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Other books by this author

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A Guide to Climate Change Lunacy (Connor Court, 2010)

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Dedicated to Charles, in memory of the discussions on terra forming we have had over the years, and in the hope that he finally finished his doctorate.

The Zards professed peace but attacked and defeated Earth's navy at the star system known as Crossroads, and claimed the human planet as their own. Those humans not enslaved were forced into a secondary site known as Earth Station, or into mining stations along the galactic arm originally built to house just a few miners.

## CHAPTER ONE

A blast of chilled air startled Suzanne out of the doze she had fallen into during her long wait, huddled in one corner of the bar on Lucifer III. A tall, broad-shouldered man in an old naval engineering officer's great coat stripped of any insignias, opened the bar hatch – they were hatches not doors, as Suzanne had discovered – letting in the frigid air. He stood before the bar, hands deep in the pockets of his coat, evidently in a foul mood.

“It's freezing outside Matt,” he snapped to the bar tender. “Can't they keep the dome heated?”

“Saving energy, Rods,” said Matt, and Suzanne knew that the bad-tempered stranger was the person she had travelled three weeks to see. “We need another generating unit on our grid, we need everything.”

Rods grunted, said “beer” and slumped into a stool at the opposite end of the tiny bar from Suzanne, not even looking at her although, except for Matt and an older man nursing a drink along the back wall, she was the only other person in the establishment. Both Matt and the man at the back watched with interest as Suzanne levered herself off her stool and approached the trader.

“Excuse me Rods, is it?” she said as Matt, a beefy, balding man who had previously declared himself to be a friend of Rods, slammed a glass in front of the trader and squirted some beer into with a bar gun.

“Uh,” said Rods without turning around.

“My sister was on the Dawn Treader.”

Rods finally looked around. Suzanne saw steady, grey eyes set in an unshaven face of regular features marred by a long scar that ran from beside the right eye down his cheek. For his part, Rods saw a girl with green eyes, slim build, fine features and short brown hair, but in his recent, bitter experience, good looking girls in bars meant trouble, and he was in no mood for trouble.

“Sorry for your loss,” he said, and turned back to his beer.

“You were in charge of the search for the Dawn?”

“In charge of’ sounds official,” said the trader without looking around. “I coordinated the search with two others and the heads of settlements. No luck, and it’s been six months. As I said, sorry for your loss. Now, pardon me, but I’ve some serious brooding to do.”

During her long wait, Suzanne had been encouraged by Matt and Matt’s wife Emma who had stood in at the bar for a time, to approach Rods and to plough on regardless of her initial reception. He was, she had been told, a difficult study, but fine once you got past the gruffness.

“I sent you this.” Suzanne opened up the screen of her digital assistant and laid it on the bar beside the trader, who glanced sideways at it.

“You were the one who sent those notes?”

“In here is where the Dawn Treader went.”

Matt leaned forward for a better look; the older man who had been there when Rods arrived abandoned his pretense of not listening to the conversation to sidle up to the bar and peer at the screen.

They read:

‘Replicant quoting Blake plus Tiger – 136746622211131’.

“I see you’ve attracted an audience,” said Rods, finally turning on his stool.

“Those cryptic notes don’t add up to star catalogue numbers. We tried a cryptographic analysis on those numbers and came up with nothing, Ma’m..”

“Suzanne.”

“Suzanne. This must’ve cost you a tidy sum to send over the squeezed light link, but it makes as much sense here as in Earth Station. You’ve come from Earth Station, right?”

Suzanne nodded.

“So, you came up three weeks by freighter just to point out these notes again?”

“Eve, my sister, said everyone had been sworn to secrecy, but the captain had told her more than the others and I wasn’t to write it down or tell anyone. She said they knew where El Dorado was.”

Matt and the older man looked startled, Rods looked bored.

“El Dorado, really?” he said.

“Yes, the legendary city of gold.”

“I know what El Dorado was supposed to mean way back on Earth,” snapped Rods, “but it has a local meaning – a planet where you can walk on the surface.”

“And Eve said her group knew where it was.”

“How did her group find it and why did they tell her? While we’re on the subject, where is it?”

“The people who got her to come said they’d found the site in old records. Both humans and Zards had been there but no Zards now as it’s too far out and they have Earth now...”

“Yes, they have earth,” interjected Matt, and we’ve got nothing.”

