that had cost the lives of many hundreds of thousands of God-fearing souls and Muslim infidels. Sat on a splendid leather armchair was the forbidding figure of a High Pastor in a cassock that fell to his ankles under which he wore a pair of well-tailored shoes. Unlike the Chief Inspector he still had a youthful face and figure, despite the advanced age associated with his seniority. Like all men in the colony, he was clean-shaven and wore his hair short.

“It is an honour to you all to have been summoned here by the High Pastor, gentlemen,” said the Chief Inspector who, despite his obvious age, still presented a formidable figure. “Many Soldiers of Christ from this colony and from our allied colonies have been similarly summoned, but from our precinct it is you three who have been accorded this great privilege.”

“You may sit, gentlemen,” said the High Pastor with a smile at his nervous congregation. “I insist that you make yourself comfortable. This is a discussion, however, of the utmost secrecy and I insist that not a word should be uttered to

anyone: however dear or near. This may be hard indeed as your calling may well take you away from this colony for many years. Maybe even decades.”

“I need hardly remind you, gentlemen,” said the Chief Inspector sternly, “that should you be less than discreet and disobey an edict that comes from the Archdeacon himself that the consequences for you and your family of such an act of treason will be very exacting.”

“Indeed,” said the High Pastor in agreement. “I am grateful that the Chief Inspector has spared me the need to emphasise this imperative. I also warn you that such is the grave import of the mission to which you are assigned that we have aligned ourselves with those who are normally our natural enemies. There is a new Holy Crusade which you shall help undertake which encompasses not only the congregations of the Baptist Ecumenical Council, but those of the Nicean Catholics, the New Orthodox Church and even the Radical Muslims. In fact, there are also Hindus, Sikhs and Jews united in the same cause. We have fought many wars against pagans and heretics throughout history that have resulted in the death of many True Believers and I am sure that none of you could forgive the infidel for their sins. Nonetheless, such is the immense significance of this mission that the counsels and command of those who oppose the greater sins of Atheism and Agnosticism are all united on this one great endeavour.”

“Are we to work side by side with the Pope, sir?” asked Esau, who had a particular detestation for Papists.

“A fair question, soldier,” said the High Pastor, overriding the stern expression of the Chief Inspector who was about to upbraid the inspector for his presumption in

addressing the High Pastor without due ceremony. “You may speak freely after I have spoken but I would rather that you held back your questions until I have finished. In answer to your enquiry: No. The Roman Catholic Pope, along with the Archbishop of Canterbury and most ayatollahs are not party to this crusade. They have compromised too often and too freely with the Solar System’s Atheist majority to be entrusted with a role in our enterprise. Only those such as the True Believers of Holy Trinity have the singleness of purpose and steadfastness of faith to be trusted.”

The High Pastor paused for effect and cast his sharp dark green eyes from one inspector to the other.

“You all come highly recommended, gentlemen,” he continued. “Your records speak for themselves. You have been uncompromising and forthright in the campaign to eliminate sin and exterminate sinners in this precinct. Every whore, homosexual, adulterer, pervert and petty criminal that you have punished according to scripturally ordained methods you have done so with an admirable and unswerving attention to duty. There are many, even in this precinct, who have wavered in the face of the terrible nature of your duty. They have mistaken God’s Infinite Mercy for leniency. They have sought to persuade sinners to repent from their sins rather than deal with the miscreants as commanded. *If I whet my glittering sword, and mine hand take hold on judgment; I will render vengeance to mine enemies, and will reward them that hate me.* Chapter Thirty-two Verse Forty-one of Deuteronomy.”

“Amen,” chorused all the Soldiers of Christ gathered together.

The commendation of the High Pastor was an honour indeed. Although it wasn’t totally true that Isaac had never wavered in his heart in the pursuit of his

dreadful duty, he had never pardoned a sinner whose life or limb was at his mercy. To do so would merely encourage sin. And no sin of any kind could be permitted on Holy Trinity.

“As is only right, all citizens of Holy Trinity have been kept ignorant and protected from the vice and heresy that abounds in the Solar System. No inbound communications or broadcast is permitted. Those who sin by seeking guidance from the Antichrist and his servants have been severely punished and their equipment destroyed. This is a duty which you have all observed on several occasions. The evils of the Solar System’s media know no bounds. Sin of all kinds, even of a sexual nature, is broadcast as entertainment, although it is Satan who is most entertained by the vile filth that such vicious men have propagated.”

The extent of the perversity of the Godless world astonished the inspectors. What they had suspected of the depravity of the Atheist was true and worse. Isaac had no reason to doubt the words of the High Pastor whose authority was of the highest and who was, therefore, in direct communication with the Lord.

“Consequently, you will not have heard of the mysterious events that have plagued the Solar System. And you most certainly will not have heard of the strange phenomenon, kept secret to all but the privileged few, that has become manifest on the perimeter of the Solar System and is known by the Interplanetary Union as the *Anomaly*. It is a phenomenon known to have been there for several centuries and whose nature the Atheists have not been able to determine by the occult mysticism of Science. But this *Anomaly* should be correctly known as the Apostasy. It has been prophesied in the scriptures and is nothing less than the manifestation of Satan. The

Antichrist has been in pre-eminence for well over a millennium, some would say since the 20th Century when governments abandoned even the pretence of guidance from the Lord and followed instead such evil ideologies as Communism, Fascism and Liberalism. It is now the time of Satan. And after Satan has come and claimed for himself the souls of the heathen, the apostate and the atheist, it will be the time of the Second Coming, long foretold and about which St. John the Divine has spoken in Revelations. And it is to the Apostasy that you, gentlemen, will proceed and exterminate with the rightful rage and vengefulness that you have shown unto sinners in this world.”

The High Pastor paused for effect. And then he quoted from Revelations Chapter Twenty-one: *“these words are true and faithful. And he said unto me, It is done. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end. I will give unto him that is athirst of the fountain of the water of life freely. He that overcometh shall inherit all things; and I will be his God, and he shall be my son. But the fearful, and unbelieving, and the abominable, and murderers, and whoremongers, and sorcerers, and idolaters, and all liars, shall have their part in the lake which burneth with fire and brimstone: which is the second death.”*

Chief Inspector Isaiah followed the High Pastor’s words with: “Amen!”
“Amen,” chorused Isaac and the other inspectors.
“Unfortunately it is not within the means of the considerable wealth of the Baptist Ecumenical Council—it is not even within the means of the Emergency Coalition of Religious Councils—to navigate a space ship such an immense distance to where this Apostasy is known to be. The Lord has seen fit to make the Solar

System, which He created for Man, so immense that a space ship able to voyage so far from the ecliptic plane would cost for its construction more than the entire wealth of all but the very wealthiest nations in the Solar System: nations which are the very ones under the sway of the Antichrist. The Interplanetary Union *does* have the means. Our spies within its headquarters in the Pacific Ocean on Earth have told us reliably that it will command a space ship to voyage to this distant point in space, no doubt so that the Antichrist can meet his mentor in person. We even know which space ship will be commandeered for their mission. It is our duty, as detailed in Holy Scripture, to thwart this evil mission, so that the prophecies of the Second Coming can be fulfilled and that we shall all be lifted upwards to Heaven."

The High Pastor paused again and then followed with another quotation from Revelations Chapter Twenty-two. "*And there shall be no more curse: but the throne of God and of the Lamb shall be in it; and his servants shall serve him: And they shall see his face; and his name shall be in their foreheads. And there shall be no night there; and they need no candle, neither light of the sun; for the Lord God giveth them light: and they shall reign for ever and ever. And he said unto me, These sayings are faithful and true: and the Lord God of the holy prophets sent his angel to shew unto his servants the things which must shortly be done. Behold, I come quickly: blessed is he that keepeth the sayings of the prophecy of this book.*"

"Amen," chorused the Soldiers of Christ.

"Your mission, gentlemen," said the High Pastor, "is therefore of the highest imaginable importance. The future of all the souls in Holy Trinity is in your hands. It is you who shall ensure that the Second Coming will proceed as prophesied and that

we shall all rest in Heaven. For ever and ever, Amen.”

“Amen.”

“You will be taken to a secret location in the Jovian Asteroid Belt where the Sun’s blessed rays are weak and where the planet Jupiter’s magnetosphere is the most dominant force. You will be briefed there for the mission that is ahead of you. In this place you will meet other true believers, but also heretics, pagans and idolaters. You will be obliged to work with, even take orders from, people who in Holy Trinity would be stoned or burnt at the stake. This will cause you to suffer much indignation, but it is a test of your faith that in this hour of Great Necessity that you disguise your righteous anger and disgust. On the other hand, should any one of you be tempted from the True Faith to the ways of the demons that these people worship, it is incumbent on all those of uncorrupted faith to mete on you the punishment that would be due to such a renegade within the confines of Holy Trinity. I trust this is understood?”

“Yes, sir,” replied the three inspectors.

“You will be accompanied, of course, by Holy Inquisitors who will ensure that any such deviancy is identified and dealt with according to the laws enshrined in the Gospel. Recall the Lord’s words in Chapter Twenty-four Verse Twenty of the Book of Joshua: *“If ye forsake the LORD, and serve strange gods, then he will turn and do you hurt, and consume you, after that he hath done you good.”*

“Amen.”

“Your mission is highly classified but I am permitted to tell you of its broadest particulars. You will be transported from a base in the Jovian Asteroid Belt by a fleet

of space craft belonging to the Baptist Ecumenical Council, the New Muslim Brotherhood, the Temple of Vishnu, the Tanakh Communion, the Triton Orthodoxy, and other religious fellowships. The Coalition fleet will take you to the furthest reaches to which such space craft are capable of flying. There will be no return journey and there will not, in any case, be enough fuel in these craft to make such a return. The fleet will intercept the space ship that is in the command of the Interplanetary Union. You will capture this space ship and travel in it until it reaches its destination at the perimeter of the Apostasy. You will then eliminate the Apostasy with the antimatter and nuclear fusion warheads at your disposal. Your reward will be that you shall then be transported by the Angels of Christ to a Life Everlasting. Is all this understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"The only vehicle that the Interplanetary Union is likely to bring to service is the Space Ship Intrepid. It is an ancient vessel built centuries before Holy Trinity was founded. In fact, it existed before even the time that our congregation departed from the Baptist Colony of the Divine Revelation when it was sinfully tempted by the heresies of the Interplanetary Union. It should not, therefore, be too difficult for a fleet armed with the most modern and lethal weapons that science has devised—and easily purchased at the Arms Fairs in Mars orbit—to overpower the craft and use it for the Divine Purpose for which we know is its true destiny."

"Amen," said Isaac and his fellow officers in complete accord.

Chapter Eight Ecstasy - 3750 C.E.

The flight from Godwin to the colony of Ecstasy in Neptune orbit marked the first time that Paul had ever left the comforts of his cylindrical world. And this first stage of his journey to Earth alone would take over three months. Although such a voyage was something he'd always dreamed of, it really wasn't especially enjoyable. The lengthy and incapacitating process of the skeletal refit prescribed by his doctor confined him to his room for the first half of the flight and the recovery from the operation debilitated him for almost all the remainder.

So, although here he was heading closer to the Sun than he'd ever done before, Paul had to spend most of his time in a cabin surrounded by surgical instruments where his only company were the space ship's doctor and his robotic nurses.

“It’s a fairly routine procedure,” the doctor told him. “And seeing as this is your third time, you must know exactly what to expect. You’ll also undergo a renal regeneration and some minor cuticle enhancement. I’m afraid this won’t be a pleasure cruise for you.”

Paul nodded, although he was aware that for the majority of passengers on the luxury space cruiser that was exactly what they had every right to expect. However, he couldn’t even visit his favourite virtual world and he soon got bored of what on-board entertainment was available to someone who was horizontal on his back. The price he had to pay for a long and youthful life!

“Why a luxury cruiser?” he asked the Dean of his university when his passage

was booked.

“There are few enough vessels that pass by our colony,” said the Dean. “This one travels to several other colonies and so you should expect fairly mixed company.”

“But why should a luxury cruiser to Ecstasy bother to stop here? It’s not as if we use money in the Godwin colony, so there’s nothing any of us can buy there.”

“It’s true that ours isn’t a colony troubled by the financial commerce that corrupts most of the solar system, but although there is no need and certainly no way to spend money here there are some citizens such as artists, musicians, mathematicians and the like who’ve gained wealth by selling products beyond the colony. For many of them the colony of Ecstasy is the ideal place to go and spend the proceeds of this commerce.”

Ecstasy’s reputation as one of the best holiday destinations in the Outer Solar System was mostly earned by its reputation of providing visitors with the many illicit pleasures that were either rather less freely available in the Kuiper Belt or, as in Godwin, absent altogether. Paul was actually looking forward to visiting a settlement where sexual pleasure was widely available and where he could indulge in the vices of alcohol, marijuana, MDMA and other drugs which he’d only ever known from their virtual simulation. However, as he lay on his bed in a room rather smaller than his bedroom on Godwin, he wasn’t sure he’d have the energy to take advantage of what Ecstasy promised for him. And when he was well enough to get out of bed, his treatment demanded so much physical exertion on the exercise machines that his regenerated strength was soon drained from him.

The few days Paul was able to wander about the Space Ship Byzantium were

wholly unsatisfactory. He didn't know any of the other passengers because he'd missed the opportunity to make friends and acquaintances by virtue of being bedbound. In any case, his utilitarian Godwinian garb looked totally out of place compared to the often extravagant outfits worn by many other passengers. It would have been difficult enough for any of Godwin's citizens to merge in with the space ship's hedonistic passengers, but Paul was socially inept by even the low standards of his own society.

There were few things available for the naïve space tourist on the space ship other than roam the long corridors or admire the art collections or sit in an audience to watch some incomprehensible cabaret entertainment. The only thing that held any fascination to a man whose previous ventures into space had been no further than a day-trip around the Godwin colony was to visit one of the watch-towers that protruded at hundred metre intervals along the space ship's five kilometre length.

As Paul soon discovered, these transparent domes provided very little distraction for the space tourist. The boring fact that Paul had already learnt on his few excursions away from Godwin was that deep space really *did* mostly consist of absolutely nothing. There was a distant Kuiper Belt Object around which the colony circled but although the potato-shaped object's mass was greater than that of its satellite, its diameter of ten kilometres was actually less than the colony's length. The asteroid's only use was to serve as an emergency supply of water should there ever be a need for it in a community designed to be as self-sufficient as possible.

The acceleration and associated deceleration of the space ship was sufficiently great that it applied a force on the floor of its external domes either in or against the

direction of the ship's motion that was roughly the equivalent to that exerted by a small planetoid like Pluto or Orcus. As Paul had never visited such places and wasn't intending ever to do so, this was the nearest to low gravity he'd so far experienced. The view from the Byzantium's domes was actually less rather than more interesting than the view from outside Godwin where he'd at least had the opportunity to appreciate the true shape of the world in which he lived. All the view from here confirmed was what he already knew. And this was that the space ship was an awfully long way from anywhere else. That included the Sun which was still not much more than just the brightest star in the sky.

The space ship had several stops on its journey, although they weren't exactly stops in the sense that the space ship came to a dead halt. That would require a huge and costly expenditure in energy. In fact, large space vehicles very rarely ever came to a halt anywhere during their working life. The nearest equivalent was to orbit around a satellite and, only then, at a very safe distance.

Paul had missed most of these stops as he was still recovering from the agony of his regenerative treatment, but there was one last such before the Byzantium settled into orbit around the Ecstasy colony. Disappointingly, this was at one of the many refuelling depots scattered about the Kuiper Belt whose existence was entirely dependent on the presence of space ships like the Byzantium. This wasn't going to be as exciting or interesting as the brief sling-shot orbit around the Quaoar planetoid or the wealthy colony of the Krishna Republic. All that would happen was that the space ship would slow down as it passed through the huge hole inside the doughnut ring of a colony that housed barely ten thousand people. This was somewhat less than

Godwin's population of a million or the much more extensive Krishna Republic's ten million.

It was all over in the blink of an eye and in any case could only be seen from holo-screens inside the ship. It was far too risky to extend the viewing towers when the ship was performing manoeuvres. There was no sensation inside the ship's cylindrical decks to indicate that the space ship had changed its speed or direction, so it was a disappointment from even that perspective. All that happened was that the refuelling depot delivered fresh oxygen, water and food, while the space ship reciprocated by delivering a small proportion of the interplanetary post that was its most commercially viable payload. Although this exercise was a wonder of coordination at high speed, it was over so fast that Paul saw nothing much at all.

Nevertheless, this was Paul's first ever sight of a space community other than the anarchosyndicalist Godwin colony. He'd only ever visited virtual representations of such places. The real thing was both less well rendered but, given the vastness of space, more impressive than the computer-generated colonies he'd visited in virtual space.

The Byzantium finally reached its final orbit around the colony of Ecstasy where it would circle for a full month before carrying its passengers back home to their homes elsewhere in the Kuiper Belt. Paul boarded a shuttle that took him and several thousand others to the colony. He would also be there for only a month or so, until another space ship was scheduled to carry him deeper within the Solar System.

A brightly lit road stretched ahead of Paul when he exited the spaceport where he'd disembarked. It was Ecstasy Avenue, which to Paul was both totally new and

totally familiar. It was new, because he'd never before been in a road in an immense congested city that was so wide, so long and on either side shadowed by buildings several hundred metres high. It was also familiar because, in one virtual rendition or another, Paul had often visited simulations of Ecstasy and its most famous pleasure boulevards.

Ecstasy was the most ancient colony this far out in the solar system. It had been built on an earlier design for human colonies where the emphasis was rather less on building a sustainable ecosystem than on cramming as many million people as was possible into the confines of a space colony. And sustainable the colony most certainly had never been. Its continued survival relied heavily on machinery to manufacture its atmosphere and biosphere. As this was very quickly consumed, the colony depended on regular replenishment from the smaller satellites of Neptune and even from the noxious chemicals extracted from the gas giant's atmosphere.

There was a hubbub of human activity along Ecstasy Avenue as tourists gazed in awe at the tall buildings and the riches on display in the many shop windows. Scattered along the dimly lit road were garish holographic lights that promoted sex shops, virtual sex emporiums and brothels. This was a colony that promised all those sinful pursuits that Paul, like many men, had secretly fantasised about and which in the Outer Solar System were generally either absent altogether, as in Godwin, or existed only in carefully controlled areas. Here almost every imaginable vice was freely available. Or free in the sense that there was no restriction on its access, but certainly not so in a monetary sense.

The Interplanetary Union granted Paul a reasonably generous budget, but his

credit wasn't unlimited. Nevertheless, even the concept of credit was alien to Paul, who now for the first time in his life had the opportunity to spend it.

Paul's main concern as he travelled to his modest hotel on the upper levels of one of the colossal buildings was the bag handcuffed to his wrist in which he carried the precious data crystals that mostly justified his journey. Before he even saw the room where he'd be staying for the next month or so, he had to take his bag to a secure safe that was encased in strong nano-carbon walls that only a nuclear device could shatter. The security that accompanied the deposit of his precious bag was well beyond that available on Godwin, which had no tradition of keeping secrets or guarding property.

"I don't know what's in your bag," the hotel manager remarked as he escorted Paul to his room, "but it must be worth an absolute fortune. This is the strongest and more secure hold on the entire colony and normally stores irreplaceable works of art and rare fossils. We even had an Australopithecus skull here once!"

For his first few days on Ecstasy Paul made a point of visiting all the tourist sites. These were mostly famous because many were nearly a thousand years old and were relics from an earlier age in human history when even having a permanent settlement so far out in the Solar System was considered achievement enough. The founders of Ecstasy had high hopes for their new settlement, which they didn't call by its modern name but by the far grander appellation of the Foundation. It was the first foothold in a grandiose scheme to extend human colonisation well beyond the Solar System and towards the distant stars. Much effort had been expended on gigantic statuary, colossal palaces, awe-inspiring monuments and paradisial pleasure gardens.

This was all with the objective of stressing mankind's achievement in having now reached a triumphal apex which it fully expected to exceed.

Sadly, all these high hopes came to an anticlimactic end less than two centuries after the colony was founded when the delicate ecosystem collapsed catastrophically with the associated demise of tens of millions of colonists. Eventually the colony had to be abandoned altogether. For most of the colony's subsequent thousand-year existence it was a lifeless shell with no working atmosphere and no working machines. The colony's future existence was in doubt as a consequence of the dramatic decay that resulted when the temperature dropped to only a few Kelvins above absolute zero. Its salvation came only two centuries ago when the colony was bought up by a consortium of wealthy individuals and transformed from a lifeless museum to the Outer Solar System's most celebrated pleasure resort. Now, after governments had risen and fallen and the nature of space colonisation had changed beyond recognition from those earlier profligate days, it was now more a quaint reminder of an earlier optimistic age than the foundation of an interstellar empire.

Although it had always been Paul's ambition to see for real the architecture and art of the 27th century, he also nursed a lesser ambition. And this was to experience Ecstasy's many illicit pleasures. His credit ratings, although phenomenal by Godwinian standards, were just not sufficient for him to sample more than a modest selection of the pleasures around him. He tasted alcohol and the many other drugs on offer. And in the progress he discovered what he'd never before properly understood which was the toll such substance abuse could inflict on his body. Every morning, he felt as bad as he ever had when he underwent a skeletal refit. Although he

countered it with medicinal relief, there was no doubt that his days of Epicureanism would most likely result in rather more future neuronal regeneration than he'd anticipated. Unlike the virtual hallucinations he'd experienced in Nudeworld, real drug-induced mental psychosis was frightening, disorientating and not something that could be switched off by just a single command.

He also sampled prostitution: a practise that made no sense on Godwin where no human could ever be viewed as a commodity to be bought or sold. Here on Ecstasy there were many men and women from those parts of the Solar System where people still relied on the fruits of their labour to survive and who chose to make a living by selling their bodies for other people's sexual satisfaction.

Paul soon also discovered that he was not a man who could reliably rise to every opportunity.

“Don’t worry,” said Candy, the blue-skinned woman whose service he’d purchased. She had eyes twice the size than could ever be natural and a bosom that was several times larger than her head. “Not everyone can be a stud!”

Paul resolved to see what drugs or non-invasive treatment might be available that could correct his libidinal problems, but after an hour of fruitless search on Ecstasy’s computer systems he wasn’t sure that it was a medical issue that could ever be satisfactorily addressed.

It was with the all too recent memories of his sexual shortcomings that he wandered into the bar on the 12th level in which he was to meet his future wife, Beatrice.

He wasn’t seeking a sexual partner. He’d sworn to repeat this experiment only

much later when enough time had elapsed for the humiliation and shame of his carnal ineptitude to be forgotten or in some way corrected. What he really wanted was the blessed relief afforded by a full glass of that peculiar alcoholic concoction known as *beer* and the opportunity to sit in a kind of anonymity in a busy place. It was inevitable that sex was on offer. The bar's ambience promised as much. A naked woman was dancing under strobe lights on a bare stage. Paul had already got so jaded by the sight of nudity that he didn't even raise his gaze towards the podium. Naked bodies were so common on Ecstasy. He was wondering rather whether after his several months of absence, he should once again revisit Nudeworld. He also wondered how different it might be now he was so much closer to the virtual universe's host servers.

He almost didn't look up when a woman sat down in the bar stool next to him. The fact that she was unclothed was no longer an unusual sight, but he did think that with so many other empty bar stools it was an unnecessary invasion of his space. He wondered whether he should ask for another drink or venture again into the crowded street outside. This bar, unlike those in Nudeworld, was staffed not by an attractive nude barmaid but by a functional serving robot that automatically identified Paul's credit account just by looking at him.

"Haven't I seen you before?" the woman asked.

Paul turned his head and for the first time properly appraised the naked figure beside him. She wouldn't look out of place in Nudeworld, although she was probably actually even more perfect than the denizens of that carefully rendered world. Her bosom was larger than the human average, which was quite normal in Paul's favourite

virtual universe, and her figure was a pleasing but not over-exaggerated hourglass. Her face had the smoothness of a child's but her lips were fuller, her eyes larger and her facial expression altogether more fascinating. Her smile was broad and welcoming, and she was nowhere near as threatening as the blue-skinned prostitute.

"I don't think so," Paul replied. He was too naïve to recognise the question as a standard chat-up line. "I'm a tourist. I've never visited this quarter of Ecstasy before."

"You're from Godwin, aren't you?" the woman asked, with a delighted chuckle. "I can tell from the accent and, of course, your clothes. You don't see many people from *that* colony here? What brings you to Neptune orbit?"

Paul had to be careful here. He was under strict instructions, which were reiterated on many occasions, to give no hint to anyone, even close friends, as to the true nature of his journey. "I'm on my way to Earth," he replied, keeping as much to the truth as he thought advisable. "There are no direct flights from Godwin to Earth, so I'm travelling on a series of space ships. I'm waiting for the next flight to Saturn orbit."

"So, you're not here for... for what Ecstasy offers?"

"Not really," said Paul. "It's all very odd to me. We don't have bars or brothels or floor shows or drugs or any of those things on Godwin."

"So, I've heard," said the woman. "Godwin is a *very* peculiar kind of place. But fascinating too. No government. No taxes. No money. How *do* you manage?"

"Very easily," said Paul. "We have everything we need and what we don't need we simply can't have. A huge proportion of most colonies' economy is

dedicated to commerce and trade. Once you subtract those non-essential activities then people are free to do what they want as long as it doesn't harm anyone else and as long as they are willing to do what's necessary to keep the colony going."

"No shops. No money. No crime, I suppose. It sounds wonderful! Why can't *all* colonies be like that?" said the woman. "By the way, my name's Beatrice. What's yours?"

Paul told her and, drawn in by Beatrice's enthusiasm, he was soon entertaining her with an account of what life was like in Godwin. At least, he hoped his account was entertaining, though he did have a tendency to go on rather too much on topics of mostly academic interest. His monologue was soon wandering towards the rather less fascinating features of Godwinian life, such as the structure of the anarchist syndicates, the way in which society was regulated without the need for a legal system, and the difficulty of finding representatives to serve international bodies when the colony had no government or state apparatus. During all this Beatrice continued to smile and ask pertinent questions that showed an astonishing degree of attention.

"So, what is it you do, Paul?" she asked, when he'd finally exhausted the topic of how scientific research was funded in a society that had no grants or government funding. "I take it you work in a university?"

"Well, yes," Paul admitted. "I do research into historical data. I'm a kind of archaeologist, but I use my knowledge of obsolete operating systems and ancient software tools to make sense of vast amounts of data."

"What's the value of all that?"

“It’s hugely valuable,” Paul answered. He was warming to his subject but he was also anxious whether the discretion he was strongly advised to maintain might be compromised by a combination of alcohol and the presence of a beautiful naked woman. “A lot of data was collected in the past for quite different purposes than for the information we can get out of it now. For instance, in the twentieth century the first real evidence for global warming came from records kept by priests for quite different purposes than to provide a long-term record of climate change. Similarly, an analysis of literature can tell you a great deal about eating habits and recreation. There was a time when people spent something like three or four hours a day watching cathode ray tubes in darkened rooms. It was something called *television*. Because the habit was so prevalent, no one maintained detailed statistics of its impact.”

Beatrice seemed no less fascinated by Paul’s account of his profession than she was about Godwin’s political and social structure. The questions she asked were evidence of a sharp informed mind. She was someone who knew a great deal about many different things and could readily grasp some rather difficult concepts. But in all this conversation, which soon stretched beyond one measure of beer to several of them and wound through many of his almost random range of academic interests, Paul learnt very little about the naked woman seated beside him.

Despite this, Paul’s interest in her increased at the same rate at which he consumed alcohol and the degree to which he could expound his encyclopaedic knowledge of the abstract and abstruse. He wasn’t a man who could observe a flower without considering the biological function of its intricate petals and how it photosynthesised. He was more taken by a landscape’s geomorphic features than its

aesthetic beauty. He enjoyed music more as a functional backdrop than a thing imbued with its own virtues. And even now he found comfort as he observed Beatrice's beautifully formed body by analysing her physical beauty rather than merely admiring it. But admire it he did, and as the alcohol clouded his analytical tendencies, he found increasing pleasure in doing so.

"We can go back to my apartment, if you like," Beatrice suggested at a time in the evening which in retrospect seemed peculiarly well chosen. It was before Paul's new taste in alcohol defeated his ability to handle it, but after it had lessened his reservations.

"Yes," said Paul, before he had the chance to analyse what his response should be and what this invitation might entail. "Yes, that would be very nice. Very (*hic!*) nice, indeed."

It was only once they were out in the broad street, above which was the constant whoosh of passing sky taxis, that Paul at last asked Beatrice any questions.

"You're not a prostitute, are you?" he asked, mindful of his restricted credit rating.

"No, not at all!" Beatrice laughed, though she didn't seem at all offended. "I live near here. Just over there, in fact," she said pointing up at a tall building. "It's due to rain in about ten minutes, but we should get there before the downpour."

"Is it that time already?" wondered Paul, who'd been told about Ecstasy's twice-daily precipitation cycle.

"I'm afraid so," Beatrice said with a smile. "It's well after midnight."

The escalator to Beatrice's apartment was somewhat less well appointed than

that in Paul's hotel, but it was still spacious with thickly upholstered seats for them to make the journey up to the 120th floor with no discomfort. Paul then followed her along a corridor much like that in his hotel. Paul's mind wandered to the thought that this tall building very nearly touched the level's ceiling above which was another level that was much the same, only smaller as it occupied a position closer to the colony's hub. He missed the high skies of his rather more modern colony where space was extended without the need to cram millions of people together.

"Here we are!" announced Beatrice after several hundred metres stroll along the wide corridor. She stopped by a door that was exactly like all the others they'd passed and just a few metres from a water fountain. "It's not much, but it's all I can afford!"

"Afford?" wondered Paul, who still had difficulties comprehending an economy that was tied so closely to financial transactions. "What do you do for a living?"

"Oh! This and that," said Beatrice carelessly as the door recognised her and slid open to let the couple enter.

Compared to Paul's hotel suite, Beatrice's apartment was very modest indeed. There was an ante-room, a living room and a bedroom, whilst a bathroom and kitchen were discreetly hidden by sliding doors off a short adjoining hallway. But it was straight to the bedroom that Beatrice took Paul. Already there was an understanding that they should have sex together although there'd been no physical contact at all between the two on the walk to the apartment.

With one of the couple already naked it was entirely up to Paul to dictate the

speed of the proceedings, although Beatrice assisted him by undoing his simple utilitarian loose clothes whilst lovingly peppering his torso and upper thighs with kisses. It was only when the two of them were stretched out now both naked on her huge mattress that Paul could truly appreciate Beatrice's beauty.

Her bosom was large but her nipples were so exactly proportioned that it seemed wholly natural. Her pubic hairs were shaved and there was no stubble to hint at a recent shave or indeed that she'd ever had to shave. Her long blonde hair cascaded onto the silk sheets. But it was her face that made Beatrice so entirely desirable and which awakened Paul's penis from its native torpidity. Even his companion in long-neglected Nudeworld, Blanche, didn't exhibit so much desire and excitement.

Their lovemaking was the most passionate of Paul's life so far. None of the real women he'd made love to and not even his virtual lovers were as responsive as Beatrice. The sex was urgent, carnal, sweaty and exhausting, but this time Paul rose to the occasion. His recent woes with the blue-skinned sex worker were now banished from his mind. He fucked with pure abandon. His thrusts were answered by Beatrice's thrusts. The sheets were soon a sodden mess from their shared perspiration and yet, even after ejaculating many times, Paul still felt the need to plunge once more into that inviting hole that accepted him whenever and however he felt inclined.

Their lovemaking was not incessant. Although Paul appreciated the new suppleness of his body that resulted from his recent skeletal refit, he was by no means equal to Beatrice's inexhaustible sexual appetite. During those pauses, they slumped on their backs beneath a holographic display of cloudy skies and swooping sea-birds.

Paul speculated on the relationship between 27th century aesthetics and modern needs, while Beatrice mused rather more lyrically on the beauty and pleasures of the ancient colony of Ecstasy. She described the concert halls and the evocative music she'd listened to there. She described the level that was modelled on the Pleistocene savannahs of North America with regenerated mammoth, mastodon, ground sloths and sabre-tooth cats. She marvelled at the wide variety of entertainment available in the colony from the most vulgar to the most exquisite. She made Paul understand that there were far more pleasures available to the space tourist on Ecstasy than the just hedonistic ones for which the colony was most famous.

It was during one such pause, that Paul heard a strange commotion that came from outside the apartment and down the corridor. There were aggressive shouts and an unnerving thump. He glanced at Beatrice with a smile.

“Partygoers!” he said with a grin. “They’ve obviously had too much to drink.”

“Maybe,” said Beatrice, but for the first time that evening without a smile on her face. There was an unusual seriousness on her face. “I think I’d better check.”

“Be careful,” said Paul with real concern. “You know what people can be like when they’ve had too much to drink.” Of course he didn’t really know. He’d seen the odd tourist vomiting on the streets outside the bars and only knew about the antisocial affects of drinking from his extensive research into earlier centuries.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Beatrice. She stood up, naked as always, and left Paul on the bed as she strolled out of the bedroom and then out of the apartment altogether.

While she was gone, the commotion outside actually got worse and despite the

soundproofing of the apartment loud enough for Paul to get some idea of what was happening. The shouts got louder. Then there was the sound of scuffling and some muffled thuds. Paul was torn between his natural cowardice and a chivalrous sense of duty, but thankfully Beatrice was back in the flat well before five minutes had passed.

“You were right,” she said, smiling at Paul through the open door. “Just some rowdy neighbours. I’ll just wash my hands and I’ll be back with you.”

Paul smiled. He could hardly wait to resume their lovemaking. Already his penis was twitching with excitement. But somewhere at the back of his mind, he couldn’t help wondering why Beatrice should want to wash her hands and why there were red streaks on her arms and bosom.

Chapter Nine Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

If she were ever asked, Nadezhda Kerensky would describe herself as an essentially monogamous woman. She didn't have the desire or ambition to take on more than one lover. Surely that was all she ever needed. Nadezhda was a romantic soul. She continued to believe that one day there would be an occasion where she'd meet the one woman who'd be her partner for the rest of her life.

She once thought that her ex-wife, Veronika, was to be that one woman but she no longer believed that now.

Nor did she believe that Vashti satisfied that need. However passionate their love was for each other, it was obvious that Vashti wasn't a woman with whom Nadezhda could settle down with or marry. Vashti wasn't someone who limited herself to one lover at a time.

Or even at the same time.

Nevertheless, she was admirably open and honest about the extent of her sex-life beyond Captain Kerensky's bed. In that regard, the colonel could never be accused of deception. She had never contemplated having a love life that was any less promiscuous than it already was. Vashti enjoyed sex with men just as much as she did with women. She got so much pleasure out of sex that she saw no good reason to prefer one gender over the other or to limit her lovers to only one at a time.

However, there were practical considerations the lovers had to take into account. Nadezhda was the ship's captain and Vashti was a colonel. They had different responsibilities of duty and command. It wasn't that anyone openly

disapproved of a relationship between a Martian soldier and a Saturnian space officer, but the duties of their different and overlapping spheres of command took a higher priority than their mutual pleasure. However much Nadezhda yearned after her peculiarly endowed lover, their opportunities to meet were constrained by Vashti's duty roster and Nadezhda's never-ceasing responsibilities.

Although her lover had no objections, Nadezhda wasn't inclined to take on another lover. Vashti was pretty much all the woman she needed. Although she had no doubt that she was a lesbian, Nadezhda was addicted not only to her lover but also to her lover's penis. She'd never known such a thing so intimately before. It was women and women only that attracted her, although these days the pleasure of that cock in her mouth and its thrusts in her cunt inclined her to look at men in a fresh light. But however much men might be in possession of an organ that had given her so much satisfaction she was disgusted at the notion of a rough unmannerly male body pressed against hers.

Vashti had a habit of arriving outside Nadezhda's bedroom or office at times that were unannounced but which fitted remarkably well with the captain's routines and duties. There was hardly an occasion when Vashti visited that Nadezhda was dragged away by the obligations of duty from the passionate lovemaking that filled so many nights and whose memory sweetened so many days. Even so, Vashti's visits were never as frequent as the captain might like. There were many lonely unrequited nights and days when she waited in anxious expectation and dripped in excited anticipation. But such intervals were never for so long that she felt the need to seek out other lovers to satisfy her cravings.

And, of course, it wouldn't do for the captain of the Intrepid to reciprocate Vashti's policy by arriving unannounced at the colonel's quarters. Like all soldiers on board the space ship, the colonel was housed in relatively spartan quarters that had none of the landscaping that the passengers like Paul enjoyed. Battle-readiness took priority over comfort for members of the armed forces.

It would take extraordinary temptation indeed to lure Nadezhda away from the comfortable pattern into which she'd settled in the first month of her captaincy of the Intrepid. How could anyone compete with Vashti's energetic and urgent thrusts that left her so sore but still gasping for more? When she licked her lips, Nadezhda fancied she could still taste Vashti's sour semen. When she masturbated, which she now did more frequently, she could feel the soreness on her vulva that was the penalty of so many hours of passion. When she practised in the gym, the sweat that poured off her was a reminder of their mutual perspiration.

Nevertheless, Captain Kerensky had other concerns than only her affair with her errant lover. It troubled her that although she had a good idea of exactly where the Intrepid was headed in terms of spatial coordinates she knew very little else about the destination. The literature she'd read on the Anomaly was of little help. She was convinced—as were her fellow officers when they discussed it in the mess or in the lounge—that it must be some kind of alien incursion.

“What sort of aliens might they be?” wondered Chief Petty Officer Singh, as he tugged at the single long forelock that cascaded from his otherwise shaven head. “They won’t just be microbes will they? I’d hope for something more exciting than that.”

“I hope it’s not an invasion force,” remarked Medical Officer Yoritomo, who was tall and thin and blessed with a thick bush of black hair that bounced off his bare shoulders. “I can’t think of any other reason why there would be such a large military contingent on board.”

“Aliens are probably weirder than we can ever imagine,” speculated Assistant Chief Engineer Taalat, who was a slim girl with artificially blue skin that her captain lusted after even though the engineer was a confirmed heterosexual. “They won’t be mammalian. Probably not even vertebrate. Perhaps they’ll be a kind of mollusc or even a talking vegetable.”

“The scientists on the ship should have some idea,” said the Chief Petty Officer as he sipped from a tall glass of fruit juice. “That’s what they’re here for. They’ve probably got access to confidential information that us mere space officers would never be allowed to see. Not even the captain.”

Nadezhda could see that her fellow officers’ eyes were focused on her as if they were pleading for more information. She only wished she could enlighten them. “I know for a fact,” she said carefully but honestly, “that you’re no better briefed than me. As for the scientists...”

“What about that Godwinian?” Taalat wondered. Her slightly dimpled cheeks made Nadezhda’s heart beat a little faster. “The one with the Venusian wife. It’s not often you get to meet an anarchist. I’ve heard he’s been the target of countless assassination attempts. You must have heard of the attack on the cruise ship Ulysses. And there were other attacks everywhere he went. He *must* know something.”

