

Τηε Ανδρομεδα Σεεδ

βψ Λεε Εδγαρ

DEDICATED TO WIVES EVERYWHERE

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Andromeda Time

THE ANΔΡΟΜΕΔΑ ΣΕΕΔ

The Director of the Europa Space Corporation was a powerful, influential man and, to a great extent, his word was law on the continental mainland. His secretary knew this as she reached out her hand towards the handle of the boardroom door. She then hesitated because she also knew just how much he hated unscheduled interruptions, especially when he was in the middle of chairing an important meeting with the four senior members of the Space Exploration Partnership.

'Excuse me, Mr Thompson,' she said nervously as the great man stopped speaking and every eye focussed upon her. She knew them all well - Professor Heinrich Akherd of the National Space Laboratory, Doctor Hans Bartek of the Rocket Propulsion Unit, Natasha Ralentov of the Orion Base Committee and General Dwight Phillips of Army Intelligence.

'What is it, Janet?' the Director said impatiently, clearly indignant at the

disturbance.

She swallowed. 'Mrs Hardy is here to see you, sir.'

There were several seconds of silence before the Director straightened. 'Very well, show her in.'

Grateful for the reprieve, the secretary instantly vanished only to be replaced by a very much younger woman who stood in the doorway dressed in a pair of pale blue overalls which bore the crimson collar identifying pilot and navigation officers currently serving on the space programme.

The Director welcomed her warmly. 'Come in, Cassi. I think you know everyone here.'

The girl's smile was both broad and genuine as she bounced into the room and ran her deep, blue eyes around the group, nodding to each in turn.

'I had to come at once,' she said pleasantly but with respect. 'I'm afraid there will have to be at least one personnel change before the launch on Friday.'

The Director looked puzzled. 'Who is not ready?'

'Commander Carter, for one. Pilot Officer Spencer, for another.'

He smiled. 'What is the problem, Cassi?'

'Those men are just not shaping up to the training. Commander Carter failed again in the simulator this morning and Officer Spencer got us lost just going to Luna Base. On Friday's mission, we cannot afford such sloppiness.'

'But, my dear, you must remember that everyone makes a mistake once in a while.'

Cassi's face flushed. 'I do not make such serious errors of judgement.'

'With respect,' said the bespectacled Hans Bartek, a slight smile touching his lips: 'You are just a little different to the norm.'

Cassi pulled back her shoulders. 'Doctor, we are talking about getting a three-hundred tonne space-cruiser off the ground, something which has never been done before. I know you said we could fit solid-fuel boosters to assist the take-off but that does not alter the fact that we have to get it right first time. It is my firm belief that the present crew are incapable of getting Wayfarer Two into Earth orbit.'

'Don't forget that all them underwent a whole series of strenuous tests and exercises before they were presented for selection. In theory, each one of them should have been ready even before you began their final training.'

'But they have been no farther than Orion Base: they have not seen space properly; they have not experienced what it is like to have to make split-second decisions when the lives and safety of the ship and crew are dependant upon you. Instead, they seem to see the whole venture as some sort of a game, one big joke.'

'It sounds to me,' said the dark-haired Natasha Ralentov: 'As if you are suffering from the typical male harassment that is usual on this sort of project. None of the men think a woman is capable of taking a breath without seeking advice about it first.'

Cassi grinned at the older woman. 'Male chauvinism, I can handle - I've had to cope with that ever since I came to Earth. It's the sheer incompetence I cannot stomach.'

The Director sighed. 'Very well, Cassi. I will look into it and let you know later. Go home for now and look after that sick husband of yours.'

She smiled once more. 'Thank you, Alan.' She nodded to the table. 'Gentlemen, Natasha.' She turned and left.

No-one spoke for a long time.

'Well?' said the Director eventually.

'It's too late,' said the General. 'We cannot change the flight crew at this stage.'

The Director looked at Hans Bartek. 'Could we delay the take-off, Doctor?'

The inventor of the Proton Drive shook his head. 'Not possible. To gain the greatest advantage of the positive Lunar alignment, the launch must go ahead as planned.'

'Are we not getting just a little paranoid about the whole thing?' said the Intelligence Chief.

'I'm sure you mean well, General Phillips, but this could be a serious complication.'

The General stood up. 'Look, I've known Steve Carter since he went to college with my own son, and Pete Spencer gained the highest marks at Flying

School. I would gladly stake my life on both of them.'

'But you do not have to, General. It is the other crew members whose lives will be at stake next Friday. As Mrs Hardy so rightly said, we have one shot at this and one shot only. Wayfarer was never designed to be launched from Earth.'

'Then why are we doing it?'

'If you remember, we had the choice of either dismantling her when she landed last year or of trying to launch her intact. After somewhat lengthy discussions, we all agreed to go for a launch with boosters to save time. We must be able to rely on those men.'

'Are you not placing too much trust in the judgement of someone who is little more than a mere child?' the General sneered. 'Just because she happens to be married to your nephew.'

The Director pulled himself erect, ready for confrontation, when he was interrupted by the calm, confident voice of an older man who stroked his beard thoughtfully.

'Has the General already forgotten that it was Mrs Hardy who single-handedly brought Wayfarer Two back from Saturn? Has he overlooked the fact that she then docked her ship at Orion Space Station, a job normally completed by a minimum of three officers? Has he also missed the point that it was this "child" who landed Wayfarer at Europoort in the first place with, I might add, meticulous precision?'

'I thought you might take her side, Professor.'

'I take no sides, General. I simply look at things objectively, without emotion. If I was one of the crew members on Wayfarer Two next Friday, I know who I would rather have sitting at the controls.'

'You would have the girl personally supervise the launch?'

'If Commander Carter is not capable...?'

'We only have her word for that,' the General snapped.

'True. But I for one trust her judgement. Perhaps if Commander Carter were to watch her in action, he might prove suitable to continue the mission after the stop-over at Orion. Wayfarer will be docked there for three days while we load the supplies that would be too heavy to have on board during lift-off.'

The Director looked around the room. 'I suggest we dispense with further discussion and, as time is short, vote on it immediately.'

There was a show of hands and the General was alone.

'Very well,' said the senior official. 'I will ask Commander Carter to stand down for the time being. Mrs Hardy will command the launch on Friday.'

SPACE Commander Stephen Carter was livid at the news. 'Goddamn it, Pete. That little slut has gotten her own way after all - she's got me off the launch staff. My first chance to get my name in headlines and she mashes it for me. I could ring her bloody neck.'

The other man smiled. 'I'm off, too, remember. It seems she's got it in for both of us.'

'Yeah, but you had little to do during the launch anyway.' He slammed his fist down on the table. 'Damn it all, she's just a kid.'

Peter Spencer grinned. 'And you're a man, right?'

'I thought so. One day, I'm gonna get her alone on Beta deck and wipe that cheeky smile right off her face.'

'I think Marshal Hardy might have something to say about that.'

'That pathetic husband of her's? He's useless since he got shot up last year. Nowadays, he couldn't fight a teddy bear and win.'

'He still carries a lot of weight around Europoort thanks to his uncle's influence. He might have proved himself to everyone else by climbing the ladder of success unaided, but his sort always run to family when in real trouble. I'd be very careful if I were you.'

'One day, I'll get her somewhere where she's light years beyond the reach of her friends and family. Two minutes in an empty airlock can play havoc with her so-perfect complexion.'

Pete shivered at thought of someone so lovely being spread all over the walls of a decompression chamber by her own internal forces.

'What are you going to do?' he asked to take his mind off the terrible mental picture.

The Europa Corporation's youngest cruiser Commander grinned wickedly. 'I don't know yet, but I'll think of something.'

MIKE Hardy looked up and smiled as the door opened. He got up from his chair and kissed his wife warmly. 'Hello, gorgeous. Good day?'

Cassi shrugged. 'So-so. I don't know if we're going to be ready for Friday's launch.'

'Problems?'

She sat down at the round kitchen table, frustration clearly etched into her face. 'It's just that the men are not coming up to scratch. I show them a dozen times but they still get it wrong.'

'You are pushing them rather hard. They are only human, you know.'

'You'd think at least one of them would have a little gumption, wouldn't you?' She looked down at her hands. 'I've asked Alan to take two of them off the team.'

Mike looked concerned and sat down opposite her. 'Who, in particular?'

'Commander Carter, for one.'

'Steve won't like that. He's a proud man with a lot to prove and he won't take too kindly to you going over his head to the Directorate. Not only that, he's headstrong and can become very upset at someone getting the better of him, especially if it's a woman.'

'I'm sorry, Mike. I hold nothing against him personally - in some ways, I quite like him. However, lives are at risk on this mission.'

Mike laughed. 'Cassi, my love. Lives are at risk on every space mission. Even taking a ride on the shuttle to Orion Base is still constituted dangerous.'

Cassi reached out and took his hands in hers. 'This is different, Mike. We are not launching a mere shuttle, we are lifting a space cruiser into orbit. We cannot use the Proton Drive within the lower atmosphere for fear of radioactive contamination. The reactor itself must be shut down prior to launch in case of an accident.'

'Will the Main Drive not be sufficient to get it up?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Escape velocity is almost thirty-thousand kilometres per hour and the Main Drive was not designed to reach such speeds, even with the aid of the auxiliary drive.'

'Is that why they're going to use solid-fuel boosters?'

'Yes. I'm told they used them all the time in the nineteen-nineties for the early vertical take-off shuttles. The timing of the drive and boosters must be very precise. Steve Carter has got it wrong three times already. He doesn't seem to take his responsibilities seriously at all.'

'How many times did he actually get it right?' Mike asked quietly.

'Oh, I don't know - fifty, a hundred times - I wasn't counting.'

'Then by the law of averages, he will get it right on Friday.'

Cassi raised her head quickly. 'We can't take that chance. He can't make a mess of it and then, a thousand feet up in the air say "Sorry folks, let's do that again" . He'll kill them all and destroy Wayfarer Two in the process.'

Mike grinned. 'It's the ship you're really worried about, isn't it?'

'Not exactly. But I was incubated on board Wayfarer and I did live on her for nineteen of my twenty years. The two of us became quite attached during that period.'

'You are just like your father at times, you know.'

She sat up straight. 'So I should be.'

'Can you never forget you are the daughter of a space pilot? Now that he's away in Wayfarer One, you no longer have to mimic him. Be yourself for a change.'

The phone rang and Mike picked it up. 'Mike Hardy.' He listened and then handed it to his wife. 'It's for you.'

Cassi pushed the long, golden hair from her face and placed the instrument to her ear as she began to put a couple of things into the microwave oven. 'This is Cassiopeia Hardy speaking.'

'It's Alan Thompson, Cassi. I have good news for you.'

She held up her head. 'Yes?'

'The Directorate want you to take Wayfarer Two up on Friday.'

Her face lit up. 'They do?'

'You were right to inform us of the situation. Commander Carter will go up by shuttle and dock with you at Orion Base Station.'

'No,' Cassi said quickly. 'I want him on board ship with me.'

There was a silence at the other end of the line.

'If he is ever to learn, he must observe the way it should be done. He has to fly her all the way to Titan, remember.'

'Is that what you really want?'

'Of course. I hold no personal grudge against the Commander.'

The voice sounded relieved. 'I'm glad to hear you say that, Cassi. You did have us worried for a while.'

The young woman smiled. 'I never hate anyone, Alan. You should know that. My ancestry would not permit such a negative emotion.'

'Yes, I'd forgotten. How's Mike?'

'Almost back to normal,' she said as she turned and looked at her husband, slapping his wrist playfully as he picked at the nuts in a bowl on the table. 'I have to take him to Bruxelles tomorrow to see Doctor Pederson for his final check-up. If Jon gives him the all-clear, Mike could be back at work next week.'

'That is good news. Ever since he caught that bullet in the shoulder, we were worried that he might be permanently handicapped in some way.'

'Oh, he will be,' said Cassi with a twinkle in her eye. 'It seems probable that he may never be able to take the G-forces of a shuttle launch any more, so I will have him here all to myself.'

'You are a very special person, Cassi.'

She grinned cheekily. 'I am, aren't I?'

The Director laughed. 'Give my love to Maggie.'

'I will. See you on Thursday for the pre-launch briefing.'

'Will you tell Commander Carter that he's in on the launch or shall I?'

'I'll tell him myself when he's got it right on the simulator a few more times.' She rang off.

'I think you should tell him right away,' suggested Mike.

'No,' she said, checking the timer on the cooker. 'Let him stew for a bit.'

'I thought the Andromedan Race didn't hold grudges.'

'They don't,' she said defensively as she served dinner. 'I'm simply making sure the Commander is kept on the ball. If I tell him now, he might relax and not take the matter too seriously.'

'I give in.'

'Not yet, you don't. Where's that daughter of yours?'

'Maggie's next door, playing with her friend.'

Cassi peered into the steaming casserole. 'Call her for me, will you? Tell her dinner is ready and on the table.'

He patted her bottom playfully. 'At your command, your Highness.'

Cassi turned sharply, frowning. 'How did you know?'

'What?' said Mike, surprised.

'What you just said. Who told you? Dad?'

Mike looked puzzled. 'About what?'

Cassi hesitated, realising that he probably didn't know after all. She turned to hide her embarrassment. 'It doesn't matter. You dish up and I'll go and get Maggie.'

Mike looked dazed for a minute as his wife ran out of the house. He picked up the phone. 'Europort Launch Centre? Put me through to the electronics expert working on Wayfarer Two's computer.'

There was a slight delay before a voice answered. 'Wayfarer Control Centre.'

'Marshal Hardy here. Can you run an identity check through Iris for me, please?'

'Certainly, Marshal. One moment.'

Mike tapped his fingers impatiently as he looked out for Cassi's return with the daughter of his deceased first wife.

'The computer is ready, Marshal,' said the voice. 'Who is the subject of your enquiry?'

'Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Hardy.'

There was a pause. 'Nothing under that name, sir.'

'Try it under her maiden name - Cassiopeia Duncan.'

'Very well, sir.' A pause. 'I have it. What is it you wish to know?'

Mike asked him several questions, thanked the man and then slowly replaced

the phone onto its bracket as Cassi returned with his seven-year-old daughter.

'Daddy, Philippa's got a new bike and she let me ride it.'

Mike seemed distracted. 'Did she now?'

Cassi was quick to notice. 'Is anything wrong?' she said as they sat down to eat.

'It's nothing,' he lied.

Cassi put down her fork. 'Tell me.'

'I've just spoken to Iris.'

The young woman looked shocked. 'Why?'

'Because you wouldn't discuss it with me. Why didn't you tell me before?'

'You didn't ask and it wasn't really that important.'

'How could you say that?' He paused. 'Who else knows?'

'Only my father.'

'I wish you'd told me.'

'Would it have made any difference? To us, I mean?'

He shook his head. 'Of course not. I married you because I loved you. I still do.'

'Then why bring up my parentage now?'

'Because your father gave me the distinct impression that the female egg he fertilised on board Wayfarer was selected at random from the Andromeda Seed.'

'No,' said Cassi slowly. 'I knew it was not random. He told me once he had loved the donor very much and he wished to preserve her memory through me.'

'But it's not just her memory which has been preserved is it?'

Cassi looked down at her hands on the table. 'How much do you know?'

'Everything that has been programmed into Iris about you.'

She looked up. 'You know my mother's name?'

He nodded. 'Yes.'

'I wish I had met her. Father said she was a wonderful person. Kind, beautiful - everything a woman should be.'

Mike sighed. 'Such a waste that she had to die along with the rest of her people.'

'Daddy,' piped up Margaret Hardy. 'What do you mean "her people" ?'

He looked at his wife. 'Ask your new mummy. Ask her who she really is.'

The child looked at her step-mother as a tear ran down her cheek. 'Why are you crying, Cassi?'

'Because my own mummy died so that I could live, she and all her family.'

'That's sad.'

'It is,' said her father with compassion, 'considering who she was. It must have hurt your father a great deal to have to leave her behind.'

Cassi lay her head on Mike's shoulder. 'It did. He told me so.'

Maggie looked from one to the other of the grown-ups she loved dearly. 'Daddy. Who was Cassi's mummy?'

'A very special person, my love. She was a lady called Lyniera - Queen Lyniera. It seems that your new mummy is, in fact, Princess Cassiopeia of Andromeda.'

THE road traffic was fairly busy as the sleek car travelled along the main autoroute to Bruxelles. The weather was fine for the time of year and Cassi was excited at the events shortly to take place. Mike Hardy hummed to a tune on the radio.

'This could be my final check-up,' he suddenly said.

His wife smiled as she held the car steady in the gathering traffic. 'I hope so. I want you fit and well again.'

'So I can get on with some work, eh?'

'I didn't say that,' she said with a wry smile.

'Ah, but that's what you meant, isn't it?'

'Don't you go putting words in my mouth, Michael Hardy. I just want you back to normal as quickly as possible. Sitting round at home doesn't suit you at all. It makes you bad-tempered and miserable - not at all like the handsome Security Marshal I met on Orion last January.'

He laughed. 'Flattery will get you everywhere.'

'I hope so,' she said with flashing eyes.

'Sitting around at home doesn't suit you either, does it?'

Cassi shrugged. 'I'll get used to it in time, though this crew training at

the launch complex is keeping me fairly occupied at the moment.'

'Well, it will soon be all over. Two days from now, Wayfarer will be in geostationary orbit, docked with Orion Station, and you will be on the shuttle back to me.'

'Sounds good,' sighed Cassi. 'No more messing about at Luna Base with a bunch of men leering at me in the changing room.'

'Does that upset you?'

Cassi laughed a little. 'Not in itself. Father warned me about some of the strange habits of Earthmen before we arrived here. No, it's just that their time and efforts could be more profitably spent than in egging each other on as to which of them can get the better of me.'

Mike frowned. 'There's nothing serious going on, I hope. Because if they've touched you...'

'No, nothing like that,' Cassi reassured him. 'It's just it's all one big joke to them and I'm usually the butt of it.'

'You don't mind?'

She grinned. 'Like you said - just two more days. Soon after that, they'll be away to Titan and I'll be free for a while and all yours.'

'Until you have to start training the next crew.'

'That won't be until we've heard back from this first lot.' She glanced into the rear-view mirror. 'Tell me, why do you think that grey Land-Cruiser is following us?'

Mike turned his head and looked behind them. 'There are thousands of those vehicles about. What makes you think it's following us?'

She shrugged. 'It was behind us soon after we left the launch complex.'

'Plenty of people use this road to Bruxelles.'

'But when we stopped for fuel, he did too.'

Mike grinned. 'Even Land Cruisers need fuel, my love.'

'He didn't stop for fuel, he simply waited for us. Are you sure it's not one of your own security team sent to keep tabs on us?'

Mike looked round once more. 'Not on my instructions, it isn't. I can't see the occupants as the windows are tinted.' He turned back to the front. 'Ignore him, he'll go away.'

The traffic got even busier as they approached the city and joined the ring road. After a few kilometres, they turned off down a slip road and, five minutes later, were climbing the hill to the hospital.

'How was the journey?' greeted Doctor Pederson as they met at reception and the men shook hands.

'Terrible,' said Mike. 'That road seems busier each time we come here.'

'You should have seen it when the inner roads were open.'

Cassi looked aghast. 'You mean cars actually drove into the city?'

'Oh, yes. In fact, right up until the end of the last century, cars and lorries were allowed into the hearts of most European cities. Now only land shuttles and bicycles use the centres during daylight hours.'

'But how did the traffic get around?'

Jon grinned. 'It didn't, most of the time. Tell me, which of you drove here today?'

Cassi held up her hand. 'Guilty.'

The doctor turned to her husband. 'Women drivers, huh?'

Mike came to his wife's rescue. 'She's learning well. She should be ready for her test soon.'

'You like driving?' Jon asked her.

Cassi nodded. 'Sometimes. Though I would much rather take a spaceship through the asteroid belt blindfold than try to negotiate the Antwerpen by-pass in the rush-hour.'

Jon Pederson laughed. 'I think I know what you mean.' He nodded to a door. 'In here.' The three of them entered. 'I won't be long, Cassi. Why don't you take a stroll round the grounds while I take a look at your man?'

Cassi smiled and nodded, letting herself out through the french windows and onto the lawn. All around her, the trees were shedding their gold and brown leaves. It had been winter when she had first come to Earth and she had initially thought Earth to be a stark, desolate planet. However, Spring had come in due course and Cassi had wallowed in the bright sunshine, watching birds and animals playing for the first time in her life, excited at the variety of colours and smells. She would always remember Spring for another

reason. It was as the tulips had bloomed in the many fields and gardens of East Anglia that she had gone to Mike's family's home near Cambridge where they had wed.

Cassi liked Mike's family. They were intelligent yet homely and genuine and had welcomed her as one of their own despite the difference in race. Yes, she would always remember Springtime. But then had come summer and Cassi was no longer the ivory-skinned, somehow fragile-looking girl from Andromeda but a suntanned beauty who turned heads all over Europe.

She shivered slightly as she walked into the shadow of a big building and around by the grassy slope overlooking the river. *That's odd*, she thought, *there is a Land-Cruiser parked outside the hospital identical to the one on the road from Europoort*. Casually, she glanced around but no-one seemed to be paying her any attention at all as she sauntered towards it. There was nothing remarkable about it - empty, of course, but she placed her hand on the bonnet and mentally noted that the engine was still hot.

The sun was warm though the breeze cool as she walked back towards the main block without seeing anything or anyone she recognised. She shrugged as the main doors slid open and she walked into the warm corridor.

'Come in,' said Jon as she knocked on the door to the examination room.

Cassi entered as Mike was buttoning up his shirt.

He smiled. 'It seems I'm okay for work, my darling. Uncle Alan will be pleased.'

'I'm sure he will,' Cassi said with a smile.

Jon put down his notes. 'Stick to driving for the time being, Mike. In a month or two, you can risk using the 'copter.'

'Okay, doctor,' Mike said officiously. 'I suppose no trips up to Orion for a while?'

'Definitely not! The G-forces experienced during lift-off are for the very fit alone.'

Mike sighed. 'Okay. I'll heed your advice.'

'You do that.' Jon smiled. 'Must you go back straight away, or do you want to see Tara? She is still here, you know.'

'I'd like that. I haven't seen that baby of her's yet.'

'Then step this way.'

Jon led the way along the passage until they came to a private section. In a room at the back was a dark-haired woman in her mid-twenties who turned at their arrival. Her face lit up. 'Cassi, Mike, how good to see you both.'

The girls embraced. 'You, too, Tara.'

'Come and see my baby.'

Cassi bent down and pulled back the covers a little to look at the tiny scrap. 'He's beautiful. What are you going to call him?'

'I haven't decided yet. How about something Andromedan? He is, after all, half Andromedan.'

'I don't know.' Cassi looked at the mother. 'Can I pick him up?'

'Help yourself. He is your brother in a manner of speaking.'

'From the Andromeda Seed,' confirmed Jon. 'The first of many successful cross-breeds, I hope.'

Cassi held the two-week-old child carefully in her arms and looked down at the tiny face. 'He's perfect.'

'Holding that baby, you look the real mother yourself,' said Mike.

'Soon, my darling,' she said quietly without taking her eyes from the baby. 'Very soon.'

'Are you planning to go back to Orion, Tara?' asked Mike.

'Not likely. I've had enough space travel for a while. I'm going to remain here on Earth with my new baby.'

'Are you staying for a meal?' Jon Pederson asked the duo.

'I'm afraid we really must leave,' said Cassi. 'Young Maggie will be home from school by the time we get back.' She handed the boy back to his mother and kissed her cheek. 'Thanks. I'll return the favour one day.'

'Who's driving back?' asked the medical man as he shook hands with Mike at the main door.

'Cassi needs the practice,' said Mike.

'Safe journey then,' Jon said as he kissed Cassi's cheek.

They got into the car and Cassi started the engine, waving as she pulled away. Driving carefully through the outer gates, she turned down the long

drive that wound around the hill to join the by-pass at the bottom.

'Mike,' she said quietly as the tyres squealed on the first bend. 'The brakes don't work.'

Mike whirled round in his seat. 'What!'

Cassi stamped the pedal with no result as the big car began to pick up speed on the gradient. She tried the handbrake but it was also inoperative.

'Rev up and then change down,' said Mike suddenly as the wheels nudged the kerb on a particularly tight bend.

Cassi obeyed and the gears grated but the car was checked from further acceleration.

'Again,' said Mike and she changed into second just before the sharpest bend. The engine whined in protest but, gradually, the car slowed until it almost stopped on the last corner above the river. Mike breathed again.

'Look out!' screamed Cassi, staring into the rear-view mirror.

Mike barely had time to duck before the shadow of the Land Cruiser crept up on them fast. There was a grating sound and they were moving forwards again. The low retaining wall crumbled at the impact and their car hung over the edge of the parapet. There was another push and tearing of metal and they were rolling, helter-skelter, down the long grassy slope towards the river. People scattered as Cassi kept her hand on the horn, fighting to get into a gear but unable because of the steepness of the banking. Bouncing and sliding, the car slithered down the steep hillside, out of control, narrowly missing children and trees en route as Cassi desperately fought to keep the car upright.

'Jump!' said Mike as he unbuckled his seat belt, forcing open the passenger door.

'I can't,' shouted Cassi. 'I have to keep the car from knocking someone down.'

The vehicle slammed onto the concrete roadway at the bottom with a sickening crash that knocked the wind out of both of them, throwing Mike completely clear of the car before bouncing across the narrow strip and plunging, bonnet first, into the murky waters of the Zenne.

It began to sink immediately as Cassi shook her head to try to dismiss the thousands of stars swimming before her eyes. For some reason, her whole body seemed paralysed and working in slow-motion as the waters gradually crept up her legs and over her chest. As they enveloped her face, she was spurred into action. She took a last breath before the water rose over her head and then fumbled for the seat belt release. Frantically, she pushed and shoved but it wouldn't budge. For some reason, the belt catch had jammed. The front of the car nudged the bottom and it began to turn onto its side as Cassi felt the pressure of the water squeezing at her body. Desperately, she tried to wriggle under her belt but it was too tight.

Keep calm, she told herself as the churned-up murk began to settle a little and she could just see what she was doing. It was then she saw it. The seat belt had not jammed because of the crash, the whole release mechanism had been disabled. She could put on her seat belt but could not take it off.

The pressure built up in her lungs as her pulse hammered through her head. She had to act soon or she would drown. Dragging her skirt up to her waist, she swivelled her leg around, placing it against the other seat. With all her above-normal strength, she heaved on the belt. At first, it would not move but, as her mind began to falter, the metal of the transmission tunnel began to tear. One more heave....

A shadow passed across her side window so she glanced up as a distorted face peered in. It had hair that seemed to form a halo around his head and teeth that were flashing in an evil grin as he pulled open the door.

Before she could respond, a hand reached in and grabbed her hair, tugging back her head against the restraint, forcing her to lose her hold on her breath as water started to pour down her gullet. The last thing she remembered was the glinting knife as it sliced towards her exposed throat.

MIKE stood, his arm in a sling, staring through the large window to the examination area of the hospital. After a few minutes, Doctor Pederson came out and closed the door. 'Don't look so worried, Cassi's got a constitution like a rhinoceros. It will take more than a pint or two of river water to kill Miss Andromeda 2021.'

'She was damn lucky, Jon,' Mike sighed. 'If those two youths on motor bikes hadn't happened by when they did and if one of them hadn't dived in and cut her free, she would not be with us now.'

'You did all you could, Mike. You dislocated your shoulder when you jumped clear so you wouldn't have been able to help her even if you had gone into the water yourself.'

'I feel so helpless. Things are happening beyond my comprehension. Why would anyone try to kill us?'

'The police sergeant said the hydraulic brake lines had all been tampered with. The first heavy pressure on the pedal and, whoosh - no fluid. He said it's a good thing it didn't happen at speed on the autoroute.'

'And it's also a good thing we were still so close to the hospital.' He paused in contemplation. 'I wonder who it was who was driving that Land-Cruiser.'

'According to witnesses, it roared off immediately you went over the edge. It's not one of the usual vehicles seen around here.'

'Cassi said one like it had followed us from Europoort. I wish I had taken more notice of her. Never mind, I'll find out somehow.' He looked at Cassi as she came out of the body scanner. 'Is she really okay to go home?'

Jon smiled. 'Perfectly. Frankly, I'm amazed at her speed of recovery. But then, you already know how special she is.'

'In more ways than one. Will Tara's baby grow up with the same characteristics?'

'Probably. The only difference is that Tara has been fertilised here with sperm from the Andromeda Seed whilst Cassi was conceived and actually incubated on board Wayfarer.'

'The first of many, eh?'

'The other Seed eggs are ready for fertilisation and implantation, so there could soon be the pitter-patter of lots of little Homo-Andromedæ feet.'

'And few outside the research team will be any the wiser.'

'Until the resultant hybrids start living for a very long time, that is. Then someone is bound to realise what we have been telling them for the last nine months is true.'

'Oh, well,' Mike sighed. 'Time will tell. Is Cassi all right to drive home?'

'I wouldn't recommend it. I've already rung the launch complex and they are sending a 'copter for you. Take her home and let her take it easy for a while.'

Mike looked suspicious. 'I thought you said she was all right.'

'Relax, Mike. As far as I can tell so far, she is perfectly well. However, there are a couple of other things I will not know the results of until tomorrow at least.'

'Serious things?'

Jon laughed and placed his arm along his friend's shoulders. 'Not at all. Mike, your wife is as fit as a fiddle. It's just that I took the opportunity to give her a complete once-over while she is here. It's not often we get real aliens in here and it's been almost a year since I examined her last and I wanted to see what sort of an effect nine months of Earth environment had had on her physical condition. If there is anything wrong, anything at all, I promise I will ring you immediately. Okay?'

Mike grinned. 'Doctor's orders, eh?'

'Definitely.' He looked at his watch. 'Your transport should be here soon. Go in to her and reassure her. I'll see you both on Friday.'

'You're coming over to Europoort for the launch?'

Jon smiled. 'Naturally. As head of the Europa Institute of Biophysics, I need to constantly advise on the health of the crew.'

The men shook hands. 'Thanks for your help, Jon. I'll see you Friday morning.'

THE rest of the day was uneventful as Mike and Cassi were flown back to Europoort and then driven home.

Maggie ran out from the nanny in the house and met them in the front garden. 'Daddy, Cassi, I wondered where you were.' She stared at her father. 'Have you hurt your arm?'

Mike smiled at his daughter and placed his good arm around her. 'It's nothing to worry your little head about. Shall we go out to eat tonight?'

Her little face was a picture of delight. 'Ooh. Yes, please.'

'Where shall we go?'

'The Burger Bar?' proposed the little girl with excitement.

'Blooming junk food,' muttered Cassi responsibly.

Mike laughed. 'It won't hurt this once. Come on, let's get a taxi.'

'Where's the car?' asked Maggie as she peered into the empty driveway.

Cassi grinned as she bent down and picked up her step-daughter. 'It went for a swim.'

AT ten the next morning, the crew and technicians were gathered for a final, televised briefing at Europoort. In the background, the tall shape of Wayfarer Two dominated the skyline as it seemed to cling to the stabilising tower which supported it.

'Well, ladies and gentlemen,' the Director was saying. 'By this time tomorrow, if all goes well, the launch will all be over. Before we go into the technical details, do any of you have any general questions?'

'Yes,' said the man from International Network TV. 'Just one for the viewers. Why Titan?'

Alan Thompson smiled as the cameras turned towards him. 'Because out of all the planets and moons within our solar system, Titan is the only other place where life as we know it might be possible. Both the Voyager and Cassini unmanned Missions sent back pictures, some of them very good, of this largest of Saturn's moons. However, to be sure, we need more than just pictures.'

'Did not the Cassini Mission tell us all we needed to know?'

'Mr Cavannah, as your viewers well know, the Cassini craft carried infra-red scanners which were able to map, fairly-accurately, all the major surface features. It also carried the Huygens Probe which was sent into the atmosphere. However, what they could not confirm is whether there is life, or even the correct conditions for life. All we know for certain is that, other than Earth, Titan is the only local celestial body that has an atmosphere which is predominantly nitrogen-based.'

'So the atmosphere is very like Earth's?'

'I didn't say that. As well as Nitrogen, there is also Helium and dissolved Ammonia as well as complex hydrocarbons. However, the temperature is around minus 180 degrees celsius which is close to the triple-point of Methane.'

'For the benefit of the lesser-knowledgeable among our viewers, could you explain what you mean by that?'

'Certainly. Methane, like most other gases, is also available as a liquid and as a solid. It is possible all three are present on Titan.'

'So the oceans the Galileo craft noted could be of liquid Methane?'

'Almost certainly.' He smiled. 'At minus 180, they definitely will not be of water.'