“...They needed someone with medical training, and they had trouble because they wanted to keep it secret. They told Eve to get her and her partner to come along, on condition that she didn’t tell anyone else, but she left this.”

“Clues her own sister doesn’t understand,” said Rods.

“I thought it must mean something,” Suzanne said, faltering. Suzanne had come a long way convinced that she held the key to her sister’s disappearance, if only she could get those looking for Eve’s group to pay attention. She had thought there would be some form of government and the search would be in the hands of officials. Instead she had found a lone trader who had given up.

“I looked at these clues every which way I could think of,” said Rods. “I found the replicant poem thing.”

“Replicant poem thing?” Suzanne had been baffled by that reference.

“Sure, in a film a made a very long time ago a sort-of bio soldier called a replicant who’s turned killer walks into an eye shop, where this guy makes eyes for these replicants and quotes Blake.”

Who’s Blake?” asked Matt.

“Late 18<sup>th</sup> century English poet,” said Rods, before Suzanne could speak. “Here – these are the lines.” He fiddled with his own digital assistant and showed the screen to Suzanne.

She read:

*Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll’d  
Around their shores indignant burning with the fires of Orc  
And Bostons Angel cried aloud as they flew thro’ the dark night.*

“It’s from ‘America A Prophecy’, – load of total drivel as far as I’m concerned, but I’m an engineer so what do I know. I preferred Blake’s poem ‘The Tiger’ better.

“Is it a famous poem?” asked the older man.

“Everyone knows the first line, Geoff” said Rods, “and that’s all I can remember ‘Tiger, tiger burning bright’”.

“In the forests of the night,” continued Suzanne,

“What immortal hand or eye  
Could frame thy fearful symmetry?”

They all looked at her.

“I teach English,” she said lamely.

“Right, now the English lesson is over”, said Rods, “we need a seven-digit catalogue number or local name, otherwise the lost expedition is going to stay lost. Last they were heard of they were heading towards Bell’s Curve.”

“Bell’s Curve has planets,” said Matt.

“A planet,” said Rods, “and it’s a gas giant; no good at all for human settlement. The captain, Rob, said he was heading towards that system but wouldn’t say anything else. Probably misdirection now that I think of it.”

“You met them?”

“Some of ‘em came here for a drink, when I was here.”

“Right in this bar,” commented Matt.

“Sorry I don’t remember your sister,” said Rods, “it was only a few of them and there were more than 50, right?”

“Fifty-three.”

“They had food for three months and it’s been more than six, not to mention problems with water and oxygen giving out. Recycling systems can need serious love to keep going.”

“But if they did find this El Dorado,” said Suzanne uncertainly, “and there was some life, then they could have foraged, they could have survived longer...”

“Oh sure, anything’s possible I suppose,” said Rods. “I could become a big time trader, defeat the Zards single handed and win the girl of my dreams. That’s also possible. Wherever these guys are they don’t have comms up as we’ve scanned the likely systems around Bell’s Curve, and we don’t have the equipment to check for stuff like small domes that might be inhabited. There’s certainly no planet with an atmosphere.”

Suzanne had no reply. She had counted on meeting Rods and was now left with nothing. She found herself blinking back tears.

Rods pushed his beer away in irritation and stood up.

“So much for brooding. No one wants to find El Dorado more than me, but we’re at a dead end. Sorry about your sister.” He turned to go.

“Rods, wait,” said Matt. “Suzanne here’s got nowhere to go – she’s been sitting at my bar for 12 hours with just some of my snacks. Why not hire her as your cruise director?” Matt and Emma, who had taken a shine to Suzanne during her long wait, had both said that they would ask Rods to do this, or at least ask him to take her on board, as one way out of the bar.

“You’re joking, right? I am not in the mood for a new cruise director, and Suzanne here teaches English – no offence.”

“None taken,” said Suzanne, blessing Matt.

“When have qualifications been important for your cruise director?” said Matt. “You get your cruise directors from Stacey’s, mostly, an’ then they try to jack the ship.”

“Must you remind me,” growled Rods.

“Hey, Suzanne here is a sensible girl,” said Matt.

“Very sensible.” Suzanne thought she should say something at this job interview.

“She’s in a different league from your other cruise directors and, you know, she’ll add class to your operations.”

“Now I need a marketing presence? I’m turning customers away.”

“Not exactly that,” said Matt, “but your other cruise directors didn’t really reflect well on the ship; use to get up to all sorts of stuff, you know. People look up to you, but you need someone who’s not crazy or dealing on the side to front for you.”