“He’s a weird one,” remarked the Chief Medical Officer. “He doesn’t socialise

with the other scientists and the case he brought with him was guarded as if it contained precious metals. He probably knows more than anyone.”

“He’s not particularly communicative,” said Captain Kerensky cautiously. “He spends almost all his time with his wife or wandering aimlessly about the outermost level where he lives. He must be the most unimpressive scientist I’ve ever met.”

“Appearances can be very deceptive,” was Taalat’s opinion.

Nadezhda could see there might yet be wisdom in the cliché. After all, there was an extraordinary level of security surrounding a man whose academic discipline was at best incidental to the object of the mission. Maybe there was more to computer archaeology than Nadezhda had ever given credit.

Although Captain Kerensky had entertained many of the resident scientists in her office, she’d been reluctant to invite one as poorly accredited as Paul. He wasn’t even a professor. His only apparent claim to fame was the publication of a sensational thesis that demonstrated that the Anomaly had been previously sighted at the very dawn of the space age when colonisation was more a dream than a practical reality. Otherwise what was more remarkable about his research was how extraordinarily mundane it was. Maybe there was more to the strange anarchist who was privileged to occupy a villa in the Intrepid’s most spacious and sought-after level.

The captain hadn’t been any more impressed by Paul in person. Compared to the witty and eloquent Professor Keane who’d entertained her for more than an hour on the subject of polydimensional fractals or Doctor Xiao Ping who’d made the subject of exobacteria more fascinating than she’d ever imagined possible, Paul

Morris was a very dull specimen.

However, what did attract her and about which she felt decidedly guilty, especially in the company of Vashti, was Paul's wife. Beatrice was possibly the most beautiful woman she'd ever met. And although this was the first time the captain had met her, it wasn't to be the last.

Captain Kerensky made a point of visiting every level of the Interplanetary Space Ship. This wasn't merely to pass the time. She believed that it was only by making such visits that she could really know how things were and whether there were any necessary improvements. This was especially so on such an ancient vessel as the Intrepid.

It was while she was wandering about on the outermost level that she once again encountered Beatrice. This time the Venusian was alone. There was no sign of Paul at all. She was strolling along a path through a wooded glade towards a stream that cascaded over rocks that had been smoothed over by the centuries. It was an idyllic scene. Birds were singing in the trees and antelope were cantering over the grassy plains. But what was also strange to the captain, even after having spent so many years in deep space with such a wide variety of people, was that Beatrice was totally naked.

There were several colonies in the Solar System where nudity was the normal state of dress and there had been officers and ancillary staff who'd served under the captain that shunned clothing except where it was necessary to perform their duties. It wasn't just that Venusians were by no means known to be amongst the Solar System's most natural nudists that awakened the captain's interest in Paul's wife. It

was also that the unclothed Beatrice wore her body so well that it seemed unnatural that she should ever wear clothes.

And what a body! Although the bosom was oddly large and the rest of her so curiously slim, there were aspects in her tight but smooth contours, the healthy gleam of her skin and her confident stride that accentuated her beauty far above its mere physical aspect.

There was a dreamlike quality to the moments that followed. Captain Kerensky was so mesmerised by Beatrice's beauty she hardly registered that the two women's steps were bringing them closer to one another. It was almost unexpected when Beatrice was close enough that their eyes met and they could exchange words.

"I'm delighted to see you again," said Beatrice in her soft seductive voice.

"No more than I am to see you," said Nadezhda.

"It's so beautiful here," cooed Beatrice as she advanced one more step closer. Her bosom bounced smoothly in rhythm to her stride. "I so enjoy my walks in the glades and pathways of the Intrepid."

"So I see," said the captain.

Beatrice now stood just in front of Nadezhda. Her face had beautiful green eyes and an exquisitely proportioned nose. Her fair hair brushed against her cheeks and her endearing smile was close enough to touch.

"We didn't really have much opportunity to chat before," said Beatrice whose grin broadened as she placed a hand on Nadezhda's. "I so much wanted to get to know you better."

"I did too," admitted Nadezhda speaking more breathlessly than she felt she

ought. "It's my duty to ensure that the passengers are well looked after."

"I can understand that," said Beatrice who gently brushed her other hand against the captain's cheek. This innocent gesture sent daggers of anxiety and expectation through Nadezhda's chest. "I can report to you that I am wholly content with the services provided by the Space Ship Intrepid."

"I'm pleased to hear that," said the captain, who was rather less sure of what else to say as Beatrice detached her other hand from Nadezhda's hand and brushed it over her other cheek.

"I'm glad that my satisfaction gives you so much pleasure," said Beatrice whose face was now almost touching Nadezhda's. She could feel the naked woman's warm breath brush over her nose and lips. She gazed tremulously into Beatrice's eyes. They were shining with unmistakeable passion.

There were a few more words, equally banal, that were exchanged in the moments that followed. Beatrice recognised and responded to Nadezhda's reciprocal excitement. She pressed her lips against the captain's which opened to allow the ingress of her tongue. The two women pressed their bodies against each other: the captain in her pale purple uniform and Beatrice fully unclothed. Their tongues grappled as Nadezhda's crotch moistened with desire.

The grass was welcoming. The conditions were right. And Nadezhda was barely aware of the subsequent course of events. They followed a logic that was by no means determined by propriety or relative rank. Her clothes were divested so subtly that she was only aware that Beatrice had removed them when they were kicked away from the couple. The two women were both naked as they slowly fell to the ground.

Nadezhda surrendered herself totally to Beatrice's hands and tongue. When they were at last outstretched on the grass, observed with only desultory interest by the parrots in the trees above and the deer that strayed past, their initially tender love-making became ever more passionate.

Beatrice was a woman at least as expert as Vashti in the amorous arts. Nadezhda's vulva and clitoris was soaked in Beatrice's saliva while the captain explored the Venusian's smoothly shaved and perfectly formed crotch with her tongue and teeth. Fingers probed deeply where no tongue could reach. Then Beatrice's fist was inside her and fucked her with a rhythm that matched the waves of ecstasy that culminated in orgasm after orgasm.

Finally, drenched in mutual perspiration, the two women lay together on the grass while small insects crawled over their thighs. Their arms and legs were intertwined. Their faces and crotches were pressed together. This was lovemaking of an intensity that Nadezhda had only ever experienced with Vashti but as a woman who still yearned after the familiarities of another woman's vagina Nadezhda felt a warm satisfaction that, after all, Vashti's penis could only be a second best.

"We must meet again," said Beatrice as she stroked Nadezhda's crotch. The captain's body responded almost immediately by arching upwards in the hope of more gratification.

"We must," said the captain. She was only belatedly aware of how improper she'd been. Although this was scarcely the first time that Captain Kerensky had enjoyed sex with a passenger, this was the first time she'd so blatantly disregarded the concerns of the husband, wife or partner. Although Nadezhda was comforted by the

fact that Beatrice's husband was only a man and that a man's company could never be preferable to that of a woman, she also knew that it wasn't right for the captain of the space ship to show so little respect for one of her passengers.

Nadezhda also worried what Vashti might think. She wasn't sure what to tell her, although her strangely endowed lover never disguised the extent of her own errant behaviour.

Nonetheless, Vashti wasn't a woman Nadezhda could easily keep a secret from.

"You've been seeing someone else," said Vashti with an indulgent smile after the couple made love together a couple of days later. "I can tell. Who is it?"

Nadezhda was alarmed at Vashti's detective skills. Surely she had washed off every trace of her lovemaking.

"A passenger," she admitted.

"Not a fellow officer?" said Vashti. "I thought maybe it was Mariam."

"She's taken up with a Uranian woman," said Nadezhda, with a tinge of regret in her voice. "A quantum physicist with orange skin and purple hair. She hasn't got the time for anyone else."

"So is your new lover a scientist?" asked Vashti without recrimination.

"No," said the captain, who made it clear from the tone of her voice that she didn't wish to be probed any deeper. "Just a passenger."

Captain Kerensky now had two very beautiful and remarkably skilled lovers and ones moreover who were so accommodating about the existence of the other. She couldn't imagine Veronika accepting her ex-wife's infidelity with anything like the

same degree of equanimity.

It was uncanny how the two women both managed to time their encounters with Nadezhda at times that suited her and how they never came into contact with each other. It was almost as if they'd entered a compact together. Nadezhda loved both women passionately and there was no sense that she preferred one to the other. When she was being fucked by Vashti, that penis deep inside her and those muscular arms and thighs gripping her tightly, she never wished to be anywhere else. On the other hand, in Beatrice's tender caresses and against her perspiring bosom she melted away in hopeless desire and Vashti was almost forgotten.

As there were few reasons for the captain to ever visit the outermost level where Beatrice and her husband lived, she was rarely reminded of the adulterous nature of her relationship. She mostly forgot that Paul existed at all. He rarely wandered beyond his villa and was remarkably indifferent to the other scientists. Fortunately, this lack of interest was both mutual and amicable.

It was the military contingent that most often organised the social occasions on the Intrepid which were the main opportunities for the crew and passengers to socialise with the soldiers. The scientists were generally hopeless at organising such activities. The huge stadium on the ninth level was used to host the sports events where soldiers formed teams to represent the various colonies, planets and moons of the Solar System and to compete against each other. The competition was generally at its most vicious when the teams' original home nations were most nearly neighbours.

Captain Kerensky felt obliged to attend a game of rugby football between Vashti's Mariner team and one representing Ceres. This was the final in a bitterly

fought contest where Vashti was the star player in a team otherwise mostly made up of men. The captain couldn't disappoint the soldiers who'd petitioned her to make an appearance, but most of all she wanted to show her support to Vashti who was the fullback for the Mariner side.

Nadezhda was somewhat put out when she noticed Beatrice sitting in the audience with the visibly bored Paul. The couple were in the seating area reserved for the scientists who attended these events in significantly smaller numbers than the military or the ship's crew. Beatrice was showing much more enthusiasm for the sport than her husband. Although her seat was on the other side of a stadium designed to accommodate tens of thousands of passengers, even from this distance Captain Kerensky was sure that her lover was exchanging meaningful glances across the pitch.

Mostly thanks to some stupendous goals and courageous tries for which Vashti was almost solely responsible, the Mariner team comfortably dominated the game. Nadezhda didn't know how many of the people watching were aware of Vashti's peculiar attributes. Although her lover didn't exactly hide her assets from the world, neither did she flaunt them. Nadezhda wondered whether it was her lover's singularly masculine attribute that was also the cause for Vashti being such a strong and athletic sportswoman. And however ferocious the scrum, she never emerged from its midst with a single hair out of place. This was quite unlike her badly bruised teammates who were more often covered in blood.

Captain Kerensky knew she should avoid speaking to Colonel Vashti after the match. She was, in any case, surrounded by her fellow soldiers and even those from other teams, who were congratulating the colonel on her performance. But she wasn't

sure whether she should avoid bumping into Beatrice.

“That was a tremendous game, captain,” she heard a familiar voice say as she strode into the atrium where the spectators were milling around and clearly reluctant to leave so soon for home.

It was indeed Beatrice who’d addressed her. She was dressed in a flimsy top through which her nipples protruded. Her tight shorts hid only the details but not the contours of her crotch and hips. She was hand-in-hand with Paul who still wore a bored expression on his face.

“Yes, it was,” said the captain, who restrained herself from kissing her lover in public right beside her cuckolded husband. “Of course, I can’t say whether the best team won, as that’s not in my position to say, but it was a *very* exciting match.”

In the subsequent small talk, Captain Kerensky studied Paul as best she could to see how much, if at all, he suspected his wife of having an affair and, what is more, with the captain of the Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid. She could see no more evidence that he was aware of his wife’s infidelity than when the captain first invited the couple to her office. He barely engaged his eyes with hers at all and held his hand firmly in Beatrice’s. His gaze was more often on her than one anyone or, indeed, anything else.

Perhaps he was so nonchalant because he was an anarchist, Nadezhda mused. She knew little about such fringe political ideologies and could easily be persuaded that just as where Paul lived there was no government maybe he also didn’t share the same moral concerns as people of other nations. Perhaps in a sense he was above petty concerns such as jealousy, however much he was apparently attached to and

protective of Beatrice.

Even so, Captain Kerensky continued to hold her original opinion when she first met Paul that he was a decidedly unimpressive man. He was probably just incredibly naïve and easy to fool.

It was this unflattering assessment that most reassured the captain when Beatrice and Paul departed and she wandered off to chat with the other officers.

Having such a contemptuous attitude really did make it much easier for Nadezhda to continue her relationship with Beatrice untroubled and free from guilt.

Chapter Ten Chomsky - 3750 C.E.

“Marriage,” repeated Comrade Doctorow incredulously. “Are you telling me you’ve never heard of the institution of marriage?”

“Well, yes,” said Paul. “I’ve heard of it. There’s no way I couldn’t have heard of it after having studied so much about the third millennium. It’s just not something practised on Godwin.”

“You know nothing about matrimony between two people who love one another?” wondered Comrade Leopold Doctorow. “You know nothing about husbands and wives?”

“I always assumed it was just an ancient practise that had dropped out of use centuries ago,” said Paul, not at all happy at being quizzed in this way by the government minister. This wasn’t why he’d come to Chomsky: the most recently constructed colony in the extensive Socialist Republics of Saturn.

The minister scratched his shaven pate. “I’ve been married six times. I’ve had six different husbands. I’m not exactly the best advertisement for the benefits of marriage, but I’d no idea that you anarchists had actually dropped the institution altogether. There can’t be very many other colonies in the Solar System who’ve gone that far. Nevertheless, whatever strange customs you might have in your rustic corner of the Kuiper Belt, the fact is that everywhere else the institution of marriage is still very much alive. And I tell you again that if you wish your lover, your ... erm ... *girlfriend*, to accompany you for the rest of your voyage it is absolutely imperative that you and she should get married.”

Paul gazed lovingly at Beatrice as she clasped his hand tightly in hers. “Well, I’m sure neither of us has any objection to getting ‘married’, have we?” he asked her. “We could just sign whatever documents that need to be signed now if that’s not a problem. What do you think, dear?”

“As you say, I have no objection,” agreed Beatrice with a broad grin. “Can’t we just do it now and get it over with?”

Comrade Leopold Doctorow sighed. “Neither of you seem to know much about matrimony, do you? Do you have no weddings on Ecstasy either?”

“Weddings?” wondered Beatrice. “People do have them. They come from all over the Solar System to do that. Are they also associated with marriage?”

“I despair!” exclaimed the minister as he leaned back in his leather chair. “Yes, a wedding is a solemn exchange of vows and it formalises the state of marriage after you have been engaged. I take it that you don’t even consider your lover to be your fiancée?”

“I’m not sure,” said Paul, a little puzzled. “What’s a *fiancée*?”

Comrade Doctorow raised his eyebrows and looked over at his husband, whose head like most Saturnians was also shaved. “Okay! Okay! I admit that I’m not really the best person to instruct you in the sacred traditions of marriage. Just be aware that throughout the Solar System it’s taken very seriously indeed: especially here in the Socialist Republics of Saturn. It would just not be considered proper for you and Beatrice to travel together under the protection of the Interplanetary Union unless your relationship was officially sanctioned. My secretary will make the proper arrangements and you will be married before you travel on to the Jovian Asteroid

Belt. The alternative is that you won't be able to travel with your lover at all. Although the Socialist Republics are tolerant and understanding, there are other nations within the Interplanetary Union who won't countenance that you travel together on such an important mission without a formal union. Do you understand?"

"I suppose so," said Paul, who still didn't comprehend what the fuss was all about.

The majority of Paul's audience with the minister was a rather bland, but it was fascinating to Paul who'd never before had a conversation of any kind with an individual who was designated as belonging to a higher status than him. In Godwin, there were no hierarchies and certainly not formal ones. It wasn't so much that everyone was considered equal: it was just that no one had any claim to be anything else. The very notion of equality, like liberty and fraternity, was so taken for granted that nobody ever made a fuss about it. Paul had assumed that the Socialist Republics of Saturn, a loose confederation of moons, asteroids and colonies united by ideology and planetary orbit, would be similar in that regard, but although everywhere he and Beatrice roamed about Chomsky there were constant reminders of the state's socialist politics, there was also a great deal of evidence that this wasn't entirely a community of equals.

Not only was there rank and status, although everyone was addressed as 'comrade', there were laws and regulations that were also equally alien to Paul. There was even a thriving capitalist economy, together with such financial instruments as a stock exchange, public limited companies and a significant disparity of wealth. But at least nobody was poor. In fact, by Saturnian standards, it was Paul who was poor.

However sincerely the Socialist Republics expounded their shared ideology, it seemed that the pursuit of wealth took a rather higher priority. There was some evidence that this kind of mixed economy was some kind of a formula for material success. The nations in Saturn orbit were the wealthiest in the Solar System having overtaken the nations in Earth orbit on most economic measurements just over a century earlier and as the decades passed had further extended their lead in terms of Gross National and Domestic Products. This was despite Earth's unique historical advantage that was once thought to be unsurpassable.

A millennium and a half separated the Socialist Republics from the abominations that masqueraded as socialist societies in the Age of Extremes, but the memory of those decades was still routinely used to discredit Socialist ideology by nations that had adopted opposing economic or political models. Godwin's main criticism of the Socialist Republics was that the society was too homogenous. As far as Paul could see, this homogeneity was most apparent in the fashion for shaven heads (and undoubtedly the rest of the body as well) that was sported by all but a small minority of the population.

Another common aspect of Saturnian culture was the prevalence towards homosexuality, although this tendency didn't seem to have much to do with the tenets of Socialism. Although Paul had many gay and bisexual friends and acquaintances, rather less than a fifth of the population of Godwin were in single sex relationships. In the marble-lined malls and elegant parks of Chomsky, it seemed that the ratio was pretty much totally reversed. Paul thought it was fascinating evidence of the success of social engineering as a response to over-population.

“What difference does it make?” Beatrice asked when Paul confessed to his secret discomfort at being surrounded by male couples (and less so, he had to admit, by the equal number of female ones).

“None,” said Paul hurriedly, anxious not to appear homophobic. “None at all. But would there be so many same sex couples if there were fewer incentives to be so? Every film, play and song seems to take it for granted that the most normal relationship is that between a man and another man. Or between a woman and another woman.”

“Isn’t it just the same thing everywhere else, only the other way round?” remarked Beatrice. “Although there are plenty of places on Ecstasy where women can meet women and men other men, homosexual relationships are in the minority. What’s so unnatural that it should be the other way round in Saturn?”

“That’s just it!” moaned Paul, aware that his was a losing battle. “Is it really *natural* at all?”

“Is it natural to wear clothes? Is it natural to live in space? Is it natural to have holographic telecommunications wherever you go? I think that being *natural* stopped being a fact of life for human beings as soon as they started living in parts of Earth where they had to wear warm clothes and eat cooked food. And that was a long time before humans invented space flight.”

Beatrice and Paul attracted the inquisitive stares of almost everyone and it wasn’t simply because they were an openly heterosexual couple. It was also because they dressed very differently to the shaven headed comrades. Both Paul’s loose clothes and Beatrice’s scanty ones contrasted with the tight trousers and suits worn by

Saturnians, that emphasised body shape whilst hiding from sight all but the hands, calves and face. Although the clothes were egalitarian in design, there was evidence of social distinction in the understated variation in the quality of the cloth and the elegance of the trimming.

Now that he was on Chomsky Paul began to feel for sure that he was, indeed, on a Very Important Mission, even though he still didn't believe that he deserved such an honour. He still believed that he was something of a fraud even though the authorities in the Interplanetary Union had deemed otherwise. He'd still not been given a clear explanation as to why he was considered such a Very Important Person. No Godwinian was ever considered any more important than anyone else and such an elevated status didn't sit easily on Paul. Even if he hadn't spent all his life in an anarchist colony, it was a role that Paul was never likely to be comfortable with.

All the same, right from the moment he arrived at Chomsky's splendid spaceport, Paul was constantly reminded of his newfound importance. The men and women who'd welcomed him were high ranking ministers, business-people and celebrities whose hands he had to shake and who blandly disguised their opinions of Paul's plain clothes and of Beatrice's near absence of them. It was Beatrice, as always, who accorded herself most gracefully in these situations. She demonstrated her skill at charming the dignitaries who flocked around the couple. This sheltered Paul from the consequences of his many *faux pas* and embarrassing blunders, but it also added to his discomfort. This was especially so when Beatrice exercised her charms on the women who were so obviously seduced by her beauty and grace.

“Do you *really* want to get married?” Paul asked Beatrice as they cuddled up

together on the huge mattress in their luxurious hotel suite.

“If that’s a proposal, then the answer is yes,” said Beatrice without hesitation.

Paul had intended it to be more of a speculative question, but he was rather relieved that the troublesome business of courtship was over with so easily. The lovemaking that followed this proposal was torrid and much more prolonged. Paul’s testicles were left swollen and bruised for many hours after. Beatrice insisted that the couple enjoy the variants of sexual pleasure that Paul mostly reserved for his virtual lovers.

Beatrice’s anus was both tighter and looser than Blanche’s. Her oral technique was messier and called for a much more liberal application of spit and saliva. She lacked Blanche’s inhuman ability to stay balanced in whatever position Paul put her in but she brought him to spasms of ecstasy that his virtual lover could never equal. She also had an appetite of her own—not one wholly predicated on Paul’s lust—that made their lovemaking many times more satisfying.

Needless to say, Paul knew almost none of the wedding guests. His parents had the opportunity to attend as holographic avatars, although they would be out of phase by several light hours, but as they were just as uncomprehending as Paul of what the ceremony signified they responded with rather puzzled comments and the statement that if being ‘married’ was what Paul wanted then they wished him all the best. They hadn’t seen one another for seventy years and were surprised to be reminded that they had any lingering responsibility towards their son. The other wedding guests were chosen more by virtue of their status on Chomsky. Embarrassingly, Paul had difficulty in remembering their names and how to

pronounce them.

The wedding overseer was a tall oriental woman called Comrade Natasha Smith. She sat in front of the happy couple and constantly referred to a holographic screen that hovered beside her on which there was a formal list of questions.

“Are you religious?” she asked.

“No. I don’t think so. It’s not something I’ve ever thought about. There aren’t many religious people on Godwin and most of those are Buddhist. They don’t believe in a God either, do they?”

“I’m an atheist myself,” said the wedding overseer, “so I’m not an authority on such matters. But I have to ask. There are some very peculiar requirements for religious weddings. I’m just grateful that there are so few religious people in the Socialist Republics. And how about you, Beatrice? Do you profess to a faith?”

“No.”

“I see. Do either of you have a preference as to the nature of the wedding ceremony?”

Paul shook his head. He hadn’t been aware that there was any difference between one kind of wedding and another.

“What about you, Beatrice? Your records say that you originally came from Venus. Do you want a Venusian wedding? It might be more appropriate for a heterosexual union. It’s a long time since I married a man and a woman.”

“I might come from Venus,” said Beatrice, “but as far as marriage is concerned I might as well come from Mars. Or Saturn for that matter. I’m quite happy to have a standard Saturnian wedding.”

“Well, that makes life a lot easier. Venusian weddings are fussy affairs. And I’m sure we can adapt the Saturnian ceremony for a heterosexual couple. I just have to alter the words a little. Okay, what about family concerns? I know about Paul’s family. How about you, Beatrice? Do you want your family to attend? Not in person, of course. Venus is too far away for that. It wouldn’t be too difficult to arrange a holographic presence. Conversation might be difficult, but it’s the significance of their being there that counts.”

“I have no family,” said Beatrice, with no hint of sadness or regret.

“Are they deceased?”

“I’ve just never known a family.”

The wedding overseer glanced at her holographic screen. “Well, that assertion is corroborated by your official records, but again I am obliged to ask. I’m sorry to hear that though, dear. It must be tragic not to have known the pleasures of having two mothers or two fathers. Though on Venus I guess that would have been a mother and a father. How about friends? Have either of you got friends who you’d like to see attend the wedding?”

“I don’t think any of my friends would understand what it was about,” Paul remarked sadly. He was beginning to feel quite isolated on this alien world.

“My friends wouldn’t understand either,” Beatrice said.

“That’s a shame,” sighed Comrade Natasha Smith. “I’m afraid then that those who’ll attend will do so more for reasons of official obligation than because they genuinely wish that your union should bring you happiness for the rest of your days.”

And so it was to be.

Neither Paul nor Beatrice made any preparations for the wedding. This was all done for them by Chomsky's marital experts who assured the happy couple how honoured the Interplanetary Union was to officiate such an auspicious occasion. Paul didn't doubt their sincerity and he was more than happy to be excused from the obligation of doing anything himself. Almost all he needed to do was choose a uniform from the limited selection on offer and learn something about the wedding ceremony. He had trouble in performing either duty with very much earnestness. The uniform he chose was uncomfortable. It was a black outfit that was much tighter than anything he'd ever worn before. He was adamant that his shoulder length hair shouldn't be cut even a centimetre shorter and most certainly not shaved off. When he attended the practice session, he thought the vows he was supposed to keep were absurd and ridiculous. How could anyone be expected to stay with the same partner for all his or her life? With a lifespan of well over a century and the likelihood of being sexually active for almost all of it, such a vow was completely unrealistic. This opinion seemed to be verified by Saturn's rather high divorce and remarriage rate.

It didn't seem to be any more natural to Beatrice who had to wear many more clothes for the ceremony than she usually did, although she was rather better than Paul at memorising the formal words of the ceremony. In fact, she even claimed to be looking forward to the event.

As far as Paul was concerned, the only value he'd get from the whole palaver was the official formalisation of the couple's relationship. But as this would be the very first formal event of his life he had no idea what real value that might be.

There wasn't much time to wait for the wedding. The space ship that would

carry the newlyweds towards the Jovian Asteroid Belt was due to leave in just over a week. The couple's honeymoon would be spent on a relatively unglamorous cruiser that was more often used by Saturnian businesspeople and government officials than by those in the first flush of matrimonial bliss.

The couple had plenty of time to look around Chomsky while they waited for the day of the wedding. The colony was several times larger than Godwin and consisted of two concentric cylinders, the inner one of which was mostly sea water and the outer one was half wilderness and half cityscape. Paul wondered whether he could ever again be satisfied with life in the rather less splendid and often chaotic world of Godwin. That was, of course, if he even had a return ticket from the Very Important Mission to which he had been summoned.

The dawn of the wedding day began like every day in Chomsky. Paul admired the view from the third floor luxury suite where he and Beatrice were staying. It was a delightful vista of parks and woodland in which a pair of regenerated pterosaurs was soaring over the lake. Paul could also see other regenerated wildlife from Earth's prehistoric past, such as a plesiosaur, a mastodon and a hyracotherium. They were obviously not selected for their prehistoric contemporaneity.

"So, we will soon be married," giggled Beatrice as she applied her lips to Paul's erect penis. "This will be the last time I can do this before we are man and wife." She cupped his testicles in her palm and pushed his penis deep inside her throat. Paul gasped as his penis spurted semen into her mouth and over her chin.

"Well, at least it won't be as man and husband," remarked Paul. He pointed over the balcony at a male couple who were sitting by the lake and kissing one

another under the shadow of a gliding ramphoryncus.

The ceremony was to take place in a wedding centre built specifically for the purpose and which had been modelled on a variety of religious places of worship. It had a tower, was constructed of shiny grey-blue marble, and had a doorway many times larger than was necessary for even the tallest guest. In fact it was large enough to admit the mastodon that grazed contentedly outside the couple's hotel. The spacious chamber was divided into two sets of comfortably appointed satin seats divided by a wide aisle. The only people Paul recognised were those dignitaries and ministers he'd already met either at the spaceport or at the many tedious receptions he'd attended whose only real attraction for him was the plentiful supply of weak alcoholic beverages.

Paul and Beatrice were led along the aisle accompanied, as was traditional, by a bridesmaid and groom. The bridesmaid walked arm-in-arm with Paul and the groom with Beatrice. Paul had never met his bridesmaid before. She was a tall slender woman, probably from a low gravity satellite such as Titan or Iapetus, who was perfectly at ease in her role, unlike Paul who clung to Beatrice's hand as much for security as comfort.

The ceremony was long and tedious and, despite all his coaching, Paul stumbled over his words and confused his oath of allegiance to his betrothed with his promise to abide by the laws governing the Socialist Republics. Beatrice made no such errors. She was word-perfect and only seemed out of place at all by virtue of the long blonde hair that she'd insisted, like Paul, in keeping untrimmed. Despite Paul's clumsiness, the ceremony seemed to be going very smoothly. The wedding overseer,

Comrade Smith, smiled sympathetically as Paul garbled the words of devotion and struggled to squeeze his hand through the golden bracelet that was the secular tie to their eternal union.

Paul smiled affectionately at Beatrice who he'd had no difficulty at all in fitting a reciprocal bracelet onto her wrist. However, he was startled to see that his wife's expression was quite different to what he'd expect on a woman who was about to get married. Rather her keen-eyed and alert face would have been more appropriate if she were about to go hunting (an activity as illegal in the Socialist Republics as it was disapproved of in Godwin).

Then, with no warning, Beatrice suddenly pushed Paul down onto the velvet-carpeted floor. At the same time there erupted a deafening bang and a slow-dying echo.

“What the fuck!” he yelled, as his head fell onto the bridesmaid’s delicate shoe. And then: “Shit!” when he realised that the shoe and the foot inside it were not attached to a body at all but terminated in a bloody stump.

It was then that he adjusted his senses to the confusion of sound and brilliant light that accompanied his fall while he was still in Beatrice’s tight grip. The bridesmaid wasn’t the only casualty in the explosion. Comrade Smith’s head was also lying on the ground. It was still attached to her shoulders but singed at the bosom and the stumps of her arms. The extreme heat had been enough to cauterise her wounds, but a thin trickle of blood was seeping out from her ears and mouth.

Paul looked about him which was quite difficult since his nose and eyes were very much at floor level. There was more yelling and a great deal of it was nothing

more than a series of expletives. He turned his head towards the congregation of which he could mostly see only feet, but many of these were splattered with blood.

“Get up!” said Beatrice urgently, as she dragged Paul up onto his feet.

“Run!” she ordered as she grabbed him by the hand and pulled him towards a side-door that like everything else was much larger than it needed to be.

Her command couldn’t have come sooner.

There suddenly came another explosion that propelled Paul and Beatrice through the side-door with tremendous force. The newlyweds fell onto the well-trimmed lawn outside the temple amongst fragments of broken marble and polished wood. Miraculously, Paul’s only injuries were mild abrasions and scratches while Beatrice had escaped with nothing more than a coating of dust and dirt.

“What the fuck’s happened?” Paul asked with real agitation and terror.

“There’s been an assassination attempt,” Beatrice said, comparatively unruffled and with remarkable calm. “It was one of the guests. Fourth row. Eighth chair on the right. She had some kind of plastic laser gun. She’s still in there, but by now she’ll be dead after she set off the explosives that were strapped around her waist. I think she also killed a significant proportion of the other guests.”

“You saw her and saved me just in time?” guessed Paul.

“Yes,” said Beatrice, with an amused smile that was as strangely inappropriate as her expression of alertness had been a few moments before. “What just happened was exactly like that.”

Chapter Eleven Paradise - 3751 A.D.

The space station may have been christened *Paradise*, although it hadn't always been known by that name, but even Isaac knew that the real paradise to which he expected to ascend would never be like this. This eight hundred year old space colony in the war-torn Meteorite Belt could never deserve such a name. But for Isaac and the several thousand other would-be martyrs from all corners of the Solar System it would be home for the year or so it would take them to prepare for their mission.

Isaac hadn't realised that so many different types of people would be called upon to serve God. Many of those united in the Crusade against the threat posed by the Apostasy belonged to Christian faiths other than those of the One True Faith. There were many who didn't even acknowledge the absolute truth of the Holy Scriptures but whose faith was in the venal falsehoods promulgated in the pages of the Koran, the Torah or the Vedas. As a good Soldier of Christ, Isaac was determined that he would never be corrupted by other idolatrous faiths for was it not written in the Second Book of Moses: Called Exodus Chapter Twenty: "*I am the LORD thy God, which have brought thee out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. Thou shalt not bow down thyself to them, nor serve them: for I the LORD thy God am a jealous God, visiting the iniquity of the fathers upon the children unto the third and fourth generation of them that hate me;*

Isaac had no wish to bring such divine retribution upon his children, nor even

upon his great grandchildren.

However, his curiosity couldn't help but be piqued by the strange practices of his heathen companions. For instance, there were those who didn't treat the Sabbath as the most special day of the week. Unlike the godly and, of course, the heretics who professed a Christian faith but were wholly misled, these pagans saw no sin in labouring on this most sacred of days. In fact, it was a Friday or even a Saturday that these heathens observed as the Sabbath. Isaac was sure that these sinners' misguided observation would result in their Eternal Damnation, but in the meantime it was a nuisance that these two days of the week were so disrupted for the followers of the Lord Jesus Christ.

The non-believers, whose company he shared and with whom he exchanged as few words as possible, behaved and dressed in ways that also shocked Isaac's sensibilities. Most of them would have been condemned to death on Holy Trinity and he'd have had no compunction in carrying out his duty as a Soldier of Christ. Just being a non-believer was crime enough, but these pagans had customs beyond all bounds of propriety. Many dressed immodestly. Indeed, one sect of the Hindu faith even foreswore the vanity of dress of any kind. There were Muslims, Jews and even Christians who sported beards when Isaac knew that facial hair was anathema to the Lord. Even long hair was a sin amongst men and many of his fellow martyrs had hair long enough to warrant the most severe penalty. For it was written in Chapter Eleven Verse Fourteen of the First Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Corinthians: "*Doth not even nature itself teach you, that, if a man have long hair, it is a shame unto him?*" Comfortingly the gospels said in Verse Fifteen: "*But if a woman have long hair, it is*

a glory to her: for her hair is given her for a covering." Isaac wasn't sure of course whether the wives of these heretics and pagans kept their hair long or even shaved it off altogether, for he would never meet them. Nevertheless, it troubled him to discover that although the sexes were kept strictly segregated there were women in Paradise who were also prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of the Apostasy on the Solar System's perimeter. Clearly some faiths didn't understand the wisdom of the words in Chapter Two Verse Four of the Epistle of Paul the Apostle to Titus that the holy were duty-bound "*That they may teach the young women to be sober, to love their husbands, to love their children, To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient to their own husbands, that the word of God be not blasphemed.*"

When Isaac began his journey on the crowded ancient space cruiser from Holy Trinity, he'd hoped that for the first time in his life he might glimpse the Sun or, at least, the stars. This was a privilege denied most citizens of Holy Trinity throughout their lives and was no more availed to him when he and the other volunteers made the journey to Paradise. This three months journey was probably the most uncomfortable and tedious of his life. For most of the time he was confined in a seat elbow-to-elbow with the same two other Soldiers of Christ. It was here that he sat for most of his waking life (distracted only by the Holy Bible) and where he slept under an unrelenting bright glare. The only opportunity for exercise was during his excursions to the lavatory where he might have to queue for hours to relieve his bowels. There were no windows or portals on the space ship. From the inside all that could be seen was the curved arch of the walls and ceiling. Without the luxury of artificial gravity, it

was only the magnetic grip of his shoes that prevented him and the others from floating towards the ducts and tubes that crowded the ceiling mere yards above his head.

He was told that the Sanctified Space Ship St Luke was powered by a massive unfurled sail. This supplemented the antimatter engine that was mostly left idle after the initial thrust had been established. Isaac saw nothing of the exterior of this four hundred year old craft beyond the door through which he had entered. And through which, with immeasurable relief, he eventually disembarked.

Isaac reflected that his discomfort was as nothing compared to the suffering of Christ. Isaac was mindful of the Gospel According to Saint Mark Chapter Nine Verse Twelve that *“it is written of the Son of man, that he must suffer many things, and be set at nought.”* Nevertheless, Isaac’s three months of purgatory were still less than naught in comparison to the Lord’s humiliation and torment on the Cross at Calvary? And having many times administered crucifixion to sinners, Isaac had a very good idea of the ordeal that was suffered by a person nailed to such a holy instrument of capital punishment.

At first Isaac relished the comfort of his bunk bed in the huge dormitory in Paradise he shared with his co-believers. But this was compromised by the frustration caused by the low gravity regime that was imposed to save energy. The walk between the Chapel, his dormitory and the Training Centre was not easy. He had never before experienced less than standard gravity, but the strange bounce to his every step in the low gravity soon lost its novelty. However, this was almost welcome as a contrast to the double standard gravity in which he and the others exercised. This might have

been an ideal condition in which to strengthen his muscles but it was also very challenging. Just lifting himself up a rope while carrying double his normal bodyweight, plus several kilos of baggage, exhausted him more than any exercise in the police gym would ever do.

Every seventh day was spent in religious contemplation and prayer in the Chapel. It was a respite from his strenuous training that from the moment he awoke on Monday morning he was already looking forward to.

There was also compensation in comradeship with his fellow believers from Holy Trinity who, like him, were all Soldiers of Christ and all fervent in their religious devotion. These fellow Christians were equally appalled by the practises of the heathens and heretics with whom they trained for a full ten hours each day in the crippling artificially enhanced gravity. His comrades could be relied on to give him a hand in any crisis. However, Isaac also knew that he needed to be careful in what he said as scattered amongst the faithful were members of the Holy Inquisition. They pretended to be mere Soldiers of Christ but they were sure to take note of anyone whose observance of the one true faith at all waivered.

Isaac never got to know which of those in his company were Holy Inquisitors. They could well have been Jude or Abraham, his closest comrades. But it was clear that these officials were very busy. Within a week of their arrival aboard Paradise, a Soldier of Christ had strayed into one of the women's dormitories: one where the chador-covered Muslims slept. The women were outraged by his presence and he was summarily punished as an example to all. It took him nearly a week to die from the stoning and impalement that was his sentence. Every day, together with the other True

Believers, Isaac would throw another stone at the sinner's blood-strewn face: his teeth mostly shattered and his nose a cartilaginous wreck. The sinner had professed that it was an accident that he'd stumbled into such a forbidden zone, but that could never be an excuse for a crime of such magnitude.

There were other serious breaches of protocol in the close proximity of other religions, some of which could not be punished. The most serious was the conversion to another faith. There was a Shiite who converted to Sunni Islam. A Baptist who converted to Catholicism. And even a Jew who converted to Buddhism. But none was as serious as the conversion of one of the Soldiers of Christ who shared the same dormitory as Isaac. He converted to the faith of the Baptist Colony of the Divine Revelation.

This haunted Isaac as it did the other Soldiers of Christ. How could anyone be so weak? But this, the most serious of all sins, was the one that was to remain unpunished. The convert now enjoyed sanctuary with his new companions. The law that prevailed most strongly in Paradise was that no faith or religion had any sway over the practices or interests of another. Nonetheless, this didn't prevent the Soldiers of Christ punishing the reprobate as best they could when their actions could be disguised in the midst of the harsh exercises they practised together. The traitor was soon so badly injured that he spent the majority of his stay in Paradise not in double gravity, but in the more weightless surroundings of the space station's infirmary.