'Will your men be able to actually land on the moon itself?'

'We don't know yet. As you know, the new series-four Lunar shuttle was completed last week and is presently docked at Orion Base Station. This will be clamped to Wayfarer Two when she reaches Orion and will be carried, piggy-back style, to Titan and then released into a synodic trajectory.'

'A what?'

'An orbit. It will go round and round Titan about a thousand kilometres above the surface.'

'And what will be the purpose of that?'

'Three crew members from Wayfarer will cross to the shuttle to make observations for about a month. They will also be able to take many close-up pictures of Saturn itself. When the readings are complete and have been deciphered, the shuttle will then launch an unmanned probe in a controlled descent to the surface of Titan.'

'Will the crew not also descend?'

'The decision whether or not to try to reach the surface will be made upon Wayfarer's return.'

'And where will Wayfarer have been in the meantime?'

'Wayfarer Two and the remaining six crew members will make a tour of some of the other outer planets and their moons and return to Titan later.'

'And the decision will be made at that time?'

'Yes.'

'What are the sort of circumstances upon which that decision will depend?'

'There are many. One of the most important will be the atmospheric pressure. According to Voyager and Galileo, it is about half as much again as it is on Earth - about one-point-seven kilogrammes per square centimetre. It is also ten times thicker than Earth's atmosphere.'

'Is that bad?'

'The pressure could be, though the the thickness may indicate that the conditions are favourable for life to develop.'

'Will the mission present other difficulties?'

'Most certainly it will. For one, Titan seems iron-free and so has no identifiable magnetic field. Reference will have to be constantly made to the mother planet for navigation.'

'How long will the journey take?'

'Using the Proton Drive? Just under twenty-four hours. It could be completed quicker but other observations will be made on the way.'

'I understand it was Wayfarer Two that visited Saturn at the beginning of the year.'

'That is correct. Commander James Duncan and his daughter completed the mission and brought back Wayfarer One intact after she had been lost in space.'

Peter Cavannah turned to Cassi. 'Mrs Hardy, I understand you have been largely responsible for the training of the crew.'

She nodded. 'That's right.'

'Very strenuous training?'

'Extremely. Much of it has been done at Lunar Base where the gravity is much the same. Titan's gravity is a mere three-point-eight percent greater so the conditions are somewhat similar.'

'But Luna has no atmosphere.'

'That is true and therein lies the greatest difference. Titan is half as big again as Luna. Maybe if Luna was a little bit bigger it, too, would have an atmosphere.'

'Who will make the decision whether or not to descend to the surface?'

'The circumstances will be discussed by a committee of five who will then reach a decision.'

'Five?'

'Commander Carter, Officer Spencer who will lead the shuttle crew, Project Director Alan Thompson, the well-known astronomer and scientist Professor Heinrich Akherd and,' she paused, 'myself.'

'With respect, Mrs Hardy. Why yourself?'

'Mine will be the casting vote if the decision is a split one. You see, I am the only person on the present team who has been there and come back alive.'

'Your father has been there, hasn't he? Could he not advise?'

'No, I'm afraid he could not.'

'And why is that?'

'Because he has not yet returned from his last mission in Wayfarer One.'

'But I thought he was due back before now.'

Cassi nodded. 'He was.'

'Are you not concerned for his safety?'

'Mr Cavannah, I am extremely concerned for his safety.'

'Mrs Hardy, a hypothetical question. If you had control of Wayfarer Two now, what would you do?'

Cassi hesitated for a long time while she looked around the sea of faces that waited for her answer.

'Mrs Hardy...?' prompted the interviewer.

Cassi looked straight into the TV camera. 'I would go and look for my father.'

THE guard stiffened at the bleep on his console and peered into the darkness beyond the pool of light from the overhead spotlight. Someone was approaching his guard-post and had been picked up by one of his infra-red scanners. Feet, legs and finally body grew into the light and he relaxed at the sight of the young woman in trainers and pale-blue overalls.

'Good evening, Officer Hardy,' he greeted respectfully.

Cassi smiled. 'Hello, sergeant.' She glanced upwards at the tall spaceship. 'Is Alec Watson still on board?'

'He is, Mrs Hardy. Shall I call him for you?'

'That's not necessary,' she said. 'It's Iris I've really come to see.'

'I'm not supposed to let anyone on board tonight without specific authority, Ma'am,' he said apologetically. 'I'm sorry - orders.'

Cassi stared at the guard without malice before reaching for the phone and pushing the earpiece behind her hair as she dialled. 'Mike? It's Cassi. I want to get aboard Wayfarer and talk to Iris but there's been some kind of security clamp-down. Can you clear me?'

'What's it worth?' asked her husband slyly.

'On our last night together for several days? Anything you like.'

There was a laugh. 'Okay, let me speak to him.'

Cassi handed the receiver to the sergeant who listened for a moment before replacing the phone. He shrugged. 'If the Marshal says it's all right, who am I to complain?' He smiled. 'I think you know the way.'

'I ought to by now,' she laughed and strode down the passageway towards the gantry.

As the lift rose into the air, the multi-coloured lights of Europoort twinkled in the darkness. In the distance, she could see the black area with fewer lights that was the North Sea. Cassi glanced upwards. Somewhere up there, unseen, was a space station. Further away, a space cruiser containing her father - long overdue.

The lift stopped and she opened the airlock and stepped inside. A green light flashed to allow her to open the inner door. The corridor, horizontal in flight, was now vertical like a deep lift-shaft but workmen had welded a makeshift ladder to the side to enable crew and engineers to reach the flight deck near the nose-cone. She swung her leg round the side and started to climb. At the top was the access door.

A bespectacled face looked over the edge at her and smiled. 'This is an unexpected surprise, my dear. Come to check up on me?'

Cassi grinned. 'Not at all, Alec. Just bored down below and eager to get going.'

The older man carried on with his work as she clambered up and sat in front of the consoles. Unlike earlier space cruisers, there were no switches, no dials, no flashing lights. Everything was controlled from a long console containing three screens and two keyboards. On the right, looking forward, was a red monitor and keyboard. This was the drive computer. From a single position, the entire course and speed of flight could be controlled by just one person. In the centre was a monitor which was connected to video cameras mounted externally. There were no windows on Wayfarer Two so this screen was their only view of the outside universe. On the left was a white screen with keyboard. Along the top were the letters I.R.I.S. (Interactive Radar Identification System). Originally designed simply for navigation purposes, the memory of Iris had since been expanded and now contained a massive database of astronomographic data.

Cassi turned to the electronics engineer. 'Are the back-up systems functioning correctly?'

He shrugged. 'You shouldn't need them but, yes, they have all been checked over thoroughly.'

'What about the drive inter-link? It caused a slight problem on the way back from Saturn.'

The technician frowned and consulted his clipboard. 'The drive interlink? No-one told me about that.'

'That's because I fixed it temporarily in flight, but I did report the fault.'

'And it was working correctly afterwards?'

'As far as I know. However....?'

He sighed. 'I suppose you want me to take a quick look at it.'

Cassi flashed her baby blue eyes, 'I would be very grateful.'

'Ah, well.' He stood up. 'You will almost certainly never need to use it but,' he grinned, 'anything for you, my dear.'

She smiled broadly. 'Thanks.'

'Look after the flight deck for me?'

She shrugged in her chair. 'I won't budge from here.'

He walked towards the hatch. 'Won't take long. Coffee in the canteen afterwards?'

Cassi nodded. 'Love to.'

As soon as he was out of the door, Cassi spun round in her chair and started to punch keys on the keyboard.

'REQUEST DIRECT CLEARANCE TO MAINFRAME.'

'REQUEST DENIED. INPUT PASSWORD >'

'SECURITY CODE CAS-1.'

There was a short delay then, 'GOOD DAY, OFFICER DUNCAN >'

Cassi smiled. Iris was still responding to her maiden name. She would have to change it.

'RUN IDENTITY FILE,' she typed.

'INPUT NAME - >'

'DUNCAN, CASSIOPEIA.'

'ADD, CHANGE OR DELETE? (A/C/D) >'

'C'

'CHANGE WHICH ENTRY? >'

'SURNAME.'

'SURNAME - DUNCAN - DELETED. INPUT NEW SURNAME >'

'HARDY,' Cassi typed.

'ENTRY CHANGED. GOOD DAY, OFFICER HARDY >'

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

'READY >'

Cassi listened for footsteps but there were none. Surreptitiously, she leaned over the hatch and looked down. There was no sign of anyone. She turned back to the console and paused as if trying to decide. Eventually, she made up her mind and reached across to the drive console.

'CONFIRM CONDITION OF ALL DRIVES,' she typed.

'ALL DRIVES ON STAND-BY >' came the lettering on the red screen.

Cassi smiled and then typed. 'ENGAGE INTERFACE WITH IRIS.'

There was a delay and then, 'DRIVES INTERFACED. ALL FUTURE COMMANDS BY VOICE CONTROL VIA IRIS >'

Cassi moved back to Iris and typed 'EMERGENCY SECURITY OVERRIDE CODE CAS-1. UPON VOICE COMMAND " CHARLIE ALPHA SIERRA UNO" , COMMIT ALL DRIVE CONTROL AND LIFE-SUPPORT FUNCTIONS TO IRIS.'

'CONFIRMED >'

Now, if necessary, she could control Wayfarer single-handedly. 'RELAY TO DRIVE CONSOLE. ALL ACTIONS BY KEYBOARD UNTIL SECURITY OVERRIDE " CHARLIE ALPHA SIERRA UNO" .'

'CONFIRMED >'

Cassi reached over to the drive console. She could hear feet on the rungs of the steel ladder.

'DISENGAGE INTERFACE WITH IRIS,' she typed on the red keys.

'CONFIRMED >'

Cassi went back to the white console and had only just pressed CTRL-K to return Iris to keyboard input when the face appeared at the hatch.

'Seems okay,' said the engineer. 'You ready to go down now? It's a busy day tomorrow.'

Cassi glanced quickly across the consoles to make sure she hadn't missed anything and then smiled innocently. 'You're absolutely right, Alec. Let's go and get that coffee you promised.'

IT was still dark when Doctor Pederson closed and locked the door of his office and, briefcase under his arm, walked briskly towards the main doors of the hospital.

'Good morning, Jon,' said the young woman who met him in the corridor. 'I hope all goes well today.'

He smiled. 'So do I, Tara. It's a big day for a lot of people.'

'Give my love to Cassi. Tell her I'm sorry I didn't see more of her when she and Mike came on Wednesday.'

'I will.'

'And don't forget her file. The receptionist popped in the final computerised print-out from those scans you made while she was here.'

He took it from her and slipped it into his briefcase. 'What would I ever do without you?'

Tara smiled cheekily. 'Muddle through like you did before I came down from

Orion Base.'

'You're probably right.' He looked at his watch. 'I must go, the helicopter is waiting. I'll ring through when it's all over. Perhaps Mike and Cassi can have a meal with the two of us sometime.'

She smiled. 'I'd like that.'

THE sky over Rotterdam was just becoming tinged with streaks of yellow and red as the crew of ten waddled along in their ungainly spacesuits towards the gantry silhouetted against the first light of the rising sun.

'First five,' said the security guard and Commander Carter led the way into the lift followed by Pilot Officer Andrew Cameron, Shuttle Pilot Peter Spencer along with Flight Engineers Thomas Johnson and Robert Walker.

'Always at the back end,' said the pretty, dark-haired biologist, Dr Carrero.

'Never mind, Juanita,' said the electronics technician. 'The others will have done all the work by the time the lift comes down again and then gets us up there.'

'Huh. Fat chance of that, Alec,' said astrophysicist Dennis Fox. 'They're probably already playing poker, knowing that lot.'

Cassi stood, silently watching them and listening to their playful banter knowing that, in their nervousness, they were probably speaking more truth than they normally would be prepared to admit to. So, she was not the only one who had noticed the lack of seriousness among some of the crew members.

'You're quiet today,' said the voice at her elbow.

Cassi smiled at the young Navigation Officer. 'Just thoughtful, Gerry. This might well be my last proper space flight.'

'You? But you're still so young.'

'Ah yes, but I have responsibilities elsewhere these days. Once we're up to Orion, I shall be glad to get down again. Now Mike has recovered from that bullet wound he received earlier in the year, we can do and see things together.'

'He almost gave his life for your Andromeda Seed, didn't he?'

Cassi nodded. 'If it hadn't been for Mike and a few others like him, I would be the only remaining hope for the Andromedan Race. As it is, the Seed eggs were saved and can be used to mix with humans.'

'Has the Seed not started? I thought that after the clearance in January, it was all going ahead as planned - to mix Terran and Andromedan humans to form some kind of master-race.'

'It was but, wisely, it was decided to wait and see the outcome of the first experimental child.'

'The one born a fortnight ago?'

'Yes. Tara's baby is still under observation at the Bruxelles hospital. So far, everything seems well.' She smiled. 'I've got a little brother at last.'

'I'm sorry the rest of your family died on Mythos.'

She shrugged. 'I never met them, Gerry. I was born on board Wayfarer, don't forget, from one of the Seed eggs my father fertilised. There are the two of us now to carry on the Andromedan Race.'

The lift came down and the door opened noisily. Dr Dennis Fox stepped inside. 'All aboard the skylark.'

The rest followed and, minutes later, they were at the airlock. The Astrophysicist opened the door. 'First floor - lingerie, hosiery and tin-tacks.'

'It is not being funny, Dennis,' said Juanita Carrero. 'In less than one hour, someone will be lighting the blue touch paper under us and we'll be going right up in the air.'

Cassi waited until the others had gone aboard and thanked the departing technicians who took the lift down. Slowly and carefully, she closed the airlock. The young Navigation Officer helped her with the bulky inner door after which she hung on one arm from the ladder and opened a small panel beside the airlock.

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

Cassi pressed 'E' to draw the atmospheric pressure from the airlock. The green light was replaced by a red one and the ten of them were sealed inside the cylinder that was shortly to become either their mode of transport or their tomb.

'Aprés vous,' said Gerry with a smile and wide gesture.

In her tight space-suit, Cassi began to climb the ladder towards the flight deck. So, she thought, there is a gentleman on board after all. If she had seen the way her companion was studying her from below and had she been able to read his mind, she would swiftly have revised her opinion of him.

They had all been wrong about Commander Carter who now sat at the console in readiness, all screens on and functioning. Andy Cameron was at the red screen, activating the drives according to the manual.

Gerry Green took his place in front of Iris. The screen simply said: 'READY >'

The doctors were already in the laboratory and the engineers in the workshop with Alec Watson. That left Peter Spencer and Cassi. There was one chair left and, without hesitation, the Shuttle Pilot sat in it.

Cassi sauntered over to the console and pressed a button. 'Wayfarer Two to Mont Aigoual Tracking Station. Radio test, please. Over.'

'Mont Aigoual receiving, Wayfarer Two. Go ahead. Over.'

'All present and correct here. Ready for countdown instructions. Over.'

'Very well. Countdown begins at oh-eight hundred hours precisely. If you switch me through to Bob Walker in engineering, we will talk him through the final checks.'

'Thanks. Switching you through now. Over and out.'

Cassi straightened and found that every eye was upon her.

She looked straight at Steve Carter. 'You have the ship, Commander.'

He looked dumfounded. 'What?'

'The command is yours. I want you to take her up to Orion.'

'And what, might I ask, will you be doing?' he said suspiciously.

Cassi turned to face him. 'I'll be watching you. And,' she said without smiling, 'If you mess this up and kill us all, I'll have you permanently grounded.'

It took a long time for the penny to drop but, when it did, it broke up the tense atmosphere. After some laughter, normal conversations resumed.

Cassi strolled over to Peter Spencer and jerked her thumb. 'Out, cowboy. I need your horse.'

The tall man reluctantly gave up his chair and wandered around for a while, chatting to the others, before going out through the hatch to join the engineers below.

The radio spoke. 'Mont Aigoual to Wayfarer Two. Do you read? Over.'

Commander Carter pressed the button. 'Receiving, Control. Go ahead.'

'Radio check complete. Suggest you now lock this channel open but also retain telecom link with Europoort until take-off.'

'Will do,' said the Commander and made the necessary adjustments to the system.

'Thank you. Confirm countdown to commence at oh-eight hundred hours precisely.'

'Very good, Control. Countdown at oh-eight hundred.'

'Handing you back to Europoort for final instructions. Good luck, Wayfarer. Over and out.'

THE atmosphere became tense at Europoort as the digital clock showed 0730 hrs. The Director sat down for the last time and surveyed the scene below him. Dozens of screens showed the situation at a glance while the master computer monitor in front of him showed the summary from the CADE (Computer Assisted Data Evaluation) system. The door to his glass-walled office opened.

'We are ready, yes?' asked Professor Akherd.

'Ready as ever, Heinrich. Are the others around?'

'Natasha is in the radio room next door talking to Orion to make sure that everything is ready at the Space Station. Dr Bartek is talking astrometrics with the General.'

'Jon Pederson? Has he arrived from Bruxelles yet?'

'The doctor arrived half an hour ago. He is speaking by radio to Dr Fox on board Wayfarer.'

'I am on edge, my friend,' the Director said nervously. 'I feel something wrong in my bones.'

The Professor smiled. 'This is the first Earth-launch for many years, Alan.'

You are bound to be apprehensive.'

'Are we doing it right? Perhaps we should have dismantled Wayfarer and ferried her up in pieces like we did originally.'

'That would have taken too long and you know it. Jupiter and Saturn are in perfect alignment at the moment but with every week that passes, the synodic lag in Saturn's orbit causes greater difficulties with navigation.'

The Director sighed. 'You are right, as usual.'

'Don't worry,' said Professor Akherd, gently touching the other man's shoulder. 'Mrs Hardy is on board. She will not let anything happen to her precious Wayfarer.'

He smiled, looked at the clock, and then pressed a button on the intercom. 'Last checks, please, ladies and gentlemen. Count-down begins in twenty minutes.'

DOCTOR Pederson heard the announcement and signed off to let the men get on with their work. With fifteen minutes still to go, he got a coffee from the machine and sat in the anti-room where it was quiet. Remembering Cassi's medical file, he put down his cup and took out the papers it contained. There was a batch of computer print-outs from the body scanner along with diagnostic reports and thermographic tables. At the back was a simple catalogue of figures with a summary. Sipping his coffee, he read it through, item by item. Blood-pressure normal, antibody count perfect, chest magnificent. He turned to the summary and nearly dropped his coffee. Slowly, he put down the cup and checked it with the data itself. There was no mistake.

He smiled. 'Well, well, Cassi. So that's your little secret, is it?'

PILOT Officer Andrew Cameron watched the clock. At precisely eight-o'clock in the morning, he said. 'Well, folks. This is it. Any last requests?'

Commander Carter cut him short. 'Don't mess about, Andy. This is serious stuff.'

Cassi smiled and relaxed.

'Lift-off in ten minutes and counting,' came the voice over the intercom. Iris mimicked the voice on her screen in amber characters.

'Confirm drive status,' said the Commander.

'Main drive activated and ready,' replied Andy. 'Auxiliary drive on stand-by. Proton Drive shut-down as per instructions.'

'Keep it that way. We daren't risk a radiation leak within the lower atmosphere.'

'Shame we can't use it,' mumbled Gerry Green.

'You'll get the chance once we're loaded at Orion.' He turned to the Navigation Officer. 'Confirm trajectory.'

'Course as computed. ETA Orion - 0915 hours.'

'Life support?'

'Atmospheric pressure 1.07 kilogrammes per square centimetre. Content mix balanced.'

'Good. Now we're in the hands of Europort Launch Centre and then Aigoual Control. I hope they know what they're doing between them.'

Gerry smiled. 'I'll bet they're thinking the same about us, Stevie boy.'

'Then we'll just have to prove them wrong, won't we?' said Commander Carter.

JON Pederson let himself into the Control Centre office to be greeted by a sea of nervous smiles. He nodded to all and sat down.

'Zero minus three minutes and counting,' came the tannoy voice.

'It's looking good,' said Professor Akherd, glancing at the command computer. 'All systems seem to be functioning correctly.'

Natasha Ralentov leant forward and placed her hand on the Director's shoulder. 'Still worried, Alan?'

The Director shook his head. 'Not any more. I do believe they are going to make it.'

'I certainly hope so after all this training and preparations.'

'Zero minus two minutes and counting,' came the voice once more.

Dr Pederson looked around him. 'By the way, Alan. Where's Cassi today? I

expected her to be here after all the work she's put in.'

The Director turned in his chair. 'Didn't you know? Sorry, Jon, I should have informed you.'

The Doctor leant forward, suddenly wary. 'Informed me? Of what?'

'She was worried about a couple of the crew. We asked her to take Wayfarer up for us.'

The Doctor's mouth dropped open as he looked up at the picture of the space-cruiser on the visual screen. 'Cassi's on board Wayfarer?'

'Zero minus one minute and counting.'

'It seemed the best thing to do under the circumstances.'

Jon jumped to his feet. 'You've got to stop the launch.'

Everyone turned to face him.

'Fifty seconds.'

'Stop the launch?' queried the Director.

'Yes. Her life is in great danger.'

'Cassi's?'

'Yes. Don't you understand? The pressures and forces during lift-off will most probably cause internal haemorrhaging and she may well die - and very painfully.'

'Forty seconds.'

The Director frowned. 'I don't understand. The medical report you sent with Mike stated she was completely fit and well.'

'She is fit and well - in the normal sense of the word.'

'Thirty seconds.'

'Then what is wrong, man?'

Doctor Pederson stared at the tall shape of Wayfarer Two as it eclipsed the rising sun. 'The complete results have just come in and...'

'Yes?'

'Cassi is just over two months pregnant. Even if the G-forces don't actually kill her, they will certainly destroy her unborn child.'

THE crew tensed themselves as the readout ran down towards zero and tannoy-link counted off the seconds. Suddenly, it changed. The numbers stopped decreasing on Iris and the voice said: 'Countdown terminated.'

Commander Carter stabbed at the communications button. 'Why?'

'Health reasons,' came the simplified reply.

The Commander looked puzzled. 'Who's health?'

'Officer Hardy.'

Cassi watched his lip start to curl in the kind of sneer which just about summed up all his feelings and frustrations of the last six months. Reacting instinctively, she reaching across Navigation Officer Green and punched CTRL-V. 'Iris. Respond to voice control.'

'CONFIRMED >' said the screen.

'Emergency security override Charlie Alpha Sierra Uno,' she said quickly.

'CONFIRMED. FULL COMMAND COMMITTED TO VOICE CONTROL PATTERN CAS-1 >'

'What the hell are you doing?' asked the baffled Commander.

She ignored him and simply said: 'Iris, resume countdown.'

'ARE YOU SURE? (Y/N) >'

'Affirmative. Activate main drive.'

'CONFIRMED ACTIVATING MAIN DRIVE. COUNTDOWN CONTINUES >'

'TEN >'

'NINE >'

'EIGHT >'

'What are you playing at?' asked Steve.

'SEVEN >'

'Launching manually.'

'SIX >'

'FIVE >'

'But we won't get enough lift-off without the solid fuel boosters and they can only be controlled from the ground.'

'FOUR >'

'THREE >'

'Trust me.'

'TWO >'

'ONE >'

'ZERO. MAIN DRIVE FULL THRUST >'

The control room was full of sound and the whole ship started to vibrate. 'She's not lifting,' screamed Andy. 'We're all going to die.'

MILD panic is probably the best way to describe the situation inside the Launch Control Centre. People began shouting warnings of drive overload, mechanical faults and electronic malfunctions. The Director looked stunned as he watched the TV monitor and saw the constant blast from the base of Wayfarer.

'She's not going to take much more of that,' said the Professor after a few minutes. He was the only calm person in the room.

'What has happened?' asked the trembling Natasha Ralentov.

The Director consulted the computer read-out. 'They've gone over to manual control.'

'But they must know they have no hope of lifting off without the boosters.'

'Of course they do. It has to be a malfunction of some kind.' He tapped the monitor screen as if that would make any difference.

The Professor stroked his chin thoughtfully. 'I'm not so sure it is a malfunction.'

'What do you mean?'

The Professor leant forward. 'Fire the boosters.'

'What?' several of them said in unison.

'I think I know what has happened. Fire the boosters.'

The Doctor spoke up. 'But we are risking Cassi's life.'

'If we don't fire them, they are all dead - Mrs Hardy included. Fire the boosters.'

'But...'

He stood up. 'Fire the damn boosters before their main drive motor burns out and the whole ship topples over.'

The Director nodded and the Mission Controller gave the order. There was a flash of light as the solid-fuel boosters ignited and the ship began to lift slowly from the pad. Gradually, it rose into the air and, with everyone watching, eventually disappeared into the sky.

The Professor sat down. 'God help the girl. I only hope she feels no pain.'

'You mean to say it was deliberate?'

He nodded. 'The screens showed no fault. They simply went manual and only one person aboard that ship knows the computer system well enough to do that.'

'And now she's dying.'

'Possibly, though I think we may be underestimating that girl's strength and determination. I have a feeling she will survive.'

They were interrupted by a technician. 'Sir, we seem to have a problem.'

The Director looked round. 'Yes, what is it?'

'The computer shows that the Main Drive has a slight power fluctuation. If it gets worse, they are not going to reach full escape velocity.'

'And?'

'The ship will either fall back to Earth, or burn up in the atmosphere.'

CASSI was already aware of the danger. The G-forces were exerting a pressure upon her and bringing a pain she had never experienced before. Her face was perspiring profusely and her whole body shook. Nevertheless, she knew what she had to do.

'Iris,' she called. 'Activate anti-matter reactor.'

'CONFIRMED. CRITICAL MASS IN TEN MINUTES >'

'You're going over to Proton Drive?' said the Commander.

She nodded. 'We have to. Iris says if we don't, we shall not maintain escape velocity for long enough to achieve orbital status.' She smiled through her tears of agony. 'Don't worry, the radiation will not affect the planet from this height.'

The men all stared at her for a long time, unaware of what she was going through.

'CRITICAL MASS IN EIGHT MINUTES >' said the drive computer screen.

For several more minutes, they watched all the screens as the ship continued

to rise. Suddenly, there was a slight shudder and the noise lessened.

'Boosters out,' called Andy Cameron. 'Shall I eject?'

The Commander nodded. 'You'd better. It will lessen the payload.'

The pilot reached out his hands and pressed keys on the computer. Nothing happened.

'Voice control,' Cassi muttered, stars swimming before her eyes. 'Iris, jettison boosters.'

There was a clunk and the ship rose more smoothly.

'CRITICAL MASS IN TWO MINUTES >' said the red screen.

'Are you all right?' Gerry called to Cassi.

She frantically shook her head. 'Sick,' she said. 'Feel sick.'

'Can I help?'

'No. Soon be over.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SIXTY SECONDS AND COUNTING >'

'Iris,' Cassi groaned. 'Activate Proton Drive immediately the reactor achieves critical mass.'

The ship fell suddenly silent and they gradually felt the G-forces stop and a weightless feeling begin.

'The main drive has cut out,' shouted Andy, staring at the screens. 'We're starting to fall back.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN THIRTY SECONDS >'

'Will we make it?'

'We have to.'

'Full left retro, Iris,' called Cassi. 'Maintain original escape trajectory.'

'CONFIRMED >' said the white screen and the ship began to turn back under the power of the lateral charge. 'CRITICAL MASS IN TEN SECONDS >'

'NINE >'

'We're falling too fast.'

'EIGHT >'

Cassi screamed in pain.

'SEVEN >'

She fought her senses.

'SIX >'

She had to stay conscious.

'FIVE >'

No-one else had ever used the Proton Drive.

'FOUR >'

'THREE >'

'Hold tight.'

'TWO >'

'ONE >'

'CRITICAL MASS ACHIEVED. ACTIVATING PROTON DRIVE >'

The falling stopped as the drive burst into action, forcing the ship upwards away from the deadly gravity pull of their home planet. Cassi panted breathlessly as the pressure increased on her once more and her mind tottered on the edge of consciousness.

'Orbital status achieved,' called Gerry. 'We're turning for Orion.'

'Cut Proton Drive,' said Cassi through gritted teeth.

'We're not there yet,' said the Commander sternly.

'Inertia,' said Cassi quietly as the noise and vibration dropped away. In the silence, her pulse was pounding away in her head and she felt a sudden warm flush burst through her abdomen. As the shadow of Orion Base engulfed them, she blissfully passed out.

THE room she came round in was white and smelled of antiseptic. Slowly, she opened her eyes against the bright glare of the lights. There was only one other person in the room.

'Cassi, you are one hell of a girl,' said Jon Pederson quietly.

She smiled. 'We made it?'

'You nearly didn't. I just came up on the shuttle to make sure you're all right.'

'Orion?'

'Yes, we're on Orion Base Station. Wayfarer is moored alongside; still in

one piece, thanks to you.'

Cassi relaxed. 'I'm glad. The others...?'

'They're fine. It's you I'm worried about.'

'I'm okay,' she said with a slight smile.

'Young lady, I think you'd better let me be the judge of that.' He stuck a thermometer between her lips and then took her wrist and consulted his watch.

'You knew, didn't you?'

'About what?'

'Don't play coy with me, Cassiopeia Hardy, I've known you too long. You deliberately risked your own life and the life of your child to save the mission, didn't you?'

Cassi nodded slowly. 'I had to.'

'I know that.'

Cassi looked surprised. 'You do?'

'You might fool the others with your big, innocent eyes and cheeky smile but I happen to know you are not in the slightest bit stupid. You would not have knowingly taken such a risk unless it was imperative. How did you know?'

'Iris told me.'

'Iris? How could a mere computer tell you the Main Drive had a fault in the circuitry?'

'I don't know. She and I between us have a kind of intuitive feeling.' She smiled. 'Call it a Computo-Andromedæ mind-meld.'

'Well, now it's my turn to give the orders around here,' said Jon as he removed the thermometer and consulted the reading. 'What you need is a long rest. I'm going to keep you here for a couple of days and then send you down on the shuttle. Mike is frantic with worry about you.'

'Okay, doctor. I'll be a good girl and do as I'm told.'

He picked up the notes and turned to leave. 'You do that.' He smiled. 'I'll come back to see you later.'

Waiting outside were two men. The Director raised one eyebrow.

'She'll live,' said the doctor.

'The child?' Professor Akherd asked quietly.

The doctor shook his head sadly. 'It didn't stand a chance. It was less than three months old so there is no permanent damage to Cassi. With a few days of rest, she should be able to return to Earth.'

The Director and Professor looked at each other. 'Damn!' swore the senior man.

Jon looked up suspiciously. 'What is it?'

'The Main Drive did not have a fault after all,' said the Director.

'No..no fault?'

'None. Our engineers have completely stripped down the inter-link circuitry and there is definitely no fault of any kind.'

'Then how...?'

'It was sabotage,' said the Professor.

'Sabotage? Are you telling me someone is deliberately trying to stop this mission?'

'It would seem that way. Their plan nearly succeeded, too. If Cassi hadn't been on board to activate the Proton Drive when she did, nine people would now be very dead.'

'But what if the launch had been halted. They would all be still on Earth - safe.'

'Not necessarily. If Cassi had not overridden Control, we would simply have delayed the launch by a few hours and removed her from the ship. When the launch finally did go ahead, as it eventually would, the Main Drive would have cut out prematurely as it did today. It's unlikely there would have been anyone else on board who could have responded as quickly and accurately as Cassi did.'

'Cassi said she knew it was going to happen.'

'I'm not surprised. She has flown Wayfarer Two all over the Solar System and knows its ways better than anyone - with the possible exception of her own father. That crew owe their lives to her.'

'Do they realise Cassi knew in advance?' asked the doctor.

'Not yet. We were just about to tell them.'

'Don't!'

'What? But they'll all want to thank her.'

'Don't tell them. What if the perpetrator is still on board?'

'Then he also would have died today.'

'Perhaps the cause was worth the sacrifice.'

'You're telling me you think that one of our own people...'

'It's been done before,' said the Professor.

'But that means they may try again.'

'And,' said Professor Akherd thoughtfully. 'Next time, they may succeed. Unless...'

He looked towards the door of the room where Cassi lay.

Doctor Pederson didn't miss the implication. 'Oh, no you don't. Mrs Hardy needs rest. She has just suffered a miscarriage, so have some concern for her health.'

'We can delay their departure by up to forty-eight hours if really necessary.'

'It's not just her physical health I'm concerned about, it is her mental and emotional future. I am somewhat alarmed by the fact that she has not reacted at all about the loss of her child. That is not normal.'

'Perhaps she is capable of handling it. Plenty of women misconceive at one time or another in their lives.'

'That's true. However, Cassi's child was far from normal. Apart from Tara's baby, it would have been the only other cross-breed child in existence. I would have expected tears and anguish after all Cassi's been through to try to preserve the Andromedan Seed.'