“Dealing on the side? I don’t think I want to know about this.”

“Hey, I’m just saying. Suzanne here is respectable; English teacher, out here because her sister was in the Dawn Treader, mum’s a school principal, dad in navy.”

Rods turned to Suzanne.

“Your dad was in the navy?”

She nodded. “And you must’ve been a naval engineer.”

“How do you know that?” There was sharp edge of suspicion in Rods voice.

“You’re wearing an engineer’s coat without the insignias.”

Rod looked down. “Hmm. What’s your last name?”

“Clark. Dad made captain just before Crossroads.”

“You lost him at Crossroads?”

“And some of my friends.”

The Earth’s navy, painfully rebuilt following an earlier defeat, had been wiped out at the Crossroads system after agreeing to a cease fire. The crews of the few ships that surrendered were executed by the Zards.

“Sorry about your dad, too.”

“We weren’t the only ones affected.”

“Take Suzanne,” said Matt. “She’s lost her dad, let her look for her sister and deal with the passengers. She won’t play them.”

Rods looked at Matt and then at Suzanne, who tried to look sensible.

“Do you know anything about star ships?”

“I recognized an engineer’s coat when I saw one, didn’t I, and I just spent three weeks in a star ship.”

“And she’s been nowhere near Stacey’s,” said Matt.

Rods glared at Matt then at Suzanne. “I’m in no mood for this.” He muttered to himself. “Voluntary basis,” he said to Suzanne. “You can tag along but the work of the ship comes first, before looking for your sister.”

“Okay,” said Suzanne meekly.

“That your stuff?” he said, pointing to Suzanne’s bag on the floor. “Give it to Igor outside.”

He turned to go, but Matt grabbed his arm and whispered to him.

“What?” said Rods, then “How much? Oh, take it off the amount you owe.”

He stalked out of the bar, letting in another blast of chill air.

Suzanne picked up her bag.

“Thanks for all that,” she said to Matt. “I can’t thank you enough, and Emma. I hope to see you both again, soon.”

“You will. The Maxwell, that’s Rods’ ship, comes here often.”

There was another, delicate question. “About the bar tab..”

“Never mind about that now, just go.”

“Oh, okay, but just one question, what is Stacey’s?”

“Um, well, it’s an establishment for men. Those two girls you spoke to who were in here. They didn’t say they were from Stacey’s?”

“Oh,” said Suzanne, then “OH!” as the full implications struck her.

“You’ll be fine,” said Matt, “just go quickly, Rods can be impatient. We’ll talk later.”

Bag in hand, Suzanne dashed out of the bar.



## CHAPTER TWO

The cold air of the dome hit Suzanne as she emerged from the bar into one of the narrow, enclosed alleys that served as streets in that colony. Rods was waiting for her, hands thrust deep in his coat pockets.

“‘bout time you came.”

“Sorry. I just had a last word to Matt. Said I didn’t have to worry about the bar bill. That was nice of him.” Suzanne smiled, thinking that she had found common ground with Rods in praising Matt.

“Nice, porcine rear end,” was Rods’ bitter response. “He stuck me with your tab. No wonder he was so keen for me to take you on.”

“Oh!” was all Suzanne could think to say.

“Give your bag to Igor,” he said, jerking his thumb at a short, stocky figure that Suzanne now realized had been standing by the door. The figure was dressed improbably in a trench coat that reached almost to the ground and a hat that gave it a

passing resemblance to an actor in an old film about detectives. "Igor, this is our new cruise director."

"Another cruise director?"

"Don't you start."

The figure turned towards Suzanne, raising one arm to take her bag. The newly appointed cruise director opened her mouth to give a cherry greeting to this new person but stopped when she realized that Igor was a robot. Its face was a metal mask with two big lenses for eyes, and a speaker for a mouth. The hand which took her bag with ease had three fingers and a thumb, covered by a glove. She had dealt with machines all her life, as everyone had, but had never met an autonomous robot before. There were so many people on Earth Station that there had been no need of them.

"Hello Igor." It seemed the only thing to say.

"Hello cruise director," said Igor formally, in a youngish male voice. "I am Igor - Integrated Ground Operating Robot. I go behind Rods in this dome. Other places I go in front."

"Oh that's... nice." Again, it was all Suzanne could think of to say.

"Stop gabbing you two and come."

Rods stalked off down the alley.