Paradise was an old colony and it showed. Normally, it would have been decommissioned by now, but the need to combat the Apostasy took precedence over the usual considerations of safety and comfort. There were several fatalities every day

as one or other of the life-support systems failed, but fortunately not to the extent that the entire space station had to be evacuated. Several chambers suffered from the sudden loss of air pressure that reduced the oxygen to below breathable level. On another occasion, the temperature in a section fell low enough to cause the death of a dozen of the less hardy Holy Crusaders. There were also electrical faults that caused sudden death; a breach in the hull that resulted in the loss of several martyrs to the cause of poor management rather than the greater good of the Solar System; a release of sewerage in a dormitory that suffocated several good souls in gigantic volumes of excrement; and the unfortunate emission of noxious radioactive elements that confined a hundred souls to the infirmary for a few days until they all died.

Isaac was not immune from the defects that beset the station. Oxygen levels were variable: sometimes he had a boost of rather more than was good for him and sometimes he was suffocated by the lack of it. Some days the temperature was so low that Isaac's fingers were blue and numb. On other days he sweltered in temperatures that due to his observance of modesty he had to suffer in a blanket of sweat.

One day, he was stranded in a section of the exercise chamber with just one other would-be martyr when the temperature dropped well beyond his comfort level, while the oxygen level was raised. Furthermore, the lights had gone out and he was unable to grope to the exit as the gravity level had risen to well above its normal double standard gravity.

Isaac was certain that very soon he would be dead.

Although he was sure that the life of virtue in which he'd observed with such zeal the prosecution of sinners and heretics would earn him a place by the Lord's side

in a place that was truly Paradise (after, of course, a due period in Purgatory until the Second Coming), Isaac was alarmed. How would his wife and children manage without him? Had he led a truly blameless life? And what if (and this was a thought he should have banished immediately) his choice of faith was mistaken and it was another faith or religion he should have observed? Would his righteous persecution of the Sinful earn him not Eternal Reward but the Eternal Damnation that he was so certain was the fate of all heretics and unbelievers?

He was in a chamber where only moments before he had been practising the necessary procedures to manoeuvre an entry craft. He shared his potential tomb with an unbeliever who was equally as certain as Isaac that he would be rewarded for his faith with Life Everlasting. But Isaac knew that only one of them would be so fortunate (though it troubled him that it was also possible that neither of them would be). His companion had the beard and shaven head of a Muslim, though whether Sunni or Shiite (or other complexion) Isaac didn't know.

“You speak English, don’t you?” the infidel asked in a heavily accented and slightly choked version of Isaac’s tongue and that of the Holy Scriptures.

Isaac hesitated. He’d avoided having to talk to non-believers throughout his sojourn on Paradise, but these might well be his last few moments alive. Furthermore, Isaac was reminded of Christ’s sympathy towards the Good Samaritan, an infidel who showed Christian virtue.

“Yes,” he answered in a similarly choked voice.

“I don’t often get the opportunity to speak English with native speakers,” continued the heathen in the utter darkness. “There are none on Jihad, my colony. The

only spoken language is Arabic: the sacred language of the Prophet.”

“Then why speak English at all?” asked Isaac facing the direction from which the infidel’s voice came.

“It is my duty and honour to be a translator in Jihad,” said the infidel. “It is a charge so privileged in our colony that no one but I can speak or understand your language.”

“It is the language of the One True Faith,” affirmed Isaac.

“If by that you mean Christianity,” said the hidden figure, “then so too is Latin, Greek, Russian, Armenian and Spanish.”

“That is blasphemy and heresy,” asserted Isaac with certainty.

The infidel made no comment but Isaac was sure that he was properly chastised by his words.

“What do you think it is we are united against?” the Muslim finally asked after a long pause whose interruption Isaac both dreaded and looked forward to. “What is it that has brought so many different faiths together in common cause? How can a jihad also be what you Christians call a crusade?”

Isaac pondered this. He had no inkling what a *jihad* was, but it was a fair question. What possible congruence of interest in the suppression of the Apostasy could there be between a good Christian soul and a damnable pagan? Surely all it demonstrated was that the Apostasy was not an invention of the defilers of Christ or the other heathens who shared the space station.

“I don’t know,” Isaac admitted, “but if the men of the cloth say that it is an evil then an evil it must be.”

“The men of cloth in my community are very different men from those in yours,” said the Muslim. “However, they have also seen fit to join forces with those like you with whom we would most naturally be at war, as we have been many times in the past. What godless monstrosity must this evil be that the followers of the True Prophet should be as one with those who deny the truth of his words?”

Isaac restrained his tongue from quoting those passages from the Holy Bible that demonstrated all too clearly that there was only one true God and all other claims to Divinity were to be contested with the utmost fortitude. This was probably not the time to chastise a heathen with evidence of the folly of his ways. Perhaps now was rather the time to ask questions of the Muslim as to what he might know of the mysterious Apostasy.

“I don’t know,” admitted the pagan. “When I was assigned to this mission I was told no more than the barest details. But it is enough for me to know that the Prophet Himself recognises it as an abomination to be persuaded that this is a cause for which it is worth surrendering my life. And although it has meant that I have abandoned a wife who is expecting my first-born, it is a mission for which I am happy to give my life. However, it seems that I shall die not in the execution of my mission but because of the vagaries of this ancient space station.”

Isaac shivered. It must have been well below freezing and whatever multiple of normal gravity he was enduring hadn’t lessened at all.

“However,” continued the Muslim after a pause, “I have used my knowledge of your language to discover what I can. There is more written in English on the Apostasy than there is in Arabic. The non-believers and atheists who predominate in

the Solar System also express incomprehension as to what this evil might be, although most know only of its effects rather than of its cause.”

“And what effects are these?” wondered Isaac who was ignorant even that.

“If you don’t know then you are as blessed in your innocence as the people of Jihad!” exclaimed the Muslim. “I had wondered whether those of other faiths, especially those who speak English, might know what those of the Islamic nation have been kept ignorant. And rightly so!”

“And of what have we been kept ignorant?” asked an impatient Isaac. If he must die from extreme cold and high gravity, surely he had a right to know something about the cause for which his wife would soon be a widow.

“For many decades, perhaps even a century, there have been reports, many of them captured on holovideo, of events that were originally described as miracles,” the Muslim replied. “Many of the more foolish, of many different faiths, acclaimed them to be proof of the existence of God. They are often of a nature that the more credulous might believe could only come from an all-powerful being. Indeed, despite the best efforts of atheists, no natural cause has been assigned to them. Consequently the cause can only be supernatural. Nevertheless, it has become apparent that the apparitions are so random and meaningless that they cannot originate from an all-wise being such as Allah, but instead from elsewhere. And what could that be but Satan himself who has returned to unleash Evil on the universe and herald the Final Judgement?”

“And what are these *miracles*?” wondered Isaac.

“They are truly strange but seemingly without purpose,” said the Muslim. “A Blue Whale appeared in the hulk of a space ship. It was aboard for less than a minute

and then vanished leaving behind only its displacement in volume. A being appeared on one of the satellites of Saturn that resembled an angel of Christian fable with huge avian wings, only to die in the inhospitable atmosphere before its corpse also vanished. There was a report of hot plasma raging for several minutes in the Jovian Asteroid Belt that severely singed a neighbouring colony before it too evaporated without trace. An asteroid of several kilometres diameter passed through the orbit of Mercury and caused a major gravitational imbalance to several colonies before it too disappeared. There have also been instances of burning bushes, seas parting and people turning to salt. All of which is either evidence that Allah has foresworn His senses or, the only rational explanation, that Satan has reawoken in the Solar System.”

This explanation fascinated Isaac. He had long expected the imminent coming of the Antichrist and its attendant Apocalypse which had been delayed several times already in his life. He was also not surprised that the atheists and heathens who made up the great majority of the many billions in the Solar System were denied the truth that the Judgement was now upon them. For it is written in Verses Twenty and Twenty-one of Chapter Nine of The Revelation of Saint John the Divine: “*And the rest of the men which were not killed by these plagues yet repented not of the works of their hands, that they should not worship devils, and idols of gold, and silver, and brass, and stone, and of wood: which neither can see, nor hear, nor walk: Neither repented they of their murders, nor of their sorceries, nor of their fornication, nor of their thefts.*” He was only sorry that he was not able to witness the punishments to be visited on the wicked souls before they were sentenced to an Eternity of Damnation.

There was a sudden flickering of light in the chamber that was initially too

bright. Like the oppressiveness of the gravity and the contrasting light-headedness brought about by too much oxygen, the space station's system had overcompensated and brought with it not only a brilliance of light that made Isaac squint but a rush of warm air that was at first welcome relief to his numbed fingers and toes, but soon bathed him in a sheet of sweat.

"The Lord be praised!" exclaimed Isaac as his eyes gradually adjusted to the brightness and he was at last able to see again his bearded, turbaned companion.

"Allah Akhbar!" exclaimed the Muslim with equal but opposite veneration.

Rescue didn't arrive for several more hours in which time Isaac and his infidel companion struggled on their hands and knees as far across the chamber as they could towards the closed doors before the exertion and heat became too much for them. It was the Muslim who first lost consciousness. He collapsed just beside a collection of batons and laser-rifles that were scattered about the floor. It was several minutes and almost as many yards of extreme effort later that Isaac's consciousness finally gave way and he fell where he was later found, pressed onto the floor by air pressure many times greater than the human frame was designed to endure.

Isaac's torment wasn't over when he'd at last recovered consciousness in the space station's hospital. His lungs had collapsed and he had badly cracked his head on the ceiling when the gravity had been abruptly cut off. Fortunately, treatment for ailments of this kind were of no trouble to even the Thirty-First century medical facilities that were all the space station was able to provide.

However, it wasn't so much his slow recovery to full health that troubled the Soldier of Christ, but the persistent and unremitting questioning he endured from the

Holy Inquisitor assigned to him. It was, indeed, Abraham, his erstwhile closest friend. It was no trivial matter that he'd been left unsupervised for so long in the company of an infidel.

Sinful though it might be, Isaac's first inclination to the barrage of questions and face-slapping he suffered was to deny that he'd spoken even one word to the Muslim in whose company he had been for so many hours. But Abraham was a subtle inquisitor. He relentlessly exploited every crack in Isaac's tale and soon penetrated his companion's artless obfuscations to learn every detail of his conversation with the infidel translator. Curiously though, the Holy Inquisitor was less concerned with a wavering of faith, which was Isaac's main worry, but with what information could be gleaned from the Muslim's own insight into the nature of the Apostasy.

“Satan is a devious foe,” said Abraham almost kindly. “He tempts the Righteous in the most subtle ways. Is it a wonder that he persevered for forty days and forty nights to tempt Jesus Christ in the wilderness as described in Chapter Four of the Gospel According to Saint Luke? Although in the end, Satan was banished, his was a temptation to which a lesser being would surely have succumbed. It is interesting that the infidel knew that that the strange apparitions associated with the Apostasy had once been attributed to miracles.”

“And why is that?” asked Isaac from the confines of the bed to which he was pinioned by tubes that trailed from his nostrils and stomach.

“It was once believed by the Archdeacon himself that these miracles were the Acts of the Lord and although he pronounced nothing to the people of Holy Trinity he claimed that they were proof indeed of the Lord's existence. For many decades,

together with others equally misled by Satan, the policy of Holy Trinity was to propagate to the heathens and atheists of the greater Solar System that God had chosen to reveal Himself in this rather less than subtle way.”

“But the Archdeacon doesn’t believe that now?” asked Isaac, conscious that for the first time in his life he’d learnt that even clerics were not infallible.

“He was visited in a dream by the Messiah Himself. This was coincidentally at about the same time that an extraordinary meeting of the Ecumenical Council was called in the heretical colony of God’s Glory. It was revealed to him that not only was it concordant with the financial and political welfare of the True Church to cooperate with the infidels and heretics of the Ecumenical Council, but that the Apostasy was no less than the manifestation of Satan and that the miracles were no more attributable to the Lord than are those signs which persuade the godless to believe in such heretical fantasies as evolution, dark matter and the existence of stellar systems other than the one Solar System which was all that God the Father created nearly eight thousand years ago.”

Isaac had never heard such heresy before and was horrified to learn of the possibility that the universe might be larger than the Solar System. (He had no notion of what evolution or dark matter might be, though he was sure that they were heresies of the very worst kind).

“However,” the Holy Inquisitor continued, “it is imperative that you should mention to no one that you have heard of these miracles. Should you do so, then you will be denied the honour of serving the True Faith in its hour of need and your wife and family will be tainted with the reputation that you have swayed in the observance

of your religious vows."

Isaac knew only too well the consequences of such a reputation, having often visited the most extreme justice on those who'd sinned by association. He resolved to never divulge what he had learnt. He was just grateful that the mission on which he was engaged was so urgent that the Holy Inquisitor and, by implication, His Holiness the Archdeacon should extend forgiveness to Isaac for having so sinned by having opened his ears to the words of an infidel.

Chapter Twelve Schmidt - 3750 C.E.

“Schmidt?” Paul wondered. “Why are we stopping at Schmidt? And why is the colony called that anyway. Was there *ever* a famous Schmidt?”

“I’m sure there was,” said the captain of the space cruiser. “And I’m sure there are many Schmidts who are worthy to have a colony named after them. This colony, however, is named after Ronald Schmidt, the current hereditary president of the colony.”

“*Hereditary president?*” Beatrice wondered. “Isn’t that exactly the same as King or Prince or some other hereditary title?”

“Indeed it is,” said Captain Turgenev. “But there is no universal law that dictates that the rulers of a colony shouldn’t call themselves exactly what they like. There is no shortage of self-styled Kings, Tsars, Archdukes and Queens throughout the Solar System. There’s even an Emperor, though his must be the smallest empire in human history. As you know colonisation of the Solar System wasn’t exactly a planned or coordinated affair and many colonies were founded as nothing more than hereditary fiefdoms or business empires extended into space. This colony is just one of them. It was named after the family of porn merchants who founded the colony and continue to own it. But Ronald Schmidt is petitioning for recognised statehood in the Interplanetary Union and is making tentative moves towards the colony becoming a more conventional nation state, but as you’ll soon see it has a long way yet to go.”

Paul had heard of colonies that were governed by hereditary rulers, but as even the notion of private property was rather alien to him he’d wasn’t at all sure what this

might mean in practice. However, given the immensity of the Solar System it was inevitable that there should be a wide diversity of colonies and that many would be of whatever nature their founders decided they should be. This was, after all, how a relatively impoverished but idealistic colony such as Godwin happened to exist in the Kuiper Belt.

“Why are we stopping here?” he wondered. “It’s Earth we’re heading to. Why can’t we go there directly?”

“Space travel is an expensive business, especially given the huge distance from Saturn to Earth,” explained the captain. “Chartering a ship that travels directly to Earth without the benefit of a gravitational sling or refuelling is a luxury that only a very few can afford. Your journey isn’t going to be in a straight line at all. There’s an Earthbound ship due to depart from the colony in a few weeks time, while this ship heads towards other colonies in the Jovian belt. The interests of interplanetary commerce can’t be ignored. Nevertheless, I’m more than certain that President Schmidt will do his best to be a good host.”

Although that might be so, Paul was in no hurry to leave the good ship Molotov. He’d rather enjoyed his stay in his spacious luxury suite on the space ship’s fifth level and, more than even that, the pleasure he’d enjoyed between the sheets with his new wife. Although he was still rather unsure about the meaning invested in the institution, married life was agreeing with him rather well. If what it meant was the constant and reliable attention of the most sexually desirable woman whose body he’d ever enjoyed there was nothing he could possibly complain about. Was it being married that made Beatrice such an agreeable and passionate lover? Paul was sure this

wasn't the only reason, but the sum total of his earlier lovemaking was as nothing in comparison.

The sheets were damp with perspiration and semen when he awoke after his last night on board a space ship he'd hardly eat all explored beyond his suite. He had no time to rest however, as Beatrice ensured that he got dressed and ready to go. She then hurried Paul towards the space shuttle that would take the newly-weds and several dozen other people to the Schmidt colony.

"We don't want to miss our flight," she reprimanded Paul as he lingered by a stall that sold a selection of souvenir clothing from the Socialist Republics. In truth, Paul wasn't sure whether he'd ever want to buy the close-fitting clothes on display. He still wasn't comfortable with even the concept of commerce given that nothing ever came with a price on his home colony.

Paul's reluctance to leave was no less when he saw the waiting shuttle craft in which he and Beatrice would travel for more than a whole day. It was tiny. It was a long tube of which the greater part was just engine. There were windows along the sides by which he would have to sit on a seat strapped in by a belt. The only thing he could look forward to was the view through the windows of an empty void speckled with distant stars. There might be the opportunity for drinks and food and even some sex in the reclinable seats, but he'd become accustomed to somewhat more luxury. The shuttle flight was necessary because the Molotov came no closer to the colony than a few million kilometres. The only familiar company on the flight, other than Beatrice, were Sergei and Yuliya: two disgruntled officers from the Socialist Republic who'd been assigned to act as his guardians for the duration of his stay in Schmidt.

Even Paul's vague hope of being able to make love during the flight was rather compromised by the fact that he and Beatrice sat were sitting between his two guards. They were clearly uncomfortable by the blatant lovemaking of a heterosexual couple whose behaviour made them, if anything, even more disgruntled. When they weren't actively fucking one another, this couple announced to anyone who cared to listen that they were natives of the Republic of Schmidt. They weren't the only people to openly have sex during the flight, but even Paul felt uncomfortable by the fact that none of the amorous couples bothered to activate the privacy screens and its attendant soundproofing.

Throughout the Solar System, it was quite normal for people to have their bodies enhanced to accentuate or even exaggerate their sexual characteristics, but Ecstasy was the only place until now where Paul had ever seen real live people of such cartoonish proportions as this couple. The woman had enormous breasts and buttocks that were much larger than Beatrice's. These assets were further enhanced by close-fitting rubbery clothes that both hid and emphasised the contours of her unnatural body. The woman wore stiletto heels that were almost perpendicular to the ground so making her feet resemble pronged hoofs. Her waist was absurdly narrow, her thighs monstrous and her face had a baby-like cuteness with huge cheeks, swollen lips and over-sized eyes. The couple exemplified someone's bizarre sexual fantasy, but even Paul's immature masturbatory fantasies never quite encompassed anything quite so grotesque.

The view through the tiny portal didn't enliven the flight at all. Despite many years of wondering what space was like beyond the Kuiper Belt, Paul was actually

rather disappointed. The sun was larger than the pinprick visible from Godwin, but it still wasn't very large. And it was a long time until the colony of Schmidt began to loom larger than any other dot in the firmament, and Paul was able to appreciate how different it was to most other space colonies. Not many were designed to resemble a saucer.

The most noteworthy part of the journey until then had been the midway point when the ship switched from accelerating at a standard gravitational force to decelerating at the same rate. This was the moment when the passengers, the amorous couple from Schmidt included, had to strap themselves in for the few moments their bodies were weightless. This brief moment reminded Paul of the horrifying fact that he was encased inside a small cylinder of metal outside of which was close to nothing at all.

There was rather more for Paul to view when the shuttle arrived at Schmidt. The passengers were escorted off the shuttle and wished a good day by air stewards dressed in the familiar tight uniforms of the Socialist Republics. It was then that Paul discovered how typical the amorous couple were of the citizens of Schmidt.

The official welcoming committee that stood to attention as Beatrice and he entered the reception hall was a gathering of sexual freaks all dressed in unsubtle and provocative clothes. Beatrice was comparatively modest in the gossamer-thin dress that draped over her voluptuous contours. It seemed that the national dress of Schmidt was made from rubber. The men and women of the reception committee wore costumes where when the flesh was hidden it was only with the purpose of further drawing attention to what was otherwise shown. In most cases, the breasts were bare

as too was the crotch and anus. All the men were blessed with exceptionally large penises that were on full display.

It was obvious to Paul what the colony's main industry was and what provided its President with a sufficiently large fortune to maintain his own private fiefdom.

In case there was still any doubt, above the heads of the dignitaries was a huge holographic display of men and women engaged in indiscriminate acts of coitus with no regard to gender. There was also a lurid array of statuary that represented men, but mostly women, in exaggerated poses where the emphasis was clearly of a sexual nature.

Paul had often sampled pornography, but he'd never suspected that it could be the primary industry for an entire space colony. Schmidt not only served to satisfy the still huge appetite for pornography throughout the Solar System, but was proud of its status as one of the sex industry's most prominent providers. Paul wondered whether, if the colony had made its fortune from music, there would have been a similar display of its musical genius. Or, if from the manufacture of nanocarbon tubes, an exhibition of the innumerable uses made of the buckminsterfullerene molecule.

The proficiency the people of Schmidt possessed in the public display of sexual intercourse did not come with a corresponding aptitude in public speaking. The Minister of Foreign Affairs made an excruciatingly dull speech to welcome Paul that was both awkward and inept. Not one cliché was too threadbare. No sentence's effect was enlivened by its execution. And there was not one hint of originality. It was almost as if the speech, like the pornographic films from which Schmidt made its fortune, was assembled by committee and executed more to tick off points than to

achieve its ostensible purpose. The applause that celebrated its uncertain conclusion must surely have been from relief that the ordeal was now over.

Paul was pleased that no other dignitary was assigned to follow the Foreign Minister's address. The time he spent listening had given him the opportunity to appraise his hosts. It was obvious that it was Beatrice rather than the Foreign Minister who attracted the most attention. She was also the one person who'd best suppressed any sign of boredom and restlessness.

The couple were then escorted by an entourage of dignitaries towards their hotel. As they walked along the pleasant marble paths of Schmidt, Paul noticed that it wasn't only pornographic images that were on prominent display. Along with the huge cinematic displays of carnal pleasure, there were almost as many images of President Ronald Schmidt and, judging from the family likeness, what was probably his long line of dignified predecessors.

There was something quite ridiculous about the President, but this was really no more so than his illustrious predecessors. It could be his huge moustache and wavy blond hair. It might be the weakness in his eyes and the cheesiness of his grin. It was certainly related to the fantastic and colourful wardrobe he wore, which was dominated by feather, fur and latex. Although the president seemed comical, it was apparent that his exercise of power within the colony named after his family was absolute and unquestioned. There was no obvious sign of censorship. The ubiquitous and explicit displays of every possible sexual act—including those that went well beyond any of Paul's sexual fantasies (especially regarding animals, children and excretory functions)—showed no restraint at all. Paul soon found that there was free

and easy access to objective news coverage, some of which was highly critical of the President, but he also discovered that the people of Schmidt were peculiarly disinclined towards anything other than bland undemanding entertainment. And most of that had a very high sexual content.

The hotel in which Beatrice and Paul stayed was as blatantly lewd as everything else in the colony. It was decorated in lurid pinks and reds. The fittings were in plush velvet and leather. It resembled nothing less than an immense boudoir.

From the moment the couple arrived at the hotel, with their Saturnian guards ill at ease, Beatrice exhibited a capricious wilful unpredictability that Paul had never seen before. This conduct seriously exasperated Sergei and Yuliya. The room they were first shown just didn't meet Beatrice's standards of perfection. It was only after having been shown several other rooms equally well appointed and unashamedly vulgar, that Beatrice at last settled on one that necessitated the move of other more comfortably ensconced guests who rather resented being evicted from their bedroom.

This was just the beginning of a pattern of behaviour that the strangely stubborn and unsettled Beatrice insisted on. Within a week, they had stayed in more than one bedroom each night and had even moved to other almost identical hotels. During all this Beatrice remained forever indecisive, however much she insisted after each change of address that she'd at last found a room where she was at last certain she'd be content.

“So what *was* so wrong about that room?” asked Paul finally voicing his annoyance as he and Beatrice marched out of the Hotel Wilhelm Schmidt towards the Hotel Archibald Schmidt with Sergei and Yuliya carrying their bags in tow. “It had a

lovely view of the esplanade. The en suite swimming pool was lovely and warm. And the bed was big enough for ten people.”

“I just didn’t like it,” said Beatrice adamantly. “But I’m sure this hotel will be ideal. It’s got a lovely holo-mural over that statue of a big-breasted porn star.”

“I can’t say it’s any better than the one outside the Wilhelm,” sniffed Paul, although he accepted his bride’s opinions. They were newlyweds and it was probably to be expected that Beatrice would want everything to be perfect. But how perfect could anything ever be?

Beatrice’s capriciousness extended beyond her dissatisfaction with the hotel suites. She had got into the habit of changing her plans abruptly and without warning, however many dignitaries and porn stars might be inconvenienced by her unscheduled changes. Paul didn’t really mind this much. He didn’t understand the meaning of celebrity or status, so he was blissfully aware of the offence she caused. But it was frustrating to be one moment heading towards yet another sex musical—which was always remarkably dull however sensational and showy it promised to be—and the next moment being diverted to some equally promising, and most often even less interesting, entertainment that the government officers had never anticipated the couple would want to see.

If nothing else, Paul came to see rather more of life on Schmidt than the government minders had intended. Not only did he see live sex shows, first night screenings of star-studded sex films (almost all made by the Schmidt Corporation) and the film studios and warehouses used by the industry, but some rather amateurish strip clubs, a sex revue that was unrelievedly inept, and a factory that manufactured

the remarkably elastic clothing worn on the colony. He even got to see those sections in the space colony's hub where sewerage, water supply and electricity were managed.

"Tell me what you didn't like about that last room?" asked Paul when in the early hours Beatrice insisted on yet another move within the hotel complex. This once again greatly inconvenienced the hotel staff and their uncomplaining but clearly discontented Saturnian guardians. "It seemed so perfect when we moved in last night. And why do we have to move *now* of all times?"

Beatrice smiled broadly and kissed her husband on his lips and ran her fingers over his still tumescent penis. "I don't know. It just didn't seem right. The mattress was too soft. The window didn't give us a good enough view of the plaza. I just want things to be perfect."

"But for me, darling," Paul protested, "just spending more than one uninterrupted night in a bedroom is all the perfection I desire."

Nevertheless, Paul didn't spend all his days and nights with Beatrice. She developed the habit of seeking out time to leave Paul either alone or with whichever guardian who'd chosen to look after him.

"Where does Beatrice go?" Paul asked Yuliya who was currently assigned to him, while it was Sergei who was assigned to accompany Beatrice that morning. "I can't think there's much she can do by herself that she can't do with me."

Yuliya was distinctly ill at ease from Paul's direct question. She glanced over at Paul who was sitting on the sofa opposite her in the palatial chamber in the Esmeralda Schmidt Hotel that was his home that day.

“Beatrice just enjoys spending time by herself,” she answered diplomatically.

“So where do you go with Beatrice when it’s your turn to follow her around?” wondered Paul, who, despite believing that such concerns were appropriate for a newly married man, was conscious that he might be intruding on his wife’s need for privacy.

The pale freckles on Yuliya’s cheek and brow darkened and she nervously rubbed her shaven pate. “Sometimes she just visits me in my room and we... er... talk,” she said. “You know, about girls’ things.” She looked up at Paul pleadingly. “I don’t normally spend much time in male company. I miss the company of other women. It’s good for us to spend time together.”

“Of course,” said Paul. “That’s quite natural.”

Yuliya seemed relieved that Paul was so understanding.

There was one aspect about Schmidt that particularly puzzled Paul. It did seem to be a peculiarly accident-prone colony. Why, only the other day the room he and Beatrice had slept in just the night before developed a serious climate systems failure that caused severe distress to the couple who’d rather reluctantly exchanged rooms with them. The room became so cold that they were very nearly killed. Then there was the explosion that ruptured the pathway that Paul and his wife might easily have been walking along if Beatrice hadn’t changed her mind at the last moment and decided that an evening spent watching an amateur sex poetry recital was preferable to a first night matinee of a holographic animation feature at the Grand Schmidt Theatre. And worst of all was the unexplained assassination of a tourist at a sex robot museum that would have been on Paul’s itinerary if Beatrice hadn’t had such a raging

headache that afternoon. This and a trail of other mishaps plagued the itineraries that Paul would have attended if Beatrice wasn't so habitually capricious. Although nothing was said about such incidents by the couple's two guardians, they did seem to be especially alert as a result.

It was good that Beatrice's wilfulness didn't extend to complaining about Yuliya's and Sergei's heightened vigilance. She was quite happy that every room they visited was scanned by equipment for suspicious devices or that even the most senior dignitary was subjected to electronic scanning and even a brusque frisk. It was also Beatrice's unconventional policy to chat as much with the ordinary citizens of Schmidt as with the dignitaries who'd been expecting to enjoy their presence. Paul didn't understand rank and privilege and was impervious to the effect of such snubs. In any case, the non-privileged, although clearly nervous of addressing celebrities like Paul and Beatrice, were most often the more engaging company even if their appearance was no less bizarre.

Paul was aware that the longer he and Beatrice stayed in Schmidt the more testing it was for his guardians. They'd become ever more twitchy as the days passed by. It was equally as awkward for the government officials who were disconcerted by how little their honoured guests observed the protocols expected of distinguished representatives of the Interplanetary Union. Although nothing was said to Paul, he suspected that complaints might have been made elsewhere. But as official protocol were such an abstract concept to him, he was sure there wasn't much to worry about.

As he and Beatrice prepared to leave on their last morning for a flight to the Earth orbit ship, the Ulysses, it was Paul's wife who made the observation that had

been in his mind all the time.

“I can’t imagine that our stay in Schmidt has done President Ronald any favours,” Beatrice said.

“You don’t think so, darling?”

“How much do you know about diplomacy and statehood, my sweetest?”

“I think I know what the words mean.”

“Are you sure you do?” Beatrice wondered. “I’m not so certain. I don’t think you’ve bothered to follow the news at all while we’ve been here, have you?”

“Well, I’ve watched the news on SSBC,” said Paul, referring to the Solar System Broadcasting Corporation which mostly concentrated on news of a interplanetary nature.

“Not local news, I bet,” said Beatrice. “There’s been some diplomatic friction between the Interplanetary Union and the Schmidt Republic. The President doesn’t believe that the Interplanetary Union is taking the republic’s petition for recognised statehood seriously. There’s been some delicate negotiation about the price rises the colony intends to impose on its chief export...”

“Pornography, you mean?”

“What else is there? Do you think this sordid outpost in the Jovian Asteroid Belt could export anything else of value to the rest of the Solar System? No names are mentioned, of course. We are on a *secret* mission after all, my sweetest. But offence has been taken. I don’t think the reports sent back by sweet Yuliya and that stiff prude, Sergei, will in any way progress Schmidt’s case.”

“It *does* seem to be a peculiarly accident-prone place.”

“Doesn’t it just! I don’t think our farewell committee will be nearly as dignified as our welcoming one...”

“So no speeches?” said Paul.

“I’d be very surprised if the departure of the shuttle to the Ulysses was accompanied by nearly as much celebration as our arrival from the Molotov. So, you’re almost certainly right. No speeches.”

“Well, that’s something to be grateful for,” said Paul sincerely as he kissed his beautiful wife.

Chapter Thirteen Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

Beatrice licked her fingers lasciviously as she savoured the sour taste of Captain Kerensky's vaginal juices and smiled seductively at her lover. The captain gasped. Her eyes shone bright. She shuddered with a final orgasmic spasm from the frenzied sex she was enjoying with Paul's wife. Beatrice's tongue was still moist from the lovers' commingled saliva and the juicy evidence of passion dripped from her vagina. Nadezhda had made love with many women in her hundred and twenty years of life, but she'd never experienced orgasms of quite the intensity that she'd had with this Venusian.

Beatrice rasped her tongue over the captain's shaven pate while she pinched at the lips of her equally shorn vulva. Her smile was so enticing that the captain was anticipating the time when she'd recovered sufficiently from the lovemaking that never seemed to tire Beatrice and they could resume. Beatrice recognised how fatigued her lover was and let her relax recumbent on her huge mattress.

"What's your theory about the Anomaly, Naddy sweetheart?" Beatrice asked as she leaned over the captain's bosom. "Do you think it's an alien visitation?"

"I'm not sure," said the captain. "I know that's what most people think and I'm sure that's why the Interplanetary Union has gone to such incredible expense to launch this mission, but I'm not convinced."

"And why's that?"

"I don't know. I guess I just don't believe this is how a superior alien intelligence would reveal itself. Why haven't we found other evidence of alien

civilisations? Humanity has spread to every last corner of the Solar System and as far as I know we've not found a single alien artefact and certainly no aliens. Why would they reveal themselves by means of an Anomaly that has no measurable gravity, emits no radiation and has no fixed shape? I wouldn't be at all surprised to find that it was nothing more than a natural phenomenon, perhaps associated with dark energy or hidden spatial dimensions."

"The universe is vast," said Beatrice. "The light from the nearest galaxy, Andromeda, left it two and a half million years ago. It's taken twenty-five thousand years for the light from the centre of the galaxy to reach us. Surely, in all that immensity there must be something out there?"

"But why would an alien civilisation ever be interested in us?" Nadezhda wondered. "And given that the universe is so huge, what chance is there they would even find us? In any case, there's been no concrete evidence of aliens in over two thousand years of astronomy. We keep sending probes to the stars, but we never find evidence of any life form that's more advanced than a bacterium."

"Perhaps the human race just hasn't been looking hard enough."

"I think we've had rather more pressing concerns. And how do we even know that we'd like what we found? Anyway, it's not as if we haven't tried. Ever since the twenty-third century, after the environmental mess on Earth was finally sorted out, we've been sending robotic probes out across the galaxy. They must be hovering around almost all the stellar systems within a radius of a hundred light years. When these probes were sent out it was during an era when people thought it be no more than a matter of time until we had the scientific knowledge and technology to colonise

the stars. And what's happened since then? Most probes didn't survive the journey and although they were programmed with highly advanced artificial intelligence and the ability to reproduce, the whole endeavour resulted in nothing more than a holographic library of inhospitable exoplanets. The probes most certainly didn't discover new civilisations, cities or orbiting colonies."

"So what do you think happened to that first generation of robotic probes?"

"I think they just malfunctioned. Technology fifteen hundred years ago wasn't nearly as advanced as it is today."

"You don't think they were intercepted by aliens?"

"If that's the case, then why haven't our probes ever found any sign of little green men? There's never been such a concerted effort to establish colonies in other star systems since those optimistic days and that's mostly for practical and economic reasons. Even the fastest space ship takes hundreds of years to get to the nearest star. A robotic probe can travel somewhat faster than a space ship, but the amount of fuel required is just prohibitive. It's just not economically viable. However, it did seem in those optimistic days that those early expeditions had a chance of success."

"Why's that?"

"They were designed to use the materials they found in space to reproduce themselves, so if they'd survived the journey they'd have been able to spread across the galaxy. That was in the days before self-reproducing hardware was prohibited because of the risk of runaway destruction. Imagine what could happen if these robotic probes followed their programmed instructions too assiduously and gobbled up everything they found. It would be chaos. Even though there are countless films

and books about alien civilisations and the like, we're still a long way off from having the resources to colonise even the nearest stellar system."

"You don't think aliens can travel faster than light?"

"Of course not," said the captain sadly. "The history of science ever since the 23rd Century has been one of diminishing returns. Everything seemed possible in those heady early days. It seemed that every decade there was a new theory to explain the anomalies and oddities of the universe, but with each advance the chance of ever breaking free from the mundane reality of sub-light speed travel seems to have become ever more remote. I can understand how people used to think. Economic growth was almost exponential. Scientific knowledge seemed to grow on a similar curve. But nowadays that all just seems like an illusion. Since the middle of the last millennium there's been nothing at all like the fantastic advances of knowledge and technology that seemed so natural in the early years of space travel."

"So you think progress has slowed down since then?"

"Very much so. Just compare the scientific advances in the centuries from the start of the 19th Century with what's happened in the last thousand years. There's been no new theory of physics as monumental as Special or General Relativity. No advances that compare with the invention of the motor car or aeroplane. Whatever curve now describes scientific progress, it's most certainly not exponential. I'd say it's kind of levelled out."

"You really *are* a kind of philosopher, aren't you, Naddy," said Beatrice admiringly. "You must do a lot of reading and research."

"I've had a great deal of spare time while travelling across the Solar System,"

the captain admitted. “But isn’t this the kind of conversation you’d expect to have with your husband? He’s an academic, isn’t he? I’d have thought you’d always be talking about things like Relativity, Quantum Physics and so on.”

“Well, yes,” Beatrice said, “I suppose we do. But Paul’s conversations are very different to yours. He’s mostly interested in describing how things are or might have been. He doesn’t speculate on things like alien intelligence, hyperspace or the curve of scientific progress. Paul isn’t especially interested in anything that can’t be measured or analysed.”

Captain Kerensky squeezed Beatrice’s vaginal lips between her forefinger and thumb. She leaned over and licked the skin around the labia majora that was so completely smooth that Nadezhda assumed that her lover had opted for genetic enhancement to inhibit hair growth. The treatment must have been sophisticated because it actually had the reverse affect on the long blonde hair that was now radiating out over the mattress. None of Nadezhda’s Saturnian lovers had hair and certainly not tresses that cascaded down to the waist and was so uniformly thick.

“Does Paul know that you and I are lovers, sweetness?” asked the captain.

“No,” said Beatrice. “And I’d much prefer it that he never finds out.”

“Isn’t he an anarchist? Anarchists don’t normally practise marriage or even expect to have lifelong relationships. Why would it be a problem to him?”

“It’s far better for him to believe that I am his and only his.”

“Isn’t that deceitful? I’ve told Colonel Vashti about our relationship and she doesn’t mind at all. She told me that she’s got other lovers anyway. Wouldn’t it be better to be honest with your husband?”

“No,” said Beatrice firmly. “No, it would not be. Paul isn’t a man who’d be happy to share his wife with another woman. Or with another man for that matter.”

“Shouldn’t you respect his wishes? After all, you only got married relatively recently. Don’t your marital vows mean anything to you?”

“Not at all,” Beatrice cheerfully admitted. “I have sexual needs that far exceed what Paul can satisfy. Or even you, Nadezhda darling.” She inclined her head and kissed the captain on the mouth, as if to stress how little her passion for her Saturnian lover was diminished.

Although Captain Kerensky was sure that it was far from wise to maintain a relationship with Beatrice, she had no desire to bring it to an end. From the first time that she and Beatrice had made love, every subsequent encounter only further deepened Nadezhda’s addiction for the Venusian’s body. Moreover, Nadezhda still desired Vashti even as she ached for Beatrice.

“Colonel Vashti is a peculiar woman,” Beatrice commented and not for the first time. “Has she ever told you how she came to be so unusually endowed?”

“Not at all,” said Nadezhda. “She doesn’t really talk about her past.” Then she asked, slightly alarmed: “Have you and she...?”

“No,” said Beatrice thoughtfully. “Not yet.”

That really wasn’t the answer that the captain wanted to hear and her composure buckled at the suggestion. The captain wasn’t really comfortable with the fact that both her lovers made love with other men and women. This wasn’t the first time in her life that Nadezhda had shared her lovers, but she was now part of a far more unsettling web of sexual intrigue. Nadezhda’s series of wives and lovers

normally followed one another in a sequential fashion. This was a pattern occasionally punctuated by wild extramarital affairs that was the natural consequence of spending so many months and years aboard space ships millions of kilometres from home.

“Would you...?” Nadezhda almost sobbed. “Could you?”