'May I talk to her for a few moments?' asked the Professor suddenly.

'Of course.' Jon hesitated. 'On one condition.'

'Yes?'

'You must promise not discuss the flight nor the suspected sabotage attempt with her. I don't want her worried any more.'

The Professor smiled disarmingly. 'You have my word, Doctor Pederson.'

CASSI looked up as the Professor came in and they faced each other in silence. Eventually, he sat on the bed next to her and placed his arm round her shoulders and pulled her gently to him. 'You are very brave, mien kinder.'

Cassi rested her head on the older man's shoulder for a moment. 'Not really. It's just something that had to be done.'

'I have a present for you,' he suddenly said.

She looked into his kindly eyes and smiled. 'A present?'

He reached into his suit pocket and took out a pocket calculator. 'You loaned it to me nine months ago but, by rights, it's still yours.'

She held it tightly in her hands. 'Thank you, Herr Professor. You have no idea just how much this means to me.'

He carefully laid her head onto the pillow, pulled the sheet up to her chin and kissed her forehead before standing to leave. 'I think I do. Use it wisely if you wish to stay alive long enough to see your twenty-first birthday.'

THE departure was held back for one day so that technicians could check out the system but no other fault was found. Commander Carter was furious at the delay. 'Don't they think us capable of handling it? Anyone would think we are children out on a pic-nic.'

'Mrs Hardy did recognise the fault and take evasive action in time,' defended Doctor Carrero.

'Just luck,' said the Commander. 'Andy or I would soon have spotted it if she hadn't noticed it first.'

The Biologist was not convinced but held her tongue. It would do no good to fuel divisions among themselves. They each were going to have to depend on one other during the flight.

'Do you yet know where you're headed after dropping us off at Titan?' she asked instead.

The Commander shook his head. 'No. They seem to be making some kind of a mystery out of the whole affair. Iris has a coded message which can only be read after we've dropped the three of you off in the shuttle at Titan.'

'Don't you have any idea where it is you're headed?'

The Commander shook his head. 'Not even me, Juanita.' He paused. 'Perhaps Alec could find out for us.'

'Alec? He's a loner if ever there was one. How will he know?'
The Commander grinned. 'He could ask the computer.'
'Iris will not tell until the programmed time.'
'No.' He grinned. 'But there is more than one way to skin a computer.'

AN hour later, the hatch to the flight deck of Wayfarer opened with a slight pressure hiss and two figures crept towards the console.

'I hope you know what you're doing,' said the shorter one.
'Relax, Alec,' said the Commander. 'I'm not asking you to do anything illegal. I just want some information from Iris concerning our course tomorrow.'

'But you are quite capable of operating the terminal yourself.'
'That's true. However, I'm looking for something a little out of the ordinary. We know we're due to take pictures of Jupiter on the way, so start there.'

Alec Watson nodded, switched on Iris and sat down in front of her. He pressed CTRL-K to release voice control.

'READY >' said the white screen.
'IDENTIFY TRAJECTORY FOR JUPITER,' he typed carefully.
The screen cleared and then:

IDENTITY	- Jupiter
DIAMETER	- 142.2Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 9h 50m 30s
INCLINATION	- 3° 04'
DENSITY	- 1.33
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 60.22 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 2.643
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	- 16
DISTANCE	- 4.34AU
DIRECTION	- 233.6° North >

'What does that tell us?' asked the confused Commander.
'Simply put, Jupiter is to the West of us at midnight.'
'What about Saturn?'

Alec shrugged. 'IDENTIFY TRAJECTORY FOR SATURN.'

IDENTITY	- Saturn
DIAMETER	- 119.35Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 10h 39m 24s
INCLINATION	- 26° 44'
DENSITY	- 0.706
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 36.255 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 1.159
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	- 19
DISTANCE	- 9.51AU
DIRECTION	- 243.5° North >

'In almost the same direction,' said the technician.
'Ten degrees out,' said the Commander.
'That's nothing. Saturn will have moved that small distance by the time we get there.'

'Try the others.'

Uranus was a long way out of trajectory and so was Neptune when they checked. With heart in mouth, Alec tried the next planet in line: 'IDENTIFY TRAJECTORY FOR PLUTO.'

IDENTITY	- Pluto
DIAMETER	- 2.4Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s
INCLINATION	- 17° 12'
DENSITY	- 0.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.7 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- .47
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	- 2
DISTANCE	- 34.07AU
DIRECTION	- 252.1° North >

'Bingo!' said Alec.

'Good grief!' said the Commander. 'Surely not.'

The technician shrugged. 'It is virtually in alignment with Jupiter and Saturn.'

'But why Pluto?'

'Probably because we haven't been there yet. On neither the Voyager nor the Galileo Missions was Pluto in the right place. Even on the first Wayfarer Missions the angle was too wide. This year, for the first time (and maybe the last for centuries) we have an almost perfect alignment.'

THERE was no fuss as Wayfarer Two blasted off the next day. Unlike the launch from Earth, there was no gravity to overcome and the big space cruiser simply pushed off under auxiliary drive until she was clear of the Space Station. The Director and Professor Akherd watched as the Main Drive flared and the ship was gone from sight in a few minutes. Nothing was said for some time. The Director finally turned to his controller. 'Update?'

The man looked up, his face lit by the screen. 'All correct, sir. Course and velocity as computed.'

'Let me know immediately if anything changes,' he instructed and the man nodded his agreement.

A bleeping started and someone picked up a phone and, after a few seconds, handed the instrument to the Director. 'It's Doctor Pederson for you, sir.'

The senior man placed the phone to his ear. 'Yes Jon?'

'It's Cassi.'

He frowned. 'What about her? Has she had a relapse?'

'No. She's gone.'

'Gone?' he repeated, stiffening and staring at the Professor.

'She was in her bed when I checked her an hour ago. I just got back and found she has disappeared.'

'Perhaps she is around Orion somewhere, taking fresh air.'

'Fresh air? On Orion? You have to be joking; it's the same air that was here when the station was built two years ago. I've had people looking for her but they report no sighting of her.'

'I wouldn't worry, she can't be far away. Has she gone down on the Earth shuttle?'

'Negative. One has not departed yet today.'

'Then...' he half-turned and stared out of the viewer screen. 'Oh, god, no.'

WAYFARER Two was crossing Mars orbit when the signal came through. 'Orion Base to Wayfarer Two - come in, please.'

The Commander raised one eyebrow and touched a button. 'Wayfarer Two receiving, Orion. Go ahead.'

Due to the distance and resultant time-lapse, there was an eight-minute delay before the voice came again. 'Request you make a search of your ship. We have a missing person alarm. Mrs Hardy cannot be found and it is vital you make a thorough check and report your findings as soon as possible.'

The Commander sighed. 'I just knew something like this would happen.' He pressed the button. 'Affirmative, Orion. Do you want us to turn around and bring her back or shall we throw her out of the airlock and let her make her own way home?'

He didn't wait for the answer but turned around to face the crew. 'Okay, Gerry. You stay here and keep watch while the rest of us go find her.'

'When we do,' asked Pete Spencer. 'What do you want us to do with her?'

He grinned. 'Put her in the airlock for a while. I intend to teach that kid a lesson she will never forget.'

IT was several hours before the radio signal finally came from Wayfarer. The messenger handed it to the Director who looked at Professor Akherd and Doctor Pederson.

'No sign,' he said glumly. 'Commander Carter says he has turned the whole ship upside down but she is nowhere to be found.'

The Doctor was not convinced. 'Do you think he's telling the truth?'

'Why should he lie? I know he was chosen at somewhat short notice and he resented Cassi's very thorough training methods but surely even he could not afford to hide something like this.'

'But she must be on board. There is nowhere else for her to have gone.'

'Do not underestimate that girl's shrewdness and determination, my friends,' said the Professor quietly. 'Don't forget Mrs Hardy was born and brought up on that ship. As a child, she will have explored every inch of her superstructure and air-ducting and will know about hiding-places of which Commander Carter and his crew will not even dream.'

'But I don't understand. Why would she take such risks?' said the incredulous Doctor Pederson.

The Professor shrugged. 'To save the lives of the crew.'

JUANITA Carrero couldn't relax. After only five hours of flight, they were already approaching Jupiter and setting up for the first series of observations but she couldn't put Cassi out of her mind.

'We must look again,' she eventually told the astrophysicist. 'You and I owe it to Señora Hardy to make a more careful search than the others.'

'One thing is certain,' said Dr Fox. 'If she is really on board, she will be very well hidden. Steve and his men did look pretty thoroughly.'

'But she is ill. She is looking terrible when we are unloading her at Orion.'

'You don't need to tell me, Juanita. I saw the blood, remember? My guess is she suffered some kind of internal haemorrhaging.'

'Or a miscarriage,' said the biologist quietly.

'Not that. They would never have allowed her to make the flight if she was pregnant, you know that.'

'Suppose they are not knowing?'

'That sort of mistake doesn't happen. Nevertheless, I understand from what Gerry said that she might just have saved our lives when that fault developed in the Main Drive. I suppose we do owe her enough to go and look once more.'

'And we won't be needed for several hours yet. How about if we are making a thorough personal search? She could be lying somewhere, bleeding to death.'

Dennis Fox stood up. 'You are right, Juanita. Let us begin in the reactor bay and work our way forwards.'

JUPITER looked bad from afar. From close-up, it sent a shiver down the Commander's spine. 'Ugly, isn't it?'

'I dunno,' said Andy. 'Looks like a gentle giant to me.'

'I'll let you be the one to go and say hello when the time comes. For my part, I prefer to stay out here where I can make a quick getaway.' He turned to his Navigation Officer. 'Take us around her slowly, Gerry. Let's get some good pictures while we're here.'

'Okay boss.' He peered at the screen. 'That's odd.'

'What is?' said Steve Carter without looking at him.

'It's that strange message again from Iris.'

'What do you mean?'

'As you know, each time I give a command to the computer, it responds with "Confirmed".'

'I do know that. It's supposed to.'

'On the way here, it threw up the "confirmed" message when I hadn't touched the keyboard.'

'Not still under partial voice control, is she?'

He checked. 'No. The first time it did it, I was about to swerve to avoid those asteroids. If you remember, the ship drifted slightly and we didn't have to alter course. Now it just did it again.'

'And have we drifted again?'

He frowned. 'Yes, we have. We've turned through a full two degrees.'

'Is that bad?'

'Not at all. It has placed us in the perfect orbit to maintain a synodic trajectory.'

The Commander laughed. 'Perhaps Mont Aigoual are playing games with us. They may not have relinquished total control of the guidance system.'

'That's possible,' Gerry said thoughtfully. 'However, if that is true, they have been very accurate considering they are well over half a billion kilometres away and the signal would have taken half an hour to get here.'

'The alternative is that Iris is working to some pre-programmed sequence.'

'I don't think so. Do you mind if I get Alec to take a look at it?'

'Not at all. Now that we are in a safe orbit, we have a few hours to spare while Tom and Bob get the pictures they need. He'll know how to de-bug the thing. We don't want any more malfunctions, do we?'

DENNIS Fox carefully closed and sealed the door to the reactor bay. He shook his head. 'Definitely not there unless she's inside the core itself and that will have fried her alive.'

'Very well. Let's check the lab and the gardens next. If she's not being there, we can look in the stores together so we don't miss anywhere.'

ALEC Watson frowned at the print-out he had taken from Iris's memory. 'The computer has responded seven times in all without apparent keyboard input. Are you sure you have not used the voice-activator at all?'

Gerry shook his head. 'Definitely not. Could Iris have responded to a signal from Earth?'

'No. There is a special sequence to go through before that can be possible and it was deactivated when we were berthed at Orion so as to eliminate one of the major possibilities for further malfunction. We have full control from this console. You must have made a mistake.'

The young man got to his feet. 'That's not possible.'

'Hold on, Gerry,' said the Commander. 'Anyone can make a mistake.'

'But when? Except for that brief period when you went looking for that idiot of a girl, you've been with me the whole time.'

'Gerry does have a point, Steve,' interrupted Andy Cameron. 'I've not seen him making any unorthodox manoeuvres.'

'You may be right. However, we cannot afford errors right out here. To be on the safe-side, Gerry, let me watch every move you make at the computer. It's one hell of a walk home.'

THE lab was empty and so was the workshop except for the two engineers who were busy with the cameras. Doctors Fox and Carrero carefully checked the stores and found nothing.

'Well, Juanita. That just leaves the living quarters. I'm sure they would have noticed Mrs Hardy if she was on the flight deck.'

The biologist nodded. 'Okay. You take the left side and I will take the right. Do not be forgetting the toilets and lockers.'

'And you don't forget the suit bays and airlock.'

Juanita smiled and, one by one, they carefully searched every single compartment along the side of the ship opposite to the big airlock door. Several times, she looked over her shoulder as a feeling she could not explain swept over her. With her heart in her mouth, she stood before the big, round door, wondering what she would find. Opening the panel at the side, she pressed the button to flood the compartment with air. Ten seconds later, the red light changed to green. Taking a deep breath, she pulled the lever and the airlock door swung open. Her breath came out easily when she found it empty. For some uncanny reason, she had expected to find something - what, she didn't know. Carefully, she closed the door and stood for a moment with her back to it.

Dennis came out of the gents' showers. 'Do you want to check the other washroom while I finish the lockers?'

Juanita nodded and sauntered over to the room indicated. There were a dozen or so lockers inside and she looked carefully in them all. Nothing. She sat down on the long bench, deep in thought.

'Well, that's that,' said Dr Fox as he entered and stood before her. 'At least now we can relax in the knowledge that Cassi is definitely not on board. Perhaps they've already found her on Orion.'

Dr Carrero shook her head. 'Señora Hardy might be young but she didn't strike me as the kind of person who would simply be getting herself lost.'

'Perhaps you were right about the miscarriage. Maybe it had such a

psychological effect on her that she finally just gave up and walked out of an airlock. It has been done before.'

'She is not the suicidal type, especially in view of her background. She is having everything to live for.'

'We're talking about an Andromedan, don't forget. There may be mental or emotional differences we are yet unaware of.'

Juanita shrugged. 'That is always possible. However....'

'Fancy a drink?' Dennis said to change the subject.

She nodded and stood up. 'Okay. Let's go back and see if Tom and Bob have finished taking their pictures of Jupiter.'

The corridor outside was deserted but Juanita suddenly stopped, her mouth open.

Dennis turned, frowning. 'What is it?'

'Did...did you touch the airlock?'

He looked at the door which stood closed. 'No. You checked it, didn't you?'

'Yes, I did,' she whispered as she stepped towards it and touched the titanium surface with the tips of her fingers. She turned suddenly. 'I checked it all right. I also left it pressurised.'

Dennis looked up at the red light which blinked over it. 'Well, it's certainly not pressurised now.' He peered in through the tiny porthole. 'Good God!'

'What is it?' she dared to ask.

'The outer door.' He turned to face her. 'It's open.'

COMMANDER Carter whirled round in his chair. 'Open?'

'It was closed when I checked it,' said Juanita defensively.

'It would have to have been, and firmly,' said Andy in confirmation. 'Else it would have blown open with the internal pressure when she opened the inner door.'

'But who can have opened it? Who's gone outside?'

'Or come in?' asked Dr Fox as they walked towards the airlock.

'No, not come in. It would be impossible to enter the inner door with the outer door still open. The pressure inside the ship wouldn't let you.'

'Even someone very fit?' said Juanita remembering Cassi's unusual strength.

The Commander stared at the biologist as if she has said something foul. 'We're talking about air pressure over an area of almost ten square metres. That's...'

'Over a hundred tonnes,' said Andy quickly.

Steve Carter clearly resented his colleague's speed of calculation but he just glared at him and said: 'So it it has to be someone going out. Who's not here?'

'We're just missing the engineers who are taking pictures and Alec who was double-checking the inter-link circuitry the last time I saw him.'

'Someone taking my name in vain?' said the squat technician as he strode towards them with a smile on his face.

'Just wondering who's missing.'

He stood on his tiptoes and looked around. 'What's so fascinating about an airlock?'

'It's open,' said Juanita.

'Open? That's careless of someone. Who's gone walkabout?'

'That's what we'd like to know. Are the engineers still in the lab?'

He shrugged. 'I'm not sure. They were earlier.'

The Commander strode down the passageway. 'Let's go take a look.'

Like sheep, the others followed until they reached the small laboratory on Delta Level. Steve pushed open the door.

'Where's Bob?' he asked of the lone engineer.

Tom shrugged. 'Don't ask me. We finished our observations ten minutes ago and he said he was desperate for the loo. Didn't you pass him on the way down?'

They hadn't and said so. For the third time, the ship was searched completely. This time, everyone looked very carefully. However, it was to no avail; Bob Walker had vanished.

'We have a problem,' said The Commander as they all gathered in the control room.

'Only one?' grinned Andy.

'It's enough.'

'I know this might sound callous,' said Peter Spencer. 'But can we not manage without him?'

'Yes, we could. But that's not our problem.'

'What is, then?' asked Dr Carrero.

'As long as the outer door is open, none of us can leave this ship. We have to close the outer door before we can pressurise the airlock to open the inner one.'

'So we can't even go and search for Bob,' said Dr Fox.

'Correct, Dennis.'

'But why would he want to go outside in the first place?'

'Goodness knows. It's not exactly your perfect environment, is it?'

'The shuttle,' Juanita suddenly said. 'Could he be checking on something in the shuttle?'

'Without telling us first? Unlikely. Anyway, he knows it's against all safety regulations to go outside alone.'

'Then...?'

'I think we must assume that either Bob Walker is intent on some kind of mischief or...'

'Yes?'

'He is dead.'

JUPITER cast a luminous glow over Wayfarer Two as the ship came out of the shadow and resumed course for Saturn. Having reported in to Orion, there was little else to be done except to carry on the flight and try to make as many observations possible under the changed circumstances. Gradually, the largest planet in the Solar System began to recede into the distance.

'How did you know?' asked the young girl as she stood looking out of the shuttle window while the light from the sun glinted and sparkled through the particles of ice in the faint ring system.

The engineer placed his helmet on the chair. 'There was nowhere else for you to go.' He grinned. 'Anyway, I saw you.'

'Saw me?' said Cassi, turning towards him.

'Tom and I had just finished our observations of Amalthea. I was just packing away the camera when I saw the sunlight glint off the screen of the shuttle. I thought I saw a movement but wasn't certain.'

'Did you tell anyone else?'

'No. Tom thinks I'm in the loo.'

'Won't you get into trouble for leaving the ship alone?'

'Not if I get back before they notice I'm missing. I didn't want to look a fool if I had made a false errand.'

'Will you tell the others?'

'They'll have to know sooner or later.'

Cassi looked down. 'I know they will.'

'Are you all right?'

She turned and smiled. 'I'm fine, thanks. I've appreciated the time to just sit and think.'

'It's you who's been sending messages to Iris, isn't it?'

Cassi nodded and held up her calculator. 'Father left Mythos with seven Andromedans last year. One of them made it for me.'

'What purpose does it serve?'

'It's a communicator in disguise. When I was a child, it meant I could sit in my own cabin and learn from Iris without getting in father's way on the flight deck. With it, I can also control Iris if I need to.'

'Like those sneaky changes of course you made on the way here.'

'I couldn't take the chance that Gerry wouldn't see the asteroids and take evasive action in time.'

Bob grinned. 'He saw them all right. You just beat him to it.'

'Delay can be fatal,' said Cassi seriously.

'One day, you are going to have to learn to trust us. We're not completely stupid, you know.'

'I never said you were,' she said defensively. 'It's just that...' She stared at him for a very long time and then handed her calculator to him.

'Here. I don't think I'll be needing this any more.'

COMMANDER Carter leaned forward over the monitor as the ringed planet grew larger. 'Reverse thrust.'

'Reverse thrust, aye,' replied Andy and the big ship began to slow down and turn into a high orbit above the whirling clouds and glistening rings.

'Ten degrees left retro and slow for Titan.'

'Ten degrees left, aye. Slowing for Titan now.'

Gradually, the red moon grew in the screen.

'IDENTIFY,' Gerry typed at the white keyboard.

Iris replied:

IDENTITY	- Titan
DIAMETER	- 5.15Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 15d 22h 41m 26.707s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 15d 23h 15m 31.49s
INCLINATION	- 0° 18'
DENSITY	- 1.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 2.47 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 0.1715814
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.69 kg/cm²
DISTANCE	- 0.0006711AU >

Alec and Tom Johnson were in the lab making observations but everyone else was on the flight deck, watching and waiting.

'Full reverse thrust,' said Steve. 'Take us into orbit, Gerry.'

The Navigation Officer obeyed and Iris responded: 'CONFIRMED >'

There was a slight clunk and the Commander looked up. 'What's that?'

Peter shrugged. 'Meteorite maybe.' He looked over Gerry's shoulder. 'Iris confirms no drop in internal pressure.'

'Sounded like the airlock door,' said Dr Carrero. 'Would you like me to be taking a look?'

Steve nodded. 'Someone had better.'

The biologist got to her feet and left the flight deck, watching as the red light over the airlock door turned green as the pressures equalised. With baited breath, she waited as the hatch opened with a hiss and in the doorway stood a lone figure in a white space suit.

'Bob!' said the biologist with a genuine smile of relief as she held out her arms.

The figure raised its gloved hands and unclipped the visor. Long, fair hair cascaded out as the helmet was lifted clear. Cassi smiled. 'Beunos Dias, Juanita.'

THE operator on Orion Base listened carefully to the message from Wayfarer Two and then called the Director's office on the radiophone. The Director heard the news and grinned broadly as he replaced the handset. 'They've found Cassi.'

There was much excitement among the members of the Directorate and then the inevitable questions.

He held up his hands for silence. 'It seems she stowed away on the Titan shuttle and they found her quite by accident.'

'But is she well?' asked Natasha Ralentov.

'She is, Natasha. Doctor Fox has examined her thoroughly and given her a clean bill of health. Apparently, Cassi has spent the whole journey resting and now feels ready to climb Terra Aphrodite.'

The General looked puzzled. 'But they haven't gone to Venus, have they?'

The Director laughed. 'No, it was a figure of speech. They are safely in Titan orbit and are already dislocating the shuttle ready to commence observations.'

'And Wayfarer is giving no trouble?' asked Professor Akherd.

'None at all. They thought they had a fault at one point but it was just Cassi being over-cautious with her remote-control device.'

The Professor smiled to himself. He had clearly done the right thing.

'Will Cassi stay with the shuttle or go with the cruiser to Charon?' asked Dr Bartek.

'That is for Commander Carter to decide.'

'Do they yet know where they are headed?'

He looked at his watch. 'They will be told in approximately fifteen minutes. At least, then they will know as much as we do.'

The General sniffed. 'I said this part of the trip was a waste of time. We don't even know where they are going.'

'Let's hope they'll know when they get there.'

'But what if someone has mis-keyed data into the computer? There could be nothing there for them to observe.'

'General Phillips,' said the Professor. 'We know there is something there. Our astronomers have been telling us that for over a century.'

'Just guesswork.'

'Not at all. We acknowledged the perturbations in Neptune's orbit a hundred years ago and suspected there was a ninth planet. Eventually, that led to the positive identification of Pluto.'

'We know that,' the General said sarcastically. 'It's in the kids' history books.'

The Director ignored him. 'The problem was, Pluto seemed to be too small to produce the fluctuations observed in Neptune's orbit around the sun. There had to be something else.'

'So?'

'For a long time, scientists looked for another planet, one they called "Planet X". However, it soon became clear that whatever it was, it was orbiting in conjunction with Pluto itself. Hence Charon.'

'You're telling me that you go along with that weird theory of Pluto having a moon almost as massive as the planet itself?'

'Not necessarily. Nevertheless, to produce the effect it has on Neptune, it would have to be very big. Either we got it wrong concerning the size of Pluto itself, or Pluto and Charon are virtually binary planets, rotating around each other.'

'And you think that finding out is important enough to risk the lives of seven people?'

'All ten really. If Wayfarer doesn't return from Pluto, Officer Spencer and his team have no hope of getting back from Titan.'

'Don't they have the fuel?'

'It's not fuel that's the problem,' said the Professor. 'We substituted the normal drive with a new one that Hans has been working on and the new core will last almost indefinitely. However, it is unlike the Proton Drive in that it will not reach light speed or even close to it. Even at maximum thrust, it will take them six years to return.'

'And?'

'They only have food and air for six months. The shuttle was not designed as an inter-planetary vehicle; merely as a short-distance ferry.'

'So they are totally dependent upon Wayfarer for survival?'

'Most certainly. Wayfarer can stay out in space indefinitely, if need be. On board, they can grow their own food and air-scrubbers keep the internal atmosphere clean as they do on Orion.'

'As long as nothing goes wrong.'

The Director intervened again. 'That, we cannot foresee, gentlemen. For the time being, we must assume they have the knowledge and ingenuity to survive.'

'And they probably have a saboteur on board?'

'We don't know that for certain.'

'This is one hell of a way to find out.'

'Gentlemen,' said the quiet Professor. 'In a few moments, Iris will present the crew with a third possibility. I think we must then leave it to Wayfarer to go and find out for us.'

THE Titan Shuttle hung free of its locating clamps, fastened to Wayfarer by a titanium safety-line while all ten of the crew waited for Iris to give them the course for their destination. Tension was high as the time approached. Suddenly, Iris bleeped. 'TRAJECTORY CALCULATED >'

'CONFIRM TRAJECTORY,' typed Gerry.

'TRAJECTORY 252.1° >'

'Pluto,' sighed Alec Watson.

Doctor Fox frowned. 'Pluto? How do you know?'

The Commander shrugged. 'Iris told us that much before we left Orion.'

'You think we're going to Pluto?' said a quiet voice behind them.

Commander Carter spun round in his swivel chair. 'You just keep your mouth shut. I've about taken all I can from you. If I want your opinion, I'll ask for it.'

'I was only trying to help,' said Cassi.

'Then don't. I suggest you confine yourself to the lower decks for the remainder of the voyage. If I had my way, I would leave you here in the shuttle. However, Pete has persuaded me there is not enough room with all the equipment they will carry, so I'm lumbered with you.'

'Very well.' She stood up and turned to go. The others watched in silence as she opened the hatch and then paused in the doorway. 'I offer you one last word of warning.'

No-one spoke.

A slight smile touched her lips. 'Beware the Ides of March.'

After the door closed, the silence was maintained for several minutes until Andy spoke. 'Whatever does she mean?'

'I don't really care,' said Steve Carter, facing the console once more.

'She knows her Shakespeare,' said Dennis Fox.

'Shakespeare?' growled Andy. 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'It was a soothsayer's warning given to Julius Caesar who was determined to do his own thing. If my memory serves me correctly, he chose to ignore the warning and was subsequently assassinated.'

CASSI looked up and smiled as the door to the laboratory opened.

'I popped in to say adios,' said Dr Carrero.

Cassi embraced her briefly. 'Gracias, Juanita.'

'Don't take Steve too seriously, Cassi,' said the older woman. 'He is being all mouth at the moment. He has a lot to prove but he'll grow up, given time.'

'I hope so. I just have this horrible feeling....'

'Don't. You have Alec and Dennis on your side. They won't let him go too far.'

Cassi held her hands. 'I can take care of myself, Juanita.'

Dr Carrero smiled. 'I know that. It's Steve I'm being worried for.'

Cassi looked into the biologist's face. 'I have something for you.' She turned and opened a drawer. After rummaging for a while, she held up a small, metal gadget the size of a large matchbox with a recessed switch and indicator lamp on top. 'Take this with you.'

Juanita Carrero frowned as she turned it over in her hands. 'What is it?'

'It's an emergency rescue beacon. Activate that switch and it will send out a microwave signal which can be picked up on the other side of the Galaxy. My father made me promise to carry one with me all the time when I'm in space. I've never had to use mine yet, but you never know.'

The biologist's mouth dropped open. 'You think I will be needing it?'

'I hope not, but both Wayfarers have been equipped with receiving sensors. There will be some delay for the message to cross the intervening distance, of course, but I can be with you in an hour.' Cassi smiled wryly. 'It's a bit of Andromedæ technology I didn't declare upon Earthfall.'

'You will come back?' Juanita said quietly as they parted.

'Oh, yes,' said Cassi with a smile. 'The others might not, but I will.' She kissed her cheek. 'Count on it.'

THE three members of the shuttle crew crossed to their craft in silence. After brief exchanges of greetings and final checks, Wayfarer Two cast off and started to pull out of orbit under auxiliary power.

'ACTIVATE ANTI-MATTER REACTOR,' typed Andy.

'Reactor activated. Critical Mass in ten minutes >' replied the red screen.

'What did she mean?' asked Gerry as the Main Drive started to move them forwards.

'Who?' asked Steve Carter obtusely.

'Mrs Hardy. She suggested we weren't going to Pluto. How does she know?'

'She doesn't know a damn thing,' said the Commander.

'Then what did she mean about the Ides of March?'

'I don't know.' He smiled. 'Neither do I care very much.'

'She must have meant something.'

The Commander turned on him. 'You go and ask her if you feel so strongly about it. Just keep her off the flight deck and away from me.'

'The fifteenth of March,' said Doctor Fox. 'The Romans had several notary days each month - Calends, Nones and Ides. The Ides of March fell on the fifteenth.'

'But that's four months away. We'll be home long before that.'

'Then she must have meant something else.' He paused. 'Tell me, what makes you think we're going to Pluto?'

'Iris said 252 degrees. That's the direction of Pluto.'

'What else does Iris say about it?'

'I'll show you,' said Gerry. He typed, 'IDENTIFY PLUTO.'

IDENTITY	- Pluto
DIAMETER	- 2.4Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s
INCLINATION	- 17° 12'
DENSITY	- 0.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.7 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- .47
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	- 2
DISTANCE	- 29.961157AU
DIRECTION	- 252.1° North >

'Four and a half billion kilometres,' said Gerry thoughtfully.

'Half an hour at three times light speed,' said the Commander.

'TWO MINUTES TO CRITICAL MASS >' said the red screen.

The Navigation Officer turned. 'You're going for LUM-3?'

'Why not?'

'What if the Proton Drive has been tampered with?'

'Then in,' he consulted his watch, 'just over a minute, there will be one very big bang and we won't know a thing about it.'

THE Director's phone buzzed. He picked it up. 'Yes?'

'It's me. I urgently need to get a message through to Cassi.'

'It will take time, Mike. Wayfarer will be more than a light-hour away by now.'

'Damn. Still, I have to send it. She is in very great danger.'

The Director leant forward, frowning. 'Danger? What do you mean?'

'Tara's son has been killed.'

'What?' He nearly dropped the phone.

'It happened just an hour ago. Apparently, someone got into the isolation bay and murdered him.'

'A two-week old baby? Who would do such a thing?'

'I don't know. Jon just rang me from the hospital. I'm on my way over to Bruxelles now to try and do what I can to help. Poor Tara is heartbroken.'

'I'll bet she is. This means...'

'Cassi is the only living Andromedan.'

'How is she in danger, Mike?'

'You know I told you about the attempt upon Cassi's life after leaving the hospital on Wednesday?'

'Yes.'

'Well, Cassi asked me to check up on the owners of grey Land Cruisers in the area.'

'And?'

'There are none owned by anyone associated with the project.'

'So...?'

'I was in the canteen yesterday and one of the maintenance fitters happened to mention he was going to hire one for his holiday in Switzerland.'

'Hire one?'

'Yes. I didn't know anyone had that kind of vehicle for hire.'

'And someone did?'

'Yes, a firm in Antwerpen. I've just come from there now.'

'And?'

'They got one back from hire on Thursday. It had a dent in the bumper and front wing.'

'Did you get the name of the hirer?'

'I did. A Simon Delatorre.'

'Never heard of him.'

'No? Listen to this. It was two other men who brought it back.'

'Names?'

'None, and this Simon Delatorre doesn't seem to exist, at least not in this area.'

'What does all this have to do with Cassi?'

'All three men wore anoraks. However, the worker at the refuel pumps who filled their tank said that, underneath, the two who returned it wore pale blue overalls with crimson flashes.'

The Director suddenly sat up straight. 'Mission personnel?'

'They would have to be. I haven't yet been able to get a sufficiently accurate description of them but one thing is certain - they are on board Wayfarer Two with my wife.'

NINETY minutes later, the radio bleeped on board the Spacecraft. 'Orion Base to Wayfarer Two. I have a message for Mrs Hardy.' There was a slight pause. 'It will be relayed direct from Europort Control and is for her ears only. Due to the time-lag, I will wait for five minutes and then call you back. Please ensure she is standing by at that time. Message ends. Orion out.'

Gerry looked at the Commander. The senior man shrugged. 'You'd better get her. Director's orders.'

The Navigation Officer got up and left.