Suzanne was very tired, extremely hungry and quite curious about what she was meant to do as cruise director. But for now, all she could do was follow Rods, walking besides Igor as Rods did not seem to want company.

"Is it far to the ship?" she asked Igor.

"Not far. At the port."

"It is cold."

"Yes, cold."

The robot was not a sparkling conversationalist, but Suzanne thought that Rods' conversation would be no better. They walked down the alley into the slightly wider alley that served as the main thoroughfare. She thrust her hands deep into her pockets and shivered. On one corner, underneath the 'to spaceport' sign was tall, bearded man who smiled nastily at them.

"Druggie!" he said. "Hey, druggie."

Rods stiffened, then shock his head slightly and moved on. The bearded man, who was taller, wider and grimmer looking than Suzanne's new employer, stepped in front of Rods.

"Ben, are we really going to do this again?" said Rods. "You know what happened last time."

"Druggie! So where are your drugs, eh?"

Suzanne noted with alarm that there were two more, rough looking men behind the tall man. One was carrying a short club that looked like the leg of a stool. The other was eyeing her. Rods noticed them too.

"Igor front," he said, without turning around, "face the two men there". The trader pointed. Igor dropped Suzanne's bag and edged around the tall man, who eyed the robot curiously, to square up to the other two men. They also did not know quite

what to make of Igor but the club man taped his weapon on his open hand meaningfully.

“So, what’s this about, Ben?” said Rods to the bearded man. “You planning on getting lucky this time?”

“Any time druggie,” said the big man, and he lashed out at Rods. Suzanne barely saw the motion, but Rods moved his head slightly and Ben’s fist struck air. At the same time the two men in front of Igor lunged, intending to brush the robot to one side. The first man smashed his improvised club on Igor’s hat with an audible clunk, but the robot’s only response was to clamp his hand around his assailant’s wrist and keep it there. The other man tried to shove past the robot but Igor grabbed his wrist as well and held on despite desperate pulling and shoving, causing the robot’s servo-motors to whine audible. A rain of blows from the club, had no noticeable effect.

While Igor was delaying the support squad, Ben tried two more swings, which also hit air. Rods conceded a little ground, leading Ben on, and then hit him twice on the jaw making him stagger. The trader jumped forward, drove another blow home just above the heart, and another on the jaw. His opponent keeled over. Rods caught him before his head hit the alley-way’s concrete floor then lowered him, none too gently, the rest of the way. He stepped over Ben and pulled up the big man’s jacket and shirt.

“Hey, what?” said Ben groggily. He tried to push Rods away. The trader thumped him hard on the side of the head and then tore a square piece of metal from the man’s clothing.

“Plate steel,” said Rods stepping away and rapping the piece of metal. “I thought your stomach looked weird - and you were really confident. A steel plate right where I belted you last time. You were hoping I’d break my hand.” Rods waved the plate in front of Ben who was in no condition to listen. “It’s not that easy, my friend.”

The other two men had stopped struggling after their champion had gone down.

“Igor, release them. Behind me.”

The stocky robot obligingly walked away, while his opponents glared uncertainly at Rods, to pick up Suzanne’s bag and stand by her again.

“Are you alright?” asked Suzanne.

The robot looked up at her – he was a little shorter than the new cruise director – and his face might have registered surprise if it had been capable of displaying emotion.

“Fine,” he said.

“Were you hurt when they hit you?”

“No... armoured.”

Another man arrived from behind Ben’s two assistants. He was thickset, his balding head hidden under a peaked cap and he carried a badge prominently on the vest pocket of his coat. The club man hurriedly dropped his weapon.

“Stan!” said Rods. “My friends and I were just having some fun.”

“So, I see,” said the newcomer. “Geoff, pick up that whatever it is and toss it over here.”

Geoff picked up the club he had just dropped without comment and tossed to the lawman, who put it against the side of the wall at an angle and stomped on it, smashing it in two. He threw the pieces back.

"You know the rules," he told Geoff. "Lucky for you I can't be bothered with any paperwork tonight. Now what about Ben there? It's too cold for a nap."

"We were having a friendly tussle."

"Is he still breathing?"

"Yep."

"Shame! You two," said Stan to the two men who were sidling away, "take Ben back to his cubicle".

"Bane of my life, that man," muttered Stan, as Ben was dragged past, having recovered enough to glare at the trader and police officer. "What's that bit of metal, you've got?" He nodded at the plate Rods had taken from Ben.