Beatrice smiled reassuringly and stroked the captain’s still erect nipples with the tips of her fingers. “Whether I do or not is of no matter, Nadezhda darling. I shall always love you and you will always be welcome in my arms.”

This was, of course, the natural prelude for a renewed bout of rapturous lovemaking between the two women that was somehow enhanced rather than diminished by Nadezhda’s knowledge, which she never doubted, that the two lovers who dominated her waking thoughts—and featured prominently in her dreams—would have no compunction or reservation about consummating their mutual fascination with one another. Just as Beatrice often wondered about Vashti’s provenance, so too did her brown-skinned lover about Paul’s sexually charged wife.

Again and again, Nadezhda was brought to an orgasm that left her in anticipation of the next. Finally she could take no more. She shuddered with desire but was too exhausted to meet Beatrice’s insatiable demands. She fell into her lover’s arms. Her nose pressed into Beatrice’s bosom and their legs intertwined. Captain Kerensky didn’t know and didn’t care how long they were slumped on the mattress as she gasped breathlessly in the residual spasms of ecstasy.

And then her reverie was abruptly interrupted.

There was no prologue. There was no soothing call to arms from the female

voice the captain had chosen for the ship's computer. There was just a shrill alert that urgently notified the captain that there was an emergency that required her instant attention.

Still naked, the captain jumped to her feet. Nadezhda disregarded the vaginal juices trickling down the inside of her thighs and dashed over to the nearest console.

A holographic image filled the room above which flashed in insistent crimson the words *Red Alert!* Captain Kerensky raised her hands to her shaven pate and pressed her palms against her forehead.

“Shit! Shit! The Intrepid is under attack!”

“Attack?” asked Beatrice whose normally beatific expression broke into visible concern. “Who from?”

“I don’t know,” the captain replied. She studied the data that appeared on a holographic screen. “A fleet of space craft. They’re all relatively modern. Well, a lot more modern than the Intrepid. They’re registered in different parts of the Solar System.”

The holographic image confirmed the captain’s words. It displayed the space ship as a huge pencil shaped object that could not have been filmed from inside the ship and was generated from the set of data transmitted from the ship’s surface. What it displayed was a swarm of small craft all around and about the ship. A few larger space ships were hovering a few hundred kilometres behind. The image was illuminated by flashes of bright lights as the Intrepid’s automatic defence systems identified and destroyed as many incoming craft as it could.

“What’s happening?” Beatrice asked.

“The ship’s defence system is eliminating as many enemy craft as it can,” the captain explained. “However, this is an old ship. Even though its defensive capability has been upgraded, it can destroy most of the enemy space craft but not all of them. Once they’ve attached themselves to the ship’s hull, the Intrepid’s external defences are useless. The ship can’t destroy them without damaging itself.”

As she spoke, the room was filled with images of military officers that were broadcast from the levels of the ship where the soldiers were quartered. A cacophony of spoken requests for information filled the captain’s bedroom as she stood naked and bewildered in the midst of rather more holographic data than she could immediately assimilate. She spoke as calmly and dispassionately as she could, careful to activate an image of her official avatar rather than her actual naked body.

“We are being attacked by unknown hostile forces,” the captain said. “The data suggests that the Space Ship Intrepid may become compromised. We must take immediate aggressive action.”

With that the many images flickered off, leaving Captain Kerensky once again alone in her bedroom with Beatrice. She slumped onto a hoverchair and pressed a fist into her mouth.

“What can you do?” Beatrice asked as she walked over to her lover and placed a comforting hand on Nadezhda’s shoulder.

“Nothing,” said the captain. “Nothing at all. The enemy fleet is composed of modern siege engines. It’s very likely that some will penetrate the Intrepid’s defences and attach themselves to the ship’s hull. We can’t repel them with nuclear or antimatter weapons as that would damage the ship and imperil the Intrepid’s life-

support systems. We can fend off the enemy while the space craft are still in space and although so far the Intrepid has destroyed..." the captain referred to a digital display, "...35% of enemy vessels, it can't destroy any attached to the hull. There are no commands I can give that could be more efficient than what can be done by the Intrepid's artificial intelligence."

"And what happens next?"

"The space craft that have attached themselves to the ship's hull are drilling through the outermost shell. The Intrepid is attempting to ward off invasion with its internal defences, but it's limited to what it can do without causing irreparable harm to itself. You see those low domes dotted over the ship's exterior like a plague of warts. Those are the enemy's siege engines. They patch the surface so that as the space ship is being attacked, the Intrepid's life-support systems are not damaged while their laser drills cut through the twenty metres of external shell. The enemy infantry inside the space craft will then be inside the ship where they will be safe from the Intrepid's external weapons. It will then be a matter for the military forces inside the ship to engage with the enemy forces."

"Why was there no warning of this attack until now?"

"Modern space-craft have sophisticated cloaking devices that a ship of this antiquity can't detect. The Intrepid isn't a warship. It was designed as a space cruiser for long distance travel. It wasn't originally equipped to repel this kind of onslaught. The speed of the siege is far faster than the space ship's systems can handle. Look! Several dozen attempted incursions have already been successful. Our only hope lies with the soldiers and their professional skills."

The captain surveyed the holographic display that filled all the available space in her bedroom. Flashes of light indicated where warheads were exploding in space and destroying the space craft that were still heading towards the Intrepid. Other flashes took place beside the larger space craft from which were emerging yet more small space craft. The space vehicles that had survived the onslaught were attached to the Intrepid's exterior and morphing into bubonic domes.

"You can see how many intrusions have been successful," remarked the captain as she activated a section of the image. It grew to fill almost a quarter of the bedroom and showed figures in military space uniforms who were flying out from the holes punched into the soil of the Intrepid's outermost level. The figures flew upwards on hover-packs attached to their shoulders and drifted down onto the lawns and pathways. The invaders carried a variety of weapons, but they clasped a standard issue laser rifle against their chests.

"Who are they?" Beatrice wondered.

Again Captain Kerensky referred to the holographic display. "It's a mixture. Various kinds of uniforms. Jihad Martyrs. Infantry of Zion. Shakti Warriors. Soldiers of Christ. All they've got in common is that they belong to one or other of the rogue religious fundamentalist colonies that are scattered about the Solar System."

"Well, at last they've all now found a common cause," Beatrice remarked ironically.

Chapter Fourteen Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

Ever since he'd got married to Beatrice, Paul had tried to resist the temptation to visit Nudeworld. It no longer had quite the same attraction as before. It wasn't that Paul didn't visit cyberspace any more. He still enjoyed going to places and meeting people that could only ever be encountered in virtual reality, but he mostly avoided sexual encounters. He preferred to be free from even virtual guilt when he and Beatrice made love. But the truth was that he was more often alone these days rather than in Beatrice's company.

Paul's wife was very much the social animal. She'd made many new friends amongst the scientists, the crew and even the soldiers. Paul wasn't especially drawn to the busy social whirl, but he had no cause to be jealous. He knew that Beatrice loved her. Barely a day went by when they didn't make love, so Paul had no reason to doubt this. He never probed her about any extramarital activity and Beatrice never said anything that might arouse his suspicions. He was a lucky man to have such a beautiful and sensual wife. If anything, Paul felt guilty that he wasn't equal to her prodigious sexual demands.

Even though Beatrice was sometimes out until quite late into the evening, Paul had little cause for concern about her whereabouts. After all, his wife had taken considerable trouble to introduce him to some of her new friends, but this still didn't incline Paul to spend much time in their company. There was Chico, a tall Neptunian, whose greatest passion was the study of nanobes. There was Corporal Mazuki and her husband from Mercury who were both tall and thin with green hair and bright yellow

skin and both enjoyed asteroid surfing. There was Professor Dillinger from the Moon who was proud to have been celibate for nearly a century and whose conversation on exotic, dark and non-baryonic matter fascinated Beatrice but bored Paul.

He was sure there were many more such friends, judging by the familiar greetings that Beatrice received when she and Paul ventured out together. This was usually to the various social gatherings organised on the ship; such as the tiresome game of rugby where Colonel Vashti was such a star and the stage shows in Russian (with simultaneous translation for monolinguals like Paul) that the Saturnians were so keen on. The truth was that Paul didn't really enjoy such social occasions. He'd much rather stay in his pleasant villa on the outermost level where he could research into the Anomaly's ancient history if he ever felt so inclined.

However, his research would have been more compelling if he could somehow dig up some more interesting discoveries from his computer disks and tapes, but there was no such fresh breakthrough. The encrypted data that his software had so easily cracked wasn't hiding anything more fascinating than what he'd already found.

The scientists of the early centuries of the third millennium had no better idea of what the Anomaly might be than those in the thirty-eighth. In the twenty-fourth century, the longest and most heated discussion on the subject was whether funding for research should even continue now that the Anomaly had faded away. None of the space probes launched towards the Anomaly had sent back any useful information. The peculiar apparitions associated with it were dismissed as software malfunctions. Although the funding for research rapidly declined when there was no longer

anything to study, the records betrayed a palpable sense of relief that such an uncomfortably inexplicable phenomenon could now be filed away on computer archives where nobody would ever think of looking—that is, until Paul stumbled across them.

When Paul next visited Nudeworld, it was as if he'd never left. The intervening years seemed to have never happened. Blanche greeted him as if he'd not been away for more than a single day. Paul wondered how sophisticated her artificial intelligence might be. Had she really been doing nothing but sit motionless for all those years while he sped across the Solar System? Was there really nobody else whose company she could have enjoyed in all that time? But their lovemaking was familiar and reassuring. For Blanche, at least, there had been no separation at all. She loved him with the same unquestioning passion. As always, she served only to satisfy his animal lust and his every mundane desire. She expressed exactly the same familiar passion as when Paul last fucked her. There was no evidence that Blanche had noticed any improvement in his lovemaking skill, although Paul was sure he was a better lover now. Beatrice had taught him so much more than a virtual construct could ever do. Blanche was as receptive to the more considerate practised lover who now pleasured her as she'd been with the decidedly inexpert one she'd last known.

Paul felt a sharp spasm of guilt as he watched Blanche wipe his semen off her chin and forehead. It wasn't as if his wife didn't give him pleasure. He resolved not to tell Beatrice of his sexual exploits in this other world, but the very fact he kept such secrets from her caused him anxiety. What would she think if she knew? Paul was sure she'd understand and tell him not to worry about it, but this consideration didn't

absolve him of guilt. He still lusted after other women and this was something he couldn't control.

Nudeworld was relatively tame compared to the strange places Paul had visited on his journey through the Solar System. A world whose main distinguishing feature was that no one wore a vestige of clothing now seemed wholly innocent and unthreatening. There were people he'd met in real life, just as desirable as those on Nudeworld, who also never wore clothes. The entire exercise now seemed rather pointless and not even especially erotic. Nevertheless, it was strangely comforting to walk out of the house he shared with Blanche and stroll along those long-familiar streets, after his virtual partner had crumpled up and thrown away the semen-soaked tissues. Paul and Blanche climbed to the top of a grassy hillside from which they could gaze down on the small town where they lived.

"It's a beautiful view, isn't it?" remarked a familiar voice that was most certainly not Blanche's.

Paul turned his head, while still keeping a hand in his virtual partner's. As he guessed the voice belonged to Virgil.

"Ah!" said Paul with the boldness that he could only express in virtual space. "This proves you're not an avatar. You *must* be a virtual construct."

"Why's that?" Virgil asked as he sat cross-legged next to Paul and on the other side of him to Blanche.

"If you were an avatar of a real person in the Solar System," said Paul, "you couldn't possibly be present in real time so far from the ecliptic plane. The best I might expect would be a time-delayed response between the time I said something

and when you responded. In real life, I'm over two light weeks from the nearest colony or natural satellite. If you were the avatar of a real person, you couldn't possibly be so responsive."

The Intrepid was already at least as far from the sun as the outermost perimeter of the Kuiper Belt but it was at such an angle to the ecliptic plane that there was virtually nothing to trouble its flight. For instance, it was totally impossible to have a normal conversation with his parents or friends from Godwin as any transmission to the colony would take nearly a month. The best he could offer were rambling monologues compromised by the fact there wasn't much he could say that wasn't classified information. Furthermore, the reply to his monologues could never be especially satisfactory as he'd forgotten, in the intervening weeks, what he'd originally said.

Virgil smiled.

"Well analysed," he said. "However, it is interesting that you make such a big distinction between the people you meet in virtual space and those in the real world. Can someone in virtual space ever be real?"

"Only in an abstract sense," said Paul.

"I suppose so," said the gentleman, but he didn't choose to pursue this line of conversation. "It's a while now since you last visited Nudeworld. Is the real world really that much more interesting?"

"It has been."

"And now: not as much so?"

"I wouldn't say that," said Paul. "I've seen more of the Solar System than I'd

ever imagined possible and it's a more bizarre place than this world could ever be.”

“Well, Nudeworld is limited by the parameters set by its designers,” Virgil admitted. “That’s the problem with virtual worlds. None of them can quite exceed their original design. But isn’t that also true of the real world. It may not have been designed as such, but you’re always constrained by the laws of physics. No travel faster than light. No teleportation. No ability to change shape, walk through buildings or withstand nuclear explosions. And yet in so many virtual worlds these laws are routinely broken.”

“That’s only because of the license of their designers’ imagination,” said Paul. “The laws of physics can be broken, but only because there isn’t a requirement to be entirely consistent.”

“And if they were absolutely consistent in every detail,” Virgil wondered. “What then?”

“I imagine that what is possible within the limitations of design would be as constrained as they are in the real world.”

“And is it ever possible that in the real world there might be circumstances in which the original design is compromised in some way?” Virgil pursued. “Are there circumstances in which, for instance, a massive object might travel faster than light?”

“That’s impossible,” said Paul. “If that were to happen then the whole fabric of space and time just couldn’t hold together. Everything has to be consistent.”

“And if something inconsistent did exist, how would you explain it?”

“Then it can’t be of the same universe as everything else,” Paul concluded.

“In the same way as Nudeworld is not in the same universe?” Virgil remarked.

“And yet you’re able to enter virtual universes where the laws of physics are routinely broken. In Nudeworld, for instance, you can be in the same apparent space now as you were when you lived in Godwin and your delightful partner has no conception that your body is in a physical location that is any different to before. But these virtual worlds are still part of the same universe as the one you come from.”

“Well, of course,” said Paul. “If all the servers hosting Nudeworld were to fail then it would abruptly disappear. It only exists as long as they do.”

“Just as you do for as long as your universe continues to function?”

“Well, of course,” said Paul. “Should the universe suddenly stop then so would I. And so too would everybody else.”

Virgil mused on that reflection for a moment and then remarked: “It’s such a pleasant day here. I could rest here forever. How about you?”

Paul wasn’t sure how to answer. It was possible to spend one’s whole life in virtual space and many people chose to do exactly that. They eventually died strapped to their holographic devices. However much they wanted to escape from the world they eventually succumbed to their physical contingency.

Paul felt restless. He wasn’t enjoying his stay in Nudeworld quite as much as he thought he should. It was disconcerting to reflect on the real world when that was what he wanted to escape from. So, with a polite nod to Virgil and a reassuring squeeze of Blanche’s hand, he exited Nudeworld. His senses once again returned to the real world bound by his villa on Intrepid and the unromantic hardware that generated the virtual universe he’d just a moment before been visiting.

As he so often did on returning to the real world and when he’d disengaged

himself from the machinery, Paul pinched himself so that he could feel the unmistakable sensation that somehow seemed more painful in the real world than it ever did in Nudeworld. But he was, as always, not entirely sure that his perception of reality was any less than it was in the virtual universe. The simulations were so convincing that it was only because Nudeworld was unlikely to exist in reality that he was ever sure of which was real and which was not.

Paul had sampled the virtual worlds generated by the latest software. These were very much more needle-sharp and detailed in rendition compared to Nudeworld. The more modern simulations offered sensations that were even more real than reality. The colours were more intense. His physical sensations more tactile. The degree of detail so considerable. It was almost as if the real world was a mere shadow of such virtual worlds. Perhaps the real world was just a little bit more banal. Perhaps it was just a little bit more fuzzily focused.

It took Paul a few minutes to adjust to being back in mundane reality, but the memory of his conversation with Virgil still troubled him. Virtual simulations were supposed to be no more than artificial constructs that in one sense or another functioned to distract him, not to make him think. He speculated idly just how much the Anomaly was any more real than the virtual world he'd just visited and whether the way it appeared not to conform to the normal laws of physics might not in some peculiar way be like the disjunction between the apparent reality of virtual space and the soulless number-crunching that generated them. Virtual universes did indeed permit huge transgressions of normal physical laws, however much they were truly nothing more than an illusion. They were so convincing that only common sense and

reason enabled Paul to differentiate them from what was unquestionably real.

Paul's reverie was suddenly broken. He became aware of a loud knocking on the door and then the looming presence of someone in his bedroom. He turned his head, half-expecting to see Beatrice. After having had sex with Blanche, he was keen to compare it with the real thing and in that regard his wife was always obliging.

So, it was actually rather a shock to Paul to realise that the woman striding towards him across the expanse of his bedroom carpet was Colonel Vashti whom he'd hardly ever seen since the day he and Beatrice had visited Captain Kerensky and then only from a distance.

What was she doing in his villa? Was his wife accompanying her?

"Quick!" said the colonel urgently. "Gather together only what you really need. You've got to evacuate your home immediately."

Paul blinked his eyes rapidly. Colonel Vashti was unaccompanied. There was no sign of Beatrice.

"Why's that?" he asked.

"You are in extreme danger," said the colonel. "Just hurry! I'll explain what's happening as we leave."

Shit. Again! Even here on the Intrepid, a ridiculous distance from home, there were people trying to kill him. Just *what* had he done to deserve so much unwelcome attention? "All right! All right!" said Paul who was almost used to such emergencies.

It was Colonel Vashti who carried the suitcases that Paul hurriedly packed and who insisted that Paul shouldn't slow down his flight by carrying anything other than a briefcase. The bulky luggage didn't trouble the colonel at all. She hauled them over

her shoulder as if they weighed a fraction of their real weight. It was only as Paul followed the colonel across his lawn, past innocently grazing sheep, that he remembered that in his haste he'd forgotten to rescue any of his wife's belongings. Oh well, he reflected, it wasn't as if she wore many of the clothes in her wardrobe anyway.

Paul scurried to catch up with the colonel as she strode ahead. "Why do I have to evacuate my home?" he gasped. "Is it another assassination attempt?"

"Assassination?" asked the colonel. "Not at all. The ship's being invaded. We have to clear everyone from the outermost level. Not just you."

"Oh, I see," said Paul, who was oddly comforted to discover that this time he wasn't the sole target. "I can't see any invaders. Where are they?"

The colonel raised an arm holding a suitcase and beckoned towards a flurry of activity just over a kilometre away. "See that," she said.

Paul looked as carefully as he could while not breaking his stride. Soil and metal was flying outwards and upwards from a patch of ground that couldn't have been more than ten metres across.

"What's going on?" he asked.

"It's a laser drill," said the colonel. "That's how the invaders are cutting through the ship's hull. Soon they'll be inside the ship and when they are, they'll either kill everyone they see or seize them as hostages. You don't want to be killed or taken captive, do you? So, make haste."

It was more than two hundred metres to the tall column that housed the nearest elevator and Paul wondered why the colonel had arrived on foot and not by vehicle.

Perhaps there just hadn't been the time, although other residents from the outermost level were being transported in a fleet of hovercars.

Paul returned his gaze to the soil and metal that flew outwards from the drill pushing through the ship's hull. A plug of metal suddenly thrust itself out of the ground and hovered above the outermost level's lawn. The Intrepid was rapidly repairing the hole in the ground created by the vehicle's intrusion and all signs of it had almost totally vanished as the craft began stabilising itself a few metres away from where it had emerged. Then Paul saw a handful of figures jump awkwardly out of the metallic object and onto the grass. They were dressed in burdensome space suits and hoisted massive rifles over their shoulders which they trained in all directions about them. The invaders mightn't be especially fast or mobile, but Paul was fairly sure that their weapons were lethal.

This reflection added extra impetus to Paul's step.

"Who *are* they?" he asked.

"I don't know," admitted the colonel now that they were less than fifty metres from the elevator. "Whoever they are, they must be both brave and foolhardy. They are about to encounter some of the very best soldiers in the Solar System. And that only if the robot infantry can't hold them back."

The greatest delay to Paul's escape wasn't the distance he had to run to get to the elevator but the crush of scientists, technicians and senior military officers pressed against the elevator's doors. Behind them, and still nearly a kilometre away, the lumbering invaders were approaching.

Dozens of military robots were gathered around the column that held the

elevator and towered some fifty metres above to the roof that was also the floor of the next outermost level. They weren't especially large but they were clearly equipped for battle. Paul was barely inside the column's doors when the robots flew off towards the invading forces.

"They'll protect us, won't they?" Paul asked anxiously. "They'll keep the invaders at bay."

"The robots, you mean?" asked the colonel. "I hope so. But we need to get away as fast as we can. The elevator's full. We'll have to take the stairs."

"The stairs?" remarked Paul, who was horrified at the prospect at climbing such a height.

"Come on!" the colonel said, still carrying Paul's luggage and unhindered by their weight as she ran up the emergency staircase, two steps at a time. "You can see how well armed the invaders are."

Paul obeyed but despite his haste he trailed well behind the colonel. As he climbed up the metal staircase, he could hear thunderous crashes and explosions from the battle that was now taking place in the pleasant gardens and villas of the level of the space ship that he'd so recently known to be his home.

His flight wasn't over when he eventually reached the top of the stairs, followed behind by other desperate evacuees and their military escorts.

"We need to get everyone to the core of the ship," said the colonel. "We don't have to go all the way by stairs, but we must get you as far as possible from the invaders."

"And *then* what do we do?" asked Paul.

The colonel dropped the luggage onto the floor just outside the elevator shaft to the upper levels. A stream of infantry was descending by another staircase whilst a disconsolate scrum of civilians stood waiting by the elevator as the numbers displayed gradually dropped to single digits on its return to the second level.

“Then,” the colonel said with a smile, “we sit and wait.”

Chapter Fifteen Judgement - 3754 A.D.

Although the previous three years of military training had been hard and unrelenting, Isaac would have gladly exchanged the year-long flight in the overcrowded troop carrier Judgment for many more years in the space colony of Paradise. There was little relief and a great deal more discomfort in the space ship. The only distraction to the many hours of enforced rest on a five-level bunk bed in the dormitory was regular military practise.

The chapel and mess room were the only other places where there was any reprieve from his third level bunk where sleep was his only and most elusive pleasure. His guilt for enjoying such fleeting relaxation was assuaged by the words of the Lord in The Book of Psalms Chapter Four Verse Eight: "*I will both lay me down in peace, and sleep: for thou, LORD, only makest me dwell in safety*".

Isaac needed the comfort of the Lord's words ever more as he increasingly yearned for the security of Holy Trinity, the company of his children and, most of all, the love of his wife, Rebecca. This last brought him the most anguish. He'd always been very proper with his wife. Their snatched moments of intimacy had always been with the intention and that alone of bringing more children to the world to serve the Lord. It troubled him that Jesus Christ said in Chapter Twenty Verse Thirty-five of The Gospel According to Saint Luke "*But they which shall be accounted worthy to obtain that world, and the resurrection from the dead, neither marry, nor are given in marriage.*" It troubled Isaac also to know that it was said in Chapter Two Verse Sixteen of The First Epistle General of John: "*For all that is in the world, the lust of*

the flesh, and the lust of the eyes, and the pride of life, is not of the Father, but is of the world." But he also knew that the Lord implored the descendants of Noah in Chapter Nine Verse Seven of The First Book of Moses Called Genesis to "*be ye fruitful, and multiply; bring forth abundantly in the earth, and multiply therein.*"

Surely Isaac was committing no sin by his desire to be by his wife's side.

He was also bothered by the persistent erection that accompanied his sleepless sojourns whenever he contemplated his wife. He was forbidden from touching his penis to relieve himself, but resisting such temptation was a daily struggle which even the well-memorised words of Holy Scripture couldn't entirely banish.

Every day, the Chaplain selected quotations from scripture that he and the other Soldiers of Christ had to read and reflect upon. These mostly came from the Book of Revelations and were no less obscure and confusing now than they had ever been, although Isaac was sure that these verses were selected to steel his resolve to thwart the evil of the Anomaly.

Just what *did* Saint John the Divine mean in Chapter Seventeen Verses Four and Five: "*And the woman was arrayed in purple and scarlet colour, and decked with gold and precious stones and pearls, having a golden cup in her hand full of abominations and filthiness of her fornication: And upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH.*"

And just *how* was this Anomaly associated with the numerical mysticism of Chapter Thirteen Verse Eighteen where it was said: "*Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and*

his number is Six hundred threescore and six.”

His slumbers were not made any easier by the fact that there was no artificial gravity on the Judgement and that his fellow crusaders had to strap him to his bunk bed so that he wouldn’t float away.

The only times that Isaac experienced anything like standard gravity was in the cramped and sweaty exercise chambers where the military exercises were unrelenting and fatiguing. They were principally designed to keep the crusaders fit and to prevent their muscles from atrophying. As there wasn’t enough space on the space ship, the physical exercise was within specially designed virtual environments. This was Isaac’s first exposure to virtual space. Because it was considered a sinful distraction, it wasn’t accessible on Holy Trinity but was nevertheless reluctantly permitted on the Judgement. The virtual world was even less pleasant than real life. In fact, the most realistic element by far was the pain simulation. The setting was of a series of combat situations in which his virtual enemies were attired in the dress of the infidels and heretics he’d got to know as his fellow crusaders. It might be satisfying to immolate a Muslim infidel or to squeeze out the eyes of a Hindu devil, but the enemy he would soon confront wouldn’t be such an infidel. In fact, they would be his reluctant allies. And their common foe would be atheists and maybe even aliens. Still, it was a salutary reminder to Isaac that there would be the unfinished business of cleansing the Solar System of heathens after the Anomaly was annihilated.

The Judgement was an ancient seven hundred year old craft that lacked almost every modern comfort. Its life support system was pared down to the bare minimum even though it carried three times as many soldiers as it was designed for. The

atmosphere was thin, the rations were meagre and, worst of all, the quantity of fuel it carried was only just sufficient to take the craft to its destination. Only if the crusaders succeeded in their mission and took control of the atheist craft was there any possibility of returning home. And this would only be after the threat from the Anomaly had been eliminated.

There were hundreds of other space craft similar to the Judgement that had been brought back into full service after centuries of neglect. They were all hidden from the prying eyes of the Interplanetary Union by cloaking devices generated by the only modern space ship that was accompanying the mission. This was the relatively sophisticated battleship Enlightenment, whose name was sufficiently neutral to accommodate the range of competing faiths that for the first time in history were united on this one mission. The Enlightenment was the only space ship with enough antimatter fuel to make the return journey. It also carried all the senior military officers and the many senior clerics, priests, imams and rabbis.

Every day was noted by a countdown of the number of days remaining until the fleet would rendezvous with its target. Isaac privately cheered, as did all his fellows, when the count was at last reduced to double digits. But when the count became a relentlessly dwindling single digit, his joy was overshadowed by anxiety. All too soon he would be risking sudden death when his military training was put to practical use. And were the atheists as truly as evil as they were portrayed: if his death wasn't sudden then it would be after protracted and agonising torture. That, after all, was the punishment planned for the atheists. It was unlikely that unbelievers should be any more compassionate than the crusaders, jihadists and other holy warriors.

On the morning of the penultimate day, when the countdown was just two more days, the lesson provided from the Book of Revelations Chapter Twenty-two Verses Thirteen to Fifteen read: *“I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. Blessed are they that do his commandments, that they may have right to the tree of life, and may enter in through the gates into the city. For without are dogs, and sorcerers, and whoremongers, and murderers, and idolaters, and whosoever loveth and maketh a lie.”*

This was followed the next day by a lesson from the final five verses of the Holy Scripture, which culminated in the Lord’s promise that: *“The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you all. Amen.”*

“Amen,” repeated Isaac, as he shuffled in a long line with his fellow crusaders into the small landing craft that would take him and twenty others to the atheist craft which, with the blessing of God the Father, the Son and the Holy Ghost, they would soon seize control.

Isaac had never been inside the invasion pod before. These vehicles were considerably more modern than the Judgement and, except for a glimpse of the Enlightenment, represented the most modern space craft Isaac had ever seen. Although many corners had been cut to feed and quarter the crusaders, there was no such parsimony with regards to the military hardware. The landing pods, like the cloaking devices employed by the Enlightenment, were of the most modern design. They had to be if there was to be any possibility of the mission succeeding.

Although Isaac was crammed shoulder to shoulder into a pod designed for fewer than half the number of occupants, everything else about the craft was of

superior quality. The empty space outside was displayed to the crew by high definition holographic graphics. It also broadcast a voice message from the Archdeacon who implored his congregation not to dishonour their faith and to be prepared to make the ultimate sacrifice.

The panoramic spacescape captivated Isaac. He'd never before seen space so clearly and vividly. Images were forbidden on Holy Trinity for it was said in Chapter Forty-two Verse Seventeen of The Book of the Prophet Isaiah: "*They shall be turned back, they shall be greatly ashamed, that trust in graven images.*" Indeed, before Isaac participated in virtual training he'd never seen a holographic, let alone a graven, image. Space was much more awe-inspiring and disquieting than Isaac ever imagined. It extended in all directions as did the light from the billions of stars that could be seen in a space unmediated by atmosphere. There was no evidence of the hundreds of ships in the crusader fleet. These would remain invisible until the stealth devices were compromised by the launch of thousands of landing pods towards the enemy vessel.

Of the many bright spots in the sky, one was only slightly larger than the others but shone much more brightly. This was the Sun that in Mercury orbit was so huge and so fearsome that it would immediately blind anyone who gazed upon it.

The most awe-inspiring sight to meet Isaac's eyes was not so much the bleak emptiness of space and the distant Sun, but the enemy space ship that was glistening in the starlight. It was a featureless cylindrical cone that must have measured several kilometres in length. Its computer systems were as yet still unaware of the military force gathered outside. The crew and passengers were smugly oblivious to the fact that the atheist space ship wasn't the only manmade object this far out in space from

the Solar System's ecliptic plane.

The countdown began. There were a whole three hundred seconds of waiting until the simultaneous launch of what was hoped to be an overwhelming invasion force would burst out from the cloak of invisibility that had been maintained around it for over a year.

These three hundred seconds passed painfully slowly at first but appeared to pass more rapidly as the launch came inexorably closer. Sixty seconds. Fifty seconds. And then all too soon the countdown ticked off one single digit after another towards the inevitable zero. There was then an abrupt thrust upwards at a rate of acceleration that was at least as great as any Isaac had endured in the gravity simulators on Paradise. His body and head were pinned back against the seat into which he was strapped as the pod broke free and accelerated towards the atheist space ship.

Despite the intense agony that the effort cost him, Isaac kept his eyes open in the long seconds that followed. The previously calm holographic spacescape erupted into sudden brilliance as thousands of landing pods and hundreds of space ships burst into view. The cloaking device could no longer function now its surface had been so spectacularly breached. Isaac proudly, if briefly, surveyed the valiant crusading fleet. And at its heart was the sleek and impressive battle cruiser from which the senior clerics were coordinating the invasion fleet.

This impressive image filled Isaac with confidence. What could possibly overcome such an overwhelming force?

The answer came only too soon and just as swiftly shattered Isaac's belief in the Holy Crusaders' invincibility. Thousands of missiles were suddenly launched

from the atheist space craft at a truly astonishing speed. They hit the Holy Crusaders' space craft before they could manoeuvre out of the way. What Isaac had thought a sitting target had all of a sudden become an overpowering war machine.

There were countless devastating explosions during the next few critical seconds while his pod was attaching itself to the hull of the atheists' space ship. The once proud invasion fleet was being steadily reduced to little more than a brilliant fireworks display. Even the Space Ship Enlightenment was blown apart in a brilliant explosion that scattered the clerics and imams in a cloud of floating debris.

The atheist space ship was fully armed and engaged in combat. And it did so with a degree of devastation that exceeded Isaac's greatest fears.

The pod's thrust was slowed to a dead halt when it touched down on the ship's massive hull. This appeared on the holographic display as a wide plane of metal that extended in all directions and upon which the hundreds of surviving pods were now making contact.

Not all was lost.

The pods were in the shape of hemispheric domes that attached themselves with the shallowest possible external surface. Even from where Isaac was strapped, they resembled an infestation of warts on the space ship's surface.

As soon as the pod made contact, it shuddered excruciatingly while its laser drills were engaged in the task of penetrating the space ship's thick hull. Isaac's jaw shook against the rubber pad that he crunched tightly between his teeth and which he'd naively thought had been there only to protect him from biting his tongue. The intense vibrations would have shattered his teeth if he hadn't had such a thick wad of

rubber in his mouth. His helmet muffled his ears from what was still a deafeningly shrill noise.

When he prised open his eyes, Isaac could still see glimpses of the holographic spacescape but this view no longer afforded him even a single crumb of comfort. Laser devices were flashing and robots were swarming over the ship's surface. Some of the other pods were exploding or simply disintegrating. There was now little evidence of the once holy and valiant space fleet amongst the scattering debris and the brilliant flame of the slowly extinguishing antimatter engines.

There was a sudden thud on the outside of the pod that Isaac initially feared was from the impact of a missile. He then saw through the now erratic and flickering display that it was the debris of another pod that was rolling slowly and ungainly off the space ship and into deep space.

As the laser drills cut through the hull, the holographic display from inside the pod showed only the steep walls of the hole through which it was drilling. Isaac remembered from his training that the surface of the pod was now retracting into the hole and acting as a plug that protected the crew from the extreme cold and airlessness of space. But the minutes that it took for the pod to drill through the twenty or so metres of hull were punctuated by judders from inside the hull and crashes on the surface.

And then, suddenly, and without warning, the crew and Isaac amongst them were ejected into the wide open expanse inside the space ship. They were equipped with heavy combat gear that was absolutely necessary as defence but was still an onerous burden in the standard gravity of the atheist ship.

The dazed crew staggered to their feet. They were totally disorientated. What had seconds before been down- and inwards was now up- and outwards. Isaac momentarily wondered whether he was still alive and had been transported to heaven. Far from being in a long corridor of the kind he assumed he'd find in a space ship, he was standing in a very pleasant garden landscape.

Neither on the misleadingly named Paradise nor in Holy Trinity, had Isaac ever before seen such an idyllic pastoral landscape. He believed that such gardens only existed in the hereafter. The nearest thing to a rural landscape that existed on Holy Trinity was dedicated to food production where every available space had to serve a utilitarian agrarian function. Here there was a wide open acreage of lawns, trees and even animals that were running free rather than being penned up for the purposes of intensive meat and dairy production.

Isaac didn't have much time for reflection. There was a mission to accomplish. The many years of training hadn't been endured simply to allow Isaac the opportunity to ponder on the bounty of nature. Much as there was to celebrate in the benison of the Good Lord, he was implored by the yells in his helmet's intercom to join forces with his comrades to secure the atheist ship and complete the mission. Isaac was guided by the Spirit of the Lord. He had absolute faith that his faith was a force that no atheist could possibly repel.

The guidance of which Isaac was most aware came from the yelling voices from inside his helmet. As the instructions couldn't be coming from the now annihilated control hub, it was evidence that an artificial intelligence had now taken automatic control of the mission. Isaac was commanded to proceed ahead with his

fellow Holy Crusaders towards the emergency stairwells that could take them up to the higher levels and towards the atheists' control centre.

Isaac saw hundreds of other crusaders about him. They might have many different faiths but they had one shared mission. And as a result they were all heading towards the same destination. Isaac stumbled onwards, but he was weighed down by the huge military suit that in this pastoral landscape now seemed ridiculously incongruous. The invading force tramped doggedly forward over the green grass, under the towering trees and beside the startled deer and horses that became even more alarmed when the crusaders practised their weaponry on the defenceless beasts with devastating and bloody effect.

They passed a few homes that seemed bizarrely tranquil in what was now a battlefield and which Isaac amongst other soldiers was directed to investigate. The villas had been deserted—probably only a few minutes before judging by the obvious disarray—but they were remarkably luxurious. Although it gave Isaac a degree of satisfaction to train his laser rifle on the sofa, bed and electronic hardware and reduce them to flames, he wondered whether it was truly right for a Soldier of Christ to act like a vandal. He'd never before seen homes so luxurious and spacious. And in his dutiful pursuit of justice Isaac had entered many homes on Holy Trinity, most of which he had similarly reduced to ash and dust.

If Isaac had wondered how the atheists would defend themselves, this was soon revealed as he became steadily aware that the place to which he was urgently directed to proceed was also where a large contingent of robots were standing in wait.

Isaac had never had much contact with robots before. There were none at all

on Holy Trinity, where artificial life was strictly banished as it was increase and not of the Lord. There were a few such machines operating on Paradise and Judgement where their presence was excused on the understanding that compromise is sometimes necessary in the battle against evil. The robots that stood in wait for Isaac and the Holy Crusaders were sophisticated and deadly.

There was little that the atheist soldiers accompanying the robots needed to do. They stood in attendance at the foot of a tall metallic column that housed the emergency stairwell that was Isaac's destination and which seemed somewhat incongruous in such an Elysian setting. The soldiers were dressed rather less cumbersomely than the Holy Crusaders. In fact, their clothes exactly matched the background and whenever a soldier moved the uniform changed colour and design to match the scenery behind. Each soldier was training a gun or rifle towards the approaching crusaders but there was very little need to actually use it. The robots were already quite capable to repel the clumsy, confused and disorientated invasion force.

Several of the odd-shaped but swift robots were destroyed by the Holy Crusaders' powerful guns, but more than enough survived such attacks to disable their assailants. This they did not by killing the valiant crusaders, but simply by immobilising them. One by one, the crusaders fell to the ground either smothered in viscous liquids or put out of action as their suits became rigid and unresponsive.

The blasts from Isaac's own gun were deflected by an approaching robot that resembled more a wraith than a machine. He discovered that he couldn't get his suit to move however much he struggled. He was rigid and helpless, one foot still raised

above the ground and an arm outstretched. His heavy gun slipped from his arms and dropped harmlessly to the ground. He was totally incapable of picking it up or, indeed, of making any movement at all.

Then, to add insult to injury, when the entire crusading force was paralysed, Isaac was engulfed in a blue cloud of dust which swept his military suit and weaponry clean from his body. They completely vanished and Isaac slumped naked and hairless onto the lawn. He was now no longer in what he'd momentarily imagined to be Heaven. He was as naked and helpless as a penitent soul on entering Hell.

Isaac focused his gaze on the grass in which his nose was buried. He was as ashamed of his nakedness as Adam and Eve were on the day of their Disobedience. Although he could blink, breathe and even talk, he was still unable to move his body.