'Better record this,' Steve Carter said to Andy Cameron. 'We can decipher it later and find out what this is all about.'

The Pilot Officer nodded and quickly connected up a small tape recorder. He had just finished when the hatch opened. His mouth dropped open. 'Holy cow!'

The Commander turned quickly at the exclamation and saw what he meant. They had seen their tutor in a lot of guises and modes of dress, but not this one. Part of one of the store-rooms had been marked off as an exercise area. Cassi had clearly been working-out there when called. She strode in, barefoot, and in a skimpy black leotard which contrasted with her flawless suntanned skin. Wiping the perspiration from her face with a towel, she stepped towards the console as the men ogled unashamedly. Cassi ignored them all and plugged a lead from her small recorder into the top of Iris's panel and pressed several keys in succession.

'Message relay in one minute,' came the voice over the air.

Cassi fiddled with the knob and then waited.

'Message relay in ten seconds.'

'Nine.'

'Eight.'

'Seven.'

'Six.'

'Five.'

'Four.'

'Three.'

'Two.'

'One.'

'Message commences.'

There was less than a second of garbled squawking and then. 'Message ends. Good luck, Wayfarer.'

Cassi pressed the button. 'Message received. Thank you, Orion.'

She unplugged the lead and made to go.

'What was that about?' asked Steve Carter.

Cassi smiled. 'I have no idea. I will slow down the baud rate and feed it through the terminal in the lab. Then, I will know.' She pranced, light-footed, out of the room but turned in the doorway. 'By the way, I instructed Iris to corrupt the data fed into Andy's recorder.'

The men gaped as the door closed.

'What a figure,' said Gerry Green. 'I could do all sorts of things with a body like that.'

'It wouldn't suit you,' said Andy.

'It is rather special,' acceded Doctor Fox.

'It's more than special,' said Gerry. 'It's positively mind-boggling.'
'Don't underestimate that girl,' said Dennis quietly. 'I read the report Jon Pederson compiled on her when she first made Earthfall.'

'And?'

'She's probably fitter and stronger than the four of us put together.'

The Commander frowned. 'How can that be?'

'The gravity and atmospheric pressure on her own planet was very different to Earth's. Her muscular geometry is designed for a greater mass than she is currently carrying on her eight-stone frame.'

'Is that all?'

'Not by a half. If Doctor Pederson has done his sums right, she will probably outlive everyone currently alive on Earth, even the children.'

'If she lives that long,' the Commander muttered under his breath.

'Oh, she will. She has much more than we have, with one exception.'

'You mean Earth women have something she doesn't have. Is that it?'

'Almost. Andromedans lack something that everyone on Earth has had at some time or another.'

'I hadn't noticed anything missing,' said Andy with a vivid recollection of her body in his mind.

'It's nothing physical,' the doctor said quickly. 'It's more of a quality.'

'And..?'

'That girl has a metabolic rate which does not fluctuate like yours and mine. She has no need to solicit adrenaline for it is there, on tap, at all times - summoned at will. Our beloved teacher is probably devoid of any kind of fear.'

CASSI carefully locked the laboratory door before playing back the message through the terminal. When it had finished, she sat staring at the screen for a very long time before bursting into tears.

WAYFARER was ten minutes out from Pluto when it went into reverse thrust. At a mere fifty-thousand kilometres per hour, it turned to enter a high orbit. Sol was a mere dot in the distance, no larger than a very bright star, and the planet ahead looked as cold and bleak as they had imagined it would as it passed the viewer screen. The horizon had a slightly blue-ish haze which looked a little like frost as they traversed the forbidding planet.

Gerry Green shivered at the sight. 'Looks cold.'

'I expect it is. The surface temperature has been estimated to be far below the point of solidification of any of Earth's gasses.'

'What's that?' said Andy as another shape came into view.

'IDENTIFY,' typed Gerry.

IDENTITY	- Charon
DIAMETER	- 1.2 Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s
INCLINATION	- 9° 11'
DENSITY	- 0.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.1 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 0.43
DISTANCE	- 0.0038AU >

'That's odd,' said Andy.

'What is?'

'Not only does Charon keep its same face toward the mother planet like Luna does to Earth, it also has the same orbital period as Pluto's axial rotation.'

'So?'

'Seen from the planet, the moon will appear stationary in the sky.'

'So? No tides.'

Gerry grinned. 'No water, I expect.'

'That's not what I mean. If Charon doesn't move in relation to Pluto, by rights the two of them should tear each other apart by the pull of their mutual gravity.'

'Or collide?'

'Yes. One or the other.'

The Commander sat back thoughtfully. 'Andy, take us up and over the moon so we can see the other side.'

'Okay, boss.'

The Navigator punched keys and the big ship began to turn.

Iris bleeped. 'DANGER >'

The men stared at the viewer screen. There was nothing in sight. There was a bang followed by a tearing sound.

'IDENTIFY DANGER,' typed Andy quickly.

Iris did not hesitate to respond. 'HULL DAMAGE. INTERNAL PRESSURE DECREASING RAPIDLY. TERMINATION OF LIFE SUPPORT IMMINENT >'

CASSI knew something was wrong the instant she became weightless and instinctively held onto the edge of her anchored table to prevent herself being flung across the room. It was short lived. Just when she thought it was safe to let go, there was a sickening crash and she was flung against the wall with a force that knocked the wind from her. Stars swam before her eyes as she slumped to the floor and the strident sound of the decompression alarm pierced through the mist of her semi-consciousness. She staggered to her feet and moved towards the door. Her own cabin was intact, so the leak had to be somewhere else. Bursting out into the corridor, she frantically looked both ways and her eyes fastened upon the red light flashing over the bulkhead door to the laboratory. Without hesitation, she ran for it, assisted by the rush of air down the corridor. She dragged open the door and, in an instant, took it all in. The tiny porthole used by the crew for making camera observations had been torn out and debris was scattered everywhere. Oblivious to the glass cutting her bare feet, she ran across the floor towards where the body of Dennis Fox was wedged in the tiny aperture, drawn out feet-first by the vacuum outside the hull.

'The door,' he gasped. 'Get out and close the door.'

Cassi turned in mid jump and slammed the door firmly, thus limiting the evacuation of air to the laboratory itself. However, instead of obeying the doctor's plea and going outside into the safety of the corridor, she was inside facing a horrible death. She ran and gripped his hands as the air whistled out past his body which acted as a plug.

'Hold on,' she shouted above the alarm siren. 'I'll pull you free.'

'No,' he screamed. 'I'm dead. Leave me and save yourself and the others before it's too late.'

'I can't leave you,' she said and pulled on his arms to prevent him being drawn totally through the gap.

'You must,' he gasped, blood suddenly dribbling from his mouth. 'I'm finished. Get out while you can.'

Despite Cassi's pull, he was slipping and they both knew it. The jagged edge of the hole was tearing at his flesh as he was slowly but inexorably drawn into space.

'The bed,' he finally said. 'Use the bed.'

Cassi turned and saw what he meant and tore at the restraining straps. As the last one came free, the wind force dragged her from the bed towards the black hole in the hull. Dennis Fox had gone. Swinging round in mid-flight, she held the mattress in front of her as she was slammed against the outer hull with a force which almost broke her arms. Desperately, she struggled to hold the plastic-covered bed over the aperture as she was held by the air pressure like a fly against the wall. She daren't let go; she would never make it to the door before the mattress would be torn apart and dragged through the hole so, spread-eagle, she hung onto the four corners with all her strength, trying to keep it flat against the wall, hoping that help would come soon.

Surely they must hear the alarm, she thought frantically, and Iris will have told them where to come by now. She suddenly had a horrible thought - perhaps other parts of the ship were holed, maybe the flight deck itself. She could feel the vacuum outside tearing at the other side of the mattress, eating its way slowly through the padded insides. The door opened.

'Holy cow,' said Tom Johnson, closing the door once more. 'Hang on, I'm coming.'

'It's no use,' Cassi screamed. She could feel the mattress tearing under her. She raised her head to look for Tom and finally saw him, under the big

table. Puzzled, she watched as he fiddled with the restraining clamps of the legs and then straightened, pulling out a walkie-talkie.

'Steve, it's Tom. Don't ask questions but when I give the word, switch off the artificial gravity and hold it off until I say.'

'Will do,' came the reply from the flight deck.

Tom firmly gripped the edge of the table. 'Now!'

Everything suddenly went weightless as she saw him dragging what would normally have been a very heavy, metal table towards her. She felt herself slipping due to the fact she had nothing to hold onto.

Tom saw her predicament. 'On,' he said and gravity was resumed as he fought for breath. With a great heave, he bent down and lifted the table onto one end, the flat top now vertical along Cassi's back. He stuffed a second mattress tightly between her body and the table top and she was firmly trapped against the window. The vacuum had shredded itself almost through the bed and she could feel it beginning to tear at the thin material of her leotard. *Another few seconds, she thought, and little pieces of my belly are going to be spread all over the surface of Pluto.*

'Grab my hand,' said Tom.

What should she do? The message from Orion had told her that two of the men on board had tried to kill her on Earth and friends of theirs had murdered Tara's baby. If they would do that, her life was worth nothing at that point in time. If she let go of the wall and he was one of them...

'Trust me,' he said. 'Let go and hold my hand before it's too late.'

She felt her leotard going. It was already too late. She had no choice but to let go of the wall and hold onto his hand.

'Gravity off,' Tom shouted into his radio again and they went weightless once more.

Tom hauled with all his strength and Cassi came out of the gap like a cork out of a champagne bottle just before the table crashed against the wall.

'On,' he called and the weight of the table jammed the mattresses against the gap.

Cassi fell down in a heap beside him as both mattresses began to tear.

'Run,' he shouted as he leaned on the table to prevent further movement. 'Get out of here.'

Cassi ran. As she opened the door, a new gale of wind poured in from the corridor as she pushed with all her might until she was through and the door slammed after her. Frantically, she tried to haul it open once more but the air pressure was now too strong even for her. A grating, shearing sound came from the other side of the door followed by a dying scream and she knew that Tom was beyond help. Running footsteps made her look up as Gerry and Andy arrived and pulled her away from the door. It wouldn't open again, even with their combined strength.

'The fire-axe,' called Andy and Gerry dragged it from the wall case where it was housed.

'You'll never smash through that door,' called Cassi. 'It's made of solid titanium.'

'She's right,' said Andy. 'It's useless.'

Gerry wouldn't give in that easily. 'Cassi, we'll pull, you try to wedge the axe head into the gap.'

All three of them were needed to budge the door and, with brute force and leverage they managed to wedge the door open a few centimetres and peer inside. It was too late. There was just an empty hole in the wall. Andy pulled out the axe and the door slammed shut under air pressure.

'Tom saved my life,' muttered Cassi.

'Dennis...?' queried Gerry.

Cassi shook her head. 'Dead, too.'

The Navigation Officer slumped down beside her. 'God help us.'

'What happened?' asked Cassi.

'I don't know.'

She frowned. 'What do you mean?'

He shrugged.

Andy spoke up. 'We went into orbit as planned but Iris gave a warning. Before we could react, we must have hit something a glancing blow.'

'What, precisely, did we hit?'

Gerry looked at her. 'There was nothing there. Nothing at all.'

'Nothing?'

He shook his head. 'Cassi, I'm scared.'

'Didn't Steve decipher my warning?'

'Warning?' said Andy.

'The Ides of March?' added Gerry.

'Yes. Did he?'

Gerry shook his head. 'It didn't make sense to any of us.'

'Didn't you ask Iris? She knew.'

'Iris?'

'Good grief.' She jumped to her feet. 'You mean Steve still doesn't know?'

'No,' he said, looking puzzled.

'Where are we now?'

'Still in Pluto orbit. We should be round again in a minute or two.'

'Come on. We've got to stop him.'

She began to run and the two men followed in silence.

Breathless, she burst onto the flight deck. 'Commander, take Wayfarer out of orbit for heaven's sake.'

He looked baffled. 'Take her out?'

'Don't argue. Do it now.'

He wanted to argue, to exert his authority but the pleading looks on the face of his two officers decided him. He pushed buttons and Wayfarer Two turned away from Pluto and curved around in a wide arc that took them clear. They all sat down.

'I think you'd better tell us what this is about,' said Commander Carter.

'I warned you,' she said as she stepped into her overalls. 'But you wouldn't listen.'

'Okay, I was wrong. Now tell me.'

Cassi nodded towards the console. 'Ask Iris.'

'I don't have time to discuss this. We've just lost two men and have a hole in the hull as well as goodness-knows what other damage.'

'Is the reactor stable?' Cassi suddenly asked.

Andy sat down at the red screen and punched keys. He sighed with relief. 'Stable and standing-by.'

Cassi turned to Alec Watson who sat in front of Iris. 'Switch to voice control.'

The technician looked at the Commander for confirmation. Steve nodded. Alec pressed CTRL-V.

'Iris. Identify Pluto,' said Cassi.

IDENTITY	- Pluto
DIAMETER	- 2.4Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s
INCLINATION	- 17° 12'
DENSITY	- 0.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.7 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- .47
NUMBER OF SATELLITES	- 2
DISTANCE	- 0.000164AU >

'I still don't see,' said Steve Carter.

Cassi frowned. 'Don't you see anything wrong in the data? Has all my training been for nothing?'

They all looked at the data issuing from Iris.

'Beware the Ides of March,' Cassi said. 'In Latin, March was the god of war, Mars. Now do you see?'

'What has Mars got to do with Pluto?'

Cassi grinned slightly. 'I admit it was a bit obscure. I thought of it on the spur of the moment when you were being so beastly to me.'

He still looked confused.

'I've got it,' said Gerry suddenly. 'Mars has two moons but Pluto only has one.'

'So we thought,' said Cassi. 'Officially, Charon is Pluto's only satellite, but Iris was telling us that she had two.'

'Two satellites?' said Andy. 'Pluto has two satellites?'

'I think we may have just hit the other one,' said Cassi, sitting down.

'But there was nothing there, I tell you.'

'Nothing you could see. Ask Iris about the second moon.'

'How? We don't know its name.'

'Yes, we do.'

'How? And how did Iris know? No-one on Earth knows about it, do they?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not for certain, though there have been anomalies in the current data. Iris only found out last week.'

'I give in,' said Steve. 'I don't understand this at all.'

Cassi said, 'That's why I had to come.'

'You knew?'

'Only what Iris told me. I simply knew that Iris doesn't lie. If Iris said that Pluto has two moons, it had to be true.'

'But how did Iris suddenly find out?'

'Aha. Therein lies a well-kept secret very few people know about.'

'Are you going to keep us in suspense?'

She shook her head. 'Not at all, though I doubt if you will believe me.'

'Try us.'

Cassi stood up and paced up and down. 'Due to a miscalculation I won't go into now, last year Wayfarers One and Two both ended up in the Andromeda Galaxy over two million light years away. I was born on this ship half-way back to Earth.'

The Commander sneered a little. 'I did hear this incredible story from the Professor.'

'Do you want me to go on or not?'

'I do,' said Andy.

'One advantage of the Wayfarer series cruisers is that the computers on both ships are interlinked.'

'By radio, you mean?'

She nodded. 'Precisely. When one Iris learns something, it automatically updates the other. It takes hours, sometimes, because of the intervening distance, but it happens.'

Alec stood up. 'I had heard of something like this that was in the development stage.'

'It was,' said Cassi. 'Even when the Wayfarers were launched last year. However, while father was on Mythos, the Andromedans made several modifications and one of them was to the computer link.'

'What difference did they make?'

'I don't know how it is done but now, regardless of the distance between the ships, the update is virtually instant.'

'Don't talk such rubbish,' said Steve. 'Radio waves are limited to light speed, we all know that.'

'Not necessarily,' said Alec. 'Already, our people are working on the study of superluminal radiation. When Commander Duncan covered five million light years in seventy-five years, it threw all our previous theories out of the window.'

'Especially when he really did it in a month,' snided the Commander.

'Time-compression,' said Cassi. 'It's quite simple.'

'It might be to you aliens. We Earth people prefer to rely on facts.'

'Then face the facts, Commander,' said Cassi. 'Iris said Pluto had two moons. You chose to ignore the warning and probably just bumped into one of them and we were lucky not to be all killed. As it is, we lost two good men.'

'But there is nothing there.'

Alec Watson interrupted the friendly tête-a-tête. 'From where did Iris learn of Pluto's second moon?'

'From Wayfarer One.'

'Pardon.'

'Iris learned it from the computer on board my father's ship. When he left last January, he was going to explore places not previously visited. He must have come this way and learned about the second moon. The instant he typed the data into his Iris, our Iris knew it was there.'

'How can we find out more data on it?' said Andy.

'We must work out what Commander Duncan called it,' said Gerry. 'And that might take a very long time.'

'Not necessarily,' said Cassi. She turned. 'Iris, identify Mythos.'

IDENTITY	- Mythos
DIAMETER	- 3.8Mn
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s

MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 30d 10h 28m 47.9s
INCLINATION	- 10° 01'
DENSITY	- 0.97
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.6 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- .42
DISTANCE	- 0.0016778AU >

'Good God,' said the Commander.

'Why Mythos?' asked Alec.

'Mythos was the planet in Andromeda where my mother lived. It seemed logical that my father would name this new moon after her home planet.'

'What happened to your original Mythos?'

'It was drawn into the black hole which engulfed their part of the nebula.'

'But why can't we see this one?'

'That is rather a long story, gentlemen.'

'I think we need to know.'

'Will you believe me?'

Most nodded. They had little choice.

'For over a century, it has been believed that the combined masses of Pluto and Charon are not enough to cause the observed fluctuations in Neptune's orbit. During the nineteen-sixties, theories were banded about concerning what astronomers called " Planet X" . Unfortunately, no-one could find it.'

'It took them long enough to find Charon,' mused Gerry.

'Too right. When they did, it only half solved the problem. Charon was too small - there had to be something else. Then, in the nineteen-nineties, an amateur astronomer, quite by accident, took a succession of photographs of Pluto. When they were developed, he saw - not one, but two moons.'

'I did hear that story,' said Alec. 'The sighting was unconfirmed and put down to fraud.'

'It was. Try as they may, no other astronomer could find this second moon. For years, they watched and waited. There were several sightings but none of them were officially documented.'

'I suppose it must be in Pluto's shadow for most of the time,' said Andy.

'Or Charon's,' said Gerry.

'That's possible,' said Cassi. 'However, look at the mean synodic period.'

They looked. 'Just over thirty days.'

'Earth days,' confirmed Cassi. 'Every sighting of Mythos was within a few seconds on the same day each month.'

'The fifteenth?' said the technician. 'The Ides of March?'

Cassi smiled. 'You're a genius, Alec. Like Mars, Pluto has two moons, one of which is seen on the fifteenth of every month.'

'It can't be invisible just because of a shadow,' said Gerry. 'Any planetary eclipse would be relatively brief, wouldn't it?'

'It would,' confirmed Alec. 'Additionally, we should be able to see it from here. But we can't.'

'Not until the fifteenth.'

'Yesterday,' said Steve.

Cassi shook her head. 'Today.'

He leant forward. 'Now look here...'

'Don't forget time-compression. You broke light speed coming here, didn't you?'

He nodded. 'What difference does that make?'

'Quite a lot. Believe me, Mythos will become visible this afternoon.'

'Then what will we do?'

'You're the Commander, but I recommend we fly close-by and drop a radio beacon onto the surface so we don't bump into her again.'

'That will mean someone going outside.'

'That's true,' said Cassi.

'But who? Do I have any volunteers?'

'I'll do it,' said Cassi when no-one else offered.

'You?'

'Of course.' She smiled. 'Don't worry, I've been space-walking since I was ten years old.'

'What?'

'I was born on this ship, don't forget. On the long haul back from

Andromeda, I would spend many, many hours lying outside, peering up at the stars.'

'Outside?'

She grinned. 'Dad would get quite angry at times at the risks I used to take. Many a time, he would have to come and drag me inside. I was simply fascinated by it all.'

Alec smiled. 'I'll bet you were quite a handful when you were a kid.'

Cassi leaned closer. 'I was a right little demon and used to hide from him. I know every inch of Wayfarer, inside and out.'

'Can you use patching equipment?' said the Commander suddenly.

Cassi smiled. 'Of course. One of the Andromedan crew showed me how.'

'Can you fix the hole in our hull?'

She nodded. 'Naturally.'

'Then that's your job for the rest of this morning.'

Andy stood up. 'I'll help. Do you know what we'll want?'

She nodded. 'We'll need a cushioned plate inside and one outside connected together through the hole by hi-stress bolts. If you can start getting something knocked together in the workshop, I'll take a look outside.'

'Alone?'

'I've done it before.'

'Okay. Let's start right away. It scares me to hell to think of that gaping hole in our side.'

AN hour later, Cassi was in the airlock. The green light turned red as the air evacuated and she unreeled a safety line from her belt and clipped the end to a ring on the wall. Carefully, she pushed open the outer door and stared out. It had been a long time but the view was just the same. Stars twinkled against the black backdrop as the bulk of Pluto gave off its cold, blue shimmer beneath her. She took a deep breath and stepped into space. They were almost six billion kilometres from the sun but the insulated suit kept her warm as she climbed, hand over hand, along the side of the ship. She was fascinated by the view of the stars and also by Charon which was just rising above the far horizon. She searched the sky for a second object but it was not to be seen. There was no shadow, no dark patch on the starry background. The mystery defied the understood laws of astrophysics. Eventually, she climbed over the far side. 'I'm in position over the hole.'

With eyes and fingertips, she examined the hull. No, there was no further damage with the exception of a broken viewing aperture. She shuddered at the sight of blood on the sides of the hole and then looked closer. Among the red splashes were scratches where something had been clamped to the hull along with several black scorch marks.

'I'm on the inside,' came Andy's voice over the radio. 'Can you see me?'

Cassi peered inside to see another suited body on the other side of the hole. 'Affirmative.'

They touched gloves through the hole.

'I couldn't find two plates so one will have to do,' said Andy. 'I'll pass out two pre-stressed bars. If you can place them across the hole on the outside, I will feed the bolts through and put the plate on the inside.'

'That should be okay,' Cassi confirmed. 'Internal pressure will hold it in place. Make sure you insulate it well around the edges.'

'You're not stupid, are you?' said Andy.

'I hope not. Pass me the bars.'

He did and, an hour later, the plate was clamped into place and the ship air-tight. For several more minutes, Cassi studied the area around the hole and it was now very clear to her that the impact had been no accident. With a last look around, she began to clamber along the hull. While she was still twenty feet from the airlock, Wayfarer began to move. Cassi frowned. It couldn't be happening but it was. The ship accelerated forward and Cassi was dislodged and swung away from the ship at the end of her safety line. As she watched, the airlock opened and she saw another suited person.

'Andy,' she called. 'Is that you?'

There was no answer as the figure bent over and fiddled with something on the wall before standing erect, waving and closing the outer door. Cassi pulled on her line but it was useless. No longer affixed to the hull, it now

hung slack as the cruiser began to pull away from her. She watched in horror as the shape of Wayfarer gradually faded until it eventually disappeared. The full implication finally dawned on her. She had been deliberately cut adrift in space ten thousand kilometres above the coldest, most desolate planet in the entire Solar System.

ALTHOUGH she could feel no fear, Cassi did have other, very acute feelings that vied for first place in her mind and heart. In the stark silence, she felt a deep sense of disappointment that she had failed in her bid to help the mission. She also felt shame for having been unable to foresee that she could end up in her present predicament. Thirdly, she felt hurt that she may never see her husband and step-daughter again. Add to that the awareness that she had seemingly betrayed the entire Andromedan race by failing to produce offspring and, all in all, it was a very miserable young lady who hung in space with tears of absolute frustration dribbling down her face. She had been alone before but never so lonely as she contemplated her situation. In her mind, she pulled herself together and began to calculate. She had a two-hour air tank and had already been out of the ship for over an hour, helping to patch the hole in Wayfarer's hull. Fifty minutes at an average of seventeen breaths per minute was eight-hundred and fifty lung-fulls of air before she would no longer be caring about what had happened to the crew of Wayfarer Two. What she couldn't understand was - why?

If they now returned to Orion without her, there would be questions asked. Both her husband and the Director would, between them, start and carry out an investigation that would make the Irangate Incident of the previous century look like a college debate.

A sudden thought shook her entire body. If these men were prepared to murder her, what would they do with the crew of the Titan shuttle? She guessed that the three crew members currently in orbit around that moon would wait patiently for a ship which would never return for them. Out of ten people who originally left Orion Base aboard Wayfarer, two had already died. In three-quarters of an hour's time, it would likely be three. In a few weeks, three more. Six people dead, and for what?

Cassi looked around her. Right below her, the ice-blue bulk of Pluto, half the size of Earth, hung motionless in the black sky. It seemed as if she could just reach down and touch it. The slightly-mottled sphere looked devoid of any significant surface features except for the dark patches already observed from Earth by means of the Hubble Telescope and she smiled for a second at the thought that no-one had ever been in a position to contemplate the planet so closely before. There was no depth of atmosphere to speak of, just that frosty methane haze which seemed whiter in places than others. Despite her insulated and heated suit, she shivered at the thought of how cold it would be upon the surface of that bleak planet. Here and there, a faint streaking in the frost-haze showed the surface rotation speed to be having an effect on the slight atmosphere. Pluto had a day only a quarter as long as that of Earth and a equatorial diameter of less than half Earth's. She found herself working out that, at the equator, the surface would be spinning at almost three-thousand kilometres per hour, almost double that of her adopted planet.

For a moment, she raised her head to observe the dirty-grey bulk of Charon, now high in the sky above Pluto. Unlike the mother planet, Charon was a Luna look-alike with massive crater damage to its surface as the reflected glow from Pluto highlighted the surface features clearly. Of the supposed second moon, there was no sign whatsoever. It was that thought which triggered something in her mind. As carefully as she could, she eased the fingers of her left hand from her thick glove and slowly inched her arm up her sleeve. It was difficult as the suit was fairly tight-fitting. However, it had been a small man's size so some movement was possible.

On Earth, all sorts of manoeuvres can be made when we have our feet firmly on the ground but, in empty space where all is weightless, such exercises are fraught with problems and dangers. Every movement is exaggerated and sudden moves spin one round involuntarily. With great care, she eventually got her hand as far as her shoulder and slipped her arm over the edge of the suit- armpit and pushed it down inside her suit - alongside her body. Had she remembered it? She smiled as her fingers touched something hard. Yes, she had.

It may do her no good at all, but she knew she had to try. Gently, she eased the small metal box, the twin of the one she had given to Juanita Carrero, out of her pocket and into the palm of her hand. With great difficulty, she struggled with the switch in the confined space. She had to know if it was working so, gradually, she raised it upwards towards her neck and twisted her head to a strange angle to try to look down inside her suit. She relaxed - the red LED was lit. Now all she had to do was wait.

The stars looked different to Cassi. Due to the shift in distance, several of the normal constellations appeared slightly distorted when compared to their traditional shape as seen from Earth. However, she was used to that. Nevertheless, it served to remind her of her lonely, isolated predicament. Cassi looked at the electronic readout projected along the top of her tinted visor and observed the time. Wayfarer Two had obviously gone out of Pluto's orbit else it would have passed her again by now. She hoped that all four of the crew on Wayfarer Two were not guilty of murder. The Director's message from Mike had mentioned that two men had seemingly been involved in the attempt to kill her at Bruxelles. If that was still true, she hoped the two innocent ones would survive. She hoped they might hear her emergency rescue beacon and return for her. She hoped they would succeed and, together, they would identify the guilty ones and overpower them. It was a vain hope but hope was all she had left.

In site of all the happenings in her life, Cassi had never before seriously contemplated death. She had been told that an Earth-person's whole life flashes by in front of his eyes in those final seconds before the end. She began to wonder if the same was true for Andromedans. Her breathing was already difficult as she looked at the tank-gauge readout which registered on the top of her visor. Two minutes, she thought. Just two more minutes and it would all be over.

There were a number of different ways to go. She could simply undo the clips on her helmet and she would die instantly as the internal suit pressure blew it off. She would not suffocate - there would be no time for that. A human body exerts an internal pressure of just over a kilogramme on every square centimetre of its skin area. Subjected to a sudden vacuum, the body reacts in the most incredible way by expanding until it can take no more, whereupon it literally explodes. This happens in a split second and is believed to be painless. It is certainly irreversible.

An alternative was for her to turn off what was left of her precious air and it would be like drowning for her and all over in a matter a minute or so. However, the way she had chosen for herself in letting things take their natural course did not merit prolonged advance contemplation and she swallowed at the very thought of it. Carefully, she raised her hand to her face, forcing it past her neck band, and wiped the perspiration from her brow. The suit was totally sealed and completely insulated. Consequently, as the oxygen became exhausted, a number of things started to happen. Firstly, the internal gas gradually began to turn to carbon-dioxide - a deadly toxic gas for humans to inhale.

Cassi tried to force herself to breathe more slowly, to stretch out her last few lung-fulls of air as much as possible but she found it difficult in view of the lack of oxygen. The second stage was that, within the suit, the temperature rapidly began to escalate due to the change of gas - a closed-circuit greenhouse effect had been created due to the highly-insulative qualities of her heated suit. Her whole body ran with sweat and she eventually began to shiver despite the warmth as her body gradually became super-dehydrated. In training, she had heard all the theories of what happened to you when you ran out of air under such circumstances but it had all been guesswork. It had never actually happened to anyone in real life and she felt as if she was being some kind of a guinea pig.

After a while, the stars were no longer sharp pinpoints of light but gradually became blurred, misty, vague in form. In addition, she began to hallucinate, imagining all sorts of things as her life began to drain away. She tried to focus on her hand and found it difficult though the blue tinges of advanced oxygen starvation were clearly there. It wouldn't take long for her brain to be permanently affected - it was already giving her considerable pain. Progressively, the hallucinations went to an advanced stage and, through the steamed-up faceplate, she could see a large fire in the sky and knew that

she was dying at last.

The flames flared towards her as if it was a giant dragon trying to scorch her space-suit. Every few seconds, the brilliant orange fire came again, getting closer by the minute. The remains of her intellect reminded her that it was impossible for such a creature to exist in deep space but she could do nothing but relax as the dragon crept closer, eager to eat her alive. When the flames eventually died down altogether, she could faintly make out its black mouth, big and wide as it bore down on her. Occasionally, a flash of flame would spurt from one side or the other of its face as it licked its lips in anticipation of a tasty meal. Its body seemed to sparkle and reflect the blue-ish haze from Pluto and she closed her eyes as it opened its huge mouth wide to devour her whole.

FOR some strange reason, it was brightly-lit inside that cave of a dragon's mouth and Cassi noticed that a big, red lamp was flashing high above her head. Also, this dragon creature was taking off her helmet and, as it came clear of her face, she noticed that the light on the wall was now green.

'Relax,' said a strangely-familiar voice and something soft was placed over her face - something that smelt good and clean, forcing her to breathe more deeply. Cassi's mind whirled. Was she actually not in a dragon at all but in this heaven place she had heard Earth-people spending so much time and energy theorising over?

She just lay there, oxygen flooding into her body, reviving her, when suddenly, strong hands were under her armpits and she was being dragged further and further towards the belly of the dragon. Then, someone that was with her inside the dragon began to tear at the fastenings of her space suit, stripping it from her body with a mixture of both care and haste. After the suit went the sweat-soaked overalls and, soon, her black leotard. Cassi looked up from the floor and saw that the other creature was wearing a space suit and that it had removed its own helmet. Frantically, she tried to focus on the face that was close to her own. Which one of them was it? Andy? Gerry? She struggled to focus and it looked like neither of them. Although still blurred, the hair was clearly of spun gold, the soft skin pale.

The floor was hard but she had no time to contemplate her position before luke-warm water began to cascade over her. Frantically, she tore the mask from her face and began to breathe normally for the first time as the water poured over her and the shower cubicle stopped trying to throw her back into space. In time, the room slowed down. As it stabilised, Cassi grabbed hold of the door handle and, with wobbly legs, finally got to her feet and hung onto the shower outlet above her head for support as the water ran down her body and her skin gradually began turn back to its normal colour. The door opened a crack.

'Are you all right?' said the quiet voice.

Cassi nodded with eyes closed and wet hair clinging to her face. 'Just stiff and weak.'

'Wait there,' the dragon's mate said and disappeared.

In a moment, the creature was back and without its spacesuit. For several minutes, Cassi just clutched hold of the shower head with her eyes tightly shut as hands vigorously rubbed her whole body with a soft sponge to promote circulation of oxygen to the starved blood-vessels. It was a little uncomfortable at first and yet paradise as she gradually began to feel her old self once more. Soon, she had taken enough and reached up and turned off the shower.

'Feeling better?' her rescuer said, holding up a large towel and enshrouding her with it.