"Just something for repairs to Igor."

"And you're carrying it here?"

"I get enthusiastic," said Rods handing the plate to Igor who put it in a pouch concealed in his trench coat. "What brings you down here, anyway? You hear Ben was prowling around?"

"It wasn't that. I got a complaint about a young woman stealing a coat from a remainder bin."

Both men turned to look at Suzanne who was doing her best to hide behind Igor.

"The missing coat is black, I am told. The same color as the coat worn by that young lady."

Rods sighed. "My new cruise director."

"Another cruise director?"

"Everyone's a critic. Matt forced her on me. Her sister was in the Dawn Treader. She teaches English. Her mum was a high school principal; dad a captain in the navy. He says I need to go respectable."

"That's right, he asked me about it, and I agreed." Stan jabbed his index finger at Rods. "I also come down to tell you the same thing. You and The Max are key here; vital even, and times are hard. A few of the traders asked me to speak to you about Sylvia."

"A few?"

"Well, all of them. Time to stop recruiting from Stacey's, and keep your hands off the cruise directors. Matt said this girl, the one behind Igor I take it, has personality."

"So much so that he stuck me with her bar bill."

"See, she's already helping trade here. Now if we can work out this problem of the coat."

They both looked at Suzanne who was trying to pretend she wasn't there, and that she wasn't freezing.

Rod sighed. "All of them?"

"Had a meeting. Everyone was happy to hear that she'd fallen from favor. She is somewhere far away from here?"

"Mining colony; Ozarks III."

“She might’ve preferred my jail. She had confederates?”

“Maybe she did, but I wouldn’t concern yourself over the details.”

“Uh huh. A lot of police work is details. Are those details going to be a problem in the future?”

“Doubt it. They’ve moved on a long way, as I understand it.”

“Not sure I want to know any more.”

“I wasn’t planning on saying anything more.”

“Whatever – now the coat.”

“The traders had a meeting about Sylvia?”

“Everyone complained.”

Rods sighed again. “Tell ‘em I’ll stick with Suzanne - that’s her name. Whose coat is it?”

“Jenny’s.”

“Jenny! She owes me money. Tell her to take the cost of the jacket off the amount owed and we’ll settle up next time around. Once she hears that she’ll shut up.”

Stan shrugged. “Problem solved. You leaving now? With Sylvia out of the way Caitlin will want you for dinner. The invitation would extend to Suzanne.”

“I’m in no mood to be told anything more about Sylvia. Next time round, I’ll be happy to. But that reminds me.” He took a small parcel out of his greatcoat pocket. “I was going to leave this at the port office for you and Caitlin. It’s medicine for William’s skin.”

Stan ripped open the package, read the box’s label and nodded.

“How much do we owe you?”

“Invoice is in the package. I talked them down to a 10 per cent mark up.”

“Stars!” said Stan after seeing the amount. “We don’t have this just now.”

“Let’s sort it out when I swing by again; there may be a discount for dinner. May not be for more than a week.”

“Done.”

Stan walked up to an apprehensive-looking Suzanne, and touched his cap.

“Congratulations on your new job, Madam.” Suzanne’s apprehensive look turned into a sweet smile. “I’m Stan Williams, colony police officer. If you do have any trouble with Rods,” he said loudly, “you can come to me”.

“Oh great,” muttered Rods.

“Thank you,” said Suzanne then scuttled after Rods who had stalked off. “Nice to meet you.”

Officer Stan waved.

Suzanne’s first impression of the James Clerk Maxwell was of the space ship’s size. She had been travelling in star ships for weeks, but had been literally herded onto each vessel then held in cramped quarters, forbidden to go beyond a set area. She had never seen the outside of the ships. But the docking airlock which connected to the Maxwell was partly transparent. She could see she was to be a cruise director, whatever

that might mean, of a grey ship that was three storeys tall and maybe 150 meters long. She craned her head to try to read the markings on the side.

Rods gave her no time to take in the sights. He punched in a key code, took a retinal scan and led them into a narrow airlock.

“Incoming Max,” Rods called out. “A new cruise director.”

“So soon!” The voice of a female.

“Will everyone stop commenting. Her name is Suzanne Clark. We’ll clear her, then you can brief her on her duties.”

“Very well.”

“Was that the ship AI?” asked Suzanne.