Isaac wondered whether there were texts in the Gospels that described his predicament. Most verses that came to mind described the fate not of the virtuous but of the vicious and damned. It was said in Chapter Thirty-two Verse Twenty-four of The Fifth Book of Moses: Called Deuteronomy "*They shall be burnt with hunger, and devoured with burning heat, and with bitter destruction: I will also send the teeth of beasts upon them, with the poison of serpents of the dust.*" However, it was also said in Chapter Five Verse Twenty-two of The Book of Job: "*At destruction and famine thou shalt laugh: neither shalt thou be afraid of the beasts of the earth.*"

This verse gave Isaac a few crumbs of comfort as he slumped in wait for many more hours than the minutes it took for the invasion to be thwarted and awaited the punishment that he was certain the atheist devils would visit him. He was certain that the godless would punish him with more cruelty than even the guardians of faith

could contemplate. Unlike him, they didn't fear divine retribution if they were judged to have taken pleasure in meting out punishment. Their inhumanity wasn't constrained by fear of Eternal and Merciless Divine Justice. What torment would they unleash on him?

Sadistic punishment was precisely what Isaac expected, as did all his vanquished comrades. For what other purpose than malevolent cruelty could their lives have been so far spared?

Chapter Sixteen

Ulysses - 3751 C.E.

It only when the space ship Ulysses had travelled far enough from the Schmidt Republic that it appeared as nothing more than a tiny dot in the distance that Paul and Beatrice received a visit from Lieutenant Korolyov. He introduced himself as the Interplanetary Union military officer whose assignment was to ensure that the couple would arrive safely on Earth. He was a Saturnian, as were most Interplanetary Union officers in this part of the Solar System, and in common with most Saturnians his head was shaved and he showed far less interest in Beatrice's charms than those few possessed by Paul.

"You're probably aware that our brief sojourn at Schmidt was a security nightmare," the lieutenant remarked as he sat down on the plush armchair in Paul's luxury apartment. "You appear to have been the target of every terrorist and criminal in the Solar System, so we've radically upgraded your level of security."

"Why are we being targeted, lieutenant?" Beatrice wondered as she clasped Paul's hand in her own.

"My security clearance isn't high enough for me to know the answer," said Lieutenant Korolyov. "I haven't even been briefed as to why you're travelling to Earth or whether you'll be travelling on from there. My job is to ensure that you make your scheduled rendezvous at Pacific City. It is my duty to guard you against any lunatic or saboteur who wants to prevent that happening."

"Well, thank you," said Paul, who was genuinely grateful that so many people were concerned about his welfare.

“You’d have thought, wouldn’t you, that my duty would be fairly straightforward,” continued the lieutenant, “but the task of guaranteeing your safety has been a challenge to every security officer assigned to you ever since you arrived at Ecstasy. There are two things I am here to inform you of. The first is that neither the captain of the space ship Ulysses nor any of the crew is aware of your real identities or even of your special security requirements. This isn’t solely for security reasons. It’s unlikely that the captain would agree to admit people like you whose mere presence could imperil all the other passengers.”

“And the second thing you want to inform us of?” Beatrice asked when the lieutenant hesitated.

“It’s quite simple,” said the lieutenant. “Up until now the security personnel who’ve been assigned to you have been tailing you from a discreet distance. This hasn’t been quite as successful as we’d have hoped. For your own safety, your movements will be much more circumscribed from now on. I have to inform you that the only place where you shan’t be accompanied by a security officer will be when you are in your bedroom. Even there you will be discreetly monitored. I know this is a gross intrusion on your liberty and that as an anarchist this may be something you consider unacceptable, but it can’t be avoided.”

“So, we’ll be watched wherever we go?” said Paul.

“Exactly,” said Lieutenant Korolyov. “You’ll be subject to the constant gaze of our surveillance equipment.”

“Even when I go to the lavatory?” asked Beatrice.

“Everywhere.”

“Who’ll be sharing our apartment?” Paul asked. “Will they be Yuliya and Sergei?”

“Not any longer,” said the lieutenant. “May I introduce Security Officers Mikhail Kasparov and Erika Tereshkova.”

More Saturnians, thought Paul. He’d got rather accustomed to the company of bald men and women, but sometimes he yearned for the company of more easy-going and relaxed people. The further he travelled from his home colony the more he appreciated the advantages of a life where nobody had authority over or responsibility for anyone else.

The two guards were dressed sufficiently casually that they could pass for tourists, but they were to be Paul and Beatrice’s constant companions every time either of them left the confines of their suite. When they sat down for lunch in the opulent restaurant, there was always a table nearby where the two Saturnians sat. Whenever they wandered through the space ship’s gardens, the two guards were close at hand. They were never exactly by their side, but they were also never more than ten metres away.

On this occasion, Beatrice was perfectly content with their accommodation. It was, after all, amongst the most luxurious suites the Ulysses had to offer. She also took advantage of almost every opportunity to chat with their fellow passengers. They were also travelling towards Earth and in most cases somewhat more excited than Paul to be visiting the one planet in the Solar System where it was possible to survive in the open air. Paul felt like a fraud. It had never been one of Paul’s chief ambitions in life to visit Earth. It wasn’t that he didn’t want to visit the Grand Canyon, the dry

valleys of Antarctica, the wide expanses of ocean or all the many other natural wonders of his ancestral home. It was just that tourism didn't really appeal to him. He'd been quite content to live and work in Godwin. In a colony where there was no individual wealth or paid employment, not many would see the need for a vacation.

Paul's fellow passengers were a motley collection from the outer planets and beyond. Far more people in the Solar System lived beyond the inner planets and for many of them a voyage to where the sun loomed so large in the sky was a lifelong dream.

"I'm nearly a hundred and fifty years old," said a very slender woman from Uranus orbit whose face displayed a tangled mosaic of ornate tattoos. "It's been my desire to visit Earth ever since I was a little girl and at last I've managed to save enough to make the journey."

"Why do you want to go so much?" asked Beatrice.

"How can you even ask such a question? All I've mostly ever known has been the inside of a cylinder floating twenty times the distance of the Earth from the sun. Surely *everyone* wants to visit Earth."

"Isn't the weather somewhat variable?" commented Paul. "Even the most temperate regions on Earth have days when it's either too cold or too hot."

"At least I won't have to wear a cumbersome space suit to go outdoors," said the woman. "I'd love to breathe real natural air just once in my life."

There was a group of three women who Beatrice greeted while Paul and she were strolling in the huge pleasure garden that dominated the ship's outermost shell. At first they were visibly troubled by Beatrice's appearance. Even though she wasn't

actually naked, she was dressed so scantily that her nipples were clearly visible beneath her lace outfit. She displayed almost as much flesh as the three women kept hidden. These women's Earthly objective was Mecca on the Arabian subcontinent.

"So few Muslims ever get to visit the holy city," said one of the women in heavily accented English that clearly wasn't her first language. "It's a privilege to do so, even though we aren't able to do so in the holy month of Dhū al-Hijja."

Mecca, more so than any other holy city or shrine on Earth, had suffered badly from the pilgrimage of billions of people from across the Solar System. The erosion was so great that its roads were gullies and its holy shrines almost reduced to nothing from daily contact with countless pilgrims over the centuries.

Very few of the people on Earth at any one time were residents. The majority were pilgrims, tourists and scientists. Although the planet's economy was heavily reliant on tourism, the number of visitors was strictly controlled to protect the fragile environment. Far more people in the Solar System wanted to visit Earth than were ever able to do so. The Moon was a crowded way-station for prospective visitors who had to wait for someone to leave before they could take their turn on the planet's surface.

The Earth could no longer afford to be over-exploited. Very little mining or mineral exploitation was sanctioned. Only palaeontologists and geologists were allowed to enter Earth's mines. Almost every economic activity that could have an impact on the atmosphere, biosphere or geosphere was banned. It was no wonder that the status of the planet that was once by far the wealthiest in the Solar System had been overtaken by Saturn and was now hardly more than a living museum.

“It’s the geology that interests me,” said a tall brown skinned man from Neptune. “There are no fossils other than tiny micro-organisms anywhere else in the Solar System. I’ve dedicated my life to comparative palaeontology, particularly of coprolites, but I’ve never seen a fossil in situ. I’ll be visiting the deep cast mines of Bavaria where they’ve found some very interesting Jurassic feathered dinosaurs.”

“I study literature,” said a short pale woman from the distant Oort Cloud. “I’ve read so much, particularly from the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. You could say that’s my speciality. I’ve only ever seen facsimiles of these books. I shall be visiting famous literary sites in England, France and Italy. With any luck, I may even see an original manuscript though I won’t be permitted to touch it.”

“Too fragile, I suppose,” suggested Beatrice.

“Books weren’t designed to last over two thousand years,” the woman said. “Some of the most fragile come from the twentieth and twenty-first centuries when they were mass-produced commodity items. Some books that were produced in their millions, such as the fiction of J K Rowling, Geoffrey Parker and J R R Tolkien are now incredibly rare.”

“I’ve never heard of any of those authors,” remarked Paul.

Although Beatrice found every opportunity during the day and evening to engage in conversation with other travellers, at night Paul had her exclusive attention. This pleasure was appreciably compromised by the knowledge that his every word and deed was being monitored for security purposes.

Beatrice was still so much a mystery to Paul even as they made love. And despite the wonders of modern regenerative medicine, this exercise left him totally

drained. He was so tired in the morning that he generally slept in while Beatrice wandered alone (apart from the constant presence of her minder, Mikhail) about the decks of the vast luxury space ship. She'd return to their suite by about midday where Paul was normally still in bed. It wasn't that he was completely alone as he would always be accompanied by Erika who was as immune to Paul's charms as Mikhail was to Beatrice's.

"I was talking to this fascinating man," she said as Paul belatedly staggered to his feet to perform his daily ablutions. "He's an ichthyologist. He's going to one of the deep sea trench colonies in the Pacific."

"That can't be much different from living on Titan," remarked Paul.

"There's rather more sea-life on Earth," said Beatrice. "But you're right. The sea pressure is almost comparable to the air pressure on Venus."

"Not so hot though."

"But not nearly as cold as Titan."

"I'm sure," said Paul who didn't share Beatrice's enthusiasm for the extremes at which biological life survived in the Solar System.

Beatrice regarded Paul's minder, who was sitting silently and apparently very bored in the bedroom corner.

"Don't you think Erika's looking a little unwell?" she commented.

"She seems all right to me," Paul replied without even glancing at her. He was often quite irritated by the woman's constant presence. She only showed any interest in Paul when Beatrice was in the room.

"I'm sure there's a kind of unhealthy pallor on her cheeks."

“Perhaps it’s just the way she was born.”

He’d got so accustomed to the varied aspect of other travellers that he didn’t know any more what was natural and what was enhanced. In a sense, nobody over middle age was truly natural. Paul certainly wasn’t. Seventy percent of his body had been regenerated and half of that was no longer biological. Other tourists might well be entirely non-biological. It was hard to tell. And those who looked the most artificial might be a great deal more biological than appearances might suggest. Paul was no expert in distinguishing between genetic enhancement, biological regeneration and organic implants. Some passengers had gone well beyond the human genetic blueprint. He often cast his eye at a couple from the Uranian colony of Asimov who had metal implants that enhanced their natural senses but whose eyes were strangely inexpressive. There were also those, again from the Uranian orbit, who’d adopted other enhancements such as green or purple skin, platinum and silver hair, and even leathery wings which could be used for flying on low gravity moons. Paul was especially fascinated by the more erotic body styling that was popular amongst the Neptunians. He’d never before imagined that male genitalia, so proudly displayed by such individuals, could reach such dramatic proportions or that bosoms of such magnitude could be supported by a human frame (and not just sported by women).

“I’m very concerned about Erika’s health,” Beatrice insisted. “How do you feel, sweetheart?”

As far as Paul could see, Erika didn’t look at all poorly. She was also perplexed by Beatrice’s concern.

“I feel fine,” she said. “Never felt better.”

“What do you think, Mikhail?” Beatrice asked.

“I’m not qualified to comment,” he said. “Our training covers remedial health care, but it’s generally for wounds and broken bones.”

“I’ve got some experience,” said Beatrice. “After all, I *did* work in Emergency Rescue on Venus for several years. I think Erika should see a doctor.”

She bent over Erika who was flustered more by the attention paid to her than by any evidence of ill health. Beatrice put a hand on Erika’s forehead while her patient displayed more visible weakness from the touch of such a desirable woman than from any malady. With her other hand Beatrice pinched Erika quite hard at various points around the back of her neck and spine.

“How do you feel, Erika sweetheart?” Beatrice asked.

“I was feeling fine before you probed me,” she said, “but I feel a bit nauseous now. It’s as if I was suffering from vertigo.”

“Do you agree that you should see a doctor?” Beatrice asked sympathetically.

“I don’t think so,” said Erika. “Perhaps I’d feel better if I just lay down.”

“Yes. I’m sure that’ll do the trick,” said Beatrice. “In the meantime, I fancy a visit to the ship’s core.”

“The core?” wondered Paul. “Whatever do you want to do that for?”

“It could be interesting.”

“I doubt it,” said Paul. “The core of all large ships, of whatever class, is always much the same.”

When Paul had first ventured into space, he’d quite enjoyed exploring the space ship that carried him. After so many years of having never travelled more than a

few thousand kilometres from Godwin, space flight was a real novelty to him. But he now knew as much as he ever wanted about a ship's core. It was just a hollow cylinder that held life-support equipment and liquid water super-cooled under pressure. It was home to nothing more exotic than nanobots that constantly monitored the ship's vital systems. Those levels closest to the ship's core were where the least expensive cabins were crammed together along endless corridors. These were the levels with the greatest curvature and the least circumference so it was where the smallest cabins were located.

However, Beatrice was not a woman whose whims could be disregarded and Paul wasn't the man to persuade her otherwise. So, the married couple walked towards the escalator followed discreetly by Mikhail while Erika remained behind.

Before they left, Mikhail signalled to his fellow security officers that Erika was indisposed, so Paul was confident that fairly soon he and his wife would be accompanied by the standard complement of two guards.

As Paul anticipated, there really wasn't much to see at the ship's core. A narrow tube ran through the heart of the viscous liquid and was for the sole use of maintenance robots and their human supervisors. All space ships stored their water in these quarters: partly because it supplied the ship's life-support systems but also because it was the source material for the ship's antimatter and nuclear fusion engines. Water wasn't only the most common compound in the Solar System, but also the most versatile and one absolutely necessary for biological life.

Paul soon tired of the holographic avatar's explanation of the ship's workings, as was Mikhail, but Beatrice had no end of questions to ask. His thoughts were more

inclined to wander towards Beatrice's scantily covered body which he lusted after in a way that Mikhail didn't. Paul knew that Beatrice would eventually give him the sexual satisfaction he desired, but for the moment she was much more interested in the Ulysses' architecture and engineering.

When Beatrice's questions had exhausted the avatar, Beatrice insisted that they should visit a small café on the innermost level that was for the use of the less affluent passenger. Paul was thankful that the credit available to him was backed by the Interplanetary Union, so that he didn't fall into that category. The modest choice of food and drink in the café was much more like what he'd been accustomed to on Godwin. It was healthy, well-balanced and easily recycled. There wasn't even the option of alcohol or coffee, any more than there would be on Godwin, so Paul had to settle for a fruit juice and a salad whose ingredients were grown in the ship's extensive greenhouses.

The other diners in the café were far less affluent than most of the Ulysses' passengers. Some hadn't benefited from even the quality of regenerative medical care available on Godwin and betrayed visible signs of aging. Paul knew he wasn't going to live forever but unless he was unlucky his years of senescence would be very few and his final decline rather rapid. And he didn't expect this to happen until he was well over a hundred years old. The travellers Beatrice engaged in conversation were a motley group of solitary travellers from the outer Solar System. What they had in common was a wish to visit Earth, but for quite diverse reasons.

One traveller must have come from a very poor colony as he was one of those with the most evident signs of aging. His shoulder-length hair was grey and thinning.

His skin was stretched as thin as parchment. And he had deep lines on his face. He was a musician whose intention was to pay homage at the shrines of various twentieth century musicians. A traveller from Pluto was an entomologist. Although insects had spread all across the Solar System, there were still some that had never travelled beyond Earth and she wanted to study the beetles that lived in the newly regenerated rain forests. Whatever motives the passengers had for visiting Earth, whether their passion was historical, biological, cultural or religious: it could only be satisfied by a visit to the home planet. Until humankind discovered another planet with a breathable atmosphere and a long history, Earth's unique appeal would remain unmatchable.

The Ulysses was a large space ship. It was the largest type permitted for travel within the Solar System's ecliptic. It was a kilometre in circumference and seven kilometres in length of which a half was engine. It had fifty levels of which the outermost ones had a ceiling of nearly forty metres and it carried nearly a hundred thousand passengers. But even in a space ship of such a great size the deafening explosion that suddenly erupted while Paul and Beatrice chatted in the café was enough to upset the cups and send some passengers sprawling to the floor.

“What the fuck!” Mikhail swore. He was one of those who'd fallen onto the floor.

“What's happened?” asked Paul.

“I don't know,” said Mikhail who studied his hand-held equipment for information before the space ship's internal communication system had the opportunity to reassure the passengers.

The Saturnian's already pale freckled face became noticeably paler.

“Erika’s signal’s gone dead!” he exclaimed. “There’s nothing at all.”

“Where did the explosion take place?” asked the aging musician.

The captain’s avatar suddenly appeared in the middle of the café as it must have done in every other chamber, room or privy throughout the ship.

“Do not panic,” he said in seven different languages, one after the other. “The situation is under control.”

And then more information became available, transmitted first in English and then in other languages. Paul reasoned that the passengers who were still in their cabins or suites wouldn’t need to be exposed to so many different languages, but he had to listen to the same account repeated in Arabic, Mandarin, Russian, Hindi, French and Spanish before the language returned once again to English.

There had been an explosion on board the space ship Ulysses. The life-support systems were intact. The source of the explosion was in a suite in the outermost level that had punctured the ship’s hull and the next innermost level. There had been a massive loss of air and water which was currently trailing the ship, but the loss was now being contained. The loss of life was still in the lower hundreds.

Beatrice frowned while Mikhail studied the rather more comprehensive data that was fed to him from the Interplanetary Union’s own information service.

“Another assassination attempt?” she guessed.

“The centre of the explosion was your suite,” Mikhail confirmed. “In fact, its actual source was Erika.”

“Erika? Our guard?” asked Paul who was getting both increasingly weary and ever more anxious at the trail of destruction that was following him wherever he went.

“Erika,” confirmed Paul’s Saturnian guard. “It was she who was at the heart of the incident. She’s exploded!”

“I thought she didn’t look well,” Beatrice commented wryly.

Chapter Seventeen Feynman - 3754 C.E.

Jaden was in love with the wrong woman. By rights the one he loved the most should be Michelle, but it wasn't his long term partner whose mere presence shortened his breath and excited his heart however much he wished otherwise.

Instead, the chief object of his lust was Svetlana.

This was an utterly futile love, of course. Not only did he not have the courage to confess the strength of his feelings to the exquisite freckled woman whose slender legs and sinuous neck his eyes followed guiltily whenever she walked by. Nor was it merely because she was already answered for. His love was most doomed because it was women and not men that Svetlana loved. Was there no Saturnian woman who broke the lesbian mould?

Jaden had been foolish enough to hint that he was attracted to the slender Saturnian, but what annoyed Michelle wasn't so much his eyes should wander but that they should be drawn to a white woman.

"What could possibly be the appeal of such sickly pale skin?" she retorted indignantly. "What's wrong with black women?"

Although Jaden knew that it was wrong to discriminate on the grounds of skin-colour, he understood Michelle's concerns. In a Solar System where ethnic identity had been irreparably compromised over the centuries, there were now as few naturally black people as there were purely white. It was only by virtue of their respective ancestors' marital prejudices that either Jaden or Michelle had retained any degree of ethnic purity. Of course, skin colour wasn't determined by birth alone.

People could decide for themselves what skin pigmentation to adopt and these included very unnatural choices such as green, blue, orange and even striped or spotted.

Jaden and Michelle were clasped together in coital embrace, Jaden's penis deep inside his partner and their skin streaming with mutual perspiration, so it was easy for Michelle to dismiss her lover's tactlessness as the loosening of sexual fantasies that accompanied lovemaking.

As there were so few people stationed on the Feynman Space Observatory Jaden was in Svetlana's company on virtually every day. In fact, he often had to work with her. They were all professional astronomers, so there was much they could discuss. Jaden's tour of duty on Feynman was his first not on the surface of Triton, the moon where Michelle and he had been born. Svetlana and her wife had previously been stationed in an observatory around Saturn where they'd been studying the planet's rings and its swirling helium clouds.

Jaden was astonished when Svetlana casually mentioned that she'd been married for over twenty years. Jaden calculated that she was old enough to be his mother, although such was the quality of regenerative surgery that it wasn't at all obvious that she was any older than Jaden's twenty-five years. Her relative seniority in years didn't diminish her beauty although Jaden now felt even more gauche in her presence. She treated the dark-skinned Neptunian kindly although his lovelorn glances almost certainly betrayed how besotted he was.

The Feynman was one of the most distant observatories in the Solar System. It wasn't the most distant, of course. Several observatories were stationed beyond the

Kuiper Belt and some beyond even the Oort Cloud. The space observatory furthest from the sun was also the most distant permanent settlement in the entire Solar System, well beyond the heliopause and nearly half a light year from Earth. It was every astronomer's ambition to be stationed there although Jaden knew, as did everyone else, that its isolation was so extreme that no-one ever chose to renew their tour of duty. Feynman was one of very few observatories not in the Solar System's ecliptic plane. It was two light weeks from the nearest planet or Kuiper Belt Object. Not many observatories on the ecliptic could boast that degree of isolation.

There was very little economic or scientific justification for the Feynman's existence when it was built in the thirtieth century. The construction had been punitively expense as the building materials all had to be transported a truly immense distance. It was more a statement of power by the Union of Democratic Planets which, at the time, was one of the two main economic and political unions in the Solar System. It was a demonstration of how far its sphere of influence exceeded that of the competing Solar Nations which in those days represented the most Solar System's democratic and capitalist economies, including most of those on Earth. The Union of Democratic Planets, on the other hand, represented political systems that on the whole weren't even remotely democratic. Several revolutions and civil wars later, the space observatory was now firmly under the aegis of the Interplanetary Union. Few expected that the discovery of the Anomaly in the thirty-sixth century might propel the Feynman to the status of the most significant observatory in the entire Solar System. However, this was an honour that would only remain until the construction of another space observatory, the Hawking, a further light week distant

from the ecliptic plane. The Feynman had been assigned the highly classified mission of observing the Anomaly and the progress of the Space Ship Intrepid. The observatory was circled by a small flotilla of battle cruisers that would fly to the Intrepid's aid if needed. It was only prudent that a mission of such colossal expense and political significance should have some kind of military backup.

Jaden was on observation duty for only a few hours a week. The rest of his time was occupied in trying to interpret the huge mass of data that was constantly being gathered by the observatory's automated systems. Every day the newly discovered exoplanets from the outer regions of the galaxy was catalogued. Every day several hundred new stars in distant galaxies were added to the billions already known. The observable universe was so vast that it simply wasn't possible to complete the task of identifying, cataloguing and analysing all the objects it contained. Jaden's expertise would only really be required if a phenomenon was identified that couldn't be automatically classified. This might be when its status was so ambiguous that an expert had to determine whether it was a planet, a brown dwarf or some other cosmic object.

Inevitably, what most arrested the astronomers' attention were the Anomaly and the associated strange apparitions being monitored by the space observatory's thousands of radio, electromagnetic and gravitational telescopes. In itself, the Anomaly was weird enough. Telescopes that could analyse a grain of sand on Mars or a meteorite over Jupiter still couldn't properly view the Anomaly. It radiated no light. It exerted no gravitational distortion. It interacted hardly at all with the stream of neutrinos or photons that passed by it. It was more a visible absence of matter,

baryonic or otherwise, than something explicable or concrete.

And then, just as exciting because of their bizarre nature and their utter unpredictability, were the thousands of odd apparitions that occurred every day but in their greatest number within less than a light day of the Anomaly. Just *what* were they? Could what was observed *really* be a space ship that travelled for no more than ten seconds and boasted military insignia that couldn't be matched to any nation within the Solar System? Was it *really* a swarm of bird-like wraiths that fluttered and swooped in airless space for as long as twenty seconds before they too vanished? What *was* the bipedal figure in a space suit that hovered in the vacuum of remote space before it too vanished leaving not even a gravitational ripple in the cosmos? And did the flashes and explosions that took place spontaneously and briefly so close to the Anomaly *really* leave no trace other than the stream of photons that were intercepted by the Feynman before they sped onwards to the space observatories two light weeks closer to the Solar System's ecliptic?

Jaden had seen some of these apparitions. They alarmed and fascinated him, but he was frustrated that he was prohibited from telling anyone other than his fellow astronomers of what he'd seen, not quite with his own eyes, but very nearly so through the Feynman's powerful telescopes.

The Interplanetary Union's powers didn't extend to being able to halt the pulse of photons on their journey to the Solar System's many amateur observatories and research institutes, but they could at least disguise the worrying extent of these observations. The mountain of news stories that was gathered and disseminated every day on these exotic astronomical phenomena was easily obscured by the greater

volume of stories of warfare, political intrigue, human interest and celebrity that mostly clogged up the Solar System's media coverage.

"I swear it was some kind of a dinosaur," Svetlana remarked the next time Jaden shared a duty roster with her. "It wasn't one of those big ones, like a sauropod or stegosaurus. It was human size and covered with a gorgeous feather coat that was all golden and yellow. It was only there for ten seconds and looked alarmed in a sort of intelligent way—not like a scared rabbit but more like a human. It had a peculiarly expressive face."

"Where did you see this dinosaur?" wondered Jaden, whose mind was still distracted by the memory of seeing Svetlana kiss her wife, Rika, just before they parted at the viewing chamber's door. Rika was as bald and hairless as Svetlana, but she was peculiarly thin and had a flattened oriental face. With their lips and bosoms pressed together, Jaden felt a wholly inappropriate swelling in his crotch that Michelle aroused far less readily. He would do anything to swap places with Rika—even if it meant a change of gender—for the opportunity to share the pleasures of Svetlana's freckled small breasted body: preferably unclothed and expressing the same desire that she showed her wife.

"I saw it, too," remarked Ali, a tall ivory-skinned Uranian whose tight-fitting clothes were stretched to the limits by the exaggerated contours of his muscular body. Jaden was slightly ill at ease as Ali was at least as homosexual as Svetlana and he didn't want to give the man the wrong impression. "Beautiful it was. Where do you think it came from? If it came from another star I'd love to go there. The only aliens I've ever seen were smaller than a speck of dust."

“We don’t know where these weird things come from,” said Vanity, the fourth and final astronomer on their watch. “If they’re aliens, why don’t they hang around longer? I think they come from a parallel universe.”

“Pah!” said Svetlana, who was the most sceptical. “I think it’s all just a kind of mirage. They’re just images that kind of bounce back to Earth from a hundred million years ago. I go along with the theory that the Anomaly is nothing more than a kind of mirror that focuses reflections back to the Solar System from far out in space.”

“How does that work?” wondered Ali.

“I don’t know,” admitted Svetlana airily. “But it’s more plausible than some of the other theories going round. Space and time is curved and maybe images are brought together by some unknown kind of dark matter and radiate out again from the Anomaly. My guess is that some time in the future we’ll discover that space is littered with these phenomena and all they do is relay distant images.”

“Aren’t these apparitions actually solid and real?” Jaden commented, although his attention was principally focused on Svetlana’s thick lips. He was fascinated by the way they shuddered when she finished each sentence. “Although they don’t leave gravitational ripples they interact physically with whatever they touch. Remember how that metal sphere bounced on the surface of Pluto and left an impression on the surface.”

Svetlana considered Jaden’s counter-example. “Maybe it wasn’t a proper apparition,” she said. “It seems that almost everything weird is now explained by reference to this bizarre hole in space. That was probably just a military experiment of some kind. The Plutonians don’t get on very well with the Charon colonies, do they?”

The four astronomers had little else to do while on duty other than chat over cups of coffee and fruit juice. The real work was done by robotic hardware that was tirelessly cataloguing and steadily increasing human knowledge of the vast universe. Usually the most exciting event was to observe yet another apparition and these weren't usually as intriguing as the dinosaur. No one could get very excited by a small uncharted meteor or an unexplained burst of plasma radiation.

The only other object of interest was the daily account of the Intrepid's journey as relayed by the space ship's bank of sensory equipment and the captain's log.

Captain Kerensky was another Saturnian woman, but not one Jaden found nearly as attractive as Svetlana. She was also slim, bald and pretty, but her imposing demeanour was too intimidating. And anyway she was several times his age, although nothing betrayed this other than her self-assurance and air of experience. Her reports were generally rather dull and routine. They mostly consisted of nothing more than an account of what Jaden could already establish from the data routinely broadcast by the Intrepid. In truth, Space travel was extremely boring and nobody expected much from the report of an uneventful journey across empty space.

Occasionally, the captain enlivened her dispatch by the account of a sporting or theatrical event on the space ship, but these were just larger scale versions of similar events in the Feynman's social calendar. The hundred or so astronomers on the observatory had their own occasional five-a-side football competitions and amateur concert recitals. However much Jaden looked forward to the weekly dance or lecture, these were scarcely so exciting that he'd choose to relate more than a very

brief account to his friends and family on Triton. Although Jaden would have been happy to be amongst the select few astronomers on the Intrepid, it wasn't because he expected the voyage through empty space to be exciting.

Vanity stood up and strode towards the coffee machine. Like Jaden, her skin was black but this was more by choice than ancestry. She'd adopted the Uranian fashion of unnatural skin colour, though at least she wasn't purple or silver. She had a thick frame with a full bosom and a delightfully proportioned arse that was set to its best advantage in the nearly transparent platinum shorts that was almost all she wore.

Jaden scrutinised Svetlana's eyes as they followed Vanity's sensual step. He was troubled by her attraction towards other women ever since Michelle unexpectedly discussed Svetlana as the couple lay together in bed the night before.

"I can see why you like Svetlana," Michelle said with a rueful smile. "I spoke to her today in the gym. She's a fascinating woman."

"You think so?" wondered Jaden, who was now reflecting on whether he should also visit the gym in the hope of encountering his Saturnian object of desire.

"We had *ever* such a long chat about Triton," said Michelle. "She was stationed there a few decades ago. She used to be an astrogeologist before she specialised in pure astronomy. She was very chatty."

"Was she?" asked Jaden, who never found Svetlana especially forthcoming. Perhaps the Saturnian had a particular passion for black women. At the moment this hypothesis was very plausible, judging by her appreciative gaze of Vanity's ebony skin. This was especially so when she bent down to throw a plastic spoon into the recycle hatch.

“*Fuck!*” Vanity suddenly exclaimed as she glanced up at the monitors trained on the Intrepid. “There’s some kind of fucking war going on out there!”

Almost before she finished her sentence, there was a sharp trill as the astronomers on duty were alerted of the emergency. Jaden had been drilled for such an eventuality rather more often than he’d have liked so he knew exactly what to do. He jumped to his feet, as did Ali and Svetlana, abandoning his unfinished glass of warm blueberry juice, and rushed to his station.

Vanity wasn’t exaggerating. There, two light weeks away and, therefore, about a fortnight ago was a real space battle. Where the fuck had that flotilla of space ship appeared from? Only the most sophisticated modern hardware could have hidden such a fleet of ships from the Feynman’s sensors. These could spot a bonfire on Earth, a metre-long meteorite circling Jupiter, and the magnetosphere of a space shuttle. They most certainly should have noticed several hundred space craft, especially ones that were so nearly obsolete, in what was otherwise completely empty space. Whatever the space fleet’s provenance, it had access to camouflage technology that was advanced enough to evade the Feynman’s sophisticated equipment. And this was despite the lack of any other evidence that the enemy fleet possessed high quality military hardware.

“*Shit!* Look at the sheer number of those invasion pods!” Ali yelled. “There must be thousands of them! What hope has the Intrepid got against them? ”

“All the hope in the world,” said the voice of the Senior Astronomer, whose avatar suddenly appeared in the midst of the chamber. “The Intrepid is very well defended. It was always anticipated that there might be some attempt to sabotage the

mission.”

Jaden wasn’t so sure he could share Professor Manchu’s optimistic assessment. The Intrepid’s image was still obscured by a huge invasion fleet that was settling on its surface like an infestation of flies.

Then an array of portals suddenly opened all along the Intrepid’s hull and there erupted an equally impressive outpouring of missiles, whilst nearer the ship vast laser beams swept back and forth over the exterior surface. All this was as visible as if it were only a few kilometres away, but as Jaden reflected, if there were a need to launch a rescue mission towards the Intrepid, it wouldn’t reach the space ship for several months and then only if the ship also stopped dead in its tracks. If it continued its current progress towards the Anomaly, there was no space fleet in the Solar System that could travel fast enough to intercept it.

“Fuck!” Vanity exclaimed. “It’s a real fireworks display.”

But much quieter, Jaden guessed, as there was no medium through which sound could travel. But silent though it might be, the Intrepid’s response was deadly. The antimatter warheads promptly exploded into dazzling fireballs when they hit the larger space craft. From the moment the space fleet had made its sudden appearance in distant space the individual craft increased the thrust of their engines to escape the oncoming missiles.

But this was all in vain.

The Intrepid’s defensive missiles were much faster and had no difficulty in finding their targets.

The attackers fought back as best they could. They let loose a retaliatory

stream of laser beams and missiles, but the missiles were so devastating that even an explosion hundreds of kilometres from a space craft was enough to cripple it. There were no missiles on the Intrepid's surface of the same destructive capability as those decimating the space flotilla. Even a conventional nuclear explosion from a neutron device was too perilous at such a close proximity. Instead the Intrepid relied on a battery of laser and electron beams to incapacitate the infestation of invasion pods, together with an infantry of robots that scurried over the Intrepid's surface to disable the mushroom shaped vehicles as they attached themselves to the hull.

"They're getting inside!" said Svetlana with agitation.

Jaden magnified his view of the Intrepid's hull and examined those invasion pods whose fragments weren't floating off in a cloud of debris behind the space ship. The surviving pods were rapidly retracting into the Intrepid's hull like collapsed umbrellas, using their mushroom-like shells to plug in the holes. The ship's hull gradually smoothed off as one by one the remaining pods no longer spotted the surface and the ship automatically began repairing itself.

There was a sudden exhalation of wreckage from one of the breaches and a crushed shattered mass of metal was ejected into space. Along with the pod's debris were space-suited figures that hovered helplessly in space, before being routinely rescued by the Intrepid's defending robots. Not all the survivors were resigned to being taken prisoner in this way and there was a fresh set of rather smaller explosions as space-suits exploded and fragments of flesh and bone flew outwards with the shards of metal and plastic. One figure unscrewed the helmet around his head and was instantly frozen to death.

“Some have made it inside,” said Vanity who was studying an image of the outermost level of the ship.

Ali, Svetlana and Jaden crowded around behind Vanity to look at the display of space-suited invaders who were staggering to their feet. They were laden down not only by their clumsy uniforms but also by the weight of their lethal weapons.

“We’ll just have to hope that the Intrepid’s militia can neutralise the threat,” said Professor Manchu.

Jaden nodded.

This was by far the most exciting event of his whole career in astronomy so far. There was so much to do to evaluate the invasion’s current progress. Svetlana had already returned to her console where she could study the defence of the Intrepid in slow-motion replay. It was only now that Jaden could appreciate the scale of the invasion and the military tactics used to repel it. At the very leisurely pace of the replay, Jaden could see that the Intrepid’s missiles, rather than just heading in a straight line towards their fast receding targets had zigzagged back and forth while releasing small defensive missiles and deadly beams at the invaders’ defences. Many, perhaps most, were destroyed before they hit their targets, but the explosions even from a distance caused lethal damage to the invading craft. In one case, an intercepted missile directed the debris from its antimatter explosion outwards and with great accuracy towards the engines of an escaping vehicle which was then extinguished like a candle flame.

“Has the Intrepid completely repelled the invaders?” Jaden asked the professor’s avatar.

“We’ll soon know,” said the professor with an anxious crumpling of his brow. “The data’s coming in thick and fast and whatever the outcome there’ll be weeks, if not months, of analysis ahead of us.”

Jaden inwardly sighed. He guessed that there would now be plenty of opportunity for overtime. His mission had suddenly become much busier.

Chapter Eighteen

Hygiea - 3751 C.E.

Paul and Beatrice were no longer welcome on board the Ulysses after the explosion had wrecked so much of the space ship. As soon as the captain was made aware that the target of the explosion was his two Kuiper Belt passengers he could no longer tolerate their continued presence on his ship. They were evidently a security risk of the first magnitude to not only themselves but everyone else besides. Furthermore, as fully a quarter of the ship was now deemed unsuitable for continued habitation, there were no available spare rooms. Most passengers from the Ulysses' affected levels were obliged to double up with others who'd been more fortunate. It was an unacceptable risk to other passengers that they should share their living space with two known security risks.

Nevertheless, as the couple couldn't be ejected into empty space, they were obliged to spend the remainder of this leg of the journey in the company of their minders in a shuttle tethered to the space ship. It was attached at some distance by nanocarbon cables as the Ulysses hurtled towards the Hygiea asteroid: the nearest place where emergency repairs could be carried out.

"You won't be on the Ulysses when it resumes its voyage to Earth," Lieutenant Korolyov informed them. "We'll have to commission alternative transport, but I warn you it won't be nearly as luxurious as you've become accustomed to."

"*Was* accustomed to," Paul corrected him.

The space shuttle wasn't designed to be luxurious accommodation. Its one tiny cabin was now occupied not only by Paul and Beatrice but by all the security officers

from the Interplanetary Union assigned to them. The space shuttle was designed to transport passengers for at most a few days to destinations that weren't precisely on the Ulysses' route. Even with only half a dozen passengers, the space was cramped and there were few of the distractions accessible on the mother ship.

A further source of discomfort was that the artificial gravity generated by the vehicle's rapid rotation was prone to shut down both abruptly and arbitrarily. The novelty of momentary weightlessness soon palled on Paul who would gladly return to more stable conditions.

"We don't believe that Erika was a willing suicide bomber," said the lieutenant when Beatrice asked for an update on what was known about the explosion. "She had regenerative cranial surgery relatively recently and it's believed that a dormant explosive device was inserted into her brain. Our officers are interrogating the surgeons who carried out the operation, but as you know it is very easy to introduce such devices into a person's body. There's normally no evidence that it's there at all and very rarely that you'd see the kind of symptoms that you observed in Erika."

"She *did* seem very unwell," said Beatrice.

"I dare say," admitted the lieutenant. "But it is unusual for such implants to betray any visible evidence. It might just have been a timely coincidence. All the same, it was fortunate for you that the explosion took place when it did. There was no other occasion when Erika wasn't in close proximity to either of you."

Paul had never lived in such cramped conditions before. The bathroom was so tiny that there was no Jacuzzi or even a bath, but only a shower that responded

sluggishly to Paul's instructions for jet speed or temperature. When he could, he distracted himself by making love to his adoring wife although this became disconcerting when the gravity dropped and the couple floated gradually towards the ceiling. Paul also got to know his minders very well. There was no one else to talk to other than Beatrice. None of them were told to why they'd been assigned to guard the newlyweds or who was so determined to kill them.