Cassi nodded and stepped forward into the open arms, trying desperately to focus upon the smiling face which had deep, blue eyes. The two of them were of the same height, the same build and, as the steam dissipated and the blood circulated, Cassi's vision became clearer. The creature smiled once more and a sharp shock ran right through Cassi's body as her mouth dropped open.

It couldn't possibly be, but it was. The person she was staring at was - herself.

CASSI stood motionless for a long time as this double of hers gently dried her back and hair. Her mind ran through all the possibilities. Was she in some

kind of a space/time warp due to the superluminal speeds they had accomplished? Alternatively, was she dreaming or simply going mad from lack of oxygen?

Gently, the young woman finished drying her, gave her a drink of some liquid that tasted sweet yet strangely salty, and then bent down and picked Cassi up bodily in her arms. 'What you need,' she whispered, 'Is a good rest.'

Cassi nodded gratefully in the silence and ran her hands gently through the girl's golden hair as she carried her up the passageway and into her own cabin where she was placed upon the bed and tucked into the sheets.

'Who are you?' Cassi said suddenly.

The girl turned in the doorway. 'Don't you know? I am the daughter of Commander James Duncan.'

'But...what...?'' Cassi began to panic. Jim Duncan was her own father, not that of this strange look-alike.

'Rest, Cassi,' said the soft voice. 'We'll talk later.'

Cassi jolted. *She even knows my name*, she thought. She started to sit up. 'But I must know...'

The young woman stepped closer and placed her hands on Cassi's shoulders - gently but firmly pushing her back down onto the pillow. 'Father will be here when you wake up. He will explain.'

Cassi became further confused. 'Father? But...?'

'Sleep for now,' her doppelganger was saying. 'You've had a narrow escape.'

Cassi forced herself to sit up. 'But I must know.'

The girl kissed her cheek. 'My name is Princess Lyniera of Andromeda.' She smiled. 'I am your sister.'

CASSI awoke as if from a drugged sleep. Her eyes were heavy and her mouth tasted foul as she slowly sat up and looked around her. What a terrible dream, she thought as she observed the familiar surroundings - a nightmare all disjointed and full of memories of dying from oxygen starvation, of being eaten alive by dragons mixed in with visions of aliens which looked like a mirror-image of herself. She put her feet to the floor and found, much to her surprise, that it was stable and firm and didn't move as she stood up. There was a brief flash of giddiness before she felt calm. Everything around her looked familiar and yet...? Cassi slid open the locker door. Nothing different there, she thought as she took out a leotard and fresh pair of overalls and climbing into them, zipping up the front before stepping into a pair of trainers and then running a brush quickly through her long hair. It was uncanny. Everything was the same. On the other hand, all in the room seemed somehow different. She was still puzzled as she opened the door and walked out into the corridor. At least that looked the same. Almost two metres in width, large hatch at each end, doorways off, airlock on the far side. Had it all been a dream, some kind of strange Andromedæ nightmare? Quietly, she slipped down to the laboratory and carefully opened the door to see what degree of destruction had been wreaked upon the room by that sudden vacuum when the window had blown out. Cassi stood and stared. Everything was in order: the mattress was on the bed, the table was still firmly anchored to the floor, the reinforced porthole stood with its telescopic camera in front of it. So, she thought, even that had been a dream. But where was everyone?

She closed the door behind her and walked quickly up the corridor toward the flight deck. At the big hatch, she paused momentarily. Who would she find on the other side of that big, steel hatch-way? Steve Carter? Alec Watson? Andy Cameron? Taking a deep breath, she reached out her hand, pulled the lever and the door swung open. Of the several faces on the flight-deck, only two turned to face her. I'm still dreaming, she thought as one of the occupants smiled and got to his feet. She stood stock still as he walked towards her as if in slow motion, reaching out his arms in a gesture of welcome. She launched herself into them and began to cry tears of joy as the two of them held each other tightly.

'I didn't expect to see you here,' he said gently. 'But I'm very glad I did. It's been a long time.'

'It's been a whole year,' Cassi agreed as he touched her tears gently with his fingertips.

He smiled. 'It may have been to you, Earth time. For me, it has been

eighteen years. Your theory was right about time-compression.'

Cassi drew back slightly. 'You've proved it?'

'Beyond any doubt. Iris has carefully logged every step of the way.'

'How far did you go?'

'Far enough. However, we didn't leave the galaxy this time. We just went on a little trip around the circumference.'

'We?'

Commander Duncan smiled. 'You've met your sister.'

Cassi glanced towards her fair-haired twin who was walking slowly towards them and then whispered, 'So it wasn't a dream.'

'No,' he said, suddenly wondering if there was going to be any jealousy between his two daughters.

He needn't have worried. The two girls embraced like long-lost relatives as he smiled and looked on. 'I'm afraid I couldn't resist the temptation to repeat the artificial birth procedure.'

Cassi looked at him. 'You fertilised another of mother's eggs?'

Jim laughed. It seemed so strange for his eldest daughter to refer to the long-dead Queen of Andromeda in such a manner as both girls had been incubated years after their mother's death from the preserved eggs of the Andromeda Seed.

'How old are you?' Cassi asked her twin.

'Eighteen,' replied the younger girl. She smiled. 'I've heard a lot about you.'

Cassi glanced at her father. 'Only the good things, I hope.'

Lyniera frowned. 'Are there any other kind?'

Cassi thought about everything that had happened to her since she had once come back from space as naive as this. She grinned. 'You, my dear sister, have got a lot to learn about human nature.'

WHILE three androids ran the basic functions of Wayfarer One, Cassi brought her father and sister up-to-date on everything that had happened to her over the last few months. Jim Duncan sat, deep in thought, raising questions where appropriate, whilst Lyniera sat with her mouth and eyes wide open.

When Cassi had finished, no-one spoke for a long time.

'Where is Wayfarer Two now?' asked her father eventually.

Cassi shrugged. 'I don't know. They just went off and abandoned me. The ship didn't come round again so they must have dropped out of orbit.'

'Well they certainly wouldn't have gone down to the surface, that's for sure. They must have departed for some other destination.' He suddenly sat up straight. 'What's the date, Earth-time?'

Cassi looked puzzled at the question. 'The fifteenth of November.'

The Commander swung around in his chair. 'We've got to get out of here.' He leant towards one of the androids. 'Take us out of Pluto orbit. Rendezvous close to Charon.'

'Yes, Commander,' said the slightly-metallic voice and Wayfarer One began to pull away from the icy planet.

'Is there a problem?' asked Cassi.

'There will be if we're still around when Mythos gets here.'

'What do you mean?'

'Watch and see.'

Perched in orbit high above the dark, pitted surface of Charon, the three of them watched and waited for almost an hour until, suddenly, Iris bleeped.

'DANGER >' said her screen.

'Identify,' Cassi said without thinking.

Iris responded instantly:

IDENTITY	- Mythos
DIAMETER	- 3.8Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 6d 9h 21m 36s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 30d 10h 28m 47.9s
INCLINATION	- 10° 01'
DENSITY	- 0.97
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 4.6 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- .42

DISTANCE

- 0.0016778AU >

There was a brilliant flash from behind Pluto and the centre screen tracked the ball of light as it passed behind the planet at amazing speed, headed sun-bound for several minutes before turning slowly to circumnavigate Charon. In a matter of moments, it was gone.

Cassi sat and stared. 'What on earth was that?'

Jim smiled. 'Nothing on Earth, my dear. That was Mythos.'

'But I don't understand. It looked more like a kind of comet.'

'In a sense, that's what Mythos is - a comet. However, unlike Halley and the others, Mythos is solid, it has structure.'

'But it moved so fast.'

'Of course, it has a long way to go.'

She faced him squarely. 'Tell me.'

He took her hand in his own. 'Mythos, to all intents and purposes, is a moon. However, its orbit is wildly eccentric.'

'How eccentric?'

'It has a sidereal period of almost one light year.'

'Good grief. In one month? That's...'

'Almost twelve times the speed of light,' he confirmed. 'On average.'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'On average? The speed is not constant?'

Jim laughed. 'If it was, we would never be able to see it, would we? No, as it passes Pluto, it is slowed by the planet's gravity pull and becomes visible for a few minutes until it accelerates away once more.'

'What is at the other focal-point of the ellipse?' Cassi asked suddenly.

He grinned. 'I can see that almost a year on Earth has robbed you of none of your shrewdness. You are right, there is something. Tell her, Lyniera.'

The younger girl faced Cassi. 'It is what your Earth astronomers call planet X - Xen.'

'But that cannot be,' protested Cassi. 'The last prediction was that it was little more than sixteen billion kilometres from Sol.'

'They were partly right,' said her father. 'They based their calculations on the effects to Neptune and Pluto's orbits. However, Xen is, in reality, much further away.'

'Then how could it cause the perturbations?'

He smiled. 'Xen is also far bigger than ever was calculated and its gravity is absolutely massive - far greater, in fact, than both Jupiter's and Saturn's put together.'

Cassi swallowed. 'That is big.'

'Not only that,' added Lyniera. 'Unlike Jupiter and Saturn which are both largely slush with a relatively small core, Xen is a solid planet like Earth.'

Cassi shivered. 'I'll bet it's cold, right out there.'

'Strangely enough,' said Jim, 'it's not. Although it is too far from the sun to get much heat, it is still warm inside though it throws off very little radiation.'

'Is there life there, do you think?'

He shook his head. 'Hardly any atmosphere, and what little of it there is remains highly toxic.'

'Oh.'

'It's yellow,' said Lyniera suddenly.

'Yellow?'

'The chlorine in the atmosphere,' said Jim. 'I guess it's probably liquid at the surface and only a gas on top. Anywhere else and it would freeze solid.'

'It looked most eerie,' said Lyniera. 'A kind of greenish-yellow slime.'

Cassi shuddered. 'Sounds disgusting.'

Her sister laughed. 'It looked it, too.'

'Want to see Xen close up?' asked her father.

'That depends how long it's going to take. I have people to worry about.'

'People? You mean those animals who tried their very best to kill you?'

'I can't believe they are all guilty.'

'Probably not but you're safer with us for the time being.'

Cassi smiled. 'Father. I am completely in your hands.'

WAYFARER One went out of Pluto orbit at high speed, racing towards the outer

edge of the Solar System. Soon, Sol was little more than a tiny pinpoint of light.

'Soon be there,' said Jim Duncan to his daughter. 'Happy?'

Cassi nodded. 'Ecstatic. Especially now I've got a new sister to share things with.'

'She knows a lot already. She learned from Iris as you did.'

The younger girl turned in her seat, knowing the others were talking about her. 'Ten minutes, father.'

'Put it on the screen.'

One of the androids obeyed but there was nothing to see. Iris responded:

IDENTITY	- Xen
DIAMETER	- 211,768 Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- Unknown
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 15d 23h 15m 31.49s
INCLINATION	- 28° 9.6'
DENSITY	- 5.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 80.45 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 17.42g
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.09 kg/cm ²
DISTANCE	- 0.0008 AU >

'My goodness, that is big,' observed Cassi. 'But why can't we see it?'

'The surface is of poor reflective quality.'

'I see.' Cassi shivered. 'I don't like it.'

'Cassi,' her father laughed. 'It's only a planet. It's not alive.'

'I know that. However, there is something strange and eerie about it. Let's go back.'

'But you haven't seen it up close yet.'

'I'm not sure I want to. How close have you been to its surface?'

'Not very close, I'm afraid. Get much closer than this and its massive gravity pull would snatch us out of the sky.'

'Any magnetic field?'

Jim nodded. 'Huge. Compressed at the front and strung out behind like the sun.'

'So there is a ferrous content?'

'It would seem so. There is one strange thing, though.'

'What's that?' said Cassi as she stared at the data.

'Can't you spot it?' he said with a sly smile. 'It certainly stands out as unusual.'

'The mean synodic period is identical to that of Pluto.'

'That's right,' agreed her sister. 'Xen always stays in the same relative position out from Pluto. What else?' She, too, was grinning.

'Inclination is similar to Terra. Density close to what I would expect. Escape velocity roughly in the correct proportion to the Surface Gravity for a solid planet.'

'Atmospheric pressure?'

'Virtually identical to Earth's.'

'Precisely. Uncanny, isn't it?'

'It is when the Gravity is so strong. You would expect a crushing atmospheric pressure like that of Venus. Have you been able to get close enough to make an accurate analysis of it?'

Jim nodded. 'Nitrogen based with oxygen, hydrogen and complex hydrocarbons.'

'No methane?'

'No methane.'

'No ammonia?'

'No ammonia.'

'So it's virtually breathable.'

'More or less. The proportions are not exactly the same as those of Earth but near enough.'

'Well I'll be blowed. A planet capable of supporting life, right out here.'

'Don't forget the gravity, Cassi,' said Lyniera. 'Any people down there would be very small on a planet with a pull seventeen times greater than of Earth.'

Cassi laughed. 'I see what you mean. Shame, that.'

'The other problem with the gravity,' added her father, 'Is that if we ever got down to the surface, we would never get back off again. Even the Proton Drive would balk at a challenge like that.'

'Well, bang goes our hopes for a second Earth,' she said as Wayfarer went into orbit above the black surface. 'Any moons?'

'Only Mythos which it shares with Pluto every thirty days.'

'Don't you find it exciting, Cassi?' asked Lyniera.

'No. I don't know why but I have a terrible feeling about it - as if we are being watched.'

'Perhaps we are.'

'What?'

'Lots of little people, ten centimetres tall and very, very strong.'

'You're making fun of me.'

Lyniera laughed. 'I am, aren't I?'

'There could be another problem,' said Jim seriously.

Both girls looked at their father enquiringly.

He stood up and paced the floor for a moment before facing them. 'I'm not absolutely certain and neither is Iris.'

Cassi grinned. 'There isn't a lot that confuses Iris.'

'Not normally. However, this is a little unusual and there is precious little accurate information to go on.'

'Tell me.'

'As you know,' Jim began. 'Pluto has a wildly eccentric orbit and, therefore, so does Xen. Every two hundred and fifty-odd years, Pluto comes in under Neptune's orbit and, for just over twenty years is actually closer to the sun than is Neptune. With me so far?'

'Of course.'

'This last happened forty-two years ago from nineteen seventy-nine to nineteen ninety-eight. At that time, the closest the two planets came was just under thirty-two astronomical units.'

'Not so close really. Still four and a half billion kilometres apart.'

'True. But it is the closest they have been for probably thousands of years.'

'But there was no problem, was there?'

'Not noticeably.'

'Then why is it important?'

'Because any change in the Solar System could be dangerous for Earth.'

'Even a minor one this far out from the sun?'

'Oh, yes. The planets are held together in a very delicate balance, you see. A major perturbation to Neptune's orbit could have a knock-on effect which could affect Earth's position relative to the sun, and that could be fatal for everyone on the planet.'

'Why are you telling us this now?'

'Because, my dears. In the spring of 2383, the two planets will pass each other once more - this time at a distance of less than twenty-one astronomical units. Who knows what effect that might have especially as it is a time when Neptune, Pluto and Zen are all in perfect alignment?'

'What can we do about it?'

Jim shrugged. 'Not a lot, I expect. All mankind can do is observe closely and take whatever action is necessary nearer to the date.'

'So this could be another Andromeda tragedy all over again? The human family could be wiped out just as our own people were.'

Jim sighed. 'I'm afraid so.'

Nothing more was said until Cassi went across to him and kissed his cheek. 'Let's go home, father.'

Jim turned to the android at the console. 'Take us back to Pluto, Beta.'

'Confirmed, Commander Duncan.'

Wayfarer One was almost back to Pluto when they were disturbed by a high-pitched bleeping from a sensor on the console.

'Juanita!' said Cassi suddenly.

'Juanita?' asked her father. 'The scientist you told us was left in Titan orbit?'

Cassi nodded. 'I gave her the back-up emergency beacon from the laboratory on Wayfarer Two. She must be in some kind of trouble.'

'How can you be so certain?'

'Trust me, father.'

'Are you sure, Cassi? Titan is a long way from here.'

'We've got to go, father. She wouldn't use the beacon unless she had to.'

'Very well. Beta, take Gamma and check out the ship. Officer Hardy will take the controls.'

The almost-human robots stood up obediently and headed for the hatch.

'And make everything secure,' Jim called after them. 'We're not going to hang about.'

Cassi sat at the computer. 'Iris, calculate trajectory for Titan.'

After less than a minute, the reply came - 'COURSE COMPUTED >'

IDENTITY	- Titan
DIAMETER	- 5.15Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 15d 22h 41m 26.707s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 15d 23h 15m 31.49s
INCLINATION	- 0° 18'
DENSITY	- 1.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 2.47 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 0.1715814
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.69 kg/cm ²
DISTANCE	- 29.961157 AU >

'Just over four hours at light speed,' calculated Lyniera quickly.

Cassi smiled. Her sister had been trained as well as she had herself. She spoke to Iris. 'Full power Proton Drive. Take us to LUM-25.'

'LUM-25?' queried her father. 'That's pushing the system a bit for so short a distance.'

Cassi nodded. 'I know, but four hours is no good when it's a matter of life or death. I want us at Titan in no more than ten minutes.'

Wayfarer One started to vibrate as the anti-matter reactor went critical and the Proton Drive thrust the big space cruiser forward, faster and faster.

'I wonder what can have happened,' said Jim. 'Didn't you say the shuttle was to remain in orbit around Titan until directed otherwise?'

Cassi nodded. 'Those were the instructions from the Directorate.'

'Then they should be relatively safe, shouldn't they?'

Cassi nodded again. 'There was no danger as long as they stayed put. They don't have the life-support to go very far.'

'Then what...?'

'I don't know. But I guess we'll soon find out.'

Nine minutes later, Iris beeped once more.

'Identify,' said Cassi.

Iris responded:

IDENTITY	- Titan
DIAMETER	- 5.15Mm
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 15d 22h 41m 26.707s
MEAN SYNODIC PERIOD	- 15d 23h 15m 31.49s
INCLINATION	- 0° 18'
DENSITY	- 1.9
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- 2.47 km/s-1
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 0.1715814
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.69 kg/cm ²
DISTANCE	- 0.002311 AU >

'Cut Proton Drive, Iris,' instructed Cassi. 'Full reverse thrust to sub-light speed.'

'CONFIRMED >' It was pure imagination, Cassi knew, but she almost believed that Iris looked relieved. She used the immense gravity-pull of Saturn to assist her in slowing them down before swinging tightly around behind the rings and approaching Titan from the other side.

'Auxiliary drive only,' said Cassi. 'Assume equatorial orbit.'

'CONFIRMED >'

She peered at the vision monitor. 'We are now around five kilometres above the shuttle's own orbit and should see her at any moment.'

The beeping was still there, indicating a nearby presence when, suddenly, it ceased. The three of them looked at each other in dismay.

'I made sure that it had new batteries,' said Cassi. 'They should last for up to twelve hours.'

'Perhaps this Juanita turned it off,' suggested Lyniera.
'Impossible,' said their father. 'Once activated, it can only be turned off by a signal from here.'

'Or,' said Cassi quietly, 'a signal from Wayfarer Two.'

They were all silent for several minutes as the ship went right around the biggest moon of Saturn. Soon, they were sure. The shuttle was no longer in orbit around Titan.

Jim Duncan reached out and pressed a button. 'Wayfarer One to Titan Shuttle. Do you read? Over.'

Nothing.

'Titan Shuttle. This is Wayfarer One. Come in, please.'

Nothing.

'Where are they?' asked Lyniera.

No-one knew. No-one said anything.

The radio crackled. '...Titan Shutt...Wayf.....'

Cassi leapt forward and stabbed at the button. 'Peter, is that you? This is Cassi. Please repeat you message. Over.' She turned to her father. 'Is the radio direction-finder on?'

Jim nodded and fiddled with the knobs.

'Pet...ncer...sss...Titan...shhh...caution. Watch out for.....'

Cassi looked at the others and then spoke to Iris. 'Full scan. Identify any alien body.'

There was a delay of about ten seconds and then. 'SINGLE EMISSION IDENTIFIED >'

'Identify.'

'WAYFARER TWO >'

'Confirm location,' Cassi said with dread in her heart.

'DISTANCE - 1.13AU AND INCREASING >'

'She's 168,000,000 kilometres from us and moving away,' said Lyniera.

'But Commander Carter must have heard the Shuttle's alarm, even if he didn't fully understand its implications.'

'Perhaps he didn't want to,' said Jim Duncan quietly.

'What do you mean?'

'I've located the shuttle.'

'Where is it?'

He looked straight at his eldest daughter. 'Down on the surface of Titan.'

FOR a long time, the three of them sat in silence contemplating the repercussions.

'I thought you said that the crew of the shuttle were not to descend to Titan's surface unless so directed by a message from Orion,' said Jim Duncan eventually.

'That's true,' said Cassi. 'I wonder why they decided to go ahead after all.'

'And why Wayfarer Two then abandoned them,' added Lyniera.

'But how do we find out?'

'They should have enough power in the shuttle to regain orbit. We have to improve radio communications somehow and talk to them about it.'

'How do we do that?' asked the younger girl.

Cassi turned to her father. 'Do you know precisely where they are?'

He nodded. 'The guidance system seems to indicate a point just north of the equator. We're just coming round to it again.'

Cassi leant over the console. 'Iris. Calculate speed and optimum height from surface to maintain geostationary status above central equatorial region.'

The problem took Iris less than a second to solve. 'OPTIMUM PROJECTION AS FOLLOWS:- ALTITUDE FROM SURFACE 7882.789km. MEAN ORBITAL VELOCITY - 0.0474937km/s >'

'Hmm,' said Cassi thoughtfully. 'That's a good deal higher than the shuttle's original orbit.'

'The shuttle didn't have to remain geostationary, Cassi,' pointed out her father. 'It could orbit the moon faster than its own sidereal period and still make all the observations.'

'That's true. Can we go lower, do you think?'

He shrugged. 'We can but try.'

Cassi turned to the console once more. 'Iris. Project minimum height and speed to maintain geostationary status.'

'MINIMUM SAFE HEIGHT - 2300km. RELATIVE VELOCITY - 0.0138574km/s.'

'That's very slow,' said Jim. 'I don't know if we can maintain that without falling towards the surface.'

'Fifty kilometres per hour? I see what you mean. Can we not use the retro rockets to keep us stable?'

'Possibly.'

'Iris,' called Cassi. 'Take us down to 2300 kilometres.'

'CONFIRMED. DO YOU WISH TO ACQUIRE PROJECTED GEOSTATIONARY STATUS? (Y/N) >'

'Y'

'CONFIRMED. DESCENDING TO 2300km >'

After about ten minutes of juggling with drive and retros, Wayfarer One edged into a precarious position directly over the place from where the signal had emitted.

Cassi pressed the button. 'Titan Shuttle, this is Wayfarer. Come in, please.'

'Hello, Wayfar....glad to see you. How.....'

'Could you repeat your message, please? You keep breaking up.'

'Can't hear y....better get.....'

'Can we go any lower, do you think?' Cassi asked her father.

'It will be very dangerous but we can certainly try.'

'Iris. Take us down to 1000 kilometres. Reduce speed accordingly.'

'DANGER >'

'Identify danger.'

'PREDICT ORBITAL DECAY >'

'I'm aware of that, Iris. Just do it.'

'CONFIRMED >'

The orange atmosphere of Titan loomed closer in the screens as the big space cruiser edged even nearer to the moon, its retros firing constantly to maintain position.

'Do we have any cable aboard?' asked Cassi suddenly.

'There's a big coil of co-ax in the stores,' said Lyniera.

'Good. Show me.'

The two girls left together, leaving their confused father juggling with the retro rockets. They ran down the long corridor and opened the door to the stores.

'Over here,' said Lyniera as she led her sister to the back, where a huge coil of cable hung on a wall-clamp.

Cassi smiled at the sight. 'Perfect. Give me a hand to drag it to the airlock.'

'What are you going to do?' asked Lyniera as they dropped the heavy insulated wire to the floor and began to drag it along the corridor.

'I'm going to lower a transponder into the atmosphere to try to improve reception. It sounds as if they can hear us to some degree but we can't receive them properly.' They stopped at the airlock. 'That'll do. Pop and get me a receptor, would you?'

The younger girl slipped to the laboratory while Cassi struggled into a space-suit. Lyniera returned with a cylinder about twenty centimetres in length.

Cassi connected the cable to it. 'I'm going to plug the cable into number two channel and lower the transponder towards the surface. See if you can help father with the radio.'

Lyniera looked concerned as she placed a hand on Cassi's arm. 'Don't fall off again.'

Cassi kissed her sister's cheek and smiled. 'I won't. Tell father to make sure and keep Wayfarer steady while I'm out there.'

'I will,' she said and ran for the flight deck while Cassi clamped on her helmet. 'Radio check - channel four.'

'Got you,' came her father's voice. 'Be careful, Cassi.'

'Of course I will. One nightmare in a lifetime is quite enough, thank you very much.'

Carefully, she dragged the large coil into airlock and closed the inner door. She hesitated momentarily before lifting the panel and pressing " E" for evacuate. In twenty seconds, the red light was on and the airlock was

drained. Cassi carefully clipped on her safety-line and opened the outer door. Her heart came into her mouth at the sight of the moon so near to her. She had felt close to the cold Pluto but the colour of Titan made it look like a giant inferno immediately below her. She then felt the closest to fear that she had ever been. Stepping out of that airlock was like she imagined stepping into hell would be. Although the temperature of the moon was well below zero, everything glowed like a furnace - Wayfarer, her suit, the cable, the sky even seemed a translucent orange colour as she hung tightly to the handholds beside the closing airlock hatch.

'Are you all right?' came the voice in her helmet which brought her back to reality.

'Yes, thanks, Lyn. Lowering the cable now.'

Gently but firmly, she pulled out the end of the cable with the transponder and lowered it until it was out of sight below her.

'How long's that cable?' came her father's voice.

'I don't know. A thousand metres perhaps.'

'Not much off a thousand kilometres, is it?'

'No,' she agreed. 'However, just getting the receptor away from the ship might help.' She looked up. 'Going up on top now to plug the other end in.'

'Be careful.'

'Father, you're like an old woman. I'm perfectly safe.'

'I bet that's what you said last time.'

'If you're trying to frighten me, your wasting your time.'

She had said the words but what was it that was making her sweat inside her suit and causing her hand to shake? The gravity of Titan was similar to that of Luna but she could feel its effects even so high above the surface as she dragged the end of the cable behind her and held it up.

'Plugging in the end now,' she called. 'Clamped into number two input port.'

'Okay, Cassi. Now get back inside quickly. I don't like you being out there.'

Cassi had to turn her back to the hull to get down and the full face of the moon lay below her, beckoning her. Her hand wouldn't let go of the rung.

'Are you in the airlock yet?' asked her father.

'No,' she admitted quietly. 'I can't move.'

'What?'

'I...I can't move.'

'Get a grip on yourself, Cassi.'

'It...it's no use. I...I...'

A movement beside her made her jump.

'Take my hand,' said Lyn firmly, stretching towards her.

'I...'

'Take it,' she repeated in a sharper tone.

Gradually, Cassi allowed her fingers to be prised from the rung and she let her sister guide her back to the airlock. She lay on the floor of the airlock as Lyn slammed the outer door and stabbed at the 'P' button to pressurise the compartment. In less than a minute, she was sitting on the floor of the corridor as her sister hung up the suits.

'I don't know what came over me,' Cassi admitted as she slowly got to her feet.

'It's the little bit of human in you coming out,' said the younger girl with a smile. 'Don't let it worry you.'

'That's twice you've saved my life.'

Lyn gripped her hands and kissed her cheek. 'It's what sisters are for. Come, father will be worrying.'

The whine of the retros rose and fell as Jim and Iris tried to hold Wayfarer steady above the surface. The computer was unable to function alone due to the lack of magnetic field from Titan.

'I can't hold her here much longer,' he said. 'We're using up solid fuel at an alarming rate as we're having to compensate all the time for the pull of Saturn.'

'Let's try the radio again,' said Cassi and she punched the button. 'Wayfarer to Titan Shuttle. Come in, please.'

'Hello, Cassi,' came the familiar voice of the mission biologist. 'Are we glad to be seeing you. We are told you had been killed.'

'I don't kill easily, Juanita. Tell me, can you hear me okay?'

'Perfectly. We can see you, too. Or, at least, we can see the glow of your retros high above us from time to time. Are you seeing us?'

'Negative, Juanita. The atmosphere is too dense. Is everyone all right?'

'Fairly well although it is being very cold in spite of the insulation and heating circuits.'

'Why did you land on Titan? Did the Directorate get through to you?'

'Not to us, only to you. You were not there?'

'I'm afraid not. This is not Wayfarer Two but Wayfarer One. I'm with my father.'

'But I am thinking...'

Cassi smiled. 'It's a long story, Juanita, and I'll tell you all about it sometime. In the meanwhile, we've got to get you up from there. Is the main lift-drive working?'

'Negative, Cassi. It failed as we were landing. Steve has been working on it but...'

Cassi did a double-take. 'Steve? Steve's down there with you?'

'Of course. When Peter was taken ill, he took his place. There is being no-one else qualified.'

'Then...then who is on Wayfarer Two?'

'Alec and Gerry.'

'So where is Andy Cameron?'

'We were told he had been killed with you. Something about a meteor storm while you were both outside fixing a hole in the hull.'

Cassi glanced up at her father and sister who looked back with serious expressions.

'There was no-one else,' whispered Lyn. 'You were definitely the only one.'

'Then who's lying?' said Jim.

'I don't know,' said Cassi thoughtfully. 'Juanita, where is Steve now?'

'He's outside, working on the fuel relay to the vetical drive unit. Bob is with him.'

'And Peter?'

'Alec and Gerry shipped him aboard Wayfarer. Have you not seen them?'

'They left, Juanita. They must be passing Jupiter about now.'

'But why...?'

'I don't know but I intend to find out. However, firstly, we must get you all up here.'

'How are you going to do that? You cannot land Wayfarer on Titan. We're only just staying afloat ourselves.'

'Afloat?'

'It is being crazy down here. Much of Titan's surface is fluid. There is a kind of sea of liquid methane with what seem to be floes of solid methane on top. We can't see very far around us due to the heavy atmosphere near the surface. However, this may not be typical of the whole surface of the moon.'

'Are you reasonably safe for the time being?'

'Steve reckons we are being okay for another hour or so.'

'An hour? What's happening?'

'The floe is slowly breaking up due to the weight of the shuttle. It is also melting from the heat radiating from the hull, slight though it is.'

'Can Steve repair the drive in time, do you think?'

'I don't know. I don't like to have to accuse anyone but he is saying it looks like sabotage.'

'Sabotage?' Cassi thought for a moment. 'Did Alec or Gerry get near the shuttle whilst you were together in orbit?'

'They didn't have time. They simply arrived and Steve and Peter swapped places.'

'What was actually wrong with Peter?' said Cassi slowly.

'I don't know. I examined him but could find nothing positive. He began to feel ill just after Wayfarer Two radioed to say they were almost ready to dock with us.'

'Let me get this straight, Juanita. Peter is fine until he hears that Wayfarer is getting close; then he suddenly develops a mysterious illness which means he and Steve have to swap places. Is that about it?'

'More or less. And now they have gone.'

'Juanita. Call Steve on the intercom. Try and find out what it is that's damaged.'

There was a long pause while Cassi stared at the others, gently tapping her fingers on the top of Iris's console.

'Cassi? Steve says it is the main drive relay for the vertical lift motor. It seems to be missing completely.'

'Can that be accessed from inside the shuttle?'

'Bob says it can only be got at from outside.'

'Who's been outside while you were orbiting?'

'Both Peter and Bob. I have stayed inside where it is warm.'

Cassi smiled a little. 'I hardly blame you. What are Steve and Bob doing now?'

'Trying to adapt one of the retro relays to fit.'

Cassi looked at her father who shook his head.

'They'll never make it fit,' he said. 'The terminals are different.'

'Have we got the correct one on board?'

Jim nodded. 'Several.'

Cassi stood up. 'Tell Steve to get back inside before he freezes to death. I'm on my way down.'

'I...'

Jim grabbed her arm. 'What do you mean, you're going down? How in heaven's name do you propose to reach the surface from here?'

'I'll jump.'

'Jump? Are you crazy?'

'Not at all. The gravity of Titan is about the same as Luna.'

'You'll still hit surface at around three metres per second. You'll break both your legs falling from this height.'

'What alternative is there? Can you drop me any lower?'

He shook his head. 'Impossible. We certainly can't hover any lower than this.'

'What if we dived down and flew over at near stall speed?' suggested Lyniera.

'The turbulence could upset the shuttle's precarious position. It would also be virtually impossible for you to accurately land on the floe where they are balancing.'