“This ship is the James Clerk Maxwell – scientist who first wrote out the equations for electromagnetic waves - so the AI is Max. Now..” He unhooked a folding table from the bulkhead and banged it down in front of Suzanne so hard that she jumped, then pulled a screen on an extendable arm out of the bulkhead. “One of the main concerns of my life is people trying to jack the ship.”

“You mean pirate the ship?”

“We say jacking and I’m not just crazy about the issue I’m full-blown paranoid and I’m in a bad mood, and the last person to try jacking the ship was your predecessor. You’re coming through the crew quarters so that means a full security check. Your pack; let’s see it. Dump it on the table. Also, your shoes, and socks. And I want to be able to see your hands at all times.”

Suzanne complied. Rods spread her meagre possessions on the table, ran a hand scanner over them, then scanned the heels of the shoes. She handed over her jacket – at least it was warmer in the airlock - and Rods checked the pockets, then scanned it.

“Thirty credits!” said Rods, finding a price tag. “I had to buy this so that Stan wouldn’t haul you off to his cell.”

“You were talking about the jacket. I was freezing and I thought it had been dumped. It was just on this pile.”

“That’s Jenny’s shop. Piles of stuff. It came off what she owes me, but you could have shop lifted something cheaper.”

Rods scowl made Suzanne think better of smiling.

Rods checked the screen which, Suzanne later found out, showed the view from a whole-person scanner. “Okay, the rest. Pants, top and underwear on the counter.”

“What?”

“You heard me! Come on, come on. Oh, for stars sake!” He grabbed a large towel from a locker beside the table and threw it at her, hitting her so hard, that she staggered back. “Tuck that under your chin to preserve your modesty, but I still have to see your hands. The main scanner shows that you’ve got stuff in your panties. Let’s see it all.”

“There’s nothing worth seeing.”

“I’ll decide if it’s nothing.”

Suzanne did as she was told but felt her eyes getting wet. She threw her top on the table, trying not to cry. She did not want to cry in front of Rods, but she was tired and hungry, and upset that she should be reduced to this, and that secrets would be

revealed. When she dropped her panties a small item fell to the floor with tinkle; a card fell with a click and another item fluttered.

“Grab those Igor.” The robot move forward, extended one arm by several times its length to pick up the objects and placed them on the table.

Suzanne sobbed.

“For star’s sake. You know the Replicant in that film misquotes Blake.”

Suzanne looked up, wiping her eyes.

“Where the angel goes up he says down. The original line is fiery the angels rose.”

“So, it’s fiery the angels fell?”

“Yes, fell.” Rods picked up the item that had tinkled – a ring - with a small laser pointer he also kept in the locker.

“This looks like an engagement ring?” He did not add the adjective “cheap” but he thought it. “Are you engaged?” She nodded. “And where is your fiance now?”

“Earth Station.”

“Does he know you’ve taken a job in a distant part of the galaxy?”

“He knows I had to come out here. He’s waiting for me.”

“So how come I had to make you strip to get this?”

“The girls I met suggested it. Said you’d be much more likely to take me.”

“Who were the girls?”

“A Stacy and an Anne. Anne had red hair and ..”

“I know them,” snapped Rods.

“They said you were a gentleman.”

“I am – a gentleman who does not like to charge round the galaxy with other people’s fiances. There have been past misunderstandings. But as it happens, considering the way that Matt and Stan have been lecturing me, it’s just as well. Put the ring back on when we’ve finished and keep it on.”

He picked up the item that had fluttered. “A twenty-credit note. Don’t often see the actual paper. Did you steal this too?”

She shook her head.

“Emergency money.”

She nodded.

“Wouldn’t have got you far.” He dropped it on the table. “And last item is an Earth Station identity card which has a different name entirely and...” Rods looked at the photo and then at Suzanne twice. “This isn’t your photo. You’re the same physical type but it’s not you. What’s going on?”

“I swapped with another girl who had to come out to a place called Basher’s Find,” said Suzanne in a small voice. “She was picked to go there but didn’t want to go.”

“That’s how you managed to get all the way out here on no money?”

Another nod.

“But you got off here.”

“Slipped out. No real controls on the gates.”

“But how did you get on the ship in the first place? Don’t these cards have biometric checks?”

She shook her head. They just do bar scans for the people coming out to these colonies.

“I’m not surprised. Basher’s Find is no career move.”

“Bad is it?”