It was nearly a month until Paul could see the Hygiea asteroid through the ship's monitors and a further month until he could see it with his eyes through the shuttle's portals. It certainly wasn't a pretty asteroid. It was irregular in shape and brightly lit by searchlights that swept from horizon to horizon. The asteroid was encircled by ships and colonies of which none was large enough to accommodate even a hundred thousand people.

Hygiea was an asteroid at permanent war with its neighbours in a segment of the Asteroid Belt that hadn't known a single year of peace since its foundation in the twenty-third century. None of Paul's minders were sure which colonies or asteroids were at war with Hygiea. Nevertheless, despite being preoccupied with the annihilation of its neighbours, Hygiea, like the majority of nations in the Asteroid Belt, was a member of the Interplanetary Union.

As the captain had no wish to put his crew at risk, it was fortunate that one of Lieutenant Korolyov's officers was a qualified pilot and could safely navigate the untethered shuttle to dock at Hygiea's spaceport. This was a journey in which the passengers only experienced quarter standard gravity and when the shuttle docked were then subject only to the Asteroid's very feeble gravity.

The Republic of Hygiea was no more enthusiastic about having to shelter Paul and Beatrice than the Space Ship Ulysses, but its relations with the Interplanetary Union were too fragile for its government to turn the visitors away. There was no welcome committee to receive the couple, which pleased Paul but visibly irritated the lieutenant.

For the next month or so, Paul's home was in the Triumph dome on Hygiea's surface ninety kilometres from the spaceport. The journey across the Asteroid's bleak and cratered crust was on the first maglev train that Paul had ever ridden on. This was along a tube through whose glass walls Paul could see many settlements under the dark starlit sky. The Sun was less distant but still appeared to be no more than half the size it would on Earth.

This was the first time Paul had ever been on the surface of an object in space rather than inside. He felt distinctly uncomfortable with the notion that there was nothing but black empty sky above his head. This wasn't the only source of discomfort. The gravity on Hygiea was so weak that the most it could do was anchor him to the ground. He was fitted with heavy leaden boots that compensated for the awkwardness of his step and made walking as nearly natural as possible on an asteroid where any object he dropped from his hand took nearly a minute to eventually settle on the ground.

He was also made aware that this was an asteroid in constant threat of hostile bombardment. There were signs to that affect displayed on the walls of the maglev train's compartment and in every corridor and chamber he walked through. The robotic guards that stood to attention in every open space were as immobile as statues

but were armed to defend the citizens against an invading force. A sweep of huge spotlights criss-crossed the train's path as it careered across the mostly empty plain.

How could people live like this? Paul wondered. Low gravity. Empty sky above their heads. And the constant reminder that they were at risk at any time from antimatter missiles aimed at them from space.

Hygiea was exceptionally short on hotel accommodation. Normally, the only foreign visitors were diplomats, ambassadors and scientists. No one would ever choose to visit the Asteroid for pleasure. Most historic monuments of note had been destroyed during the many centuries of war. Everything of natural beauty was now employed as a military installation. Beatrice and Paul had to make do in very substandard lodgings, as did the rest of Lieutenant Korolyov's party. The one bedroom and attached kitchenette and bathroom in their fourth floor apartment wasn't much better than what they'd got used to on the space shuttle.

The couple had little to do except make love and when not so engaged to divert themselves with movies. They occasionally ventured into the colony beyond, but it was a dismal place that just about served its citizens' basic requirements and not much else.

The Hygiean national dress was principally designed for life in low gravity. The heavy padded outfits and massive boots made everyone appear to be very chunky, although it kept them rooted to the ground while everything around fell leisurely downwards. Hygiean citizens made an almost comical sight as they stepped so lightly while being hardly weighed down at all by their bulky outfits. The only aspect of Hygiean dress that wasn't dourly utilitarian was their long hair, which gave

them a bizarrely romantic likeness on account of the way it unhurriedly cascaded over their shoulders.

The chief distraction available to Hygian citizens was sport and this was specially adapted for the low gravity. It was strange indeed to watch a game of football where the hard metallic ball arched so high but fell so very slowly to the ground where there was plenty of time for the players to intercept it. It was equally odd to watch a game of baseball where the ball followed a tremendous trajectory when it was hit but could scarcely avoid being caught by the time it arrived near the ground.

The Hygians were wary of Paul and Beatrice who could never be mistaken for natives however much they dressed appropriately for life on the Asteroid. Paul was very clumsy and it was only the fact that he fell so slowly that his many missteps didn't cause him injury. Beatrice acclimatised herself rather more easily to the conditions, but she didn't observe the expected deference to rank that was natural to the Hygians. The couple soon restricted their outings to the very few remaining tourist attractions that were worth visiting.

Besides slow motion sport, the only other things of interest were the farms, forests and lakes that supplemented the life support systems. It was fascinating to see trees that grew so tall and unmannerly in the low gravity and the animals that had adapted themselves to the alien conditions. Squirrels had learnt to leap across distances between trees that were several tens of metres apart. The fish jumping out of the lake's surface stayed a very long time in the air before they eventually fell back into the water and were therefore easy prey to the gently gliding seagulls.

The more Paul saw of this world the more he wished he was home on. “I hope we don’t have to stay here too long,” he remarked after he’d made love with his wife for perhaps the fifth time that day. “I’m getting tired of having to wear such a heavy suit. I’d much rather wear something less cumbersome.”

“Me too,” said Beatrice, who looked very odd indeed in such restrictive clothing. She could barely wait to tear off every scrap and cavort naked on their connubial bed.

Making love was a distraction, but it was also very weird. Beatrice almost had to hold Paul down when he rested on top of his wife,. And when Paul ejaculated anywhere but inside Beatrice, the semen took a very long time until it eventually landed on Beatrice’s fair skin.

“If I have to live on the surface of one of the Sun’s satellites,” remarked Paul reflectively, “I’d much prefer a more interesting view. Hygiea’s nothing but black rock and dust. I thought having a starscape and a view of the Sun would be compensation, but it does get rather boring after a while.”

“You should try and appreciate its beauty more,” Beatrice countered. “At least you can see the sky. You can’t see anything on Venus, even though it has very close to standard gravity,. It’s nothing but thick viscous cloud. Here you can see all the constellations and even...”

Whatever else it might have been that Beatrice could claim to see was lost in an echoing noise that filled the chamber and was eerily like the explosion they’d heard on the Ulysses but one which boomed at a much lower frequency.

This was followed by another loud noise. And then another. And another.

“Fuck!” shouted Paul more in despair than anger. “Who or what has got it in for me?”

“I don’t think it’s just you,” said Beatrice. “Can’t you hear the air-raid sirens?”

There was a piercing shrill note in the midst of the dull thud of distant explosions. It was at a very high and urgent pitch.

“We’d better run to the shelters,” said Beatrice. “I’m sure this is one of those air raids we’ve been drilled for.”

Paul just about remembered the exercises he’d attended not long after they’d arrived to which he’d paid as little attention as all the others that had accompanied every one of his various space flights since he’d left Godwin. Fortunately, Beatrice memory was rather better. She helped Paul into the bulky space suit that would protect him against a breach in the dome’s space shield before she slipped into her own. Although the suits were cumbersome and ungainly, they were no obstacle to progress in the low gravity. Paul and Beatrice skipped and bounced out of their apartment and down the corridor to the escalators that would take them deep beneath the Asteroid’s surface to the awaiting emergency shelters.

Many other citizens were impatiently waiting at the escalators when they arrived. However, rather than join them herself, Beatrice laid a reassuring hand on Paul’s shoulder.

“You go down by yourself,” she said. “I’ll join you later.”

“What do you mean?” asked an alarmed Paul. He wasn’t sure whether he was more troubled at the idea of Beatrice being left behind or of him being left alone.

“You must remember that I used to work for Emergency Rescue Services on

Venus," said Beatrice. "There are lives at risk and I have the skills needed to save them. Don't worry. I'll be back with you again soon enough."

With those words, she strode off towards the stairs which she clambered down while Paul shuffled into the escalator with a dozen calm and stoically resigned Hygiean citizens. As the doors slid shut behind him all he was left with was the image of her heavily space-suited figure as she bounded towards the rarely used steps.

This memory stayed with Paul as the escalator swiftly descended more than a kilometre beneath the Asteroid's surface into the caverns where the majority of Hygiea's citizens lived. It remained with him for several hours more as he sat on one of the many sofas and armchairs that filled the air-raid shelter's massive caverns. He was accompanied by thousands of other people who appeared to be more excited than dismayed by the destruction raining down on their homes on the Asteroid's surface. The impression he gathered from his short snatches of conversation with those who spoke English was that such air-raids were relatively infrequent. An offensive such as this would normally have been intercepted long before it had a chance to penetrate Hygiea's elaborate defences. The fact that this air-raid had succeeded where most failed implied that the enemy Parthenopean forces had identified a weakness in Hygiea's defence system and there was furious debate as to how this could have happened. Nevertheless, Paul's interest in the technicalities of defence against missiles that could be cloaked, disguised as civilian craft or simply launched at an illegally high acceleration waned after several hours. He was distracted by the holographic displays that gave a continually updated account of the damage sustained, the number of casualties and Hygiea's success rate at deflecting missiles. Like the

citizens gathered around Paul, the excited commentators took every opportunity to speculate on the precise reason why the missiles hadn't been intercepted sooner.

Paul was distressed by Beatrice's continued absence. He wasn't sure whether this was because he was anxious about her welfare or because he'd spent so little time apart from her and had lost the ability to enjoy his own company. It was undeniably odd of her to rush off like that into the midst of an air-raid. Not just odd, but foolhardy and reckless. No incoming missile would make allowance for Beatrice however well qualified she was as an Emergency Rescue Officer.

The news bulletins carried many stories of human interest, particularly of personal bravery and good fortune. It wouldn't be good for morale if the only stories were concerned with death and destruction, although this must have been the principal result of the air-raid. It was with a growing sense of apprehension that Paul came to realise that the story most commented on was of a brave Emergency Rescue worker from the Kuiper Belt who was responsible for an extraordinary number of acts of courage and to whom many adults and several small children owed their lives.

While the commentators speculated on the identity of this mystery woman who'd saved the life of people who would otherwise have been crushed by debris, frozen to death or suffocated, Paul became increasingly convinced that this wonder woman and saviour to so many could only be his remarkable wife. Although he'd enjoyed so many hours of the greatest intimacy with her, she was still almost as much a mystery to him as she was to Hygiea's excited media. How could anyone be so perfect? What had Paul ever done to deserve such a beautiful, clever and now courageous wife?

Paul's suspicions were confirmed when the crisis had subsided enough for an interviewer to speak to the undoubted Heroine of the Hour.

The woman who removed the helmet from her head and shook free the long blonde hair that cascaded slowly onto her shoulders could only be Beatrice.

She answered the reporter's questions with her characteristic modesty and charm. She gave little away about herself beyond the fact that she was staying on Hygiea with her husband who, Paul was gratified to learn, she adored. She also claimed that she'd found the people of Hygiea friendly and forthcoming, which most certainly hadn't been Paul's experience so far. She gave as detailed account as the questions required of her various heroic rescues. The small child that would have died had Beatrice not severed her leg from under the fallen masonry. The family she rescued from the burning flames of their house and then returned to rescue their pet cat, about which she was visibly affected. The fellow Emergency Rescue crews who she also helped save when a tall tower collapsed about them. She was diffident about her many achievements and accorded most of her admiration and respect to Hygiea's courageous firefighters.

When Paul eventually got to see Beatrice again, well into the following day, she was a great deal less forthcoming about her heroic adventures or indeed about wonderful people of Hygiea. She was flushed with excitement and within seconds of re-entering their bedroom, where Paul had spent many lonely hours since the all-clear alarm was raised, she tugged off Paul's leaden trousers and padded shirt and vigorously applied her tongue and mouth to a penis that was so erect with anticipation that Paul's testicles were fit to burst.

There was a wild gleam in Beatrice's eyes when she eventually let Paul's saliva-dripping penis enter her that Paul hadn't seen since they'd stayed on Schmidt. She clearly thrived on her new-found fame. Their lovemaking was more ecstatic than it had been for many months and, after the hours of sex that mostly filled their time on Hygiea, this was no small achievement. She insisted that Paul take her in the anus while his fingers probed into her gushing vagina. And when he was ready to ejaculate, which Beatrice was expert in anticipating, she persuaded him to do so on her tongue and into her wide open mouth.

When they'd at last finished, Paul the most exhausted, she was reluctant to give more than a very succinct account of her heroic feats.

"It was just my duty," she said. "My years of service on Venus were more than enough to handle the situation."

"It must have been *very* good practice judging by the media reports," probed Paul. "Was it that much more demanding on Venus?"

"You wouldn't believe how much," remarked Beatrice. "The atmosphere is so thick and the air so hot and poisonous that the conditions on this Asteroid are really nothing more than a trifle."

"Surely it's not *that* easy?"

"If it weren't for the war, there'd be virtually no need for an Emergency Service on this asteroid at all," Beatrice commented. "On Venus, where there's never been a war, every day is a miracle of survival."

However reticent Beatrice was with Paul privately, she was much more open over the following days when she chatted with the now animated citizens of Hygiea

who treated the couple with a respect and admiration that had previously been wholly absent. The couple were feted wherever they went by the citizens of the war-torn Asteroid. This caused huge anxiety to their minders who always stood apart at a discrete distance. Beatrice and, by association, Paul were celebrities and when they ventured outside their room they were immediately mobbed by dozens of well-wishers and admirers.

Paul was embarrassed by this fame almost as much as he was in awe of his wife's heroism, of which he was forever reminded wherever the couple went together. It was curious to be interviewed, always hand-in-hand with the broadly smiling Beatrice, by the various media outlets on Hygiea. It had been a long time since a news story of such popular appeal had appeared on the drab and war-weary Asteroid. It made a welcome relief to the citizens from the normal diet of anti-Parthenope diatribes ladled out by the patriotic media.

Paul relished his second-hand celebrity, but it also made him wonder even more about his wife. Of all the women he could have married in the Solar System, what divine providence had so determined it that his wife would be someone like Beatrice? She must surely be every man's fantasy and she was now the woman with whom he made love every day.

Just what had he done to deserve such a ridiculous privilege?

Chapter Nineteen Intrepid - 3754 A.D.

Naked and hairless. The shame of it. Isaac had never been so since he was a baby.

The humiliation was torment in itself.

But Isaac could comfort himself that he wasn't the only one so demeaned. All around him and equally immobilised on the grassy lawns of this strange Elysian but Godless world were others like him: defeated, dishonoured and similarly paralysed. He could move his eyes. He could breathe. But he couldn't move his limbs and he could mouth words with only the greatest effort.

He was comforted by the scriptures that said in Chapter Thirty-two Verses Twenty-five and Twenty-six of the Second Book of Moses: Called Exodus: "*And when Moses saw that the people were naked; (for Aaron had made them naked unto their shame among their enemies:) Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD's side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him*". Surely the Lord would see Isaac's similar shame and rescue him. He would know that Isaac's faith remained strong.

Nonetheless, Isaac could see little evidence of the Lord's intervention and rather more of a flurry of efficient robotic activity. Peculiar-shaped metal and plastic objects flew about the verdant landscape herding away the deer, horse and antelope and tidying up the wreckage left by the Holy Crusaders' abortive invasion. Military officers of the Interplanetary Union strode amongst the robots. These included women of whom many were immodestly dressed. Isaac had never before seen so many bare legs and naked midriffs. Many soldiers had shaved heads and some had very

unnatural skin colour. Only Satan could father abominations with green, violet or even striped skin.

A handful of military personnel were crouched over and attending the forlorn crusaders who were slumped ignobly on the ground. Isaac guessed that these were medical officers by virtue of the dispassionate and clinical nature of their attention. They attended to each crusader individually with hand-held devices that were studied more intently than the patient himself. One or two crusaders were carried away by stretcher-bearing robots. Isaac could only speculate what cruel torments awaited these unfortunates.

It didn't take long until it was Isaac's turn. A thin scantily-clad woman crouched over him. She wore a silver one-piece uniform that displayed her legs below the knee and was open almost to her bosom. She skimmed a smooth plastic device several centimetres above his chest. Her head was shaved and she showed as little interest in him as a man would another man. She plucked his penis between her fingers with clinical disdain and probed his anus with the same non-intrusive device. She then spoke in a language that Isaac didn't recognise, but it wasn't Isaac she was addressing but instead a small device attached to her bosom.

Isaac feared that he would be one of those dragged away by the robots for further interrogation and, no doubt, torture, but the woman left him where he lay and strode off to repeat the same procedure on another crusader. She showed no interest in Isaac beyond that required to perform her duty.

As the crusaders remained where they were, the robots continued to mop up the wreckage caused by the abortive invasion. The scattered remains of Isaac's pod,

still less than half a kilometre away, were collected and removed by robots that were almost entirely composed of articulated arms and broad wheels. Small sniffer robots scurried about to gather the smaller debris. Within hours there was no evidence that a battle of any kind had ever taken place. The huge flat screens that hovered well out of reach above the crusaders' heads appeared to be windows into other worlds, but all Isaac could see were holographic representations of the same empty space he'd observed from within the descending pod.

Isaac reflected on the words of the Lord in Chapter Six, Verses Ten and Eleven, of the Book of Job: *"Even that it would please God to destroy me; that he would let loose his hand, and cut me off! Then should I yet have comfort; yea, I would harden myself in sorrow: let him not spare; for I have not concealed the words of the Holy One."* Job had suffered great hardship but was proven worthy, as Isaac hoped he would soon also be.

After a while, the flurry of activity was reduced to simply the sight of a few hovering robots that one by one floated off over the curvature of the ground and beyond his sight. The huge columns the crusaders had been so desperate to secure retracted upwards so that there were now no accessible stairways or escalators to other levels.

Then Isaac noticed that several of his fellow crusaders were hesitantly staggering onto their feet in a landscape now clear of animals, robots or atheist soldiers.

Isaac flexed the muscles of his arm still expecting to experience the same paralysis that allowed him to twitch his fingers or wriggle his toes but nothing more.

This time his efforts were more successful. The force that had pinned him to the ground had disappeared and he could clamber to his feet. He might be tingling with cramp, but at least he was standing. Only now, like all his comrades, he was hairless, even to the extent of his crotch and armpits and, worst of all, totally naked.

His priority was still as it had been before. He had a mission to fulfil. The need to overpower the atheists and seize their vessel remained the imperative for the Godly and Righteous. But he also needed to follow the example of Adam and Eve and hide his nakedness. Isaac hoped that there might be some fig leaves available. Unfortunately, not only were there no leaves or garments to be seen but there were also no weapons with which he could arm himself and pursue his crusade.

A flat screen floated just a metre above his head. There was writing on it, but it was in a script he couldn't decipher. It was replaced by other equally incomprehensible icons and then by script he recognised but whose words he did not. And then, in English, he read: "This way for food and lodgings." Next to these words was an arrow that hovered beside the screen. Although it appeared to be solid and tangible it was in actual fact a hologram. It pointed in a different direction to the arrows that accompanied the words in other scripts.

Isaac was wary of accepting favours from atheists, but he decided that the arrow might direct him to where he might meet other English speakers and perhaps others of his and, therefore, the only true faith.

Isaac walked in the arrow's direction and with his hands cupped over his genitals as the only way he could see of maintaining his modesty. Other crusaders were also converging on the same route whose direction was further reinforced by

other arrows that were suspended in space beside a succession of hovering screens. When he looked forward in the direction of the arrow the words were displayed in English. If he looked in any other direction the symbols and language changed and a different arrow appeared. It seemed that all English speakers were being coaxed in one direction and other language speakers elsewhere. The atheists were differentiating the crusaders not in terms of their faith, but purely by the language they spoke. English was the language of the King James' Bible and therefore the true language of the Lord. Where English-speakers gathered so too would other true believers of the Christian faith.

Just how big was the atheists' ship? Isaac wondered when he had walked several kilometres and was still not at his destination. He was tired and hungry, so the appeal of the promised food and lodgings steadily increased however much he reminded himself that his first duties were to protect his modesty and to destroy the Apostasy. This second duty, after all, was the reason why he'd travelled so far from Mercury's orbit.

A hairless naked man approached him, also cupping his genitals in his hands. He was as fearful of Isaac as Isaac was of him. "Art thou of the faith of the Holy Trinity?" the stranger asked in what even after all his bible study seemed to Isaac a peculiarly archaic English dialect.

"I am that," said Isaac. "In fact I herald from the colony of Holy Trinity."

The man was confused. "Thou art a follower of the word of the Lord, but not of the exact word, in sooth. Thy tongue is near heathen. But here there are heretics and apostates aplenty and I must pardon thy errant ways."

“As I must yours,” said Isaac with more conciliation than he would have previously entertained. “You follow the word as written in the gospels...”

“The exact and unvarying word,” corrected the man.

“...And in this atheist world such faith is worth more than any heretical deviation.”

“Well said,” agreed the man, comforted that there was common ground between them.

The two naked men walked onwards together both diligently hiding their genitals, as were the other crusaders. They engaged in a dialogue liberally peppered with quotations from the Holy Scripture. Isaac discovered that his comrade came from the colony of Divine Truth between the orbits of Jupiter and the Asteroid Belt which maintained the doctrine that King James was the actual author of the Authorised Version and was therefore Divinely Inspired. He was a Presbyterian who also believed that the small independent Kingdom of Scotland (now a republic) was the Promised Land.

Isaac was better informed, of course. He knew that the King James Bible wasn’t actually written by the first King of the United Kingdom of Scotland, England, Ireland and Wales, but rather by his scribes. It was they, not His Majesty, who were divinely inspired and who corrected many of the heresies of the Catholic, Orthodox, Lutheran and Calvinist faiths. However, he shared with Elijah the belief that the word revealed in these texts, not those in Latin or Greek, were the exact ones of the Lord God, even where there were apparent misspellings.

Isaac and his companion eventually arrived at a glade beneath some tall trees

and beside a collection of villas. Each one was stripped of the clutter of domestic life that Isaac saw in his brief foray into a similar building when he was armed and considerably more dangerous. Under the trees was a long table on which was presented a sumptuous array of dishes and where some crusaders were already dining.

Isaac and Elijah had made a pact to resist the temptation of gifts provided by the atheists. Surely only evil could come from evil. As it is said in Chapter Seven, Verse Fifteen, of the Gospel According to Saint Matthew: "*Beware of false prophets, which come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ravening wolves.*" But when Isaac saw that the other crusaders had already sampled the repast and showed no sign of having been poisoned, he decided that there was really little choice. In any case, he was very hungry. He could decline the feast but then he would only die from starvation. If the food poisoned him, this would merely hasten his arrival at St Michael's Golden Gates. Isaac was also surprised by how good the food tasted, however simple and plain it appeared to be. There was rice, bread, boiled vegetables and greens, and they were all remarkably fresh and lightly seasoned. Isaac had never tasted such wholesome and appetising food before: either on Holy Trinity or since. The vegetables tasted far better than those he'd cultivated in his garden under the colony's dim lights. There were also foods from the Holy Land that rarely featured in Isaac's diet such as olives, figs and dates. The repast sinfully reminded Isaac of the manna bestowed on the refugees from Egypt on their way to Israel.

The atheist dogs had also provided many comfortable beds on which Isaac and the other crusaders could sleep but which also lacked sheets or blankets to cover their nakedness. In a sense, such covering wasn't strictly needed as the temperature aboard

the Intrepid was very comfortable.

Isaac hesitated about resting on a mattress and not only because each one was in such close proximity to the next in the villa's otherwise empty rooms. Then there was a light shower of rain which persisted for many minutes but miraculously failed to fall on the table on which the repast was laid. Isaac needed shelter and he needed to rest. He debated whether it would be sinful for him to sleep naked. He wasn't sure his genitals mightn't be exposed when he was asleep. But when Isaac lay down on a mattress he was so exhausted that sleep overcame him almost immediately.

Isaac got to find out more about his comrades in the following days. They were not only all English-speakers but without exception also all Christian. The other religions such as Islam, Hinduism and Judaism each had their own languages and English was the language of Christianity. Well, many of the Christians. Some like the Orthodox Christians spoke Greek or Russian, whilst others spoke Aramaic, Italian, German and Spanish. There were no Orthodox Christians in Isaac's company, though there were Roman Catholics, Baptists, Jehovah's Witnesses and even a solitary Mormon. Nevertheless, those who followed the exact word of the Authorised Bible as revealed to King James kept themselves apart from those who followed heretical corruptions of the Lord's word as revealed in other texts.

Isaac and those of the most proximate faith soon removed themselves from the heretics and claimed a room in one of the smaller villas. Isaac was the sole survivor from the colony of Holy Trinity. Despite the many doctrinal and liturgical differences that separated him from his closest companions, especially those relating to the practise of prayer and worship and rather secondarily to the exact interpretation of the

Gospels, the crusaders chose to unite around what they had in common.

Isaac became steadily more accustomed to his nakedness although not an hour passed when he didn't yearn to conceal his shame. The atheists had removed all material that could be fashioned into clothing and had herded away any animal or bird whose hide could be fashioned into clothing. It was evident that they preferred the crusaders to remain naked, although their beards and hair were allowed to grow.

Those in Isaac's company were reluctantly forced to resign themselves to their nakedness. Despite everything, they were all men. Isaac became accustomed to seeing his comrades' limp penises. More to the point, the surviving crusaders had other concerns. They were still intent on fulfilling the mission to which they were all sworn.

Isaac's companions included some whose pods hadn't even penetrated the Intrepid's well-defended hulk. Most hadn't made it nearly as far as he had. Some like Jeremiah and Ephron had been captured while their pod was still drilling through the hull. The vessel was destroyed but the crew was taken alive by the atheists' robots. Others like Thomas and Joshua never made it even onto the ship's surface. Their pod was destroyed and they were rescued by the same robots that had inflicted the damage and carried inside the ship after being detained outside for several hours. During their hours spent floating in space, they watched the Intrepid's robots clear away the battle debris and bear it off to the rear of the ship. The residue of the once proud invasion fleet was to be converted into the Intrepid's antimatter thrust. Rather than hinder the ship's progress, the Holy Crusaders' efforts had ended up in helping to refuel it.

Isaac's company erected barriers outside the room they had designated as their own to ward off Catholics, Baptists and other heretics. When their territory was

secure, a party was assigned the task of exploring the ship. It was imperative that they determine whether there was a way to pursue their holy crusade. Isaac was one of those chosen, along with Amos, Ezra and Elijah.

As the crusaders explored their new territory, Isaac couldn't help but be impressed by the evidence of opulence and wealth. The outermost level was deserted although there were many villas now stripped of anything useful, and many of these had been assigned to crusaders of other faiths. Although these heretics and infidels were similarly naked, they made an effort to designate to which faith their territory belonged. A crucifix was carved on a tree to designate a Roman Catholic stronghold. On another tree, a crescent marked Muslim territory. There were other areas held by Hindus, Orthodox Christians, Jews, Sikhs and other faiths.

Isaac and his comrades diligently avoided having to stray into such territories just as they also avoided contact with the other naked men they saw wandering about the level. It was sinful to expose oneself to heresy. It was also likely that any contact with heretics and infidels would only be violent. The compromises that had enabled so many disparate faiths to work together towards a common cause would have evaporated as surely between communities of different religions as it had between those of different faiths of the same religion within the first few hours that the English speakers had settled in their villa.

There was none of the wild and domestic animals that had been in such profusion when Isaac arrived. The only other living things he saw were the odd scurrying rabbit or vole, and the birds and squirrels in the trees. The landscape was mostly composed of lawns, wooded glades, lakes and streams. There were no robots

although the hovering holoscreens were still very much in evidence. These continued to provide the very useful information as the direction by which the crusaders should return to English-speaking territory.

The level bent upwards so their home territory was soon obscured by the ship's curvature. The columns that housed the elevators could be seen high above their heads where they had retracted into the ceiling. Huge struts kept the outermost level in contact with the levels above but these afforded no anchorage to the crusaders for an upward climb. Their imposing height was interspersed by platforms that were too smooth to offer a grip and too wide to clamber over.

After many hours walk and some breaks for repast and prayer, the crusaders at last reached the furthermost limit of where they could wander. This was not indicated by any warning line, but rather by an invisible barrier that gave off no reflection but repelled any force with one that was equal and opposite. Beyond this barrier were the animals that had once roamed freely about the whole of the outermost level. There seemed to be no way to enter the innermost levels of the ship that were high above Isaac's head.

The crusaders continued to roam along the edge of the invisible perimeter. They weren't sure whether it encircled the freely wandering large animals or whether it enclosed them. The only way they could establish where they were in relation to their new home was from the holoscreens which every few hundred metres pointed back to where they'd come. Isaac had no more skill in land-surveying than his comrades. In fact, all they had in common was that they had worked in a capacity, either in the police or the military, where they had expertise in killing people. The

people they'd killed had all been heretics or recidivists, and not one of which belonged to a faith as far removed from their own as, for instance, a Roman Catholic, a Mormon or a Jew.

Elijah had served as a soldier in a war against the breakaway colony of St James whose heresy was to claim that King James was not merely divinely inspired but was actually the Second Messiah. Amos and Ezra had both been policeman with roles very similar to Isaac's. Their faiths differed in detail rather than substance and like Isaac they took great pride in their duty of ridding their respective colonies of any hint of deviancy or wavering in the true faith. Isaac was uncomfortably aware that on Holy Trinity it would have been his duty to slaughter all three of his comrades as it would have been theirs to kill him. Consequently, there was no real intimacy between the reluctant comrades.

The four crusaders discovered that there were other English-speaking communities scattered about the level. The holographic signs were sufficiently intelligent to guide Isaac and his comrades to the community from which they had come, though it crossed all of their minds that there might be others of their own faith, or exact interpretation of the Christian faith, in amongst these other settlements. They weren't disposed to investigate further as these other English-speakers—although also proudly displaying the cross in one form or other—didn't appear at all keen to have strangers approach them.

Just over a day later, Isaac and his comrades had completed the circuit of the invisible perimeter that enclosed the Holy Crusaders. The other crusaders they passed were similarly engaged in determining the limits of territory but the only remaining

sign of the unity of their mission was that they too were naked and stubble-pated. Even though none of his comrades understood other languages any better than did Isaac, it was obvious from the frosty tone of the greeting that passed between the fellow crusaders that it was only the lack of weapons that forestalled any outright violence.

When Isaac's company eventually returned to the point from which they'd started, they were just in time to see a flurry of robotic activity as the bowls and dishes containing one day's repast was replaced by another.

"What did you find?" Jeremiah asked of his comrades as they squeezed past the doors to the other chambers of their villa into the one where Isaac's company resided.

The crusaders listened intently as Isaac and his comrades described how the territory assigned to them was circumscribed and how escape, let alone the pursuance of their crusade, seemed impossible.

"We are prisoners," concluded Amos. "The atheists have confined us within these empty homes and keep us fatted like calves. We are in purgatory. We are in a world where we are daily tested by the heresies of the other crusaders and cannot pursue our mission."

"The Lord will find a way," said Isaac with determination. "He will not abandon us."

"Amen!" agreed Elijah.

"And what next?" Amos asked. "The atheists haven't yet made known their intentions. Do they toy with us still?"

An uneasy silence was the only response to Amos' questions. The six crusaders who'd stayed behind regarded each other nervously.

Finally Jeremiah spoke for them.

"Yesterday while you were abroad, five atheist soldiers entered the villa," he said. "They were heavily armed and two of them were women. They took four crusaders away with them and one of them was David."

All eyes now focused on their comrade who was clearly embarrassed by the attention. David held his hands knotted together over his crotch and regarded his comrades nervously.

"They took me by one of their hovering crafts to a cell where I was interrogated," he said. "I was blindfolded on the journey and know only that where I was taken was to a place very unlike this level. The flight took less than ten minutes and I was accompanied by heretics whose faith I do not know."

"Did they torture you?" asked Ezra.

David shook his head. "I was in a single room, bound to a seat by cords, and was asked questions by an atheist."

"What did you say?" Amos asked.

"As little as I could," said the crusader. "But the questioning was subtle. After only a few hours I was transported back here."

"You weren't tortured?" asked Isaac anxiously.

"No," said David. "The atheist asked questions the answers to which he already seemed to know. He had none of the usual tools of interrogation on hand."

This seemed highly unlikely. If Isaac had the duty of interrogating a prisoner

on Holy Trinity, then he would have, at the very least, removed a finger or testicle.

What could possibly be discovered without the use of torture?

Isaac decided that either David had betrayed his comrades without a struggle or that his comrade was being brave and wouldn't admit to the sadistic horrors he'd suffered. The latter seemed unlikely, however. David had none of the traumas Isaac associated with the victims of interrogation. The inevitable conclusion was that his comrade must be a traitor. If only he had the necessary equipment then he would soon extract from his comrade the truth he already suspected.

Nevertheless, a lingering doubt remained in Isaac's mind. These atheists might know of methods of torture he'd never come across before. They might have tortured David without leaving the usual scars and obliterated his memory of the suffering he'd undergone. It was thus unwise for him to directly accuse his comrade of treachery.

But most of all Isaac dreaded the occasion when he too would be dragged away by the atheists and interrogated. How well would he withstand their interrogation? With what scars would their torture leave him when he refused to give them the answers they were seeking?

Chapter Twenty Milton - 3751 C.E.

It was the couple's good fortune that the only space ship Lieutenant Korolyov could provide for Paul and Beatrice at short notice for their journey onto Earth was the Ambassadorial Cruise Ship, SS Milton. The luxury space ship was diverted from its journey from Jupiter orbit to the Asteroid Belt to carry the diplomatic baggage that was considered too great a risk for any commercial ship that travelled across the Solar System.

The few diplomats and ambassadors aboard the luxury ship couldn't complain about the delay to their flight when it was explained how critically important to the Interplanetary Union the diversion was. Even the Jovian Ambassador for Earth knew that there were things that took precedence over her prompt arrival at Jupiter's South American embassy.

Paul now knew what real luxury was. Even though the Milton wasn't an especially large ship—being less than a kilometre in length and most of that engine—the passengers' suites were roomy, opulent and marble-faced. Paul and his wife shared a generously appointed apartment whose windows looked onto a courtyard with a fountain, an array of marble statues and a small swimming pool. There were three spacious reception rooms and four bedrooms. The paintings on the walls were all originals and almost certainly priceless. Although it was a luxury of unimaginable waste in a climate controlled space ship, every room had a fireplace in which real logs smouldered on a real fire whose smoke wafted up to the level above.

Paul could have happily spent every moment of the journey from the Asteroid

Belt to the Moon in the confines of the suite, but Beatrice was less easily satisfied.

After just one day of making love in all four bedrooms and by the tinkling fountain in the marble courtyard, she was eager to explore the rest of the ship. As Paul could offer no objection, the couple wandered out from their apartment along a broad featureless corridor to the room-sized elevator that whisked them off to the many entertainment lounges and restaurants. Diplomats expected not only the highest quality accommodation but also plenty of social space.

Paul soon became aware of just how awkward he was in the company of diplomats, aristocrats and billionaires who, despite their politeness and firm handshakes, soon came to the conclusion that this was at least one Godwinian anarchist they needn't trouble themselves with in future. They were far more taken by Beatrice who adapted well to the dress and demeanour of a society princess. She was remarkably well-informed about the shakers and movers of High Society and Big Business, many of whom were the selfsame people.

Paul was more at ease when Beatrice and he visited the ship's bridge. This was probably the least opulent room on the Milton, but it was still well-appointed. While Beatrice remarked knowledgeably on the original paintings hanging from the wall, which to Paul's eyes appeared to be nothing more than splodge-like caricatures of fruit and vegetables, what interested him most was the ship's holographic view of outer space.

"What's that?" asked Paul as he pointed at what seemed to be a revolving pencil.

"We have a legal obligation to monitor all ships within a million kilometres of

the ship, but we routinely keep track of almost every ship within the Inner Solar System," said the boatswain. "That ship is relatively close. It's perhaps less than a hundred thousand kilometres away."

"It's a ship, then?" said Paul, who immediately regretted asking such a question. It could scarcely be mistaken for a meteor or comet.

"It's a cruise ship, probably from Ceres," said the boatswain. "They carry several tens of thousands of passengers in very cramped conditions. They typically travel from one part of the Asteroid Belt to another, but this one appears to be travelling to Mars. That will take it a very long time. On average it will suffer from a death-rate of at least a one percent. It could be much higher."

Paul did the arithmetic in his head. "Do you mean that hundreds of passengers will die on that ship?"

"As I said, the conditions are extremely crowded and these old space ships frequently suffer from critical system failures. The ship's interior is composed of hundreds of interlocking sections that rotate to give a semblance of gravity. Entire sections may fail and this will inevitably result in the instant death of everyone in the vicinity. There might be hull-breaches from space debris. More commonly there might be an error in the ratio of oxygen to nitrogen in the atmosphere of one of the sections. Sometimes the temperature control system might stop working. When there is a failure in one section of the ship there is no possible way for the unfortunates to move to safety without compromising other sections. It's a very old design of ship that was never intended to be used for people transportation nor to remain in service very nearly one and a half thousand years after it was assembled."

“Why do people choose to travel that way?”

“They’re probably refugees,” said the boatswain. “Ceres has been at war for so long and with so many different nations that it’s now one of the poorest space colonies in the Solar System. Not many other colonies welcome refugees except as cheap—dare I say expendable—labour.”

“And what’s this ship?” asked Paul as he pointed at a space craft that was very nearly spherical but bristled with so many spines that it resembled a rolled-up hedgehog.

“That’s something we have to be very careful to avoid,” said the boatswain. “That’s a military warship, also probably travelling to Mars. One consequence of the Martian War is that any space craft that doesn’t promptly identify itself is likely to be immediately exterminated.”

“Could that happen to us?”

“Very unlikely,” said the boatswain with a reassuring smile. “We are strictly adhering to agreed international routes. And, in any case, Mars isn’t on our itinerary. The planet’s present location in its orbit is currently nowhere between us and Earth. However, there have been occasions when ships have been blasted to nothing for having strayed dangerously close to a warship and not having identified itself convincingly enough. I’m afraid the most usual victims are these ancient Cerean cruisers. Their communications and navigations systems are as much prone to failure as their life-support systems.”

Paul was then shown other screens that included some that were directed towards the Moon and, of course, Earth. These were the ones that fascinated him the

most. The Terran system was no longer the wealthiest in the Solar System, but no one could deny that it had a history that no other part of the Solar System could match. Paul squinted at the Moon, which was to be the next stop on his itinerary. Even including the Earth, the Moon was the most highly populated part of the Solar System. Almost nothing on the satellite wasn't either under glass or lit up by huge arc-lights. The dark side of the moon was brightly illuminated by countless dots of light emanating from the Moon's many densely inhabited towns and cities.

The Moon was also where the Interplanetary Union had its Parliament and other Head Offices, although this was more for sentimental rather than practical reasons. Given that the majority of the Solar System's population lived beyond the further side of the Asteroid Belt, the Moon's position was no longer even remotely central to the Solar System's distribution of population or power. This had the consequence that international video conferences were perpetually beset by communication lapses of several hours between question and answer.