'But we can't just sit here and let them die. Do we have any rocket packs?'

He shook his head. 'They'll be no good. Rocket packs are for ship to ship transfers. They'll never combat gravity - they weren't designed for that.'

'I can try.'

He shook his head again. 'No, it's too risky.'

'But I could use it simply to slow my descent.'

'I suppose you could,' he said thoughtfully. 'Nevertheless, it would be very dangerous.'

'The descent would be much slower than on Earth, wouldn't it?'

'Certainly it would. However, what you don't know is how accurate you can get. From what your friend Juanita tells us, it's a pretty alien environment down there. Miss the particular lump of frozen matter they are on and you could just disappear into a sea of liquid Methane.'

Cassi shuddered. 'Nasty.'

'There must be another way.'

'No. I'll go and get one ready.'

'Two,' Lyniera said. 'I'm coming with you.'

Jim looked stricken. 'But I could lose both of you. Can't we send one of the androids instead?'

Lyniera shook her head. 'They're not programmed to handle this sort of situation.'

'But to risk losing you both now I've got you together...'

'If we don't go,' said Cassi, 'Three people will definitely die. We have to try. Can't you see that?'

'Titan Shuttle to Wayfarer One,' said a male voice over the radio. 'Do you read?'

'Hi, Steve, it's Cassi. How does it look?'

'Pretty bad. Juanita told me about you're arrival but I don't think there is anything you can do for us. We're done for, I'm afraid.'

'We've got the part you need for the drive up here. We're just working out how to get it down to you.'

'I think it's too late. This floe we're on is shrinking almost by the

minute. I don't suppose we've got much more than thirty minutes before it becomes unstable and tips us off.'

'How long will it take to fit the relay?'

'Seconds. Just plug it in, snap on the cable connectors and we're up, up and away.'

'I'm on my way down in a few minutes. Father will radio you just before I drop.'

'Drop? What do you mean? What are you going to try to do?'

'I'm coming down with a rocket-pack to slow my fall.'

Jim butted in. 'Commander Duncan here, Steve. What's the weather like? Is there wind?'

'Not to speak of, Commander. The main problem is going to be visibility. Cassi won't see us until she is virtually on top of us.'

'How big is the floe you're on?'

'Around ninety metres by sixty. There are others around but if she lands on the wrong one, we may not be able to recover her.'

'I'm afraid Cassi is determined and once my daughter makes up her mind there is little I can do to change it.'

'Commander?'

'Yes, Steve?'

'Why is she doing this?'

'To save your lives, I surmise. I would do it myself if I was able but I'm afraid I'm a little old for acrobatics. It's all I can do to get about ship some days.'

'It's an awful risk for her to take and we hardly deserve it. I'm afraid I haven't been Cassi's best pupil. In fact, I probably deserve to be left here.'

'Whether you feel you deserve it or not, Steve, the others don't, so Cassi will be coming down soon. Has Juanita still got her emergency beacon?'

'I think so. Why?'

'Switch it on and let's see if I can pick you up.'

A piercing beeping echoed through the flight deck and Jim turned down the volume.

'Is it working?' called Steve.

'It is. I'm going to give Cassi a miniature receiver. With luck, your signal will guide her straight to you.'

'Commander, are you sure you want to do this?'

Jim smiled to himself. 'No, but Cassi is.'

A hiss came as the hatch opened. Both girls walked in with space suits donned, less helmets.

'We're ready,' said Lyniera.

Jim looked at Cassi. 'Take this portable direction-finder. Hopefully, it will point you to the right area.'

Both girls kissed their father and then clipped on their helmets.

'Radio test, channel four,' said Cassi.

Their father moved a switch and then nodded.

'Radio check,' said Lyniera.

'Wait till I give the word,' Jim said. 'I'm going to dive as low as I dare. When you've jumped, let me know and I'll resume a safe position. For heaven's sake, let me know what's happening.'

The girls nodded. 'We will.'

THE airlock lamp turned red as the two of them waited for the pressure to evacuate before stepping out of the door. Lyniera pushed it open and swung herself around the edge, holding onto the rungs for support. Cassi stepped to the edge and looked down. It was the wrong thing to do. She froze.

'We've got to shut the door,' said her sister. 'Hold onto the rungs at the side.'

Cassi took a deep breath and, slowly, moved to the side and held on tight as the outer door closed behind them. They were alone in space. Only death seemed to wait below them.

'Take my hand,' said Lyniera and Cassi reached out and gripped it firmly. 'Ready?'

Cassi nodded.

'Remember what father said. Because of the small amount of fuel we can

carry, don't fire the rocket packs until we have to. Direction-finder switched on?'

Cassi looked down at the small box strapped around her left wrist. 'On and working.'

'Descending now,' came their father's voice. 'I'm going to try circling rather than hovering. I should be able to get lower that way.'

The ship started to move forward under auxiliary drive and, within minutes, they were inside the atmosphere, spiralling towards the location of the shuttle. As the ship levelled, Cassi looked at her sister and nodded. They jumped together.

'We've gone, father,' called Cassi. 'Get back into orbit.'

Despite the lower gravity, the bright orange cloud banks seemed to rush up at them at an alarming rate. Cassi felt her heart-rate start to increase and she tried to force herself not to seize up again by taking deep breaths. Lyniera heard her breathing and looked across at her.

'Now?' she asked.

'Yes,' said Cassi in a high-pitched voice. 'Now.'

There was not much of a jerk as she squeezed the trigger to fire the rocket on her back and looked to see that Lyn's had done the same. Side by side, they gently floated down until the atmosphere engulfed them completely. Vaguely, she could see her sister about three metres to her left and slightly higher and was relieved at the sight.

She looked at the receiver. 'A little to the right. We're drifting slightly westwards.'

'Okay. Can you see anything?'

'Not yet. We're still pretty high, remember. Good grief, this atmosphere is like methane soup.'

Lyniera laughed. 'Just don't drink it.'

'Don't worry, I won't.'

'How high are we, do you think?'

'Two kilometres, at a guess. Shut the rocket off, let's free-fall for a bit.'

'Okay. Shutting off now.'

Within seconds, they had almost lost sight of one another as they fell towards the surface at about two metres per second.

'Estimated altitude two hundred metres, Lyn. Fire rocket to slow descent.'

'Okay, Cassi. Firing now. Can you see anything?'

'Not a thing. I just hope that my altimeter is working correctly. We should be within two minutes of them now.'

'I can't see you.'

'Nor I you. What height do you have?'

'Fifty metres and almost hovering.'

'Same with me but I'm falling completely blind. If it wasn't for the homing signal, I'd be totally lost. You've got to get closer to me somehow.'

'But I can't see you.'

'Father, can you hear us?'

'Yes, Cassi. According to Iris, you're no more than ten metres apart and falling pretty near dead on target.'

'Thanks. Stick with me, Lyn. The floe isn't very big and we've only got the signal as a guide. Miss it and we're done for.'

'Just follow the beacon down, I'll stay with you.'

'Rockets now at full thrust. Rate of descent down to a metre per second. Where's that blasted shuttle?'

'I can't see it either.'

'Oh, no!'

'What is it, Cassi?'

'The beacon's stopped. Did you shut it off, father?'

'Of course not. Wayfarer Two must have done so remotely. I'll speak to Steve and get him to start it again.'

'It's too late. I can see the surface not far below me and the shuttle's nowhere to be seen.'

'It must be there.'

'But it's not, I tell you. I'm sorry father, but we've let you down. The rocket pack is almost out of fuel and there's nothing solid anywhere in sight.'

CASSI held the rocket pack firing as long as she dare and alighted gently upon what seemed to be a rippling sea. As she touched her foot down, the surface gave a little and then supported her weight. Surprised, she shut down the pack and found the surface was elastic, a kind of thick skin which moved under her. It was like trying to balance on a water bed. She peered into the mist around her, desperately trying to see anything. 'Lyn, can you hear me?'

'Yes, I can't stay up much longer. Where are you?'

'I'm on the surface. It seems to be holding my weight at the moment though I don't know for how long.'

'It looks horrible.'

'Try it. Land gently and see if it will hold your weight, too.'

'Okay. Touching down now. Whoops!'

'Are you all right?'

'Yes, it gave a little and I fell over but it seems to be holding together. Where are you?'

'It's difficult to tell without landmarks. Can you see the faint glow from the mother planet?'

'Yes, just.'

'Turn to face it if you can.'

'Okay. I'm looking straight at it.'

'Now wave your arms and I'll do the same. One of us must be closer than the other to it. If we're within fifty feet of so of each other, one of us should see the other.'

'I'm waving. Eeeeah!'

'Lyn! What is it?'

'The surface gave under my weight. My leg's gone right through the skin.'

'Are you all right?'

'I think so but I can't get it out.'

'Did you see me before you went through?'

'No.'

'Father, can you hear me?'

'Yes, Cassi. According to Iris, you are very close together. I've just told Steve to start the beacon again.'

'Thanks but I must find Lyn first.'

There was a slight delay then, 'Cassi, fire your rocket pack for a few seconds.'

'I don't have much fuel left.'

'Do it,' said her father.

'Okay, firing now.'

Cassi squeezed the trigger and the rocket ignited, raising a cloud of mist like an activated fire-extinguisher in the freezing atmosphere.

'I've picked up your heat output. Lyn is to your left - about thirty feet.'

'Thanks, dad. I'm moving that way now.'

'Be careful not to get too close. If the surface broke through under Lyn's weight, it might give way completely under both of you.'

'Don't come close, Cassi,' called Lyniera suddenly. 'The surface is giving all around me now.'

'Is it breaking up?'

'No, it's stretching and tearing. Both of my legs have gone through now.'

Their father's voice came again. 'Lie flat and spread your weight. They used to do that on thin ice on Earth.'

'Okay. I'm lying flat.'

'Is it better?'

'No. I'm slipping. There's nothing to hold on to.'

'Keep calm,' said Cassi. 'I can't be far from you now.'

'No, Cassi. Don't come any nearer or we're both done for. Leave me and get to the shuttle before the same thing happens to you.'

Cassi stopped. About five metres from her, she could just see her sister who was slowly slipping into a hole in the elastic surface as it stretched and melted around her. Cassi looked down at the fuel gauge of her rocket pack. It said empty. However, it had said empty before her last burn.

'Lyn. I'm going to fire my rocket and jump over you. I want you to grab my foot with your left hand and fire your rocket with your right.'

'I'm virtually out of fuel. It was spluttering as I landed.'
'We've got to take the chance that there's just enough left between us to take us clear. Are you ready?'

Lyniera was now up to her chest in liquid methane. 'Ready.'

'Okay. Here I come.'

Cassi pulled the trigger and jumped forward as hard as she could. As she passed over her sister, Lyniera let go of the ice and grabbed Cassi's foot. They both started to fall until the younger girl fired her own rocket and they became almost weightless once more.

'Full power,' shouted Cassi and they both moved forward, Lyniera's legs pulling from her death-trap until they both collapsed onto the surface several metres away, both rocket packs exhausted of fuel. The flexible surface started to give and, for one moment, Cassi thought they were both going through as they lay flat on their faces until the flexing ceased.

'All right?' she asked.

Lyniera nodded and smiled weakly. 'Thanks.'

'As slowly as you can, slip your pack off and push it away from you. It will ease the weight from being all in one place.'

'Right.'

Lyniera undid her straps and, following her elder sister, pushed the useless instrument away from her. She rolled back towards Cassi and gripped her hand. 'Which way?'

Their father's voice came in their helmets. 'Ahead and slightly to your right. The shuttle's not more than fifty metres away from you.'

Cassi lifted her head as far as she dare. 'I can't see it.'

'Believe me, it's there.'

She looked at her companion. 'Right, Lyn. This is where we learn to crawl all over again.'

'Will we make it, do you think?'

'Of course we will. We've got to.'

JUANITA Carrero looked up at the sound. 'What's that?'

Commander Carter sighed. 'It sounds like the ice is finally giving way. I think this is the end.'

The biologist turned and stared. 'Look! The airlock lamp.'

'It's on,' confirmed the engineer. 'There's someone entering the airlock from outside.'

'They have found us. We are saved.'

'Not yet, we're not.'

They heard the hiss of compressed air in the single room and, as the light turned green, Bob Walker pulled the handle and opened the door. A suited figure crawled in from the tiny space and stood up. Juanita stepped forward and undid the helmet clips, lifting it clear.

'Cassi,' she said at the sight of the long, fair hair. 'Are we glad to see you.'

The young girl frowned. 'Doctor Carrero?'

It was Juanita's turn to frown.

The newcomer smiled. 'I am Lyniera of Mythos. My sister is right behind me.'

All three of the shuttle crew stood, mouths open, as the red light came on once again and then turned green. The door opened and another figure entered and took off her helmet.

Cassi grinned. 'I've fitted the new relay. We're ready to go when you are.'

'Well, I'll be damned,' said the Commander, still confused.

'Come on, Steve. We haven't much time. This floe is about to tip over. Take us up.'

'Yes, of course.' He jumped into his seat and pushed switches. 'Ready?'

'There aren't enough take-off couches,' said the engineer to the girls. 'Just lie on the floor and you'll be all right.'

Cassi and Lyn sat down against the wall and waited as they heard the motor fire.

Steve looked at the screen. 'So far, so good. Now come on, baby. Let's see if you can fly.'

He pushed down on the joystick and the engine note increased in pitch and volume. The shuttle shuddered and leaned to one side.

'We are going over,' shouted Juanita.

Steve pulled the stick right back and the shuttle began to shudder violently until, with a tearing sound, it broke free from the frozen methane and the G-forces pushed them down as they rapidly ascended from the moon's surface.

'She seems to be holding,' called Bob. 'Five minutes and we should be in orbit.'

Steve turned the stick and pushed it to one side and the shuttle began to move forwards, rapidly accelerating up through the clouds. Soon, they were clear of the atmosphere and the noise died down as he throttled back to cruise height.

'Wayfarer One to Titan Shuttle. Congratulations.'

'Thanks, Commander. Where are you?'

'Right above you, Steve. Just keep climbing like that for a few more seconds and then shut down. I'll grab you in the locking clamps.'

'Will do, Commander. It's good to be alive.'

'Don't thank me. Thank those two little demons of mine down there.'

Steve turned to face the "terrible twins." 'Don't worry, I will.'

ALL aboard Wayfarer, they ate together and discussed what to do next.

'Where is Wayfarer Two right now?' asked Bob Walker.

'Probably through the asteroids by now, heading for Earth.'

'What will they be telling them at Orion?' asked Juanita.

'Anything they like. They think you're all dead.'

'Why have they done this dreadful thing?'

Jim shrugged. 'Your guess is as good as mine.'

'Tell me, Steve,' said Cassi. 'What happened at Pluto?'

'I'm not sure. I was at the controls and Alec went to see what was happening with the skin-graft. There was a banging and rattling and he came back to say that you and Andy had been killed and lost in a meteor shower.'

'Didn't you see the shower yourself?'

'I didn't. I was upset at losing you both but had no cause to disbelieve him.'

'When did you first suspect something was wrong?'

'Not until we contacted the shuttle. Juanita said that Peter was ill and I went over to see what I could do. Bob helped me to ship Peter back to Wayfarer Two.'

'When we got him there,' added the engineer: 'They told us that the Directorate had just radioed to say that the descent to the surface must go ahead immediately.'

'And you didn't check up?'

'At that stage, I saw no reason to,' said Steve. 'Anyway, due to the distance from Earth, it would have taken over two hours to get a reply from them.'

'Without the vertical lift drive working, you were fortunate to get down in one piece,' said Cassi.

'We certainly were,' said Steve. 'We glided in on forward drive as arranged until we were ready to actually land. It was when we reached stall speed and tried to fire the vertical lift drive that we realised it wasn't working. Unfortunately, we were going too slow to recover and belly-flopped onto the surface.'

'We were lucky to hit a particularly thick section of the skin,' added Bob. 'Else we would have sunk without trace within seconds.'

'What a way to go, eh?' said Jim Duncan.

Lyniera shivered at the thought.

'I wonder what they thought of the emergency beacon,' said Cassi thoughtfully.

'They probably didn't realise it's significance,' said her father. 'They ignored yours, didn't they?'

'But they will have heard Juanita's, too.'

'And will know we are alive,' agreed the biologist.

'But what they won't know is that you are no longer on the surface of Titan. They will feel completely safe in the knowledge that you have no way of getting home again.'

'Then we have one up on them,' said Steve with a sly smile.

'Two,' said Cassi. 'They don't know that we have Wayfarer One.'

'Three,' said Lyniera to her sister. 'They don't know that you are still alive.'

'Nor,' said her father, 'do they know about you. Have they got a surprise in store for them.'

'What are we going to do?' asked Juanita.

'Simple,' said Jim. 'We just let them get back to Earth and then arrive and drop them right in it.'

'No,' said Cassi. 'They must not get back to Earth before us. We must stop them.'

'What do you mean?'

'I mean the Andromeda Seed is in danger. When it becomes known I am dead, they will try to destroy the eggs at Bruxelles.'

'But why? How can you be so sure?'

'Because they are trying to eliminate all traces of the Seed.'

'But why? After the debates earlier in the year, it was agreed to go ahead with the project and have the eggs fertilised by humans in the normal way - produce a new, mixed, race from them.'

'I know it was agreed but don't forget there were people like the General who only accepted it under protest.'

'I still don't believe they would deliberately destroy living organisms.'

'They killed Tara's baby,' said Cassi sadly.

'They did what?' said her father.

'Someone broke into the observation unit of the hospital at Bruxelles and calmly and deliberately murdered a tiny baby that had committed no crime except become born of an Andromedan father and a Terran mother.'

'Good grief,' said Jim, sitting down. 'Poor Tara.'

'They will stop at nothing, father. They think I am dead. That leaves only the Andromeda Seed.'

'There is still yourself. You can have mixed children.'

'So can I,' said Lyniera excitedly. 'All I need is a male human to mate with me.'

Jim Duncan grinned. 'I admire your eagerness, my child, but it is not quite as simple as that.'

'I am eighteen,' she said proudly. 'I am old enough to have a man.'

Cassi placed her arm around her sister. 'Age is not everything, Lyn. Let's get back to Earth first and then see what happens about getting you a mate if you still want one by then.'

'How are you going to get back before the others?' asked Steve soberly.

Jim grinned. He remembered Cassi's last high-speed return to Earth and the consternation it had caused at Orion Base.

'I'm going to delay them,' said Cassi, sitting in front of the drive computer.

'INTERFACE IRIS,' she typed on the red keys.

'CONFIRMED,' REPLIED THE SCREEN. 'ALL DRIVE FUNCTIONS NOW COMMITTED TO IRIS >'

Cassi pressed CTRL-V to initiate voice control. 'Iris. Confirm condition of main reactor.'

'CRITICAL MASS ACHIEVED. ALL DRIVES READY >'

'Activate main drive. Proceed with countdown to Proton Drive.'

'MAIN DRIVE CONFIRMED. ACTIVATING PROTON DRIVE IN TEN SECONDS >'

'NINE >'

The ship began to move out of orbit.

'Better get strapped in,' said Jim.

'EIGHT >'

'Trajectory for Luna,' commanded Cassi.

'SEVEN >'

'TRAJECTORY CONFIRMED >'

'SIX >'

'FIVE >'

'FOUR >'

'Earth, here we come.'

'THREE >'

'TWO >'

'Hold tight.'

'ONE >'
'ZERO. PROTON DRIVE ACTIVATED >'
Cassi smiled. 'Advance to LUM-6.'

THEY circumnavigated Saturn in a matter of minutes and then curved away towards Jupiter as the whining of the Proton Drive increased, throwing them forward, faster and faster, until they reached six times light speed.

'Why did you instruct Iris to head for Luna?' asked Jim Duncan. 'We can't land Wayfarer on Luna.'

'I know,' said Cassi with a glint in her eye. She ran her fingers over the keyboard for a few seconds and then the screen cleared to:

IDENTITY	- Orion Base Station
DIAMETER	- 0.4 km
SIDEREAL AXIAL ROTATION	- 0h 52m 12s
INCLINATION	- 90°
DENSITY	- Variable
DISTANCE FROM TERRA	- 36,000 km
ESCAPE VELOCITY	- Geosynchronous
SURFACE GRAVITY	- 1.0
ATMOSPHERIC PRESSURE	- 1.07 kg/cm ²
DISTANCE	- 8.539AU >

'Well?' said her father.

Cassi grinned. 'DATA INPUT,' she typed carefully.

The other crowded around and watched Iris as she replied, 'ADD, CHANGE OR DELETE (A/C/D) >'

'C' typed Cassi.

'CHANGE WHICH ENTRY? >'

'DISTANCE FROM TERRA.'

'EXISTING ENTRY = 36000km. ARE YOU SURE YOU WANT TO CHANGE THE ENTRY? (Y/N) >'

'Y'

'ENTRY DELETED. INPUT NEW DATA >'

'DISTANCE FROM TERRA - 50000km.'

'CONFIRMED >' said Iris. 'DISTANCE FROM TERRA - 50000km >'

'What are you up to?' said her father. 'You've just thrown all our approach co-ordinates to pot.'

'Not ours, father. We're not heading for Orion Base, remember? We're heading for Luna. I think I can find my way from Luna to Orion blindfolded.'

'Then why...?'

'SID,' said Lyniera with a smile.

'Who?' asked Steve.

Cassi laughed. 'The System for Instant Data-transfer.'

Steve frowned. 'I still don't follow.'

'Don't you remember what I told you on the way out? Anything Iris One learns...'

'...Is automatically updated on Iris Two,' added Juanita slowly. 'You've lied to the computer - deliberately.'

'Yes. But unless they twig what I have done, the crew of Wayfarer Two won't realise what is happening until they try to find the space station.'

'Good grief,' said Steve. 'They'll be looking in the wrong place.'

'It's worse than that,' said the engineer with a sly grin.

'What do you mean, Bob?'

'Think about it. Orion only stays geostationary because of a delicate balance of altitude and velocity. Mrs Hardy has, in effect, just told both computers that Orion is 50000 kilometres above the surface but the other data remains unchanged. Their Iris won't know which entry to believe.'

'She will assume that Orion is no longer geostationary,' said Cassi with a smile. 'The entries for height and speed are numerical entries which compute digitally. The term geostationary is simply an assumed condition dependant on the relationship between the other two figures.'

'They'll be totally lost,' said Steve.

'Not for long. Alec is no fool and will soon work out what is wrong and put it right. I'm just trying to buy us a little time.'

'Will he know who has altered the data?'

'Maybe not. That depends on how certain he is that I am dead and that this ship is still lost in space somewhere. He may just assume it's a data error resulting from a power surge in the circuitry.'

'I doubt it,' said Steve. 'It might fool Gerry for a while but Alec knows the system is shielded against such electro-peaks.'

'How long will it give us?' asked Juanita.

'Not long,' replied Cassi. 'A matter of minutes maybe.'

'It will be enough?'

'We'll soon find out. Iris, state estimated time of arrival at Luna - Earth time.'

'NINE MINUTES AND ELEVEN SECONDS PRECISELY >'

Cassi thought for a second. 'Iris. Advance to LUM-10.'

THE asteroids were a blur beneath them as Cassi took Wayfarer One over the elliptic and the bright disc that was Earth began to grow in the forward screen. Steve Carter read the approach data.

'Any sign of Wayfarer Two?' asked Jim.

'Negative, Commander. I think she must have overcome the data error and docked at Orion.'

'We'll soon find out,' said Cassi grimly.

Orion didn't see them coming due to the speed. As Jim cut to sub-light speed and pulled in tightly behind Terra to lose inertia, they could see the massive cruiser docked beside the Space Station.

'They've arrived,' said Steve.

As if on cue, the radio spoke. 'Orion Base to incoming vehicle. You have entered Terran space. Please identify yourself. Over.'

Jim pushed the button. 'Orion Base, this is Commander James Duncan of Europa Corporation Space Cruiser Wayfarer One. Request permission to dock. Over.'

'Permission granted. Welcome home, Commander Duncan. I will advise the Admiral of your safe return.'

'Thank you. Tell me. How long has Wayfarer Two been back?'

'Not more than ten minutes, Commander.'

'Good. Request Admiral Burleigh to hold Pilot Officer Peter Spencer, Navigation Officer Gerald Green and Flight Technician Alec Watson for questioning.'

'Very well, Commander. I will relay your message to the Admiral. Orion out.'

'Full reverse thrust,' Jim commanded as the Base station grew on the screen.

'DATA ERROR. ORION STATION AT ALTITUDE 36000km NOT 50000km AS STATED >'

'It seems Iris has caught you out, Cassi.'

'It had to happen,' she sighed. 'At least it gave us a few minutes.'

'Orion Base to Wayfarer One,' spoke the radio.

'Jim Duncan here, Admiral. Did you get my message?'

'Affirmative, Commander. However, I am unable to act upon your request as the crew have already cleared immigration and are on their way down to the surface in the Earth shuttle.'

'That's unusual,' said Steve at his shoulder. 'There is usually a six-hour clearance period and contamination check-up prior to transfer. There must be something very urgent going on for the Admiral to authorise an immediate transfer.'

'The Admiral was partly in on the original plot, don't forget,' reminded Cassi. 'I know he was cleared at the time, but both you and I know he was against the use of the Andromeda Seed in the first place.'

'You're right, Cassi.' Jim turned to the radio. 'Message understood, Admiral. Proceeding with docking as arranged.'

'Very good, Commander. See you on board Orion.'

Jim turned to face Cassi but she had gone. So had Lyniera. 'Now what are they up to?'

'I don't know,' said Steve thoughtfully. 'Give me a moment.' He turned and left.

He found the girls beside the airlock, struggling into space-suits. 'Where are you going?'

'Down to Earth. We're taking the shuttle.'

'It's dangerous. That relay may not hold up to Earth gravity.'

'We've got to risk it,' said Cassi.

Steve nodded and pushed the intercom button on the wall. 'Commander. Request you approach very slowly and release the locking clamps on the Titan Shuttle.'

'But why?'

'No time now. Please do it.'

'Very well.' There was a pause. 'Good luck, Steve.'

'You're coming?' said Lyniera as she lifted the helmet and dropped it over her head.

'I can't let you go down alone. You don't know what or who might be waiting for you.'

'I guess you're right,' said Cassi. 'Father. Radio check - channel four.'

'Receiving you, Cassi,' came Juanita's voice. 'Be careful.'

'I will. Please get father to contact Mike on the radiophone as soon as you dock. Tell him to meet us at Europoort and to double the guard at Bruxelles Hospital. Don't use the ship's radio or the message will be intercepted.'

'I'll tell him, Cassi. See you down below.'

The three of them stepped into the airlock.

'PRESSURISE OR EVACUATE? (P/V) >' said the display.

Steve pushed 'E'.

The green light turned red and, this time, Cassi didn't even hesitate as she swung herself out of the airlock and climbed, hand over hand, towards the small Titan shuttle perched on Wayfarer's back.

'You go first,' said Cassi to Steve. 'Get the drive ready.'

'Will do.' He opened the hatch and swung his legs into the narrow confine of the shuttle's single airlock.

Lyniera looked at Cassi. 'Are you okay?'

Cassi looked down at the blue arc of Earth below them and then back to her sister. 'Never felt better.' She looked at the red light. 'After you.'

The younger girl swung into the airlock and, for the last time, Cassi looked around her. Orion Station was now only a matter of a hundred metres away. Terra looked beautiful with its brown and blue surface mottled with flecks of white cloud. The pale disc of Luna was just rising above China, its eerie glow reflecting from the water vapour in the upper atmosphere.

'Come on, Cassi,' said Lyniera as the drive ignited. 'We haven't got much time.'

Cassi dived into the airlock and slammed the outer door after her.

'Go!' she shouted and felt the shuttle shudder as it broke free from its restraining clamps. They were on a one-way journey and had already passed the point of no return.

ADMIRAL Jonathan Burleigh watched Wayfarer One docking and also saw the shuttle lift-off. He pressed a button on the console. 'Get me General Phillips on the radiophone immediately.'

'Very well, Admiral,' came the reply.

Impatiently, he tapped his fingers on the table as time seemed to drag. The Titan Shuttle gradually disappeared from his view.

'Your call to the General,' said the intercom.

'Thanks,' he said and picked up the handset. 'Dwight? It's Jonathan.'

'I thought I told you not to call me by radiophone unless it is an emergency.'

'Yes, I know. However, there is something you have to know.'

'Yes, what is it?'

The door opened. Admiral Burleigh looked up at the two men who had entered and sat with his mouth open.

'Hurry up,' said the radiophone, 'I haven't got all day. Tell me why you called me.'

'Put down the phone,' said Jim Duncan.

'Jonathan. Are you there?'

'Put it down. Now!'

The Admiral raised it and opened his mouth to speak but was cut short by an explosion as the computer monitor from the end of his desk dropped onto the instrument and smashed both in a shower of sparks and imploded cathode-ray-tube.

Bob Walker leant over him. 'The Commander told you to put it down.'

'You've got no right to come in here like this and...'

'Shut up!'

He closed his mouth.

Jim came around the desk and sat on the corner, towering over the blustering but terrified Admiral. The Admiral stabbed at the emergency security button but Jim held up his hand which contained the ends of two wires. They spoke for themselves.

'Where's the other radiophone?' asked the Commander.

'There...there is no other. I...'

'Don't make me out to be a complete fool,' Jim said calmly. 'There is no way you would isolate yourself up here with only one means of communication with Earth. Where is the duplicate phone?'

'I told you...'

'Do you want Bob to drop another monitor? This time on your head?'

'You would threaten me?'

Jim nodded slowly.

The Admiral's eyes looked from one to the other of them. They meant business. 'In the engineering section. They use it for data transfer.'

Jim smiled. 'Now you're learning.' He stood up. 'Bob, I'm going to engineering to try to get a message through to the Marshal.' He pointed to the Admiral. 'If he so much as blinks, see that he meets with a serious accident.'

Bob leant forward and grinned. 'It would be my pleasure.'

JUANITA Carrero stepped out of the airlock of Wayfarer One and walked casually across the docking bay to where the door to Wayfarer Two stood open. Remembering she had some personal belongings still on board, she closed the outer door and opened the inner door to her old ship. The flight deck was deserted as she would have expected it to be so she strolled down the passageway to her room. It didn't take long to throw her things into her zip bag and double-check she had left nothing important behind. Then she remembered her spare electro-log. She had loaned it to Andy on the way out. With a sigh, she stepped out and down the corridor a few paces. The sign on the door said "Pilot Officer Andrew Cameron" but, for some unknown reason, the door was locked.

That's odd, she thought. If he had died in space, why would they lock up his room? Perhaps he had something valuable inside. She dropped her bag beside the airlock and went back to the flight deck and recovered the master key from the main console. Twisting the tab around her finger, she stepped back to the door. Inserting the electronic shaft, she turned it and the door swung open. A strange, musty smell wafted out and she shivered for a second. These rooms should be aired properly when the ship is docked, she thought. There were papers on the desk and personal belongings scattered on the bunk and floor. Obviously, no-one had thought to tidy up after Andy had been lost in space. The electro-log was nowhere in sight so she went through the desk drawers but found nothing.

'I'll bet it's in the pocket of his overalls,' she said to herself and pulled open the locker door.

For a second, she stood, motionless and speechless, until a plastic-enclosed body literally fell on top of her. Throwing it off, she grabbed frantically at the knob and almost fell out of the doorway. With eyes wide with fear, she dropped her electro-log and ran screaming down the corridor.

CASSI watched with admiration as Steve Carter handled the Titan Shuttle with skilled precision. As though he had done it a thousand times, he coasted down and landed at Europort Launch Centre with barely a bump.

'Thanks, Steve,' she said as she threw off her belt and headed for the hatch. As she tumbled out with Lyniera right behind, a jeep pulled alongside. The driver got out and Cassi launched herself into his arms, her feet off the ground.

'Steady on, my darling, you'll have us both over,' said Mike with a grin. He then stopped and stared at the other creature who had a wry smile on her lips as she watched them embrace.

'Good grief!' was all he said.