“Penal colony that has room to take people. Fortunately for you I can sort something out with the managers. One less person isn’t going to bother them.” He dropped the card on the table. “Max!

“Yes.”

“Suzanne has standard entry to the crew quarters. Cabin three. Turn off surveillance in the entry airlock for three minutes.” He turned to Suzanne. “Get dressed. The cameras are off. And put the table back up. Igor will lead you through. Igor wait outside for our cruise director.”

She reached out to grab her underwear. He turned to go.

“But wait, what am I supposed to do as cruise director?”

“Your job will be to deal with the creatures that I hate and fear the most in all the galaxy.”

“Goodness, what creatures?” said Suzanne trying to imagine what in all of space her new employer would find so horrible.

“Passengers! They whine; they want me to fix the coffee machine; they try jacking the ship. I don’t like them. Dealing with them is your job, and good luck to you. We pick up a new load in about three days – about 40 of the horrors, I think.”

“Forty people! Three days! But where am I to put them? Am I to feed them anything?” Suzanne had imagined a nameless horde of passengers mobbing her, demanding food. She had never even hosted a dinner party – a point she had not mentioned in her job interview.

“It’s all in the files, all written with newcomers in mind, just ask Max when you get to your cabin. She will have the schedules to follow; just don’t bother me about the passengers unless they start jacking the ship.”

He left, slamming the airlock hatch.



## CHAPTER THREE

Igor took Suzanne's bag when she emerged from the airlock and led the way down a short corridor to a lift, which took them up two decks. Less stressed, Suzanne could take note of her surroundings. She could see that the fittings bore signs of wear. The lift, which took them to the top, or A deck, which contained the crew quarters, functioned well enough but the carpet was threadbare. Mirrors in the lift had blotches on the edges. But then Suzanne could not recall seeing carpet on the floors of any of the ships she had been in, and had never used any lifts in them.

"This seems like a large ship," she said to Igor. "How many crew are there?"

"Two humans; two robots – and Max."

"What? So just me and Rods and you and another robot."

"IRA – Integrated Robotic Assistant. We do the work, you tell us what to do."

"I do?" It had not occurred to Suzanne she might have assistance. But what was she going to do with this assistance? Then the lift doors opened and she forgot, for the moment, her new concerns about being a cruise director.

In past Eras, a real estate agent would have described the crew quarters as compact. A better adjective was "cramped". But to Suzanne, used to the overcrowding of Earth Station and to sharing bunks on transports, it was palatial. Igor showed her to a tiny cabin fitted with two bunks, with a postage-stamp sized en-suite, tiny closet and fold down work station which, she quickly realized, was all hers. It was acres of space. It was paradise. She quickly found she could fold up the top bunk for additional vistas. She thought of Richard, her absent fiancé, and how privacy was all but impossible on Earth Station. He had to come out. Then her stomach rumbled. An inquiry about food and meals led her to a small but well-stocked galley with a programmable auto-cook unit. She made herself a sandwich, eating half of it then and there, then found some biscuits on which she spread a substance described as butter on the container but would have not been within many light years of an actual cow. There was juice. Suzanne left some.

Then she noticed the background music. She was used to constant, quiet background music at Earth Station and on the ships she had been in, but that had been anodyne – designed to sooth. This music was different.

*I polished up that handle so carefully  
That now I am the Ruler of the Queen's Navy  
He polished up that handle so carefully  
That now he is the Ruler of the Queen's Navy*

Suzanne had been only vaguely aware of the comic operas of Gilbert & Sullivan before setting foot in The Max but soon found herself humming along. Occasionally Mozart or the likes of Handel's Messiah intruded, but sooner or later the background music returned to Gilbert & Sullivan.

As office boy I made such a mark  
That they gave me the post of a junior clerk  
I served the writs with a smile so bland  
And I copied all the letters in a big round hand

*He copied all the letters in a big round hand*

I copied all the letters in a hand so free  
That now I am the Ruler of the Queen's Navy

*He copied all the letters in a hand so free  
That now he is the Ruler of the Queen's Navy*

The James Clerk Maxwell was a different ship, Suzanne decided.

"Where is Rods," Suzanne asked Igor. The robot had followed Suzanne back to her cabin – after the new cruise director had decided not to eat in the small, deserted dining room (ward room, she was later told stiffly, not dining room) – and stood around, apparently for want of anything else to do.

"Bridge."

"Can I see him for a moment?"

"Not to be disturbed. He said he will space both of us if I let you anywhere near him."