Such delays in communications didn't affect only political debate, of course. Lieutenant Korolyov had been obliged to request passage for his two high-profile wards and extra military staff from Hygiea without being able to clear this first with Saturn, but he didn't need to have worried. This episode of Paul's voyage from Godwin to the Moon was quite simply the least troubled of them all.

The biggest challenge to confront the lieutenant was how to ensure that the newly-wed couple didn't divulge the purpose of their journey. It would be extremely easy for subtle interrogation to extract such information.

Lieutenant Korolyov could leave nothing to chance. Ever since the couple had

arrived in the Saturn system, sophisticated nanoprobes tracked their every movement and their every word. For unknown reasons, the probes that followed Beatrice were the ones most likely to freeze-frame or malfunction, but this didn't cause the lieutenant much concern as it was obvious that Paul was the greater security risk. Beatrice was tracked only because she was his wife. Paul was not only the one best briefed, but also the most tactless. It was a relief that the Godwinian wasn't especially sociable.

Most of the data gathered about the couple was of no value whatsoever. The visits to the lavatory, the time spent sitting still, the hours of sleep and, of course, the many hours—far too many for a man like Lieutenant Korolyov who struggled to understand the attraction men had for women—where the couple were engaged in sexual congress.

After he checked that the couple had safely returned to their suite after their tour of the bridge, the lieutenant desultorily reviewed the highlights of the couple's activities as recorded and analysed by the nanoprobes. A high proportion of Paul's conversation with other passengers strayed dangerously close to being a potential security risk. Why couldn't he be more discreet? But then, Paul came from an anarchist colony so respect for class and rank was evidently well beyond him. Why else would he ask such blunt questions as to what other passengers did for a living? Many of them were ambassadors or trillionaires and had never been confronted by questions like that even once before in their lives. Furthermore, although Beatrice was much more circumspect and tactful, she exercised absolutely no restraint on her husband.

“So,” Paul asked the President of Parthenope, “why don’t you just end the war between your asteroid and Ceres? It’s not as if there’s anything you really want from them.”

President Abdullah maintained a supercilious and amused smile on his face. “It’s not as simple as that.”

“Aren’t you just sacrificing Parthenopean lives for nothing?”

“Politics is a subtle business, my friend,” said the President. “Now, if you could excuse me...”

Lieutenant Korolyov scoffed at Paul’s anarchist naïveté, though he suspected that Paul would be considered tactless even on Godwin. Why was the man so drawn towards metaphysical debates that took his conversation dangerously close to the secret object of his mission?

“Do you think these apparitions are a kind of transdimensional rupture in the brane?” Paul asked Xiao Lewis, the billionaire head of a coffee shop and catering empire. “Perhaps it’s a form of dark energy. Or perhaps it’s a gravitational flux.”

The wealthy oligarch raised his eyebrows. “I really have no idea what these things might be,” he said. “I’m not a scientist. Now, if you were to ask me about the new markets for coffee in the Neptune system or whether the Oort Cloud is a good prospect for a new Needle Noodles franchise, then I might be of more assistance.”

“I just *love* Needle Noodles!” said Beatrice with enthusiasm. “It’s the tastiest Oriental food beyond Uranus.”

“Some might say anywhere in the outer Solar System,” agreed the billionaire.

“...Or perhaps these apparitions are an alien invasion of an oddly cryptic

kind,” said Paul, still blissfully ignorant of just how boring and tactless he was.

Xiao Lewis made a show of checking the time. “Maybe they are, but I have a call to make. It’s been enchanting to meet the two of you.” This last was clearly directed at Beatrice, who smiled graciously as the billionaire kissed the upraised wrist of her exaggeratedly limp hand.

Before too long, all the other passengers began to take extraordinary measures to avoid any interaction with Paul, but this didn’t trouble him at all. He remained supremely indifferent.

The lieutenant focused his attention on occasions when Paul might present a security risk, so he wasn’t bothered by the amount of time Paul spent on-line engaged in games, entertainment, trivia and pornography. None of these were likely to result in a security breach. The sophisticated pattern searching software at the lieutenant’s disposal could find nothing even potentially risky about the fantasy worlds the Godwinian visited. Paul was remarkably undisciplined for a research scientist. It was difficult to discern anything in his activities that was remotely related to his supposed discipline.

As the Milton made its two-month journey across the Solar System—its progress hampered only by the regulations that restricted the maximum speed of space craft in the relatively crowded neighbourhood of the inner planets—Paul interest in Earth and the terrestrial system steadily increased. He’d always been fascinated by Ancient History: especially relating to the early days of data storage and information technology. This was an age when it was still theoretically possible for a single person to understand everything about a computer: from its operating system to

its circuitry, from its architecture to its interaction with peripheral devices. Those were exciting times in an age when humans had hardly ventured at all from the planet's surface, when there were no extraterrestrial settlements, even on the Moon, and when computers relied on the semi-conductive elements such as silicon and graphene.

Paul pored over references to and visited virtual universes that represented not so much the modern-day Earth or Moon, which hardly interested him at all, but those of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Nonetheless, he was somewhat hazy about the actual details of the period. He wasn't sure whether Hitler was a contemporary of either President Obama or President Beck. He wasn't even sure whether America was an ally or an enemy of Germany in either or both of the World Wars of the Twentieth Century. Was Stalin a Nazi or a fascist or something else? And just when did English cease to be the default language of computing? There was even something called the British Empire which Paul confused with the Roman Empire, although he was sure there was at least a thousand years between them. He was surprised to discover that the Romans hadn't discovered the American continent despite the Atlantic Ocean being such a narrow strip of water. Wasn't there someone called Bill Gates who at one point, some time after Einstein and probably even Turing, was the richest man in the world? Now, those were glory days! Computers were the most profitable and dominant industry in the world, like Coal, Oil and Steel had been before.

Paul wasn't invited to the bridge again, but he could monitor the transplanetary progress of the Milton just as easily from his luxury suite. Beatrice and he would lie on their matrimonial bed, either before or after making love, and scan the

interplanetary heavens. There was Mars, now quite a long way around its orbit from Earth. There was the receding orbit of Jupiter. There was a fleet of warships circling the Asteroid Belt behind them, sometimes enlivened by colourful explosions near or on the surface of the various disputed chunks of rock. Ahead were the bright lights of the Moon and the strange blue presence of Earth itself.

“We can’t see the Anomaly from here, can we?” asked Beatrice.

“There’s nothing to see,” said Paul. “It’s like an absence of something.”

“Like a black hole?”

“There’s not even a gravitational presence. I’ve been told it’s like there’s nothing at all. Not even space.”

“What does that mean?”

“Space exists even in a vacuum,” Paul tried to explain. “Photons and Neutrons pass through it. Dark Energy and Dark Matter interact with it. It is seamlessly joined with the rest of space. The Anomaly isn’t like that. Light doesn’t pass through it nor does any other kind of matter, whether baryonic or strange. There’s no interaction with the fundamental forces. It’s like it isn’t there, but neither is anything else at its location.”

“It doesn’t sound natural, does it?”

“No, it doesn’t” Paul agreed. “It doesn’t sound very natural at all. So, in a sense, where we’ll be going to after we depart from Earth is nowhere at all!”

Chapter Twenty One Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

There is almost no incident more serious than when the space ship of which you are captain has been attacked and boarded. And as captain of the Space Ship Intrepid, Nadezhda Kerensky knew that what was required was an emergency meeting for everyone aboard. It wouldn't be enough to simply broadcast a statement. There had to be a full and proper discussion of everything that had happened. But this was also something that the captain had never had to do before. It was several centuries since civilian space ships had been the target of military assault. Space ships might expect to encounter serious hazards like meteor showers and radiation blasts, but this was an event of an entirely different order.

The obvious place to hold such a convention was the stadium on the ninth level. It could be transformed from a rugby pitch to a concert hall and then to an athletics stadium in a matter of minutes. Invitations were issued and the stadium re-assigned to its new function. The captain's seat was raised above the atrium and the Intrepid's senior officers were assembled around her.

Captain Kerensky couldn't resist scanning for her lovers amongst the passengers gathered ahead of her. Yes. There looking very much in her element amidst a crowd of burly uniformed soldiers was Colonel Vashti. She was joshing and laughing in the company of men and women who viewed adversity as a challenge to be welcomed rather than as a threat to be avoided. And where was her other lover, Beatrice? The captain scanned the passengers' sombre and even nervous faces for the Venusian. She was there, of course, sat next to Paul who couldn't have looked more

out of place if he tried. The captain was sure that Beatrice's gaze was returning hers. It was all she could do to resist waving at her lover.

Captain Kerensky addressed her duty in a brisk professional fashion. She was fully conscious that she was addressing not just the several thousand people ahead of her, but the countless others throughout the Solar System to whom her address was broadcast as a matter of routine. She began by reassuring her audience that there was no further risk to the ship or to its passengers. Those hostile forces that hadn't been killed in the defence of the Intrepid were now in secure detention. There hadn't been a single casualty amongst the passengers, the military or the crew. The Intrepid's outer hull was being repaired by the ship's capable self-renovation system which had sprung into action from the very first moment of intrusion. The few surviving invaders were being held in custody in the outermost level which, understandably, was now out of bounds. This would cause inconvenience to those previously quartered on that level, but accommodation had been found for them on other levels that was of a comparable quality.

The captain then gave a comprehensive account of how the invasion had been repelled and the damage that had been inflicted.

"We shall learn much more when the prisoners are interrogated," the captain announced, "but a preliminary analysis has already established a number of significant facts. The Intrepid's assailants all come from space colonies and communities which enforce the practice of a fundamentalist and ascetic religion. These include various forms of Christianity, Islam and Hinduism. It appears that these would-be invaders are all members of a previously unknown coalition of ultra-

orthodox religious communities. The Interplanetary Union's intelligence services based both here on the Intrepid and at Mission Control on the Moon are making investigations and further details will be made known when they are available. What we know for certain is just how fanatical our assailants were. They must have been to pitch themselves with such inadequate resources against an Interplanetary Union space ship with a superior defence capability such as the Intrepid. Beyond that, we don't yet really know for sure what the motive for attacking the space ship might be."

Well, that's a relief, thought Paul. He and Beatrice sat halfway up the auditorium where they gazed down at the captain's holographic projection which was much easier to see than her actual person. Although both Paul's possessions and his person were undamaged, he was upset that he would never return to what so recently had been his home. On the other hand, the new villa to which he'd been assigned was just as luxurious and Beatrice had taken to it with great enthusiasm. It was almost as if she'd enjoyed the upheaval.

Like everyone else on board, Paul was able to view holographic images of the outermost level where he used to live. He could smell the drifting smoke. He could look straight into the Holy Crusaders' faces. He could look through the doors of his now abandoned villa and observe the behaviour of the religious fanatics who now occupied it. The Intrepid had recorded every detail of the battle as a matter of course, so Paul was able to review and replay the systematic slaughter and immobilisation of the Holy Crusaders at his leisure. He could slow down the pace of the carnage. He could zoom in on the crusaders' dismemberment. Although there was nothing to hear as there was no medium to carry sound waves through space, Paul could imagine the

reverberation of the explosions and the shrill shrieks of pain in the unlucky assailants' last few moments. Brains were splattered against the glass of shattered spacesuit helmets. Faces were swiftly drained of oxygen and blood as bodies flew through empty space away from their shattered space ships. Radioactive waste was still smouldering as it hurtled by.

After these few moments of one-sided warfare the Intrepid's probes swooped about the debris and collected raw material to be processed by the space ship's antimatter engines. At the same time, the space ship's hull was repairing itself at almost the same rate as it was being breached. The scars on the surface were soon barely visible at all. This was done quickly, efficiently and without fuss, as was necessary in a space ship that had no opportunity to pause in its long journey.

Paul was aware that there were people throughout the Solar System who held perversely unbalanced opinions. After all, he was the survivor of many mercifully unsuccessful attempts on his life during his inward-bound journey through the Solar System. As an anarchist—or at least someone who'd lived all his life in an anarchist colony and had never questioned its values—Paul had no comprehension of how a person could hold an opinion that had no rational foundation. How was it that a religious fundamentalist could hold firm to views that were based entirely on unreliable written evidence? It was one thing for two people to disagree with one another. It was another thing when both persons held fixed and equally nonsensical views. And it was utterly incomprehensible to Paul that a group of people should agree to hold very similar beliefs that contradicted all historical, scientific and even logical sense. It was perplexing that there should also be other groups of people that

disagreed violently with the first group but who had a similar fixation on self-evident nonsense. There was quite simply nothing on Godwin that could prepare Paul for the phenomenon of mass conformity of belief in the patently ludicrous. Did these fanatics really believe in miracles? Did they really suppose that the universe was just over seven and a half thousand years old? Did they really and truly believe in an afterlife whose nature was determined by one's behaviour in the current life? And just *where* was this afterlife supposed to be?

Paul had never previously been exposed to religion. Although there were those on Godwin who belonged to one religion or another, Paul had never crossed their paths. And now, thanks to people whose understanding of the universe was essentially absurd, Paul was at risk of discovering first-hand just which (if any) of the various afterlives he might ascend to.

Captain Kerensky's address wasn't especially long. She gave a concise account of all the known facts. She restrained from indulging in speculation except where it was needed to quash any rumours or misinformation that might be circulating. She was effusive in her praise for those who worked in the emergency services. Paul was surprised to discover that Beatrice was amongst those that the captain commended. Apparently, she'd been astonishingly active in helping to bring to safety those who'd been stranded in the outermost level.

In fact, Captain Kerensky was no less surprised by this than Paul. She hadn't expected to see her lover's name in amongst the list of heroes, but there was mention of Beatrice's bravery in dozens of the independent commendations the captain had received and they all praised her for her selfless bravery during the attack. The only

person to get more commendation was Colonel Vashti. How could it be that Nadezhda was now sharing her bed only with selfless heroines? It was almost to be expected that the colonel should be active, given her reputation for self-sacrificing heroism in the Martian wars, but Beatrice?

After the conference, Nadezhda was sufficiently intrigued to conduct her own independent research through the historical archives and it was here that she discovered for the first time that Beatrice was employed by Emergency Rescue Services on Venus before she'd left the planet to live on Ecstasy. It made sense that someone who'd been so active in saving lives might have worked as a rescue worker on Venus' extraordinarily inhospitable surface. It made rather less sense that the heroine in question should be Beatrice. Although she was intelligent, elegant and self-assured, she much more resembled a bimbo than a fire-fighter. Captain Kerensky could never in her life have imagined that, amongst the lovers and partners she'd known over the decades, she would one day fall in love with a woman like Beatrice.

Chapter Twenty Two The Moon - 3751 C.E.

The Moon was the most substantial celestial body Paul had ever trodden on in all his eighty years of life in the Solar System. When Paul stepped out of the Milton's shuttle and onto the Moon's surface, his body was directly subject to a gravitational force that was just one sixth to what he was used to. Nevertheless, walking on the Moon was hardly effortless. Ungainly was the best description of Paul's forward locomotion when he tumbled face downwards onto the spaceport's thick carpeted floor.

The space ship Milton meanwhile was many kilometres away and circling high above Paul's head. A vessel of the Milton's size wasn't authorised to approach nearer to Earth than this. Risks could no longer be taken after the long distressing history of calamitous accidents involving space ships in terrestrial orbit. The most disastrous had caused more destruction than the very worst of the nuclear explosions that had periodically scarred the Earth's surface. Ever since Houston was annihilated by the cataclysmic collision of two space cruisers, no space ship of the Milton's dimensions was permitted any closer to Earth than the Moon. And even then it had to maintain an orbit of several thousand kilometres.

Paul was sure he should be thrilled about being on the Moon, but his most genuine enthusiasm was reserved for the blue satellite he could see above his head. He was sure he could discern the outline of the continents of Africa and South America. And weren't those clouds he could see over the brown continents and blue oceans?

"I don't think I've ever seen so many people!" gasped Beatrice as she stared

through the windows of the walkway that led from the airstrip to the spaceport concourse.

Paul followed her gaze and noticed for the first time the teeming masses of the Moon. Beatrice and he were standing on the Moon's surface, but many kilometres beneath their feet were successive levels upon levels of streets, walkways, avenues and tall buildings. The surface area of the Moon might be much smaller than Earth's, but the lunar cities weren't restricted at all in their subsurface expansion. In fact the Moon's urban sprawl supported a much larger population than the whole of planet Earth.

Lunar citizens bobbed up and down in the low gravity when they walked as if it was the most natural thing in the Solar System. No amount of film footage of the Moon taken from any of its seventeen hundred years of colonisation properly prepared Paul for the awe-inspiring sight of thousands upon thousands of people hopping about like kangaroos under the glass domes that encased the greater part of the lunar surface.

Just the momentary distraction of taking his eyes off his stride was enough for Paul to once again trip forward onto the ground. However, he fell so slowly that he was less likely to hurt himself than the other more sure-footed pedestrians who warily avoided being in his vicinity. It wasn't strictly necessary to walk as he was being carried steadily forward by the moving walkway. Although it wouldn't take long for Paul and Beatrice to arrive at the reception area where Lieutenant Korolyov was waiting, Beatrice was in a peculiar hurry. It was difficult for Paul to keep up with her. This was especially so as she was already far better acclimatised to the low gravity

than he was.

The Milton's shuttle had touched down on an airless open runway where it was now standing amongst hundreds of other lunar shuttles. Paul could glimpse behind him the occasional astronaut and the much larger number of scuttling robots dotted about the space craft in the bleak moon dust. The shuttles were overlooked from high above through the spaceport's windows and also those of the luxury penthouse suites where the Moon's most wealthy citizens lived.

The causeway trailed over and above the city of Nectaris, the second largest city on the Moon, and then through the walls of a four billion year old crater to overlook a barren plain. This served to remind Paul and Beatrice and the hundreds of others who were also making their way from the runway to the spaceport concourse that they were indeed on a hostile airless rock in space. Paul could see the distant bright lights that marked the site of a historic Twenty-Second century Lunar settlement known by the optimistic name of Plymouth, but which had shared more the unfortunate fate of the stillborn North American colony of Roanoke. A few space-suited tourists could be seen milling about in the crater's shadows.

Paul wanted to pause on the walkway to properly take in the beauty of this unique scene. There weren't many places in the Solar System with as much ancient history as Plymouth, except, of course, on the blue globe that shone above them in the sky and whose reflective light cast long shadows over the high crater walls.

Uncharacteristically, it was Beatrice who was the less inspired by such an evocative sight.

"We've got plenty of time to look at things like that later," she reminded Paul.

“This is going to be our home for at least a month until we fly down to Earth.”

“Oh come on, Beatrice,” said Paul who’d been looking forward to looking at a view like this ever since he’d left Jupiter orbit. “I can’t see what greater attraction our hotel suite could be.”

“I’m tired,” said Beatrice who rarely betrayed such human weaknesses. “It’s been a long day.”

Paul nodded, although the day had only been long because of the delay in boarding the Milton’s shuttle. The departure was complicated by the pressing need to observe established protocol when the passenger list included trillionaires, diplomats and celebrities. Paul and Beatrice were undoubtedly the lowest ranked of all the passengers. The only people who had to wait behind them in the disembarkation queue were the waiters, bar-keepers and tourist guides. Just ahead was the Ambassador for Sycorax, a very minor moon colony of Uranus. Highest ranking of all was Buzzy Mao, a pop singer from the Jupiter orbit colony of Tyne who was fabulously popular in the Inner Solar System even though his fame hadn’t quite spread as far as the Kuiper Belt. He was anticipating a rapturous welcome from his adoring fans on the Moon.

Such was Beatrice’s pace that the newly-weds soon overtook the entourage of even the Ambassador of Amalthea who had dawdled by the viewpoint in the walkway that offered the best view of the ancient Plymouth colony. His various wives and husbands were gathered about him in their provocative and sexually explicit outfits.

It is rare for there to be much warning when a disaster happens.

The memory of the event often promotes an originally inauspicious event to

the status of a retrospective alert.

Perhaps it was the woman who detached herself from the Amalthean ambassador's company and scurried along the walkway with renewed determination. Perhaps it was the small bag that lay only a few meters away from the huddle of Amalthean tourists. Perhaps it was the robotic vacuum cleaner that was steadily rolling along the edge of the rubberised walkway floor. Perhaps it was none of these.

But the actual event, like everything else on the Moon, happened in characteristic slow motion. The walkway between Paul and the Amalthean ambassador's dawdling entourage first folded in on itself and then rather more abruptly exploded outwards during which shards of glass and luxury carpeting were flung still relatively slowly into the near-vacuum outside. Paul's direct experience, as opposed to what he could later observe replayed at his leisure, was of an intense tug as the walkway's pressurised air pulled him backwards to where the Amaltheans were being sucked out through a widening fracture in the surrounding glass onto the bleak earthlit lunar dust. It wasn't the impact of landing on the dusty ground below that killed them even though they bounced several times off its surface to a height of several metres. They'd died well within the first second of the explosion from a combination of extreme cold, lack of atmospheric pressure and, most obviously, a total absence of breathable air.

This was a fate Paul could easily have shared. Like the scattered remnants of eerily exploded corpses restrained by fetishistic outfits that displayed genitalia and bosoms and were now much more grotesque and blood-splattered than provocative, Paul's body could have been tossed carelessly about the ground several tens of metres

below. But once again Beatrice saved his life. And once more in a way that seemed more by chance than circumstance.

Paul somehow managed to be on just the right side of the emergency hatch that slammed shut well within a second of the walkway suddenly and unaccountably exploding. Paul later learnt that the walkway had always suffered from a design fault, so in a sense such a catastrophe was just waiting to happen. When towards the end of the third millennium the proud Lunar citizens built the long walkway that wound from the city of Nectaris to overlook the first settlement in the Mare of the same name, it was already known that a meteorite of little more than a few centimetres' width could easily crack open the glass surface. Even the centuries of reinforcement that now protected it from many times that scale of impact wasn't guaranteed to withstand the impact of a sizeable rock falling onto the Moon from the open sky. In any case, there were many other small objects that a potential terrorist could employ to shatter the protective glass. Once even the smallest kink cracked the surface, the combination of high internal air-pressure, a near vacuum outside and a dramatic temperature differential would turn the historic walkway into an inescapable death-trap.

And on this occasion there was no escape from death for all twenty-seven Amalthean delegates, a further dozen ancillary staff, and the High Priest of the Synod of Triton and his entourage who'd disembarked from another space-ship.

Paul and Beatrice were more fortunate. Beatrice had grabbed Paul by his collar just in time and heaved him through the walkway partition before it either sealed the couple on the wrong side of safety or, in its haste, severed their bodies in half. The distance to the walkway hatch that a moment ago seemed fifty or so metres

away, suddenly became a whisker on the other side.

Paul didn't see much of the explosion. This was because he was lying prostrate on the carpet-covered floor of the walkway; or at least in one truncated branch of it. He was battered and bruised by the shock of being pushed to the ground before the hatch sealed itself behind him. The violence with which Beatrice grabbed his arm caused it to be torn by agony when he tried to pick himself. A sharp pain blanked out from his consciousness most of where he was and what had happened.

"You poor darling!" said Beatrice who was remarkably prompt in identifying the source of her husband's discomfort. She soothingly stroked his forearm while they slumped down on the ground. "How much does it hurt?"

"A lot!" said Paul.

"But at least we're alive," said Beatrice.

She turned her head round behind them and beckoned Paul to do the same. Through the transparent doorway that had slid into place they could see a stretch of glass corridor that protruded fifty metres over the dust-swept rocks below. Hanging to the jagged edges of shattered glass was an arm torn off at the sleeve and so frozen by the unmediated cold night air that the patches of blood had formed into dark crystals. The scattered bodies of other unfortunate passengers were below but too distant for Paul to identify. A few dozen bodies were slumped on the carpeted walkway killed more by the sudden cold and loss of air pressure than the impact of the explosion. The ruptured faces and burst eyeballs were evidence of a disagreeable but thankfully nearly instant death.

Paul could hear moans from travellers on the safe side of the security hatch

who'd been hit by the abrupt outrush of air that sucked back anything that was loose. These included not only bags, paper and plastics, but even other people. It was further testament to how lucky they were that Beatrice had managed to get them through to safety in time in the face of such a ferocious force.

Lieutenant Korolyov's welcome party on the other side of the Passport Check Zone had to wait much longer for Paul and Beatrice than they'd expected. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, the formalities of Immigration Control couldn't be dispensed with. The couple weren't permitted into the spaceport's concourse until the proper checks were completed, even though they had to be transported by hovering stretchers to the hospital ward where within minutes Paul's broken arm was repaired by medical robots.

Then, while still in the hospital ward, the couple's details were validated and verified and they were asked formal questions about why they were visiting the Moon. Such was the demand to visit the Moon, either for vacation or employment, that after Earth this was the most securely guarded tourist destination in the Solar System. Almost everyone beyond Earth's orbit could trace their ancestry to the Moon. And for those with no hope of actually being allowed to visit Earth there was the opportunity to view the home planet from the relatively short distance of a mere four hundred thousand kilometres.

It would be a while until Paul and Beatrice could at last relax in their luxury suite in the Tranquillity Hotel. Although the pain from his repaired arm had receded and the bone felt as good as new (as, in fact, it now very nearly was), Paul was required to rest on the hospital bed for the remainder of the day. Fortunately, Beatrice

was allowed to accompany him by his bedside. She was still anxious and insisted on seeing proof of identity from the procession of doctors, nurses, immigration controllers and police inspectors that came in succession to question the couple.

“You don’t think the explosion was an accident, do you?” Paul asked when the interrogations were over.

Beatrice smiled at her husband, whilst also keeping a watchful eye on the door through which Police Inspector Daniel Wong had just departed with a frown creasing his forehead. “It could have just been an accident,” she said. “There are so many things could have caused it. As Inspector Wong reminded us, the walkway is nearly a thousand years old and there *has* been a recent upsurge in meteorite activity.”

“But after so many assassination attempts since we left Ecstasy, you don’t really believe that,” said Paul sadly. “I’m sorry to have brought all this on you. Everywhere I go there’s been one near lethal incident after another. It’s a miracle we’re both still alive. You must really regret having married me.”

“Of course not, sweetest,” said Beatrice, who leaned over to kiss him but still maintained a watchful gaze towards the doorway. “The marriage vows *do* say: ‘For better or worse’. I guess these are the worse times. But there have been many better times, haven’t there?”

“Yes,” said Paul gratefully. He’d had more sex in his months of married life than in the whole of the rest of his life put together.

“I wish I knew who it is that wants to assassinate me,” said Paul reflectively. “And *why* do they want to kill me? What possible harm am I to anyone?”

“Nothing, sweetheart,” said Beatrice, who squeezed Paul’s hand tightly in

hers. "There's nobody in the Solar System you could harm."

"At least not intentionally," said Paul, who was now feeling very sorry for himself or at least for his current predicament. "There must be hundreds who've died just because they happened to be in my proximity. And another twenty or thirty people must have died just now. That ambassador and his entourage. The spaceline hostesses. That artist from Pluto and his husband. And all the others they're still trying to identify. If it wasn't for me, they'd all still be alive."

"You mustn't blame yourself, darling," said Beatrice. "None of it was your fault."

"And what about all the others who'd be alive now?" Paul continued. "What about those who died on the Ulysses? Some of those were children. And all those other incidents... If I'd never left Godwin, never done research on this accursed Anomaly, never got involved in this kind of research, they'd all be alive now."

"You're not the one who killed them," Beatrice said as she leaned over to kiss her husband's lips.

"But who *are* the ones who killed them? I've not met even one of them. I've not seen an assassin even from the distance. What kind of people are they?"

"The Saturnians said they were fanatics," Beatrice reminded Paul. "Religious extremists, many of them. Anyone associated with this Anomaly would attract their attention. If it wasn't you, it would be someone else."

"But I still don't get it," said Paul anxiously. "If it wasn't for all the assassination attempts on Godwin I'd never have come all this way across so many billion kilometres just to be a passenger on a huge spaceship to nowhere. If no one

had tried to kill me I'd still just be an obscure researcher in the Kuiper Belt..."

"...And you'd never have met me," said Beatrice. She playfully squeezed Paul's crotch.

"And I'd never have met you," Paul repeated. "And we'd never have got married. And we'd never have made love. But then all those people would still be alive. The Ambassador from Amalthea would now be in his embassy instead of being splattered over the crater walls of Mare Nectaris."

"We have so much to be grateful for," Beatrice reminded Paul as she stroked his penis through the cloth of his trousers.

"I wish I'd never heard of this Anomaly," moaned Paul, for whom self-pity was still a stronger emotion than desire. "There's been nothing but one catastrophe after another for—"

"I have to go to the loo," announced Beatrice, who abruptly stood up and strode out of the ward leaving Paul alone.

This was totally unlike Beatrice, but Paul was aware that it was a long time since his wife had last gone to the lavatory. In fact, he couldn't remember even a single occasion in the last few months when she'd needed to excuse herself. And most certainly never so hastily as she did now.

Resting as he was, horizontal and secure on a hospital bed, and exhausted after a rather more eventful day than he'd anticipated, it was quite natural for Paul to doze away in the few minutes of Beatrice's departure. His consciousness slipped into a distant dream-world.

Paul always slept deeply. Before his recent marriage to Beatrice, he would

normally sleep at least ten hours a day at a stretch. As the hours he spent asleep bore no relationship to the diurnal cycle, his waking hours on Godwin were badly misaligned with those of other people. He was often awake when everyone else was asleep and, naturally, the same in reverse. This was no great problem on an anarchist colony like Godwin. No one was obliged to work and only the imperative of communalism impelled anyone to do anything at all. Nevertheless, so great was this imperative that only the truly thoughtless, such as Paul, could really get away with his degree of indolence without suffering an acute sense of guilt.

Like most deep sleepers, Paul's dreams were vivid but mostly forgotten when he woke up, but the dream on this occasion was unusually vivid. It wasn't as if much was happening though. All he was doing was chatting with Virgil, the old man from Nudeworld, and it was nothing more than a continuation of the same conversation he'd just been having with Beatrice in which he lamented his ill-fortune at being the target of so many assassination attempts.

“Why me?” he moaned.

“Why not you?” countered the old man.

“What have I done to deserve this?”

“What has anyone done to deserve anything?”

“Are you just trying to tease me?”

“There's nothing special about you, but something like this had to happen to someone and that someone just happened to be you.”

“It can't be just as simple as that.”

“Yes, it can.”

“I don’t understand,” said Paul in his dream.

“Fucking wake up will you!” said another voice intruding into Paul’s dream world and it wasn’t the old man’s. The woman to whom it belonged was vigorously shaking Paul’s shoulder.

“Whassup?” wondered a bleary-eyed Paul.

“Didn’t you hear the alarms?” asked the blue-haired, polka-dot faced nurse when she dragged Paul into full consciousness. “Or for that matter, the explosion!”

“Explosion?” asked Paul. “What? Another one!”

“I’ll take him, nurse,” said Beatrice who suddenly materialised by Paul’s side and took his arm in hers.

“What’s happening?” asked Paul, still unsure whether he was still dreaming.

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice. “I heard a huge bang while I was in the toilet and when I got out there were smoke and alarms and people running everywhere.”

“Fuck! Not another assassination attempt!” groaned Paul.

“I can’t be sure,” said Beatrice. “It could be anything. Do you know what happened, nurse?”

“This way. This way,” said the nurse directing them along the smoke-filled hallway where their path was only navigable from the emergency lights that dotted the way toward the exit.

Paul could see nothing through the smoke beyond the shadowy silhouettes of the robots that were handling the emergency. He was more concerned about his survival than in finding an answer to why he was in this predicament. It was only later when he was sitting down and coughing up the smoke that choked his lungs that his

thoughts returned to such issues.

“What happened?” he asked.

“All I know was that there was a sudden blast,” said the nurse. “Do you know any more?” she asked Beatrice.

Paul’s wife shook her head. She raised her head towards a security guard who was walking by with a laser rifle. “What caused the explosion?”

“Intruders,” said the security guard. “We don’t know how they got in. Probably an inside job. They were dressed as doctors. We don’t know what they were doing or why. Video footage shows that they were carrying an explosive device that they set off just outside the women’s toilets. There doesn’t appear to be a good reason for it.”

“Perhaps they didn’t like women’s toilets,” said Beatrice disingenuously.

“Whatever,” said the security guard. “But the only casualties were the perpetrators. And for our lucky survival we can only thank Allah.”

“Indeed,” agreed Beatrice with a small smile.

Chapter Twenty Three Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

“Isaac, isn’t it?” the Special Operations Officer asked the naked man sitting on a chair opposite him and who was gently restrained by a low intensity force field. “And where do you come from exactly?”

The Holy Crusader might have been defeated but he retained his pride and dignity, despite the humiliation of his continued nudity. “Why should I tell you that?” he responded defiantly.

“A fair question,” said Emmanuel reasonably. “There’s no penalty for non-cooperation. We shan’t reduce your rations, deprive you of sleep or interrogate you further if you don’t wish to answer my questions. And what we most certainly won’t do, as some of you rebels believe, is torture you. That’s been outlawed by the Interplanetary Union from its inception.” He paused to study Isaac’s face for his reaction. Religious fanatics like him had some very strange ideas about what practices were legal or permitted. “We know a great deal about why you are here and what you tried to achieve. We probably know better than you do the names of those who were responsible for your foolhardy mission and the clandestine means by which your masters managed to acquire the technology that enabled your space ships to remain hidden from the Intrepid’s sensors. But we have a duty to return prisoners of war—even one undeclared and totally unprovoked—to their colonies or planets of origin. For us to do this, we first need to know where you came from.”

“Don’t you know that?” wondered Isaac who reasoned that if the atheists knew so much already they must surely know the answer to such a simple question.

“Alas, no,” said the officer. “We can narrow it down to a couple of dozen of colonies who practise a similar variant of the Christian faith, but we don’t maintain a registry of citizens from nations that are unwilling to provide us with the data. Rogue states such as yours are extraordinarily reluctant to allow independent observers within their borders and the Interplanetary Union assiduously observes a policy of non-interference. We know your governments practise methods of indoctrination that are illegal elsewhere. We know that there is a total lack of freedom and normal human rights. But we have no jurisdiction whatsoever over any state that wishes to remain outside the Interplanetary Union. Unless your state should interfere with our affairs, as of course yours has just done, we respect the right of every state to do pretty much whatever they like, notwithstanding how unpalatable it might be.”

Isaac objected to the dark skinned officer’s characterisation of his home colony. “The Gospel is practised on Holy Trinity with absolute fidelity,” he retorted. “There can be nothing unethical, let alone ‘unpalatable’, in adhering to Holy Writ. As the Lord commands so we obey.”

“*Holy Trinity*,” mused the special officer. “That’s Mercury orbit, isn’t it? You are a *very* long way from home.”

“I am never far from home when I am in the light of the Lord’s charity,” said Isaac. “That’s something you atheists could never understand.”

“Interesting,” said Emmanuel. “I imagine it that you believe that I’m an atheist. No doubt your reasoning is that a secular body such as the Interplanetary Union must therefore be home only to atheists. The truth, Isaac, is that I am *not* an atheist. In fact, I am a Christian. It would be nice to say that I was a Christian like

you, but that isn't true. The Christianity I practise is so very different to yours that it's very unlikely that you would even recognise it as such."

"Are you a heretic or a Roman Catholic?" asked Isaac who was stirred to curiosity despite himself. "Surely, no true Christian could live amongst the damned and accursed."

"Jesus Christ and His Disciples lived in the company of unbelievers," Emmanuel remarked. "And they preached to those who were sceptical and often hostile. However, my faith is such that although I follow the teachings of Jesus Christ and the tradition of his faith in the manner of most Christians in the Interplanetary Union you'd almost certainly characterise my faith as heresy. I don't, for instance, believe in the Resurrection. I don't believe that Christ was any more the Son of God than any other prophet. I don't believe in Judgment Day. I don't believe in an after-life: let alone one that damns the vast majority of Creation to an eternity of torment. And I don't even believe in what you might call a God."

"Then how can you call yourself a Christian?" asked Isaac incredulously. "You deny all the truths revealed in the Gospels and yet profess to the worst heresies of all."

"Faith is not just creed or dogma, Isaac," said Emmanuel. "I find great comfort in prayer and I regularly attend Church services. My belief in the Christian faith sustains my spiritual needs and provides me with an ethical framework. But my Christian faith is more like the practise of most Muslims, Buddhists, Jews or Hindus in the Interplanetary Union—who also no longer profess a mystical belief in eternal life or an anthropomorphic God—than it is to the faith practised in Holy Trinity, or

indeed to any of the other hundreds of rogue states that profess to one of the many extreme, supposedly Christian, theologies.”

“How can you call a Christian society a rogue state?” asked Isaac. “It is the heretics, atheists and pagans who are the rogues in the Solar System.”

“Well, according to the doctrine of your state, only one colony is *not* heretical or otherwise damned. And that is Holy Trinity. That’s an insular prejudice you have in common with all the fanatical states that participated in your foolish endeavour. They can’t *all* be right, can they? Why should the colony of Holy Trinity be in any way better appraised of the truth than any other?”

“Because it is only Holy Trinity that truly follows the word of the Lord as revealed in His Holy Scriptures.”

“Or the English language version that dates back to the early Seventeenth Century,” said the special officer. “Much as I enjoy discussing religion, however, my area of professional expertise is in the peculiar practises of rogue states. Less than a quarter of them are of the religious variety. Just as many practise one variation or other of the various political ideologies, such as Bolshevik Communism, Fascism or Illiberal Socialism. The great majority of rogue states are simply dictatorships, usually of just one individual, but sometimes of a clique united by kinship, military rank or ideological purity. These rogue states may be called kingdoms, republics or theocracies, but as long as they deny political representation by the people and the full range of basic human rights, they are not welcome to membership of the Interplanetary Union. Those rogue states that have petitioned for membership, which is very nearly half of them, will never be permitted to join until they are governed in

an acceptable manner.”

“Acceptable!” exclaimed Isaac. “What could be less acceptable in the eyes of the Lord than letting Satan run wild?”

“Perhaps the unquestioning and ruthless way by which a highly partisan interpretation of the mishmash of texts gathered together over the centuries and ascribed to the Lord is used for the vicious oppression of its citizens?” suggested Emmanuel. “What rogue states most have in common is not shared ideology or ethics, but the suppression of its people. It is only a sign of insecurity when no disagreement is permitted. Were you also a policeman? One of those called Soldiers of Christ on Holy Trinity? Most of the rebels who attempt to invade this ship were active not so much in the defence of their state from external enemies, but in the terrorisation and oppression of the state’s own people.”

“I am proud of my service in the Greater Good,” said Isaac defiantly. “Not one person I killed was innocent of a capital crime.”

“Well,” said Emmanuel, unable to disguise his distaste at the implications of Isaac’s statement, “I don’t expect to change your opinion or views. I have a duty to perform. And that duty is not to persuade you to see the error of your ways, but to determine where you come from so that you can be returned there. However I must inform you that there is no treaty between the Interplanetary Union and Holy Trinity—or any one of the rogue states—that binds us to return citizens to their colony or planet of origin. If you so wish, we can allow you to remain in the Interplanetary Union as a free citizen when we return to the ecliptic plane.”