'My sister,' Cassi explained as Steve climbed out to join them.
'But...?'
'No time,' she said as she grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the jeep.
'Did you get a message from father?'
'Just ten minutes ago,' he said as he climbed behind the wheel and Steve and Lyniera clambered into the back.
'Have you been in touch with the hospital yet?'
'As soon as I rang off from speaking to your father,' he said as he selected first gear and pulled away from the cooling shuttle. 'Jon was in surgery, but I left a message with his receptionist. What's all this about anyway?'
'We'll tell you later. Where did the others go when they touched down in the Orion shuttle?'
'They left Europoort just before I arrived. No-one would admit to knowing which way they went.'
'They're after the Andromeda Seed. We've got to get to the hospital before they do.'
'There's only one way to do that,' Mike said as he changed direction and headed for the hangers.
'You can't fly,' Cassi suddenly said. 'The doctor said...'
'Blow what the doctor said. I'm taking you to Bruxelles in the helicopter.'
The jeep skidded to a halt beside the hanger and Mike called to a mechanic.
'I'm taking number seven. Is she fuelled and ready?'
'Affirmative, Marshal. Shall I get you clearance?'
'Yes, please. Bruxelles Institute of Biophysics.'
'Direct?'
Mike nodded as he climbed inside the glass bubble. 'Direct.' He turned to the others. 'Sit down and belt up. This may be bumpy as I haven't done it for a while.'
'Can't Steve fly?' asked the worried Cassi.
'Not the way I can,' he said with a grin as he started the rotor.

THE helicopter flew low across the waters of the enlarged Oosterschelde, one of the two outlet waterways around what had been the Zeeland isle of Middelburg before the seas rose at the end of the twentieth century. Does mankind never learn from its past mistakes? It seems not. The city of Antwerpen was a blur on the eastern horizon as the four of them flew south until Bruxelles Aeroport appeared ahead of them. Ignoring the traditional landing area, Mike cut across the busy by-pass and, soon, the medical complex came into view. Mike landed on the grassed area near the front of the building and they all climbed out and walked towards the hospital.

A fair-haired man came out to meet them. 'Hello Mike, Cassi. Good morning Commander Carter.' He stared at Lyniera. 'Well, Mike. I see what you meant when you telephoned and said Cassi had a twin.'

Mike grinned. 'Alike, aren't they?'
Jon looked at Cassi. 'Is she...?'
Cassi nodded. 'My sister. Conceived and incubated on board Wayfarer just as I was.'
'Is the Andromeda Seed still safe?' interrupted Mike.
'Yes, do you want to see the eggs?'
'No, we want to take them away,' said Cassi.
'Take them away? But why?'
'Because at this very moment there are people on their way here to destroy them.'
'Destroy them? But the agreement with the government...'
'...is being ignored right now.'
'But they will not get the Seed from me. The hospital is off limits to outsiders.'

'The men we are talking about have no regard for such sanctities, Jon. They have murdered six people already, if you include Tara's baby.'

'Is Tara around?' asked Cassi suddenly. 'I'd like to see her before we go.'

'Of course,' said the doctor with a smile. 'Come this way.'

Jon led them into the hospital, up in the lift and then along a corridor. At the end was a private room which contained a bed which, in turn, contained a young woman whose eyes lit up at the sight of Cassi. The girls embraced and

introductions were made all round.

'We've only popped in briefly,' explained Cassi. 'We're taking the Andromeda Seed away for safe keeping.' She explained why.

Tara threw off her bedclothes. 'I'm coming.'

'But...,' started the doctor.

'Don't try and stop me, Jon Pederson. Those animals killed my baby. I have every right to be in on this.'

'But you have been ill.'

'I've simply been depressed. You told me so yourself. Now I'm elated at the chance of getting my own back on them.'

'It will be dangerous,' said Steve.

Tara smiled. 'I don't care. Now how about letting me get dressed?'

The men went outside and Jon showed them the Seed eggs. 'You will be careful with them, won't you?'

Mike took the container from his hand. 'All we want to do now is to prevent more deaths.'

'If those people are that unscrupulous, then wherever you go, they will follow you and destroy the Seed. Also, if the General is behind this, there isn't anywhere you can hide where his people won't find you eventually.'

'Then we will go to some place where we can even up the odds a little,' said Cassi as she joined them along with Lyniera and a beaming Tara.

'But where on Earth is there such a place?'

Cassi smiled. 'Nowhere at all.'

THE insulated box containing the Andromeda Seed was carried carefully out of the hospital and Mike and Steve loaded it onto the helicopter. As they all climbed aboard, a car swerved into the car park with a screech of tyres.

'Just in time,' said Mike as he started the rotor.

'We're not away yet,' observed Steve as he watched the car stop and the three people begin to get out.

Suddenly, Alec Watson saw the helicopter and shouted to his companions who jumped back into the car which then leapt forwards. It crashed through the perimeter fence and headed straight for the helicopter as the engine built up speed. Mike twisted the throttle to full and pulled back on the stick. Just as the car reached them, they were airborne. Shots were fired and the bullets ricocheted off the bodywork as they rose rapidly into the air. At the last minute, Mike dropped the nose and the starboard skid went through the windscreen of the car, sending a shower of toughened glass all over the occupants. Backing off, Mike pulled back and they were soon zooming over the main road.

'They're still following,' said Steve.

'We'll outrun them in this,' grinned Mike. 'Where to, Cassi? Where's this place you want to hide the Seed?'

'Back to Europoort.'

'Europoort? But the General will have men there by now.'

'We'll have to take that chance. We don't have any option.'

The helicopter was back at the launch complex within fifteen minutes and landing beside the Titan Shuttle.

'Will there be enough lift?' asked Mike.

'I'm not sure. It's never been done before.'

'Then isn't this just a little risky?'

Cassi nodded. 'To say the least, Mike. However, while we're up, can you contact the Director and see if he can find some legal way of restricting the General and his operations.'

'I'll try.'

'Steve, I want you to stay with Mike. You are the only person with credibility whom the directorate will believe.'

'They'll believe you, surely?'

'I can't be sure of that. Humouring my idiosyncrasies is one thing, believing this fantastic story is another thing altogether. Take care, you are our chief witness.'

'Are you sure you don't want me to come with you?'

Cassi nodded. 'Perfectly. We three girls are lighter and will stand a much better chance of getting into orbit safely.'

CASSI strapped herself into the pilot's seat while Lyn and Tara occupied the other two.

While Lyniera accessed the drive computer, Cassi pressed a button. 'Titan Shuttle to Europoort Launch Control. Do you read?'

'Europoort Launch Control receiving.'

'This is Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Hardy. I need clearance for immediate lift-off.'

'We have no flight authorisation plan. What is your destination?'

'I am on a training session with two new pilots,' she lied.

'CRITICAL MASS IN TWO MINUTES >'

There was silence for almost a minute before the radio spoke again. 'I'm afraid there has been a twenty-four hour launch clampdown, Mrs Hardy. I am unable to allow you to take off.'

'That'll be the General's work,' muttered Tara.

'CRITICAL MASS IN ONE MINUTE >'

'Switch to manual override,' said Cassi to her sister and then; 'Europoort Launch Control. I am issuing a Priority One directive. I repeat, a Priority One directive. Immediate clearance essential.'

'Can you do that?' asked Tara.

Cassi smiled. 'No. But I just did.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN TEN SECONDS >'

'They'll shoot us down with missiles if we ignore protocol.'

'CRITICAL MASS ACHIEVED. MAIN DRIVES READY FOR LIFT-OFF >'

'That's a chance we'll have to take. Full vertical thrust, Lyn. We're going up.'

There was a flash and a roar and the main drive fired and the ship began to ascend slowly and sedately from the tarmac.

'Titan Shuttle. Return to base immediately. Return to....'

Silence - and then another voice. 'It's the Director here, Cassi. I don't know what it is you're up to but good luck.'

Cassi grinned. 'Thank you, Alan.'

'I'm not going to regret this, am I?'

'Not at all. Just listen to what Mike and Steve have to say. They'll tell you everything you need to know.'

'Very well. But I have to tell you that, until the Directorate officially agrees to act, you are completely on your own.'

'That's how I like it, Alan.'

'ALTITUDE 100m >'

'She's barely holding against gravity,' said Lyniera. 'We don't have sufficient escape velocity.'

'We'll use the forward drive,' said Cassi instinctively and threw switches.

The shuttle started to vibrate as both drives operated at full thrust and, after but a moment's hesitation, the shuttle began to move forward.

'Aircraft on the long-range scanner,' shouted Tara. 'Three of them, coming in fast from the south.'

'Speed?'

'Estimated Mach-3. They're heading straight for us.'

'Hold on tight, girls,' said Cassi as she pulled back on the column.

'Cassi, this is a shuttle, not a fighter plane,' cried Tara as they banked around the edge of the launch complex, accelerating upwards at a steep angle.

'Shame we don't have Proton Drive in the shuttle,' said Lyniera grimly. 'We'd soon lose them then.'

At almost two thousand kilometres per hour, the shuttle raced northwards along the coast of Nederland. In under two minutes, they were turning eastwards over the Waddensee.

'Missiles,' called Tara at the monitor. 'They've launched missiles at us.'

'Number and estimated time to impact?'

Tara glanced at the computer screen. 'Three in a hundred-metre cluster and fifteen seconds.'

'Count me down from five seconds,' said Cassi as she put the shuttle into a tight right and upwards curve. 'I wish Mike was here now.'

'Ten seconds.'

'I hope this is going to be as easy as the simulator made it out to be.'

'Five seconds,' Tara said as Cassi levelled out over Groningen. 'Four.'

'Full reverse thrust at two, Lyn.'

'Three.'

'You've got it.'

'Two.'

The straps bit deeply into their shoulders as the retros fired and, at the same time, Cassi flipped the shuttle upside down, firing the lift motors at full thrust. The shuttle appeared to stand still for a second and then drop out of the sky. At virtually nil metres, Cassi turned the right way up and applied full thrust to the forward drive. The missiles, confused without a visible target, didn't know what to home in on. One of the aircraft flew straight into them and there was a blinding flash as it disintegrated instantly in mid air. The other two curved away in time and turned to follow the shuttle westwards across the North Sea.

The water was just below them as they gradually accelerated away from the aircraft who held their fire after the demise of their colleague. At more than a kilometre per second, Cassi pulled up just short of the English coast and zoomed up in the air at a forty-five degree angle. The G-forces were extraordinary as they continued to gain speed and height at an alarming rate. The land receded rapidly below them as the air thinned and the interior temperature dropped.

'Escape velocity achieved,' called out Tara as they reached an altitude of three-thousand kilometres. 'Estimated time to Orion - forty-eight minutes.'

Cassi smiled. 'We're not going to Orion.'

Both the other girls whirled around. 'But we thought...'

'We were heading for Wayfarer? No point. We'll have Wayfarer One and they'll have Wayfarer Two. Neither ship has any kind of capacity for fighting so we'll simply chase each other all over the Solar System and for what?'

'To protect the Andromeda Seed?'

'But the Andromeda Seed is useless anywhere but on Earth.'

'We could use the male sperm of the Seed to fertilise each other in space,' suggested Lyniera.

'And what would three pregnant women do wandering around in space? Set up a nursery school for unemployed aliens? No, all we have to do is to keep the Seed safe until somebody decides to restrain the General and his accomplices.'

'But I still don't realise what this is all about,' said the puzzled Lyniera. 'Why did they sabotage the mission in the first place? Why murder the others and try to kill you? And, most of all, why attempt to destroy the Andromeda Seed?'

'That's a lot of questions,' said her sister with a smile.

'I can answer some of them, I think,' said Tara. 'The General is one of the foremost resisters to the continuation of the Space Programme.'

'But why? Surely it is in the interests of everyone to find out more about the Solar System.'

'True. However, before the missions started, General Phillips had control of a huge amount of government expenditure which he could use to develop sophisticated weapon systems. He not only sees the missions as a waste of public money but also a serious threat to Earth's continued security.'

'He would rather have aircraft and missiles than visit other planets and stars?'

'You've put in in a nutshell and, unfortunately, there are a lot of people who would agree with him. While I was the Admiral's secretary on Orion, the General and he were always talking about the changes they would make if Orion was turned into a battle station instead of a base for serious scientific research.'

'But why the deaths and the attempts to destroy the Seed?'

'Same reason,' said Cassi as they levelled off slightly into a high trajectory. 'The Seed is the first really constructive thing to come out of astro research. The eggs, Tara's baby and me all represent a threat to his prestigious position and material prosperity.'

'And me,' added Lyniera.

Cassi smiled. 'He doesn't know about you yet.'

'And the astronauts that were left on Wayfarer Two were all in on it?'

'That's right. The idea was to cause a disaster on such a scale that would turn public opinion completely against the space programme. When that

happened, the Andromeda Seed project would also become suspect and development of the new mixed race would stop immediately.'

'But to think those three men would stoop that low.'

'There were several replacements, if you recall. Some of the crew members got sick or had accidents. Hence the crash training course at the end.'

'Steve was a replacement, wasn't he?'

'Yes, he was. Only Juanita Carrero, Bob Walker, Tom Johnson and Dennis Fox were on the original mission team.'

'But Steve seems all right.'

'He is.'

'But he must have replaced someone, someone who dropped out of the original crew.'

'That's right. Steve Carter was brought in because father had not returned from Pluto. Father was to have led the team in the first place. That's why I knew that Steve was not guilty. He was just incompetent - or so I thought. I was wrong about that, too, wasn't I?'

'So the three baddies were all last-minute substitutes.'

Cassi nodded. 'All recommended by General Phillips.'

'Good grief! What lengths to go to.'

'Power does that to you after a while. Let's hope the Directorate are able to deal with the situation properly this time.'

'Mmm,' said Tara. 'All we have to do is stay out of the way until they do. But I still don't understand why we don't use Wayfarer and get well away from Earth. If the Proton Drive is as good as you say it is, we could be at the edge of the Solar System in a few hours.'

'We could, but think of the time delay in getting messages to and fro. Also, I want those murderers kept local where they can be caught and dealt with appropriately.'

'But you said we are not going to Orion?'

Cassi shook her head. 'We're not. I have no confidence Admiral Burleigh won't just hand us and the Seed over to those men.'

'I can't see father letting that happen,' said Lyniera.

'But father is not as young as he used to be and he only has Bob to help him. He might be able to restrain the Admiral for a few hours but there is no way just the two of them can hold out on Orion against serious pressure.'

'But if we're not going to Orion, where are we headed?'

Cassi grinned mischievously. 'Didn't I tell you? We're going to see the man in the moon.'

JIM Duncan watched on the monitor as, instead of docking as anticipated, the Titan shuttle passed Orion by.

'Hmm,' he said thoughtfully. 'I wonder what those girls of mine are up to now.'

Bob Walker looked up from the computer screen. 'Sensors show further emissions from Earth, Commander. Looks like the normal Orion Shuttle has also launched in their wake.'

Jim looked over to the subdued Admiral Burleigh. 'We'll soon know what's going on when they get here.'

'If you'll just let me contact Europort...,' started the other man.

'Huh. And have you give a warning to General Phillips? No chance. You are staying right here where I can see what you are up to.'

'Commander Duncan, this is intolerable.'

Jim smiled. 'It is, isn't it?'

'That's odd,' interrupted the engineer.

Jim turned. 'What is it?'

'The Orion Shuttle has lodged a flight plan for Luna Base.'

'Luna Base?' He looked at the Admiral. 'There's no scheduled staff change, is there?'

The Admiral looked at them sourly with a look that signified lack of cooperation.

Jim smiled. 'I thought not.'

'Commander,' said Bob. 'The Titan Shuttle has altered course.'

'Where is it headed?'

'Luna Base.'

Jim frowned. 'Now why would Cassi want to go there?'

'Do you think whoever is on the Orion Shuttle is after Mrs Hardy?'

'I suppose that is possible,' the Commander replied thoughtfully. 'What are their respective estimated times of arrival?'

The engineer punched buttons and then consulted the data which began to print out. 'There won't be much to choose between them. The Titan shuttle should lock into Lunar orbit in just under four hours and the Orion Shuttle will be no more than ten minutes behind them.'

'Of course, I'd forgotten. The Orion Shuttle has the greater power of the two.'

'Much greater,' confirmed Bob Walker. 'It was designed for regular lift-off from Earth whereas the Titan Shuttle was not and must have really struggled to get back up here. If it hadn't been for those emergency boosters we fitted as a precautionary-measure, it wouldn't have made it at all.'

Jim turned quickly. 'Could whoever it is on the Orion Shuttle catch up with Cassi?'

Bob shrugged. 'It's possible. They have almost double the thrust of the Titan Shuttle at full power.'

'Then they will catch my daughters.'

Bob smiled. 'Not necessarily. Don't forget the Titan shuttle has much greater manoeuvrability.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, for one thing, the Orion Shuttle depends on an atmosphere to glide and land efficiently and there is no atmosphere on the moon. Their landing will have to be a little hit and miss - a bit like like trying to land Wayfarer on a moving asteroid.'

'And the Titan Shuttle?'

'It has vertical take-off facility as well as sophisticated lateral retros. It was built for us to hover and locate a suitable landing spot on Saturn's largest moon, don't forget. The gravity and environment on Luna is not so much different from Titan, except for the lack of atmosphere.'

'So that evens things up a little.'

'That depends upon who's piloting the shuttle and how good they are at playing space invaders.'

'Space invaders? What are they?'

Bob smiled. 'It was a primitive computer game of the last century. A small craft with only limited sideways movement had to dodge the repeated attacks of wave after wave of craft intent on eliminating it with various horrible nasties. If you were playing this game, the only way to escape was to fire a laser and destroy the attackers before they got you.'

'That could be a problem.'

'A problem?'

'Yes. I have no idea what sort of horrible nasties they have upon the Orion Shuttle nor how they intend to use them. But one thing I do know is that my daughters are both half-Andromedan and it is beyond possibility that either of them could fight or kill others, no matter how evil they are. Besides that, they have no weapons of any kind on the Shuttle.'

'Other than the Captain's emergency blaster,' said Bob.

'The what?'

'Blaster. A bit like an old-fashioned sawn-off shotgun and fires shot rather than a projectile. The Titan shuttle was kitted out with one in case of wild animals or the like on Titan. It's stashed away in the suit locker.'

'I didn't know that.'

'No,' said Bob with a faint smile. 'But Steve does.'

'Then they are not completely defenceless.'

'Perhaps not, but the weapon is not designed to kill except at very close range. It was included more to frighten really unless the enemy was wearing a space suit, of course. It would probably puncture the skin of one.'

'Pretty terminal if he's in a vacuum at the time. A kilogramme of internal pressure for every square centimetre of his body surface could spread him out over a pretty large area.'

'That's true,' said Bob with a smile. 'However, the thing is just as likely to harm the user than the assailant if they don't remember Newton's Third Law of Dynamics.'

'Every action has an equal and opposite reaction?'

'Precisely. Just like a rocket motor, the gun will move backwards with the same speed and force as the shot in a low-gravity environment. I hope Steve remembers that if he intends to use it.'

Jim smiled. 'I'm sure he will.'

LYNIERA Duncan adjusted course slightly as the Titan Shuttle approached Lunar orbit. 'How far are they behind us, Cassi?'

Her sister consulted the data. 'Nine minutes and gaining.'

'Is there just the one Base on Luna, Tara?'

'Just one that's manned,' said the Earth girl. 'Plus the old expedition sites.'

Lyniera peered out of the re-inforced windshield. 'Can we see the base from here?'

Tara shook her head. 'Not yet. It is on the far side - away from the Earth.'

'Why?' asked Lyniera.

'It is used mainly for observations and houses the visual and radio telescopes.'

'But radio waves travel in straight lines. How do they communicate with Terra?'

'Simple. There is a huge relay mast in the D'Alembert Mountains which transfers all messages and data direct to the Mont Aigoual tracking station in Southern France.'

'And the other sites you mentioned?'

'None still manned. Even the mines utilise androids now.'

'Mines?'

'Shafts down under the surface near the Flamstead crater on Oceanus Procellarum.' Tara pointed them out on the map. 'Nothing much left at any of them now except for the Russian sites at Petavius and Mendelejev.'

The shuttle arched over the top of Luna and went into the shadow.

Tara suddenly reached forward. 'Tell me the instant we are out of visual linearity with Earth.'

'Why?' asked Lyniera.

'Years ago, children used to play a kind of game on Earth. It was called hide and seek. Why don't we go play hide and seek with our pursuers?'

Cassi smiled. 'Okay. You give the word and we'll follow your guidance instructions.'

'It will mean flying very low, close to the surface.'

Cassi grinned. 'We're used to that. We just did that along the Dutch coast while trying to get away from those jet fighter planes.'

'This will be a little different, Cassi. For one thing, the moon is much smaller than Earth.'

'What difference will that make?' asked Lyniera.

'No horizon,' clarified her sister. 'We will come upon things very fast, without warning.'

'Also the relative heights,' added Tara. 'Compared with Terra, the mountains are much higher in proportion to the flat lands. You'll be flying virtually blind through what will seem like a perpetual mountain range.'

'And don't forget the gravity,' said Cassi. 'It is a fraction of that of Earth. Any movement made by person or vehicle is magnified sixfold.'

'But that means...'

Tara nodded. 'Jump a metre in the air and you actually jump six metres. In this craft, it will be worse, especially at speed as one tiny movement of the controls means that either we crash or we flip off into space.'

'Sounds hairy,' said Lyniera.

'Can you handle it?' asked her sister. 'Or shall I take over the flight controls?'

'Tell you what - let's work together. You operate the guidance systems and I'll control the drive and retros.'

'What about me?' said Tara.

'You navigate. Just shout left, right, up or down and we'll respond.'

'Okay,' said Tara, looking a little apprehensive for the first time. She looked at the screen. 'We'll be in their scanner shadow in forty seconds.'

'Count me down,' said Cassi. 'Lyn, full left retro at Tara's command.'

The younger girl placed her fingers on the keys of the drive computer.

'You've got it.'

'Thirty seconds.'

'Cut the interior lights, would you?'

'Okay,' said Lyniera and their external vision improved as the dark side, away from the sun, rolled by beneath them.

'Twenty seconds.'

'Make sure your seat belts are tight.'

'Fifteen seconds.'

'Retros standing by.'

'Ten seconds to scanner shadow.'

'Is the main drive going flat out?'

'Affirmative. Seventy-three thousand kilometres per hour.'

Cassi smiled. 'Around the moon in nine minutes.'

'Five seconds to scanner shadow.'

'Four.'

'Three.'

'Two.'

'One.'

'In shadow.'

'Full left retro,' said Cassi and threw the shuttle into a steep left dive. Ten metres above the rocky surface of Mare Marginis, Cassi said, 'Cut,' and the shuttle levelled out.

Tara held her breath as the surface flashed by just beneath them at over two kilometres per second.

'Bloody hell,' she said quietly.

The motion was a little disturbing to the unaccustomed stomach as the two alien girls worked in perfect unison without a word being spoken between them.

'Are they following?' asked Cassi suddenly.

'I can't tell as we're below their horizon.'

Cassi looked at the digital time read-out. 'Left retro again in ten seconds, Lyn. We've got to turn again before we cross their original trajectory or they'll see us.'

'Done,' said Lyniera.

'Go,' said Tara and the shuttle did a sharp turn as it passed over the Tsiolkovski Crater. She closed her eyes and moved her lips in silent prayer.

'What's that ahead?' said Cassi suddenly. 'Lyn. Full right retro, take us around it.'

Tara looked at the chart and the scanner screen. 'Looks like Warner.'

'Who?'

'Warner. One of the deepest craters in Southern Luna.'

'How long before sunrise here?'

Tara glanced at the guidance computer once more. 'Four hours.'

'Great. Full reverse thrust, Lyn, let's go take a look.'

The shuttle curved in under the rim of the crater and Cassi used the vertical drive as little as possible to bring them down in a cloud of dust on the small flat area in the centre of the impact crater. The canyon walls seemed to bear in on them as the sounds of the drives died away. Inside the crater it was almost totally black, the blue glow from the Earth offering the only illumination as the dust began to settle on and around the tiny shuttle.

'Bloody hell,' said Tara again. 'I hope I never have to go through that flight again. Hide and seek was never like this on Earth.'

The Andromedan sisters laughed aloud at Tara's expression. A slight smirk came over Tara's face. 'Now I know what Jon meant when he told me to beware of women drivers.'

ON Orion, the two men watched the ship disappear from the screens. 'Well, it's up to them now. They're on their own.'

'They'll survive, Commander. Neither of your daughters strike me as being stupid.'

'I hope you're right, Bob. Even then, I'm not terribly happy about them running about on the moon playing cat and mouse with three desperate criminals who have shown that life means nothing.'

The door opened with a hiss and in walked two security guards. 'Admiral Burleigh, I....' one started and then instantly took in the situation.

'Come in, Captain,' said the Admiral, a look of pure relief on his face. 'These men are criminals who have invaded the security of Orion Base.'

The Security Captain hesitated. He had never doubted the Base Minister's word but he also knew Commander Duncan well enough to know he was no criminal. He nodded to his companion to guard the door and slowly stepped over to the Admiral's desk. 'Admiral, with respect...'

The senior officer jumped to his feet. 'Didn't you hear what I said? Arrest these men immediately.'

For the first time, the security man looked worried. He had his job to think of. His eyes went from one to the other of them. 'Commander Duncan, I...'

'Go ahead,' said Jim. 'We are not armed and neither will we try to get away.'

The suggestion was preposterous. Who could get away from a space station? Where was there to go? The Captain realised this.

'I would ask only one thing,' continued Jim.

'Yes?'

'Before you do anything, speak with your superior officer.'

'Superior officer?' His eyes flicked to the Admiral and then back to Jim. 'But he is not here? The Admiral...'

'...has no official control of security at all.'

'I know that, sir. But...'

'The radiophone in engineering is still working. Might I suggest we all go there now and speak to Marshal Hardy. I'm sure he will be delighted to hear from you.'

'You can't do that,' blustered the Admiral. 'He is not here - in command.'

'No, sir,' said the Captain. 'But I think that, all the same, we will speak to him, especially in view of what has happened.'

The Admiral looked wary. 'Happened? What has happened?'

'A short while ago, Doctor Carrero was found near to the docking bay by one of my men. She was in a terrible state and it has taken us some time to get any kind of sense out of her. She kept muttering something about a dead body on Wayfarer Two.'

Jim whirled around. 'A dead body?'

'Yes, Commander. I just checked for myself and it is the body of one of the crew. He has been murdered.'

Jim looked at Bob Walker. 'We must get to Luna Base at once.'

'I'm afraid,' said the security Captain. 'That, until I have consulted the Marshal, no-one can leave Orion.'

'Look!' said Bob Walker suddenly, his eyes on the scanner screen.

Jim turned. 'What is it?'

'Look! Another shuttle is coming up from Earth.'

'That's the General's own ship,' said the Captain.

Jim frowned. 'Why would he be coming here?'

'He isn't,' said Bob quietly as he watched the screen. 'He's headed straight for Luna.'

EVERYTHING was silent in Warner Crater as the three girls struggled into their space suits in case of attack. There had been no time at take-off.

'So far, so good,' said Tara as she zipped up her neck-band and reached for her helmet.

Cassi suddenly reached out her hand. 'Don't use the radio. They may be listening.'

'Then how do we communicate?'

'We touch helmets together, like this.' She demonstrated. 'Father showed me that trick years ago.'

'And me,' said Lyniera. 'When we were in orbit around Mythos.'

Cassi smiled. 'Do you know, that feels like a hundred years ago?'

'It probably was,' smirked Tara, 'Knowing you and your time compression.'

'Not this time, Tara. There's no more than a few weeks in it.'

'I don't mean your trip, Cassi. I mean your father's. He left here alone nine months ago and came back with an eighteen-year-old daughter. Even if your theories on time compression are correct, he must have gone one hell of a speed to achieve that kind of differential.'

'He did,' said Lyniera. 'We rarely dropped below light speed.'

'Energy equals the mass times the speed of light squared,' muttered Tara.

'Except,' said Cassi, 'that the dilation co-efficient of the acquired mass is not always directly proportional to the relative compound velocity of the initial energy release at source.'

Tara grinned. 'If you say so.'

'It means,' clarified Lyniera, 'that up to light speed, some time difference does occur between the moving and stationary objects. It's what Einstein and others were trying to get over during the last century.'

'Yes, I know that from technical college. At only forty percent of light speed, such a differential is measurable but it is always dilatory. Time on the moving craft was always behind that of the stationary observer.'

'That only occurs up to light speed. After that, a reversal occurs. You get massive time compression instead. Years in space take mere months or even weeks on Earth.'

'But why can't our scientists measure it?'

Cassi grinned. 'Because it's moving too fast.'

'What?'

'Earth-based eyes and scanning media only measure velocity within the visible light window. Just as the spectrum of light has invisible beams such as microwaves and radio waves, so it has a lateral spectrum that remains largely unseen to the human eye and immeasurable by instruments based upon human standards.'

'But I still don't understand why we have, before now, never identified objects that move faster than the speed of light.'

'Stubbornness.'

'What?'

'Einstein said it was impossible and practically everyone believed him. Father once told me about men like Galileo and Copernicus who challenged the works of earlier men like Ptolemy and were ridiculed for it. Later came Tycho and Kepler who were also made to look stupid when they questioned things and yet, today, we know they were far more accurate than Ptolemy.'

'You think the same thing is true of Einstein?'

'Don't get me wrong, Tara. Einstein was nearly right in most things. In fact, he received much the same opposition as some of the others had done.'

'But he was wrong?'

'Not wrong exactly. Merely not in possession of all the facts. He made the best diagnosis on the available information of the time. We now know better.'

'You mean, you now know better.'

'Iris has all the data in her memory banks. Perhaps they will believe Iris.'

'I still find it hard to believe.'

'Tara,' said Cassi suddenly. 'Do you believe in God?'

Tara's mouth dropped open. 'What's that got to do with it?'

'Answer me. Do you?'

Tara shrugged. 'I'm not sure. Like many others of my age, I was brought up to believe that everything happened by some kind of accident. It was popular to do so in the nineteen-nineties.'

'In fact,' said Cassi. 'Am I not right in saying that you were regarded as distinctly old-fashioned if you believed otherwise?'

'I suppose you were.'

'Like Copernicus and Galileo when they dared to challenge the hitherto supposedly proven ideas?'

'I'm beginning to see what you are getting at. You mean that people only believe what they want to believe.'

'Exactly. But don't get me wrong. In my brief time on Earth, I met some very strange people - people who believed in God for totally wrong reasons. But I also met other men who refused to do so simply because it was more convenient not to do so.'

'Do you believe in God, Cassi?'

'Like you, I'm not sure. However, there are a great many things in life, particularly in science, that are only explained if you bring some kind of higher intelligence into the equation. To believe that all this universe, your Earth, this moon, all just happened to come about by some kind of random accident runs directly against all the known laws of physics as any logical minds will tell you if they are completely honest.'

'Why did we get involved in this discussion?' asked a puzzled Lyniera.

'Because, during those nine months on Earth, I read a book that father had once mentioned to me as a child.'

'The Bible?' offered her younger sister.

'Yes. If what I read is correct and this God is a real person, he cannot be handicapped by the speed of light.'

'What do you mean?'

'Well, think of it constructively. Here, on Earth, you have your average prophet. Let's call him Abraham. He prays to his God in heaven, wherever that is, and gets an immediate answer. Now what are the implications of that?'

'I don't know,' said Tara. 'You've lost me.'

'He must be very close,' said Lyniera.

Cassi smiled. 'Precisely, sister dear. Not only that, he must be near to everywhere else at the same time if he is able to answer their prayers, too.'

'He obviously can't do that.'

'Why not? He's got the entire universe to look after, don't forget. Even in Andromeda, they believed in God.'

'And that's over two million light years away,' added Lyniera.

'So,' concluded Cassi. 'Either the distances between the stellar bodies are nowhere near as great as they seem and basic trigonometry is against that - at least as far as the nearby stellar bodies are concerned.'

'Or?'

'Or this God, and all his angels, are able to move at speeds that leave light standing, so to speak.'

'Is that possible?'

'Don't forget SID.'

'Sid?'

'System for instant data-transfer. The Wayfarers use it to update each other's Iris. SID is not handicapped by light-speed.'

Tara smiled. 'I think we humans still have a lot to learn.'

'We do, don't we?'

Lyniera stood up and stared out of the window at the sphere of Earth. 'It almost looks as though we are going to fall down there, doesn't it?'

'You'll get used to it,' said Tara.

'You've seen it before?' said Lyniera.

Tara laughed. 'Of course. Don't forget I was on Orion for over a year.' She turned to Cassi. 'Are we going to stay here long?'

'I hope not. All I want to do is to keep out of everyone's way until the Seed is safe. Then we will return it to Earth.'

'So it's hide and seek for a while longer?'

'Exactly. However, we should be fairly safe as long as we're careful. After all, it's just the three of them against the three of us, isn't it?'

THE eerie blue light glinted off the hull of the Orion shuttle as it passed from sunlight into earthglow once more. At near stall speed, it cruised in a search pattern less than a kilometre above the barren lunar landscape.

'Where the hell did they go to?' said the pilot as he adjusted course once more.

'They simply disappeared, Pete. One minute they were just ahead of us and the next, they vanished.'

'A shuttle craft does not simply vanish, not even if it is a Titan shuttle.'