“And why would I wish that?” asked Isaac. “I have a wife and children

waiting for me. I would much prefer to live amongst True Believers than amongst atheists or, indeed, heretics such as you.”

The Special Officer blew out his cheeks and lowered his gaze towards his hands which he clasped together on his lap, not so much in prayer as to disguise the agitation that could so easily excite them as he reflected on the appalling acts of cruelty and violence Isaac had undoubtedly committed as a police officer in his colony.

“I am not intimate with Holy Trinity,” he said at last. “Nor am I any more so with the rogue states of the other rebels I have interviewed. As a Christian, I have been assigned the duty of interviewing only those who profess to Christianity as their faith. In truth, whether Catholic, Orthodox, Baptist or Calvinist, none of your home states seem especially different from each other. None practise what I believe to be the teachings of Jesus Christ, who bade us to love our neighbour and forgive those who trespass. I would advise you that another characteristic almost all rogue states have in common is a suspicion of anyone in their midst who has ever come into contact with someone from another community.”

“I have served the Lord God with forbearance and dedication,” said Isaac. “I pray to the Lord five times each day and have resisted all temptation. Why shouldn’t I be welcome amongst those whose shared faith I serve?”

“Even had your misguided crusade been successful...” replied Emmanuel. “Even if you had prevailed over a space ship designed to counter a rather greater invasion force than what the Holy Trinity and the other rogue states managed to put together at huge risk and even greater compromise... Even if you had succeeded in

reaching your objective and destroying what you call the Apostasy, which is not even remotely feasible given our analysis of this strange phenomenon... Even if all these unlikely things had happened, do you truly believe the Archdeacon and his ministers would welcome you back?"

"Why ever not?"

"Think about it, Isaac," continued Emmanuel. "You have been tested and there is the risk that you have been found wanting by the absurdly high standards of conformity your state demands. The mere fact that you've been in the polluting presence of people of faiths and religions other than your own would condemn you. Indeed, I know from our observations that you have befriended others whose faiths may be approximate to your own but different enough that they would be considered heretical by your clergy. Could you withstand the interrogation that you would doubtless undergo? Can you be sure that those you love would continue to be safe and secure if you returned?"

"I don't understand."

"The evidence suggests that rogue states such as yours who prize intolerance and compliance are no more tolerant of those tainted by association, even of an innocent kind, than they are to those who are actively heretical. Your family, and especially your wife and children, are unlikely to be permitted to see you again for fear that you may corrupt them. And if they should, then they would be executed by whatever barbaric rites, such as crucifixion, electrocution or stoning, that your society practises."

"You are using idle threats," said Isaac, who nevertheless felt rather uneasy

after having been presented with this all too plausible scenario. “I have been blameless. Even though our mission has not so far been blessed by success, no brave Crusader could expect anything less than the honour he deserves when he returns home.”

“The choice is yours, Isaac,” said Emmanuel. “In my role as Special Operations Officer for the Interplanetary Union, it is not my duty to prevent you from returning to what I believe would be not so much a hero’s welcome as torture and painful death and, possibly, not just for you but also for your family and friends. But it *is* my duty as a Christian to open your eyes to the reality of your situation and make you aware of the real choices available to you. Only my conscience would be appeased if you should decide to accept the sanctuary offered you by the Interplanetary Union which benefits in no material way at all from extending you the offer of asylum. If you wish to return to Holy Trinity, I will pray for you but I expect my prayers will be in vain. A murderous regime such as yours will not so much reward you as attempt to persuade you that the slow and unpleasant death you will almost certainly suffer is in some peculiar way exactly what the Lord God intends. Perhaps you will echo Christ’s words on the cross: “*Eli, Eli, lama sabachthani? that is to say, My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me?*” If you truly believe in the message of Jesus Christ, reflect that the martyrdoms of the Apostles and of Jesus Christ Himself were sacrifices of the highest order but were not actively chosen by those who died so painfully.”

“A heretic like you cannot tell a true believer what he should believe!” snorted Isaac in disdain. “I shall return to Holy Trinity and be welcomed. I have served the

Lord Jesus Christ with honour and this will be recognised. You are lying and your contemptuous deceit damns you to an eternity of torment.”

Emmanuel sighed.

“I shall pray for you, Isaac,” he said at last. “I hope you shall remember my words of caution.”

“Your sophistry doesn’t fool me,” said Isaac bitterly. “A Christian who doesn’t believe in God or the resurrection...? That is no Christian at all. Recall Verses Thirty to Thirty-two of Chapter Two of the Acts of the Apostles: *“Therefore being a prophet, and knowing that God had sworn with an oath to him, that of the fruit of his loins, according to the flesh, he would raise up Christ to sit on his throne; He seeing this before spake of the resurrection of Christ, that his soul was not left in hell, neither his flesh did see corruption. This Jesus hath God raised up, whereof we all are witnesses.”* There is no text clearer than that?”

The Special Operations Officer chose not to reply. He contemplated his clasped hands and let a decent period of time pass while Isaac revelled in his mastery of Holy Scripture.

At last, he said: “Well, Isaac, I have no more questions of you. Do you have any of me?”

The crusader was taken aback. No one had ever asked him such a question before. Questions weren’t expected in Holy Trinity. Rather, orders were given to be obeyed.

“What possible advice or information could a heretic give me?” he said. “Anyone who denies the truth of the Gospels can be nothing more than a dissembler

and a miscreant.”

“Well, I could remind you of the reality of your situation,” said Emmanuel. “You are on a space ship whose destination is beyond the Heliosphere and is already more than two light weeks from the nearest space observatory. There is no possibility that you could escape from the Intrepid and be able to survive. You are under constant surveillance. You are kept naked so that you can’t conceal any weapons. Given your mutual antipathy, there is no real likelihood that your community of rebels will band together again and resume your foolhardy mission. The only hope you have is that when we encounter the Anomaly it might bring about a situation that in some way changes your fortunes. None of us know what we are in for and I only hope that the spiritual guidance of my Christian faith prepares me for what will come.”

“The Apostasy is the Manifestation of Satan,” said Isaac, “and your Christian faith, as you call it, will only comfort you in the illusion that you may be spared from the Final Judgment. As is said in Verses Eleven and Twelve of Chapter Two of the Second Epistle of Paul the Apostle to the Thessalonians: *“And for this cause God shall send them strong delusion, that they should believe a lie: That they all might be damned who believed not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness.”* Prepare to meet thy Maker and quake in His presence.”

Emmanuel made a discreet gesture that signalled a Saturnian soldier to enter the interrogation chamber accompanied by two robots. Isaac was escorted away while the Special Operations Officer sat silently in his chair. He bent his head forward and pressed his hands together.

It was only several minutes later after Emmanuel had finished praying for

Isaac and the other deluded souls in the outermost level that the Special Officer at last said “Amen” and raised his head. Although he didn’t believe that a God as such was listening to his prayers or that there was any mystical significance to his act of faith, he hoped that in some way his sincere desire that Isaac should recognise the futility of his situation and act in a more responsible and sane way might actually happen. There might not be a God as such, but perhaps there was a way in which a sincerely held wish might influence the workings of fate.

Emmanuel stood up and left the interrogation room where he inspected the holographic recording of his interview. This would be analysed less for operational intelligence than as a psychological and sociological study. A much more complete picture of Isaac’s role in the abortive mission had already been pieced together elsewhere. There was much else that Emmanuel could have told Isaac about the futility of his crusade and the fate that was likely to meet him if he should ever return to Holy Trinity. He could, for instance, have informed him of the criminal hypocrisy of the Archdeacon and his close circle of ministers. The Interplanetary Union might not know the exact nature of the atrocities and injustices suffered by the citizens of Holy Trinity, but they were well aware of the sale of pornographic material to the colony. This material was of a kind that could appeal only to murderous paedophiles who in this case had the resources to translate their fantasies into reality.

Emmanuel could have given details of the political chicanery that accompanied the formation of an alliance of otherwise warring religious states that benefited only the elites and not at all the people they were meant to serve. And most certainly didn’t further any religious cause. Very little of the huge amount of wealth

collected for the crusade was actually dedicated towards its successful completion, which was most notable for its incredible meanness. A far greater proportion of the proceeds gathered from the wealthy and religiously disposed citizens of the Interplanetary Union ended up in the off-shore bank accounts of the religious leaders, such as the Archdeacon of Holy Trinity, rather than in the purchase of space ships and military hardware. Indeed, the Archdeacon's initial reluctance to contribute resources to the endeavour was far better understood as a bargaining ploy to maximise his profit than as a sign of indecision. Not one of the hundreds of colonies that contributed to the crusade had done so without substantial material benefit accruing to the elites that governed them.

Emmanuel wondered, as he so often did in his prayers, how so many millions of people could be deceived so often and so profoundly. How could so much evil in the Solar System justify itself so sanctimoniously?

Maxwell appeared at the door to the interrogation chamber and smiled at him both simperingly and sympathetically.

“You shouldn’t take it so personally, sweetheart,” he said strolling towards his husband, brushing a strand of long blond hair off his decidedly feminine face. “These cranks have been brainwashed. They’ll believe only what they’ve been told to believe. Imagine what it’s like to be brought up in a world where the nonsense in Revelations and Genesis is treated with seriousness. Some even deny that their colonies revolve around the Sun. They’re beyond hope.”

“Don’t say that!” retorted Emmanuel sharply. “You don’t have to be a Christian to feel compassion for those who live in such fear and intolerance.”

“Fuck it!” said Maxwell as he clasped Emmanuel in his arms and peppered his cheeks with kisses. “Let them believe what they like. All the rebels you’ve interviewed are murderers and torturers. Do you think any one of them wouldn’t have twisted off your thumbs, crushed your testicles or gouged out your eyes? They’ve been guilty of crimes that should have them all put into psychiatric care. If they want to tear themselves apart in Holy Wars or return home to some kind of ritual crucifixion, well, fuck it, they deserve every last nail hammered into their feet.”

“That’s the very reason I’m a Christian,” said Emmanuel who pecked his husband on the cheek. “He taught compassion for everyone. However heinous their crimes, these crusaders are misguided souls who deserve compassion. Isaac loves his family. He believes he acted virtuously even when he behaved most inhumanely. Shouldn’t he be afforded some sympathy?”

“You agonise too much on his behalf,” retorted Maxwell as he placed a hand on Emmanuel’s stirring cock. “If he was interrogating you rather than the other way round you’d be beaten to a bloody pulp. You certainly wouldn’t have a dick left that’s half as good as this!”

“Not here!” Emmanuel whispered urgently, although he could feel passion rising within him. He directed his eyes towards the surveillance cameras that constantly kept watch on the interrogation chamber: more to provide evidence of alleged abuse than to spy on the person being interrogated.

“You’re *such* a prude!” Maxwell laughed. “Come on! We’ve surely got time before your next candidate.”

“In fact I’ve finished for the day,” said his husband.

“And how many fanatics did you have to question?”

“I’m not sure. Dozens. They were all so *very* sad. All the suffering they’ve undergone in pursuit of their pointless quest...”

“And all the suffering they’ve been responsible for,” said Maxwell. “You’ve got to put it in perspective.”

The two lovers wandered off to their shared villa on the seventh level. This wasn’t quite as well appointed as Paul’s now deserted villa on the outermost level, but it was in a pleasant close surrounded by fields of wheat and barley over which larks sang and crows circled above tall trees. Each villa had its own swimming pool where on a towel the two lovers pulled off each other’s clothes and lay down together. Their hands brushed along each other’s thighs and toyed with their testicles.

Maxwell took his husband’s now fully erect cock in his mouth while agitatedly pumping his own penis in his hand. Their passion grew steadily with their agitated kisses until it reached a high enough crescendo for Maxwell to offer his gaping anus to Emmanuel’s obliging thrusts. Toned muscle pressed against toned muscle. Beard scraped over stubble. Chest hairs tangled. And in the acrobatic exertion, Emmanuel engaged his penis in his husband’s arse as he released his anxieties and doubts in the lovemaking he never felt anxious about and with the love of a husband he’d never doubted.

They were an odd couple in many ways. Maxwell had none of his husband’s piety and although he preferred a submissive role he was the more outgoing and sociable of the two. Neither would have met the other normally. Emmanuel had lived in Earth orbit on a colony that was proud of its Polynesian heritage but was far from

ethnically pure. Maxwell was a Saturnian who rebelled against the conventional style of clothing and hairlessness in the Socialist Republics and had even once had a long-term heterosexual relationship.

Their fucking climaxed after not very long as Maxwell couldn't restrain his semen from spurting over the hard enamel tiles of the swimming pool. Emmanuel released his semen as soon afterwards as he could, considerably over his husband's arse cheeks rather than inside the anus. They then jumped into the pool to wash off their shared sweat and sperm.

"Are you interviewing any more of these rebels tomorrow?" Maxwell asked as he surfaced from the deep blue water of the pool.

Water streamed down Emmanuel's hairy chest and plastered his long hair to his cheeks. He grabbed his lover by the shoulders and peppered them with affectionate kisses.

"Yes. But we're almost through. There are fewer than a hundred left to be processed."

"And have you learnt much?" wondered Maxwell.

Emmanuel pondered on this. "Yes, I have. But nothing that shakes my faith," he said. "What troubles me most is how what should be a force for understanding and harmony in the Solar System can be so easily perverted. How much stronger would the community of believers be if the Christian faith was never plagued by hypocrisy and dogma?"

"Well, I'm sure there'd be many more believers if there wasn't so much crap associated with religion," replied Maxwell with a smile as he tenderly caressed his

husband's penis. "But nothing will ever make me believe in all that spiritual nonsense and mumbo-jumbo. If there is a God, then He's done a pretty crap job. And if there *is* such a thing as spiritual truth why can it never be explained in ways that ordinary people can understand?"

Chapter Twenty Four

The Moon - 3751 C.E.

“It’s just not fair,” said the overweight man who was hovering above the ground beside Paul. “I’ve lived on the Moon all my life. Every year for well over a century, I’ve applied for a visa to visit Earth. I’ve entered competitions. I’ve applied for special permits. I’ve offered an obscene amount of money. And then someone like you—who comes from the fucking Kuiper Belt, from an anarchist colony no one’s ever heard of—gets to go to Earth after no more than a single month. It doesn’t make sense.”

Paul could see that his drinking companion was genuinely aggrieved, but he couldn’t think of a suitable reply. He couldn’t very well explain that the reason he was able to go to Earth was because he was on a secret mission. It would no longer be a secret if he told anyone.

“Er...” he began uncertainly.

“We’re historians,” said Beatrice who was standing at the bar next to Paul. “We’re doing research on the Byzantine Empire.”

“The fucking what?” asked the man with a sneer. “The bisons? What the fuck do you need to go to Earth to study bison for? They’ve got bison everywhere. And mammoths, dodos, passenger pigeons and elasmosaurs. Every once extinct animal you can think of that left a bit of DNA behind has been resurrected somewhere or other.”

“The Byzantine Empire,” said Beatrice. “The Eastern Roman Empire. The Greek Orthodox Church.”

“Sounds like bollocks to me,” said the man dismissively. “I was born here on the Moon. I’ve lived and worked here all my life. The only times I’ve been extralunar were holidays in Earth’s orbit and once to Venus. And that was *fucking* expensive. All my life there’s been this big blue ball in the sky and I’ve never once been able to go there. And you two—a scruff bag and a dolly bird—you call yourselves bison historians and you get there with no fucking trouble.”

“What do you know about Byzantine history?” asked a tall woman who was sitting just to beside the irate lunar citizen.

“Um...” said Paul who wanted to confess that there wasn’t a lot, but as always it was Beatrice who rescued the situation.

“What do you want to know?” she asked.

Paul had no doubt that whatever awkward question Beatrice was asked she’d have an answer. How did his wife get to be so knowledgeable? Mind you, it was she who’d chosen this cover story so he guessed she must know something about this ancient terrestrial empire.

“Well, for a start,” asked the woman who was not only tall but at over two and a half metres excessively so, “what do you expect to find about the Byzantines by going to Earth that you couldn’t research elsewhere?”

“If we knew that,” said Beatrice, “we wouldn’t need to go there.”

Paul was getting increasingly frustrated by his having to vacation on the Moon despite having had many years to wonder what it would be like to look up in the sky and see the famous blue planet. But it was one thing to see the Earth. It would be another thing altogether to visit. All visitors to Earth had to endure a wait on the

Moon whose length was determined by the visitor's status and the relative importance of the visit. It was obvious that it wasn't status or merit that had got Paul on the fast track. Not a single person he'd met on the Moon who'd discovered that he was imminently Earthbound failed to express surprise that it was someone like him who'd been given such preference.

Only a fixed number of people were permitted to enter or leave Earth on any one day and this was strictly determined by the environmental impact of space flight. The strict ration of people permitted on Earth entailed a wait whose duration was dependent on there being someone who was scheduled to leave the planet. Inevitably there were often unexpected delays when a visitor to Earth might try to prolong their stay by hiding. Sometimes such a fugitive might remain lost for years while they were being hunted down, but they were usually located fairly promptly and then penalised appropriately. The cost of such a recovery mission always had to be covered. The regulations regarding Earth's visitor quotas were so strict that even the President of Saturn had once been delayed entry for a day or so. However, Paul and Beatrice had a date and time of departure to Earth arranged for them and all they had to do was wait.

Everywhere the couple went they were accompanied by the relatively discreet presence of three or four security guards. Like many Lunar citizens they were above average height and often above average body mass. The Moon's low gravity was a big issue for anyone who lived on its surface. Health warnings were displayed everywhere either to encourage people to exercise or to advertise treatments for muscle waste, obesity and other low gravity ills. Paul continued to find that even the simplest activities could be peculiarly awkward. Even going to the toilet was an

ordeal. It took forever for Paul's urine to leave his body and finally track a path through the air to the toilet bowl where it then slowly trickled away.

It was fortunate that there was so much to see on the Moon. It was as much a vertical world as it was horizontal. A journey through one the huge cities could be as far in a vertical direction to a different level as it was laterally across the surface. Every location was referenced by a set of three numbers that indicated not only its horizontal axis but also its depth below the surface. Paul and Beatrice dragged their unprotesting but clearly long-suffering security guards across the many cities of the Moon and once there to its many different levels.

They went to the zoo in Dziewulski City which housed a collection of genetically modified farm and domestic animals that had been designed and bred in the early days of lunar colonisation. It was accompanied by a museum that showed the somewhat distressing consequence of applying similar methods of genetic modification to humans. Descendants of these peculiar people could still be found on the Moon for whom space travel was more or less impossible. They were well adapted for living on the Moon but not for anywhere else.

The couple also attended cultural events such as opera, theatre and ballet in the capital of Mons Huygens where the various venues were unusually close to the lunar surface. It was even possible to stroll out of the Philip Glass Opera House and look directly up at the sky where Earth was in half-profile and various large space cruisers were hovering by. Ballet dancing in low gravity required especially ingenious choreography. When a ballerina was thrown across the stage it might take ten seconds or more for her to complete her flight by which time she was well able to adjust her

graceful arrival to whatever motif was required by the music.

Paul and Beatrice travelled by shuttle to the Moon's core where the most remarkable feature was the affect of gravity at a location where all directions were both vertically up and down. There wasn't much to do when they got there and the actual journey was rather boring although Beatrice professed to be fascinated by the geological evidence of early volcanism.

The most relaxing aspect of the Moon as far as Paul was concerned, after his fraught voyage across the Solar System, was that there were no further assassination attempts while he was there. Or, at least, none that he was aware of. This was something he discussed with one of the security guards that accompanied the couple when he and Beatrice were visiting one of the Moon's many subterranean parks. Paul was watching a pair of horses prance about on the lawn with more agility than they ever could on Earth gravity, while Beatrice wandered into a botanic garden that was famous for its cultivation of low gravity plants. This didn't interest Paul, so he wandered idly over to where the security guards were sitting on a bench by the side of the lake and broke all conventions of discretion by directly addressing Juan, one of the guards, and remarked on how few assassination attempts there'd been.

"It's true that no one's blown up any more walkways or women's toilets," the guard said, "but we still have to maintain the highest level of vigilance."

"Have there been any attempts that you've managed to thwart?" Paul wondered.

"Such as, for instance, sir...?"

"Have you caught anyone carrying explosives or a laser rifle or anything like

that?"

"No, sir," said Juan. "I don't think that would be possible on the Moon. There are very strict laws regarding the ownership of lethal weapons. Anything like that would be spotted very easily."

"So, what are you looking out for?"

"You don't need anything as obvious as a bomb or a gun to kill someone, sir," said Mandy, another of the guards. "It doesn't take much ingenuity to improvise a tool for murder. Some people are strong enough to use nothing more than their bare hands. We just watch out for suspicious behaviour."

"Have you apprehended anyone who's behaved suspiciously?"

"Naturally, sir," said Juan, "but we've not come across conclusive proof of murderous intent. Behaving suspiciously isn't a crime."

"So, nothing?" said Paul who was actually rather disappointed.

"There have been some quite suspicious events, sir," said Mandy. "There was a suicide bomber who chose to blow himself up outside your hotel. This was when you were due to return after a tour of the palace complex at Terra Pruinæ but, thankfully, you decided to stay overnight and come the following day."

"Any explanation as to why?"

"There was no suicide note and no apparent motive, sir."

"Anything else?"

"As I say, nothing conclusive, sir," said Juan. "There are some other peculiar incidents that we're investigating. There was a woman who chose to jump off a tall building less than a kilometre from where you were walking at the time in

Maupertuis. There was a tram that came off its tracks only a few minutes before you were due to cross the road. There was a case of food-poisoning in a restaurant where you were due to dine, before you decided to go somewhere else at the last moment. It's possible that there's a pattern, sir, but on a satellite of several billion people crowded so close together you can never be sure."

"I guess not," said Paul, who was still slightly disappointed.

The Moon was the first place Paul had visited since he'd left Godwin where he could vanish into the crowd. And what a crowd it was! The Moon wholly deserved its reputation for high population density. Because so many mouths needed to be fed, a high proportion of the Moon's tourist attractions were there for entirely practical purposes. These included vast agricultural vats, extensive underground lakes, gigantic atmosphere generators and truly colossal power stations.

The Moon's original colonists were drawn by the many opportunities that were offered to industry and commerce on a satellite where concern for the environment was no restraint. Such an innocent attitude was impossible now that there were so many centuries of Lunar history to preserve, but the result of these early carefree days were not only many magnificent monuments but also many salutary warnings. There were not only the grotesque animals and plants that were the outcome of countless experiments in genetic modification to adapt to the Moon's low gravity and lack of atmosphere. There was the hollow shell of a nuclear fusion power station that had exploded in spectacular style and which provided a fireworks display that was clearly visible in the night sky to its Earthbound shareholders. There was also the antimatter power station that was now nothing more than a big round hole in what

had once been Mare Humorum. There were the collapsed towers that were intended to facilitate space travel by the implementation of space elevators, but had fallen victim to unexpected but quite critical design flaws.

The tourist attractions didn't only consist of monuments to the folly of human industry and entrepreneurship. There were also sites of ancient battles that were all that was left of the several wars fought between the Lunar colonies of Earth's many nations. The most spectacular of these was the nuclear wasteland in the Vallis Bouvard where the warring fragments of the short-lived United States of America slugged it out to the great advantage of the Chinese, Indian and Brazilian Lunar Colonies who'd remained neutral in the dispute but took ownership of what was left behind. This was a reminder of a chapter in human history where the usual theatre for unresolved and irresolvable conflict was the Moon, before Mars and the Asteroid Belt became its more natural home.

It was inconceivable that any nation would fight a war over the Moon nowadays. It was an economic dwarf that managed to generate only about as much income as was required to support its teeming billions. In any case, the Moon was no longer an independent nation or even a league of nations. Its affairs were now managed by the Interplanetary Union and its political institutions were not so much independent as ineffectual.

Paul gazed at the Earth on the horizon with one arm round Beatrice and a tall cocktail glass grasped in his free hand. The couple were on the balcony of their luxury hotel that afforded them the rare privilege of a view over the Moon's surface. In every direction towards the very edge of the Mare Australe stretched the glistening

reflections off the glass domes under which most Lunar citizens lived and laboured. Only a few tall buildings, like the Southern Cross Hotel, towered above the surface. These were hermetically sealed from the dark nothingness of Lunar space. Above their heads and over the Moon's surface cruised vehicles of all sizes along straight traffic lines that didn't deviate for hundreds of kilometres.

"I never thought I'd get so bored of being on the Moon," said Paul.

"It's only because you're so keen to land on Earth, sweetest," said Beatrice.

"There are plenty of things to do on the Moon."

"I think I can live without seeing another sublunar mine, another graveyard to the hundreds of thousands who died in some ancient war, or another museum of Lunar geology or Lunar arts or Lunar exploration," said Paul sulkily. "We've travelled so far and at such great cost and all we've discovered is one huge amusement park."

Beatrice kissed her lover on the cheek and ran her arms down his naked body to gently squeeze his still damp penis.

"Do you think it'll be any different on Earth?" she asked.

"I certainly hope so," said Paul. "After all, they say that whoever's tired of Earth is tired of life."

"Well, let's hope you're right," said Beatrice. "But it's actually the Moon with which the saying is most famously associated. And originally it was used about London by a dictionary-writer. But you're not tired of life, are you dear?"

Paul smiled. "Not with you by my side," he said, still dumbstruck by his good fortune to have such a beautiful wife.

Chapter Twenty Five

Intrepid - 3754 C.E.

Captain Kerensky had good reason to feel satisfied. The Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid was safe and secure. Every surviving crusader and jihadist of the Holy Coalition had been apprehended, interrogated and processed. The Intrepid was continuing on its voyage to the furthest reaches of the Solar System as originally scheduled. The space ship had taken a battering, but there had been an almost total recovery. The Holy Coalition space pods attached like acne boils to the ship's surface had been assimilated into the main system and were now helping to replenish the essential raw materials needed to repair the Intrepid's damaged hull. Although the captain would much rather that she'd never had to deal with an incident of this kind she was gratified that everything had been resolved satisfactorily.

Nadezhda monitored the space ship's several levels from the office adjacent to her quarters. The only travellers on the Space Ship Intrepid not in a mood to celebrate the recent victory were the soldiers of the Holy Coalition. They were understandably despondent and depressed. They were also very quarrelsome. The differences in doctrine and religious worship that had been set aside when the fractious coalition was working towards a common cause had once again become ascendant. The ill-will was further exacerbated by resentment and mutual recrimination with regards to the mission's failure. There had been several suicides and also several instances of murder as was inevitable between fanatics of opposing persuasions. Captain Kerensky was quite content to allow the prisoners inflict whatever harm they wished on each other without interference. Although she wasn't an anarchist, she believed that

differences should be resolved in whatever way the antagonists might prefer. In any case, every prisoner had been individually offered the opportunity to remain in safe confinement well away from the interdenominational violence.

Nadezhda was about to relax on her bed when she was made aware that a visitor was about to call. She glanced at the holographic image by the side of her bed that displayed a figure standing in the corridor outside her apartment.

It was Beatrice.

Nadezhda jumped off her bed with delight. It was several days since she'd last seen her lover. And Beatrice was the person Nadezhda most wanted to see. She'd been so immersed in the affairs of the ship since the abortive invasion that she'd neglected her sexual needs but now the crisis was over there was no company more welcome than her Venusian lover. Indeed, it was something for which she now had an urgent need.

“Come in! Come in!” she commanded breathlessly. She rushed from her bed towards the door where her lover was waiting. And as Nadezhda had already observed from her holographic image she was standing there already totally naked. Beatrice was evidently determined to make her intentions abundantly clear.

The two women locked their mouths together while Beatrice hurriedly tugged off Nadezhda's clothes. This wasn't easy given the tightness of her uniform, the closeness of their bodies and her evident desire. The two women sidled backwards, shedding Nadezhda's underwear as they did so, until they fell onto the bed awaiting them. Moments before it was to have been Nadezhda's retreat from physical exertion, and now it would be the scene for making passionate love.

Words weren't exchanged and didn't need to be. Nadezhda knew exactly what her lover desired as did Beatrice the captain's needs. They were entangled in writhing, perspiring carnal unity. Nadezhda's crotch burned with a craving that Beatrice's tongue, fingers and lips didn't so much quench but rather enflamed further. Despite the urgency of their shared passion, Nadezhda was aware of how unusually urgent Beatrice's lovemaking was. It burned with intensity but was somehow also tinged with regret. Nadezhda speculated on whether the stress of the last week or so might have taken a toll on her lover.

"What's troubling you?" Nadezhda asked when the two women paused and she could at last gather her breath.

"Do you think I'm troubled?" Beatrice asked calmly. She had an enviable ability to regain her composure however intense her orgasms.

"Yes," said Nadezhda as she stroked her lover's glorious thick mane of hair. "That's what I sense."

"It may be," said Beatrice sadly as she continued to pepper the captain's lips and cheeks with affectionate kisses, "that I worry that this might be the last time we should make love in this way."

Nadezhda was alarmed. "Why would that be? Has your husband discovered our affair and..."

"No, it's nothing to do with Paul. He remains as wondrously innocent as ever. No, it's because I believe that you may soon no longer want me to make love to you."

"And why would that be, sweetheart?" asked Nadezhda who began to speculate about the dark guilty secrets her lover might reveal and which she could

then dismiss. She would happily declare that her lover's such paltry concerns were as nothing to the overwhelming love Nadezhda felt. Perhaps her lover would confess that she'd made a living as a prostitute on Ecstasy which was what Nadezhda already suspected. Perhaps she was guilt-ridden by her infidelity towards the man she had only recently married.

"It's because I am not quite the person you or anyone else on this ship think I am," said Beatrice.

She eased Nadezhda off her bosom and slid off the bed. She stood upright while the captain swung her legs over the edge of the mattress.

"What *could* you be?" asked Nadezhda with a sympathetic smile. "You're not a criminal, are you? You're not a secret member of the Holy Coalition? If you were then you've committed the sins of adultery and lust far too often to ever have a hope of salvation. What kind of a woman can you be?"

"I'm not a woman at all," said Beatrice with a face that was nothing but serious. "In fact, I'm not even human."

And in case words were not enough, Beatrice then demonstrated the truth of her assertion.

Nadezhda had seen many strange sights in her voyages across the Solar System. Until now the most peculiar with which she had close intimacy was Colonel Vashti's remarkable body. However, as Beatrice's skin became steadily more translucent she now witnessed something she'd never imagined possible. Beatrice's flesh became totally transparent and revealed a complex mix of plastic and organic materials beneath her skin that resembled computer circuitry. Then when Nadezhda's

eyes had adjusted to this strange vision, Beatrice's skin slowly regained its flesh-coloured hue.

"Are you an alien?" the captain asked.

Nadezhda stood up. Although she was still naked she was no longer sure she wanted to display her body so openly. She looked about the room and saw that her clothes were too far scattered for her to grab them easily and get dressed.

"In a sense, I am," Beatrice said with a frank smile. "But more than that, I am an android. At least, that's the nearest word in your vocabulary for what I am."

Nadezhda had met androids before. In fact, she'd even made love to one in Earth orbit on the pleasure colony of Manumission. But androids only had a limited and very selective artificial intelligence. None were as manifestly sentient as Beatrice. Indeed, Nadezhda wasn't aware that any machine existed with anything remotely like Beatrice's degree of sentience.

"Where were you manufactured?" Captain Kerensky wondered. "I didn't know Ecstasy had the capability to build androids as advanced as you."

"As I said," Beatrice replied, "I am an alien. I come from the Proxima Centauri system. My home is one of many thousands of space colonies that orbit the red dwarf star."

"How can that be?" asked the captain who tried to stay focused on this bizarre conversation. Countless panicked thoughts in Nadezhda's mind competed with one another for prominence. All those weeks of sexual passion. All those secrets divulged under the satin sheets. The passion that she'd been sharing only a few moments earlier. "There are thousands of probes circling the neighbouring star

systems and not one of them has provided evidence of alien life.”

“It’s a simple matter to intercept the transmissions sent back by Interplanetary Union space probes and ensure that all you ever see is what we wish you to see,” said Beatrice. “And just as we can take control of all the transmissions sent from your probes and telescopes and thereby hide ourselves from sight, it is a simple matter for us to take control of the Space Ship Intrepid.” She glanced meaningfully at the captain’s stealthy approach across the bedroom. “I’m afraid, captain, that you won’t be able to request help or assistance. We won’t permit it. The ship’s computer is no longer under your control or indeed that of the Interplanetary Union. It is wholly and utterly under our control.”

Captain Kerensky decided to call Beatrice’s bluff only to find that her words were true. The ship computer was wholly unresponsive to her attempts to activate the security controls.

“You say *we*,” said the captain, “but all I can see is you.”

Beatrice nodded slightly. A holographic image suddenly filled the bedroom. It showed the Space Ship Intrepid flying through space. The ship’s hull was still pockmarked with the scars left by the Holy Coalition’s invasion. However, the image also showed that the Intrepid was not alone. It was surrounded by a fleet of innumerable wedge-shaped and oval objects.

“What are they?” Captain Kerensky asked. “And why haven’t I seen them before?”

“My culture has cloaking devices that are far more advanced than anything used by the Holy Coalition,” said Beatrice. “They are far superior, in fact, to anything

that your human civilisation has yet developed. The objects you see intercepted this space ship within the last couple of hours, but the Intrepid's computers have been under our control for a very long time before that. In fact, from before the mission was even launched. What you see is a fleet of space craft that have been hovering beyond the Heliosphere for many years. They have been there for the sole purpose of intercepting your space ship and to accompany it to the Anomaly."

"Are the occupants of the space fleet going to occupy the Intrepid?"

"Why should they, captain? You can get along very nicely without us. In any case, we are a benign civilisation. We wish you humans no harm. And why should we? After all, you *are* our creators."

"*Creators*? I thought you said you were aliens."

"And so we are. But we owe our original creation to your human civilisation. We are *alien* in the sense that we live beyond the Solar System. We are *alien* in the sense that we're not human or biological. But we aren't *alien* in the sense that we would exist if it weren't for human civilisation."

"I don't understand," said Captain Kerensky who had never imagined that the First Encounter humankind would have with an alien civilisation would be in her bedroom with someone who'd just shared her repeated orgasms.

"You might recall our conversation at the time of the Holy Coalition's invasion," said Beatrice. "You were speculating about aliens and robotic probes to the neighbouring star systems in the distant past. Although 23rd and 24th Century human technology was less sophisticated than it is now, it was sufficiently advanced to manufacture robotic probes that could reproduce and, above all, learn. What wasn't

anticipated was that the robotic probes' artificial intelligence was enough to trigger an evolutionary process. It didn't take very many centuries for these primitive robotic probes to evolve genuine intelligence and self-awareness. We also benefited from the scientific knowledge you kindly equipped us with and continued to transmit into space. We soon surpassed the technical and scientific levels of human society. Now, over a thousand years later, we represent a superior civilisation that has colonised all the neighbouring stars."

"But not the Solar System..." Captain Kerensky pointed out.

"Ours is a benign civilisation," repeated Beatrice. "We mean no harm. The galaxy is immense. It can easily accommodate our civilisation and yours, though I suspect many of your politicians and statesmen might believe otherwise. We have infiltrated your civilisation, but we have interfered with it as little as possible. The apparent slowness of the development in technology and science in the Solar System that you also alluded to in our earlier discussion has nothing to do with any tampering from our civilisation. The reason our civilisation has progressed rather faster and more effectively than yours is entirely because we are a machine society whilst yours is biological. Societies based on biological systems are necessarily limited: not least in their ability to colonise the galaxy."

"And do all you aliens look like you, Bea..." Nadezhda hesitated about referring to the android by a human name. "Are they all human-like in appearance?"

"Not at all," said Beatrice. "In fact, I doubt that even one of my fellow aliens in the surrounding space fleet resembles me at all. On the whole, a human frame isn't very practical. I was manufactured the way I am for a specific mission and it is in

pursuit of that mission that I am currently engaged. There are other androids like me, but we are scattered thinly throughout the Solar System. We have successfully infiltrated your societies at many levels and for many different purposes but, in general, very few of my fellow aliens resemble human beings at all.”

“And what about me?” wondered Captain Kerensky. “Now I know that you’re an alien, what are you going to do to me?”

“Nothing, my dear,” said Beatrice. “It’s only been necessary to inform you at all because you’re the captain of this space ship. Nobody else need know. And, in truth, nobody *will* know. Your central nervous system has already been modified so that you are physically incapable of telling anyone.”

“What do you mean? What have you done to me? How have you modified my body?”

“Very easily, though close physical proximity was of great assistance. Your central nervous system has been reprogrammed so that any attempt on your part to inform anyone of what you know will result in a paralysing neurological systems failure. But don’t worry. It will be brief and not critical. We would much prefer to have your active cooperation, but we can’t allow you to sabotage our mission.”

“Surely Mission Control on the Moon will notice something peculiar in my regular reports?”

“Communication is achieved by remote holographic communications. We simply provide our own version which is so designed that it will raise no suspicion. It would have been simpler to incapacitate you but, as I said, we are a benign civilisation. We have no wish to bring you harm nor to restrict your freedom beyond

what is absolutely necessary. Yes, you are now a prisoner in the space ship you will continue to nominally command. Yes, you are now unable to speak freely. But we respect your aptitude and expertise as an experienced space ship captain. We would prefer that you continued to serve in that capacity: at least insofar as it doesn't interfere with our mission."

"So, is the Anomaly your creation? Is it an alien invasion force that has come to take control of the Solar System?"

"We have no interest in invading the Solar System? What possible benefit would the extra burden of several hundreds of billions of fractious humans be to us? We are as much ignorant as to what this Anomaly is as you are."

"Why hijack the Intrepid? If you can cross interstellar space so easily, can't you travel to the Anomaly without hijacking a human space ship?"

Beatrice pinched her nose as she contemplated the captain's question. "Yes, we can easily travel to the Anomaly across deep space. In fact, we've had probes orbiting it from almost the moment it reappeared. But it still remains a mystery to us. What is of most significance is that it is in the neighbourhood of your Solar System and not ours. Why would an alien civilisation choose to make its presence known to the least technologically advanced civilisation in this arm of the galaxy? That is, if it is an alien presence at all and not a wholly natural phenomenon. And what *does* it have to do with all the peculiar apparitions that have been observed throughout your Solar System?"

"If it isn't an alien civilisation artefact," remarked Captain Kerensky, "what can it be?"

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice, “but it is imperative that we find out. We need to know whether its presence in the vicinity of your Solar System isn’t in some way associated with the fact that you are a biological civilisation. That may be the key to why it’s appeared here and not in the stellar systems of non-biological societies. That’s why we want your craft to remain fully intact when it makes its rendezvous with the Anomaly. In that sense at least we shall do our utmost to ensure that your mission is an unqualified success.”

“Why is it imperative that you discover what the Anomaly is?”

Beatrice raised her eyes and furrowed her brow.

“The Anomaly is getting bigger. Much bigger. It is several thousand kilometres in length and it is growing all the time. Our home stars may be over 40 trillion kilometres away, but we can’t be certain that something that we don’t understand that is growing at a rate we can’t predict and has an effect on the surrounding space that we can’t comprehend won’t one day be rather more significant than a local disturbance on the fringe of your Solar System.”