'It won't be easy to spot,' said Alec. 'It's only half our size, don't forget, and can manoeuvre and land in places we can't get near to.'

'But it's still over twenty metres in length. There aren't many places you can hide a thing of that size.'

'Except in one of the craters.'

The navigator turned on him. 'But there are thousands of bloody craters. Which do you suggest we try first? The one with the prettiest view?'

'No,' said Alec thoughtfully. 'Switch the scanners to infra-red. It will take some time for their engines to cool down and they will stand out like a sore thumb.'

'I hope you're right. If that girl gets away with this, the General will be the laughing stock of Terra.'

'I'm not sure I am too worried about the wrath of Dwight Phillips right now.'

'What do you mean, Alec?' said the pilot.

'We still have that little matter of the "fault" on take off. It was none of us three that sabotaged the main drive so that leaves only one person.'

'You mean the General? You think he would deliberately have caused a disaster? With us on board?'

'It would have achieved what he was after, wouldn't it? With that little Andromedan bitch on board, he would have had all his eggs in one basket, so to speak. What better way to ensure the space programme is permanently grounded?'

'I think when this is all over, we will all have a nice little chat with General Phillips.'

'First things first, lads. Before we do anything else, we have a shuttle to find and a Seed to eliminate.'

Pete smiled. 'I'm going to enjoy that.'

'Not half as much as I am. I still don't know how that girl got back from Pluto but she's certainly not going to get away this time. I am going to take great delight in personally watching her die - extremely slowly and very, very painfully.'

IN Warner Crater, the Titan Shuttle was still in near shadow as the three occupants sat in suspense, waiting to be found.

'Shouldn't we shut down the drive?' asked Lyniera with her helmet touching her sister's. 'They will read our emissions if they fly close.'

'They'll do that anyway,' said Cassi. 'Against the ice-cold temperature of this crater, their infra-red scanners will locate us as soon as they are within a kilometre or so of us. Besides, I want the engines ready for a quick get-away if I have to.'

'This isn't working very well,' said Tara as she took her helmet off again and shook her dark hair. 'I can't tell what you two are on about. Can't we use the suit radios?'

Cassi looked at her for a long time. 'You're absolutely right, Tara. In an emergency, we'll be too limited. However, we must keep our suits and helmets on in case the hull gets damaged if they attack us.'

'So what will we do?'

Cassi grinned. 'We'll keep switching channels to confuse them. With a bit of luck, we won't be on any one channel long enough for them to locate us.'

'How will we know which channel?'

'We've got four channels. If I say "switch" and hold up a number of fingers, change to that channel. Does that sound reasonable?'

Tara nodded and replaced her helmet. 'I don't suppose we'd be safer outside on the surface?'

'We might be. However, the Seed must be kept at a constant temperature. The insulated container will maintain equilibrium for a short while but the box must be connected to a power supply for most of the time else they will all die.'

'I see.'

'Emission approaching,' said Lyniera suddenly. 'I think they may have found us.'

'Switch,' said Cassi and held up three fingers.

The others made the adjustment and waited as the Orion Shuttle passed almost overhead without hesitating.

'I think they missed us,' whispered the younger girl as she stared at the screen.

'Stand-by vertical lift drive,' said Cassi suddenly.

'But if they've missed us....'

'Don't depend on it. Let's be ready to get out of here - fast.'

Lyniera touched keys. 'Drive ready.'

The three girls stared out at the black sky and the encroaching white strip along the rim of the crater as the sun rose from behind the sphere of Earth.

'Look!' said Lyniera suddenly, pointing at the shape which cast a shadow over them.

'Activate main lift drive,' said Cassi instinctively. 'But hold lift until maximum thrust achieved.'

'What are you going to do?' asked the shaking Tara as the shuttle started to vibrate.

Cassi grinned. 'I'm going to frighten the life out of them.'

THE Orion Shuttle was close to stalling as it passed over the crater once more, looking for somewhere to land.

'Set us down, Pete. Let's get this over with.'

'Two minutes,' said the pilot. 'This isn't a helicopter, you know.'

'Look out!' screamed Alec suddenly as the Titan Shuttle came flying out of the crater.

Pete Spencer pulled at the controls but they were too sluggish in the low-pressure environment. The Titan Shuttle came up at them, narrowly missing their port side, and sent the Orion shuttle lurching from side to side as the heat from the lift drive scorched the side of the hull.

CASSI watched the Orion shuttle wobble about like a drunken man.

'Full left retro,' she shouted to Lyniera who responded immediately and the Titan shuttle shifted sideways over the top of the Orion shuttle, the main drive forcing the other ship down even further with the thrust of the rocket motor.

'That'll teach them,' said Tara as she peered at the screen.

'Full ahead,' called Cassi. 'And switch.' She held up two fingers and then wondered why Tara was convulsed with laughter.

THERE was a jarring crash as the Orion shuttle hit the crater rim a glancing blow before spinning across the lunar surface. Eventually, Pilot Officer Spencer regained control and lifted the shuttle back into a safe orbit.

'My God, that was close,' he said with relief at their survival.

'I thought we'd had it then,' agreed Alec Watson.

'What a pair you two are,' murmured the third man. 'Are you going to let a mere child get the better of you forever? Get after them and let's finish this thing once and for all.'

IT was silent and dark as the Titan Shuttle sat amid the disused structures on the flat landscape of the wide Mendeleev crater.

'Shouldn't we go across to Luna Base?' whispered Tara. 'We'd be safer there.'

'For a while, maybe. The trouble is, we would be putting the lives of the people there in danger. Those three men from Wayfarer Two can't afford to leave any witnesses.'

'So we keep hopping around, trying to remain one jump ahead of them all the time?'

Cassi shrugged. 'We have little choice until Earth decides to act.'

Lyniera giggled. 'At least they won't try to sneak up on us again in a hurry. They must have been terrified to see us coming straight up at them.'

'Even worse,' added Tara, 'When you flew right over them and did a paint-stripping job with the blast from the vertical lift motor.'

'Don't underestimate them, girls. They are evil men who have killed and have nothing to lose by murdering a few more of us.'

'Why here, Cassi?'

'Because we will see them coming much easier. There doesn't seem to be much point in hiding from them in craters where we could be caught next time. No, if we stay here, they can't land too close due to the exploration domes around us and we will have plenty of time to lift off.'

'For how long? I mean, how long do you intend to keep away from them?'

'As long as necessary unless we can find some way to trap them.'

'And how are you going to do that?'

Cassi smiled. 'I don't know but I'm working on it.'

'Well, we're hidden pretty well here.'

'That's it,' said Cassi suddenly. 'Did you say there are mines near here?'

'Yes,' replied Tara. 'Several on the Sea of Storms. The biggest is at Flamstead.'

'Manned?'

'Probably.'

'Any recently abandoned that you know of?'

'Only the early shaft east of Grimaldi. It was manned at first but, to my knowledge, it is now sealed up.'

'Airtight?'

Tara nodded. 'It was. It has not been totally abandoned, merely suspended due to lack of funds. Most of the effort is now concentrated at Flamstead where they've built a new shuttle port recently.'

'Perfect,' smiled Cassi as she fired up the motor. 'Guide me to this Grimaldi.'

Lyniera was more cautious. 'The men can't be far away. If we take off now, they will see us for sure.'

Cassi's eyes twinkled. 'I certainly hope so.'

ALEC Watson couldn't believe his instruments. 'I have registered an energy emission from Mendelejev. It must be them taking off.'

Peter Spencer smiled. 'Then what are we waiting for?'

He pushed forward the controls and the Orion shuttle began to accelerate rapidly, turning over Mare Marginis. 'Where are they headed?'

Alec pushed buttons. 'Looks like they're coming this way.'

The tall man thought for a moment and then said, 'Circle around in an arc and they'll fly right past us and we can follow them.'

'Right you are. Here we go.'

Appolonius passed below them as they turned and saw the Titan Shuttle ahead of them.

Alec frowned. 'They don't seem in any hurry.'

'Perhaps they haven't seen us yet.'

'That girl is anything but stupid. I have a feeling she's up to something. Stick real close - she's not going to give us the slip again.'

The Titan shuttle flew straight across Mare Tranquillitatis and then over Sinus Medii with the Orion Shuttle behind and above within two hundred metres.

'They must be able to see us,' said Alec. 'But they're making no attempt to get away from us.'

'Have they manoeuvred at all since we picked them up?'

'Not a centimetre's deviation from original course.'

'They're not in it,' said Alec with certainty. 'It's a trick.'

'But how...?'

'Automatic pilot. They've fooled us again. Get in close and make sure. If it looks empty, flip it over.' He grinned. 'We don't want them bringing it down by remote control somewhere where they can use it again, do we?'

Pete nodded. 'Okay. Going in now.'

The Titan shuttle maintained its course at a steady height of five hundred metres as he drew alongside and they tried to peer in the large windscreen.

'Can't see,' said Alec. 'No interior lights...Look out!'

Without warning, the shuttle fired the lift motor and retros at the same time. Before the pilot could dodge it, the shuttle cut right across their bows, rising all the time. Pete dipped the shuttle's nose but it was too late. There was a crash and the reinforced landing leg of the Titan Shuttle smashed through the outer skin and tore a jagged hole along the side of the main cabin.

Sparks flew everywhere as instruments were shorted out and the shuttle fell out of control towards the low peaks of the Riphean Mountains. Only Peter Spencer's expert flying skill prevented a complete disaster as the Shuttle bounced on the Lunar surface and spun round as the Titan shuttle gave them a further blast of atomic fire from the lift drive before roaring off westwards once more.

'Goddamn it!' screamed the leader. 'She's gone too far this time. Get this bloody thing up there and ram the stupid bitch out of the sky.'

'But it'll kill us all. We're holed already and God knows what other damage has been done.'

'Do as I tell you. I've taken all I'm going to from her.'

Pete shrugged as the shuttle rose again. 'You're the boss.'

The other man snarled. 'And don't you ever forget it.'

It didn't take long to catch them. Just south of Havel, the Titan shuttle

was hovering near the old mine workings.

'Now! Go and get them.'

Pete frowned. 'They're landing.'

'Then you do the same.'

'If we do,' the pilot cautioned. 'We might never get up again.'

'We'll have to take that chance. Get down right alongside.'

'How will we get up again?'

'The General is on his way here, don't forget. He'll pick us up if the worst comes to the worst.'

'Okay. Descending now.'

The Titan shuttle didn't take off again. As the Orion Shuttle landed alongside it, the hatch opened and two suited figures jumped to the ground.

Alec pointed. 'It's them. There's two of them and their heading for the mine.'

'Then they're cut off and we've got them right where we want them, haven't we?'

CASSI and Lyniera came out of the airlock and into the main offices of the mining complex. With her torch, Cassi searched for the light switch and eventually found it, flooding the upper levels with low-frequency light.

'If you leave the inner door open,' observed the younger girl as Cassi tried to memorise the layout of the mine from the plan on the wall. 'They won't be able to open the airlock, will they?'

'And they'll go to the shuttle and find Tara, won't they? No, let them inside here and they can chase us around the mines for a bit while Tara looks after the Seed. They won't be able to get to her as long as she keeps the shuttle's inner door open.'

'But will we be able to keep away from them?'

Cassi smiled. 'We can but try. Let's get down to the next level. Switch channels.' She held up four fingers.

Lyniera made the adjustment and followed her elder sister through the far doorway and towards the workings.

On the lower level, Cassi stopped. 'Let's take our suits off. We will be able to run and hide better.'

'Won't that be dangerous? What if we lose pressure?'

Cassi looked around her and then shook her head. 'Unlikely. We've passed through three airtight bulkheads already and the pressure seems to have stayed up since the mines were abandoned. They are unlikely to lose pressure in the next twenty-four hours, are they?'

'I guess you're right,' said Lyniera, removing her helmet.

Both girls stripped out of their suits and stood in their blue stretch overalls and trainers.

Cassi grinned and held out her hand to her sister. 'Let's give them a run for their money.'

Hand in hand, they ran deeper into the mine, following the memorised route, until they reached a heavily-stratified section. Cassi ran her hands over the roughly-hewn surface. 'I wonder what it was the miners hoped to get from down here.'

'Perhaps they just wanted to find out what was down here. Father says that Earth people often embark on that sort of fruitless mission.'

'Listen, young lady,' said Cassi. 'You're beginning to sound like General Phillips. If our father hadn't embarked on what some regarded as a fruitless mission, we wouldn't be alive now and the Andromedan race would have become extinct forever.'

'It still might if those men get their way.'

Cassi smiled. 'Then we'll have to make sure they don't, won't we?'

FOR two hours, the two girls ran rings around their pursuers. It was especially confusing because the men didn't know about Lyniera and every time they caught a glimpse of golden hair, they thought it was Cassi.

'Hey!' they overheard one of the men say eventually. 'This is getting ridiculous. Every time we get near her, she appears behind us.'

'Then we'll have to find some way to stop it. Listen, this is what we'll

do.'

'What are they up to?' whispered Lyniera.

'I don't know but now they're down here, we've got to find a way to get up to the surface ahead of them. If we do, we can trap them here until help arrives.'

'Can we do it?'

'Of course. Look, they're splitting up. You go that way and I'll go this. See you upstairs in ten minutes.'

Through dodging and diving in and out of the mine workings, the two girls worked their way upwards and, collecting their suits from where they had hidden them, exited into the main office area. They closed and sealed the hatch and then relaxed. It was a mistake.

'Well, well, well,' said the voice behind them. 'So that's what your little trick is. There's two of you.' He pointed his gun at them. 'I thought you might try something like this and decided to come up here and wait for you.'

Cassi's shoulders fell in defeat. 'Hello, Andy.'

WITHIN minutes, Alec and Pete had joined them.

'You don't seem at all surprised to see me,' said Andrew Cameron.

'Of course not. I knew you hadn't died in space.'

'But I thought...,' began Lyniera.

'That's what we were supposed to think but I knew he had survived.'

'How?' asked Alec.

'Because someone tried to kill me last week in Bruxelles. Two men returned the damaged Land Cruiser to the hire company and everyone else checked out except you two. What happened to Gerry?'

Andy shrugged. 'He died.'

'For what? Why are you doing all this?'

'To stop the space programme. What else?'

'But why?'

'Because money that should be used for defence is being squandered on useless trips all over the galaxy. The General is paying us a lot of money to sabotage the space programme.'

'So it's all for money.'

'It was. But now it has become personal. You made a fool out of me so I am now going to get my revenge.'

'Revenge?'

'Of course.' He turned to Lyniera. 'Get into your space suit.'

Cassi stepped forward but was halted by the gun. 'Where are you taking my sister?'

'Sister? That explains the likeness. Well, we're taking your sister along with us for insurance.' He looked her over. 'And, perhaps, for a little fun along the way.'

'And me?'

Andy smiled. 'Wait and see. Pete, you and Alec take the younger girl and get ready to leave.'

'How?' said Peter Spencer.

'In the Titan Shuttle, of course. It's the only safe way off this moon now.'

'Okay. What are you going to do?'

'I'm going to have a little fun of my own. Get going and I'll see you outside in five minutes or so.'

'The General will be here soon,' Alec reminded him.

'Yes. And I want a straight word with him, too, concerning the little matter of sabotage on take-off. Take the girl and get into the shuttle.'

Cassi said nothing as Alec, Pete and Lyniera put on their helmets and went into the airlock. The green light turned red and Andy and Cassi were alone.

'What are you going to do with me?' asked Cassi slowly.

Andy grinned as he flooded the airlock once more. 'I'm going to leave you here, of course.'

'Here?'

He swung open the big metal door. 'Get into the airlock.'

'What if I refuse?'

'Then I shall be forced to let the others do horrible things to your sister. I don't think either of you would like that.'

Cassi stubbornly stared back at him. If she was alone, she would have rushed him - done anything. But for Lyn's sake, she must do as she was told even though it meant dying in the most horrible manner imaginable.

Andy waved his gun towards the airlock. 'Get in.'

Cassi stepped inside and stood alone in the middle of that vast, empty chamber. Nothing but a single door stood between her and a total vacuum. Andy closed the inner door while Cassi stared out of the tiny porthole at the alien landscape outside. This was the end.

'Not afraid?' came his voice over the intercom. 'You ought to be. One touch of the button and you are all over the walls of the airlock.'

She turned. 'I'm not afraid of you nor anyone else.'

'Not afraid of death?'

'Not even death. I have faced death many times before.'

'Then how about pain? At maximum evacuation, this chamber can be depressurised in less than half a minute. Alternatively, I can slow it down.' He touched a switch on the wall. 'There. Now it will take several minutes.'

'You are an animal,' she said without emotion.

'Maybe so. But I shall remember the next few minutes for the rest of my life as you are very slowly shredded into tiny pieces.'

'You won't get away with this.'

He laughed. 'That's what they used to say in all the best-selling books and movies. However, this is not a story and there is no Lone Ranger to come along and rescue you. You are alone in a sealed chamber which is shortly to become your tomb.'

Cassi didn't reply but stood with her arms wrapped around herself. She was not afraid, merely disappointed as she had been when abandoned in space. That had been Andy's doing, too.

'You'd better get on with it then,' she said without looking at him.

'Eager to die? Very well.' He reached out his finger towards the panel. 'Goodbye, Cassi. Pleasant screams.'

PILOT Officer Andrew Cameron grinned wickedly as he punched at the evacuation button and the slight hiss from the vent indicated the pumps had started to draw the air out of the chamber. He watched through the porthole as Cassi began to struggle for breath and slowly drop to her knees. Just one minute more. Something cold and hard touched the back of his neck.

'Turn it off,' said the voice.

Andy just stood there, his mouth open. The pressure on the top of his spine increased. 'Do it.'

Reluctantly, he pressed the button to re-pressurise the airlock and then slowly turned his head.

'Drop the gun,' said Tara, the blaster from the Titan Shuttle still pointed at his face.

His gloved fingers opened and the weapon fell to the ground. The pumps stopped.

'Open the airlock, mister.'

He did and Cassi almost fell into the office, her face tinged blue with oxygen starvation.

'Are you all right, Cassi?'

The younger girl nodded, still struggling for breath as she sat down at the desk.

'When you feel better, put your space-suit on.'

'Tara...,' began the younger girl.

'No time to talk,' said Tara as she waved the shuttle's blaster to encourage Andy to move away from the airlock. 'I couldn't just sit in the shuttle and wait. I had to do something.'

'The Seed...?'

'Safe, in this office. Now then, feller. It's your turn to think seriously about death.'

'Get lost,' he sniggered. 'My friends are outside. Pull that trigger and you'll not get away alive.'

'I don't think they will know. Sound doesn't carry through a vacuum. Did no-one tell you that?'

For the first time, Andy began to look apprehensive. 'What are you going to

do?'

'Do?' Tara snarled, her face a mask of hate. 'What do you think?'

'Tara...' started Cassi.

'Keep out of this, Cassi. This animal doesn't deserve to live.'

'You...you're going to kill me?' said Andy.

She pushed the barrel under his nose and took off the safety catch. 'You and your friends killed my baby.'

'Please don't,' muttered Andy.

Cassi started to get to her feet as she saw another danger. 'Tara. Don't pull that trigger.'

'Why not? These things are only effective at short range - I know that.' She looked him straight in the eyes. 'But I don't want you hurt, feller, I want you dead.'

'Wait...I...I...'

'Tara, don't...'

She smiled at him. 'You killed my baby.'

Cassi instinctively ducked at the sound of the explosion. Andy's head snapped back, his face no longer recognisable, as she reached out to grab Tara's suited figure. She was too late. Newton's laws were proven once more as the force not only spun Andy's body around but also smashed Tara up against the wall with a force that almost shook the room.

'Tara,' she called as the Earth woman slowly slid down the wall, leaving a smear of blood on the insulation board.

Cassi dropped to the floor beside her and lifted her head. 'Steady. You're hurt bad.'

Tara shook her head painfully. 'I'm dead.'

'I'll get help.'

'No,' said Tara. 'Go and save Lyn.'

Cassi held on to Tara's head as she fought the pain. Glancing across the room, she saw that Andy was also beyond help. Perhaps it was better this way. Gradually, she felt the girl relax in her arms and it was over.

Carefully, Cassi laid Tara's head onto the floor and slowly got to her feet. 'Tara, my friend. I'll never forget you.'

With urgency, she climbed into her space suit, clipped on her helmet and stepped into the airlock. She picked up Andy's gun from where he had dropped it but then put it down again. She couldn't kill. Instead, she closed the inner door and pressed the button to evacuate the air pressure. The outer door to the airlock of the Titan Shuttle seemed to grow bigger as she walked across the intervening distance, wondering how it was that she was going to get Lyniera out from their evil clutches. It was as she placed her hand on the rail beside the door and swung it open that she remembered. Going towards the back, she lifted a small sprung flap, put her hand inside and pulled. She leant on the superstructure. 'Alec, can you hear me?'

No response, so she switched channels. 'Alec, can you hear me?'

Still nothing.

Change again. 'Alec, can you hear me?'

There was a buzzing in her helmet and then, 'What do you want? Where's Andy?'

'He's dead.' There was no other way to put it.

'Dead?'

'Yes. You know - deceased, not alive, blown away.'

'What do you want?'

'I want my sister out of there in one piece.'

'You've got to be joking, kid. She's our insurance for getting out of here.'

Cassi held up the vertical drive relay. 'You ain't going nowhere.'

'What do you mean?'

'Try the motor.'

He presumably did but nothing happened. 'I'll teach you to mess about with us.'

'How are you going to get out?'

'What do you mean?'

'The outer door is open and it's staying that way until I have your word to release my sister.'

'The General will be here soon. He'll let us out.'

'Will he? Remember what Andy said. It's possible he wants us all dead, you

included. No witnesses, remember?'

There was silence for some time while she presumed they conferred.

'How are we going to do it?'

'I'll close the door. You let Lyn go and I'll replace the relay so you can leave.'

'No, I don't trust you. You put the relay in first then we'll let your sister go.'

It was stalemate. Neither side trusted the other and for good reason.

Cassi's brain raced until she heard Lyn's voice over the radio. 'Cassi, they're hurting me.'

'Very well,' said Cassi. 'Get my sister into the airlock with a suit on. When I see she's safe, I'll replace the relay.'

'Okay,' came the eventual reply.

Cassi side-stepped, slammed the airlock shut and waited. Suppose it wasn't Lyn who came out but one of the men? She would be killed, they would replace the relay and roar off with Lyn. She shuddered at the thought of what those two might do to her sister before throwing her into space somewhere. They certainly could not afford to take her back to Earth. The red light came on and she saw the suited figure in the airlock.

'Is that you, Lyn?'

The figure nodded so Cassi went to the panel and held the relay over the socket. What if it was a trick? What if they didn't let her go? What if they fired the motor straight away and she was burnt to a cinder by the hot blast of the engines. She suddenly had an idea and, as a precaution, she uncoiled her emergency safety line, clipped it around the wiring of the relay and stood back.

'Relay's ready,' she said. 'Now let Lyn go.'

Would they do it? The green light turned red and the airlock door started to open. Just as Lyniera stepped onto the threshold, the motor fired. Cassi hurled herself backwards away from a fiery death and fell to the ground.

'Jump!' she shouted to her sister as the shuttle rapidly began to rise into the air.

Lyniera hesitated for a second and then leapt out into space and, as if in slow motion, fell to the rocky ground.

'Goodbye, girls,' came the sadistic voice over the radio as the shuttle began to edge sideways towards them - its main drive vapourising all in its path and raising clouds of lunar dust.

Cassi ran to where her sister had fallen and roughly dragged her to her feet. 'Are you all right?'

Lyniera nodded feebly. 'Just winded from falling awkwardly. This lunar gravity takes some getting used to.'

'Run,' Cassi said as she glanced over her shoulder at the approaching death by fire. 'They're trying to burn us up with the main engines.'

The shuttle turned at a height of five metres and roared towards them - all the more eerie because of the lack of sound. At the last moment, they dived behind some rocks and the shuttle hovered like a preying vulture and began to descend towards them. They were trapped. Cassi could feel the heat from the engines through her insulated suit as she searched for a way out. At the last possible minute, she pushed Lyn to one side and jumped herself as she did, something snagged her ankle and she fell over and over amid a sea of dust and fire. Suddenly, it stopped as the engines died. For a second, the shuttle seemed to hang motionless in the sky, the blue glow of earth reflecting from its metalwork, before falling rapidly, hitting the ground with an impact that made the ground shake.

'Lyn!' Cassi called. 'Where are you?'

'I'm all right,' came the reply as the dust began to settle. 'I jumped clear. What happened?'

Cassi held up the end of her safety line that was still attached to the vertical drive relay. 'I'm afraid it was my fault.'

IT was impossible to tell whether the men had survived the fall. The hull looked intact though the engine and airlock were badly damaged. There was no response from the radio.

'I've killed them,' said Cassi sadly.

'They deserved it,' replied her sister.

Cassi turned on her. 'But don't you understand? They're dead and it's all my fault for clipping on that safety line.'

'It saved my life,' reminded Lyniera and Cassi said no more as she looked at the smashed shuttle. The ground began to vibrate slightly and she stood up. 'What's that?'

Cassi looked up. 'It's the General's shuttle.'

Lyniera grabbed her arm and tried to drag her away from the scene. 'Come on, we've got to get back to the mine.'

Cassi stood, still looking at the wreck.

'Now, Cassi. Don't let them catch us.'

As if in a dream, Cassi allowed her sister to pull her to the door to the mine complex and they entered the airlock. The door closed and the airlock pressurised as the Earth shuttle landed and the two girls watched out of the re-inforced viewing aperture at the dust which began to settle around the sleek craft.

'Do we hide in the mines again?' asked Lyniera.

Cassi removed her helmet and shook her head. 'There's no point. He will have brought plenty of men with him this time and we'd have no chance.'

Lyniera grabbed her by the shoulders. 'You're just going to sit here and wait for them?'

Cassi nodded. 'I've had enough of this running and hiding and killing. It Earth doesn't want the Andromeda Seed then the two of us might as well die, too. There's nowhere for us to go.'

Lyniera started to argue but then decided against it. She glanced at Tara and Andy and finally sat down and took off her helmet. The two girls looked on as the hatch in the side of the General's private shuttle opened and two men climbed out and began to walk towards them.

'Can't we open the inner door and prevent them entering?'

'Yes, but we're only delaying the inevitable. The fact that the General is here, now, proves that Mike and Steve were unable to get any support for us from Earth.'

Lyniera indicated the insulated container. 'Then the Andromeda Seed is doomed?'

Cassi nodded as the red light came on. 'The Andromeda Seed is doomed.'

Hand in hand, they sat together beside their unfertilised race as the red light turned green and the airlock slowly opened. Both men had blasters in their hands as they stepped forward and looked carefully around the mining office, suspicious of the fact that only the two girls were waiting. One stepped towards Andy's body and then indicated Tara. His companion looked at the woman and shook his head.

'Are you going to kill us now?' Cassi shouted.

The helmeted figures looked at each other before putting away their blasters. Together, they removed their helmets.

Cassi's heart stopped. 'Mike!'

The Marshal grinned as his wife launched herself at him, almost knocking them both over due to the low gravity.

Lyniera stood in front of the smiling Steve Carter before stepping towards him.

'Thank you,' she said eventually, their eyes and hands locked together.

He smiled. 'It's over.'

'No,' said Lyniera as she moved closer. 'This is just the beginning.'

ΕΠΙΛΟΓΥΕ

Jim Duncan stood up as his daughters entered the Control Office of the Orion Space Station. For a long time, he stared at them and then held out his arms. 'I thought I'd never see you again.'

'We had to come back, father,' said Lyniera as both girls hugged him.

'Because we knew you would worry.'

The Commander looked over their heads. 'I suppose I have you and Mike to thank for saving them.'

Steve shrugged. 'It was the least we could do.'

Cassi turned and looked at her husband to whom she had hung on tightly all the way from Luna. 'You took a great risk coming up here. Jon said it could kill you to be in space again.'

'It's not the space that's dangerous,' replied the Marshal. 'Merely the lift-off from Earth and I have to admit it was pretty uncomfortable. However, Steve is a careful pilot, especially when he's pinched General Phillips' private shuttle.'

Cassi grinned. 'I'll bet the General is hopping mad.'

'He is,' agreed Steve. 'Screaming blue murder at all and sundry. None of us will be very welcome when we return to Earth.'

'He'll get away with all this, then?' said Lyniera.

Mike nodded. 'I'm afraid it looks like it, at least for the time being. He is a very powerful man and even Uncle Alan has great difficulty restraining him, especially when public opinion is behind him.'

'You mean...?'

He nodded again. 'The plan to use the Andromeda Seed has been suspended indefinitely.'

'Then Tara died in vain,' said Cassi sadly. 'This has all been for nothing.'

'Not necessarily,' said Jim with a gleam in his eye. 'One good thing has come out of it.'

'What, father?'

'Admiral Burleigh was persuaded to resign this morning. Orion has a new Base Minister.'

Cassi looked around the sea of faces. 'New Base Minister?'

Mike nodded. 'Allow me to introduce Admiral James Duncan, Space Fleet Commander-in-Chief.'

'But the Wayfarer programme...'

'...also has a new Commander. Wayfarer Two will be in dock for some time while they repair the hull and other damage but, in the meantime, Wayfarer One will have a new captain.'

Lyniera looked up at Jim. 'Who will take over your ship, father?'

'The best Cruiser Captain in the galaxy - Commander Stephen Carter.'

She glanced at Steve and smiled. 'What is the next mission?'

'Iris has received a mysterious input via SID.'

Lyniera looked puzzled. 'But both Wayfarer ships are here. Who could there be who is able to send a message to Iris via SID?'

'It could have come from only one place,' said Cassi. 'Only one place in the whole wide universe.'

Jim nodded. 'We thought everyone had died. Somehow, someone has survived. The next Wayfarer mission will be to investigate the source of the signal.'

'So,' said Cassi quietly. 'Return to Andromeda.'

'Exactly. I am rather sad not to be going but I am getting old now. The Proton Drive in Wayfarer One is currently being uprated with another little device invented by Doctor Bartek which will treble the present maximum speed. Instead of taking thirty years it will cover the distance in less than ten.'

'That's still a long time,' said Mike.

Jim smiled. 'It is. However, special suspended-animation units are also being installed for you all. Once free of the Solar System, you will sleep until you encounter the Andromeda Spiral. When you get there, you will have barely aged at all.'

'It will be an honour to undertake such a mission,' said Steve proudly.

'I should hope so, too,' said Jim with a smile. 'However, you will need a crew and, as the new Admiral, I have just declared lawful the ancient custom of press-ganging.'

'Press-ganging?' said Cassi.

'It was an old European tradition,' explained Mike. 'The Captain of a ship had the liberty to choose and commandeer his own crew.'

'That's right,' said Steve as he walked around the room, surveying the available manpower, with his hands behind his back like a good Commander should. He stopped in front of the Marshal. 'Earth re-entry would probably kill you, Mike. I'll need a good second-in-command.'

Mike smiled. 'You've got one.'

Steve looked down at the young woman in his arms. 'Where I am going, I will need nothing but the very best Navigation Officer.'

Cassi grinned and made a mock salute. 'I am at your disposal, Commander Carter.'

He stared at her for a long time before leaning forward and kissing her cheek. 'Thank you, Cassi.'

Cassi blushed. 'It was a pleasure.'

Bob Walker cleared his throat. 'You will be needing an engineer, sir.'

'And an astro-biologist,' added the now-recovered Juanita Carrero who was holding his hand.

'There is one other member who cannot be left out,' said Cassi as the door opened to allow a child to enter and take her father's hand. 'She may be only seven years old but she cooks a mean omelette.'

Steve frowned as he paced up and down. 'So, let me get this straight. I've got Number One, a Navigation Officer, an Engineer, a biologist and a cook. What else do I need?'

'You'll need a pilot,' said Jim.

Commander Carter stopped in front of the girl with the golden hair. 'You're right, Admiral. The only thing I am short of now is a pilot-cum-girl-Friday-cum-computer-expert-cum-wife. Now I wonder where I might find someone like that.'

Lyniera raised one eyebrow. 'I couldn't begin to guess.'

Other Books by the author:

Queen of the Persians

Albion Gold

The Curse of King Arthur's Brood

The Revenge of King Arthur's Brood

The Return of King Arthur's Brood

Plot

Plot to War

Plot for a King

The DeBosvile Chronicles

Mountain of Blood

Requiem for a Princess

Checkmate for Princess

Aftermath of a Princess

Escape Unto Death

The Andromeda Burn
Return to Andromeda
The Andromeda Trial

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Venus and her Men
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Granton
Murder Most 'Orrid
Northern Murders and Manslaughters
Cumbrian Characters