"Space us? What is that?"

"Put in airlock while in space and outer door opened."

"Goodness! Was he serious?"

"Lift off in half an hour," said Max, unexpectedly chiming into the conversation a she sometimes did. In the ship, Igor was partially an extension of Max, but shipboard announcements came direct from Max. "You have to strap in."

"Where do I strap in?"

"In your chair. Plates and cups to be returned and stored."

"Got it." Suzanne thought for a moment. "What is Rods' routine?" she asked Igor. "Where will he be that I can also be, so I can also speak to him without being put in an airlock?"

"Exercise in rec room, B deck, 7AM ship time."

"So the floor – I mean deck – below this one. I take the lift down?"

"Ladder at bridge end of passage."

"Ladder?"

"Ladder – never stairs, ladder."

Suzanne looked at the digital clock with analogue display inset in the wall. She would study her cruise directing files for a while and then have time for a few hours sleep in a bed that was all hers.

The newly appointed cruise director for The James Clerk Maxwell was at the ship's rec room on the dot of 7AM, still missing sleep but determined to take the next step in relations with her new employer. The area was crammed with equipment that she recognised only from old films. It included a punching bag, weight lifting bench and a treadmill. On one wall was a visual display of the ship's course, direction and time to next destination – Fin's Reef, where ever that was, in two hours. Screens with that display were all over the ship. On the other was a picture of a younger Rods having his hand held up by a referee in a boxing ring. Rods was already there, skipping rope with impressive speed, as Suzanne had to admit. He had a T-shirt on but his obvious muscles were a world away from the men she had known on Earth Station with no room for any exercise apart from hunching over a computer screen. This included her own fiancé, she reluctantly conceded to herself. Rods visibly started when he saw her and then glared. Suzanne dived for the nearest piece of equipment, which happened to be the treadmill. She wanted to make it appear that she, too, was there for the exercise.

A pair of goggles with a cable attached hung on a bracket, but she had no idea what they were for. Instead, after puzzling over the controls, she hit start. The machine hummed and she found herself running full tilt. Like the men she knew, Suzanne was also badly out of condition, and being cooped up on space ships for weeks had not helped. In a moment she was puffing. She bent over to see how to slow the machine down, stumbled and fell and was flung off with an "eek", forcing Rods to stop skipping and jump back.

"If you're going to make a nuisance of yourself," he growled, putting the skipping rope away, "you might as come over here and hold the punching bag for me."

While the trader turned away to pull on practice boxing gloves Suzanne picked herself up, still puffing from her exertion on the treadmill, and eyed the punching bag apprehensively. She was average height but, in her fevered imagination, the bag seemed bigger than her. Suzanne tentatively approached the bag, then wrapped her arms tightly around it.

Rods turned around and his jaw dropped.

"What are you doing?"

"You said to hold the bag for you."

"I meant brace yourself against it, so I can hit it without it swinging, not get intimate with it."

"Oh!"

"Let go of the bag; put your shoulder into it there." He put his hand on her shoulder and pushed it down to the right place. His hands were strong but not rough, Suzanne decided. "Now put your feet back."

Suzanne closed her eyes.

The first time Rods hit the bag she almost fell over. The second time she was flung onto the weight lifting bench. Suzanne picked herself up straight way, trying not to

look at Rods, who notably did not ask whether she was hurt, and braced herself again, eyes screwed shut and teeth gritted.

Nothing happened. After a few seconds she opened one eye and looked up at Rods who had one gloved hand on his side and another on the bag looking down at her. Abruptly he put his head back and barked, or at least Suzanne thought he barked. She was reminded of videos she had seen of seals on Earth calling to one another. Then she realized that the spaceman was laughing. He could be heard through most of the ship.

“Arf! Arf! Arf! When you fell off the treadmill... Arf! Arf! Arf! Then you.. then you.. were hugging the bag.. Arf! Arf! Arf!” Rods lent back against the bulkhead, holding his stomach. “I’m sorry,” he said, after a moment, gasping. “I’ve been mean to you haven’t I?”

Suzanne nodded, looking sheepish.

“Sports are not really your thing, are they?”

She shook her head.

“Come over to the treadmill.” He pulled off one glove, still chuckling, and adjusted the controls. “This ship is more than 30 years old and the treadmill was installed second-hand at the time it was built, so it’s one of the few pieces of equipment Max can’t control. You have to adjust the speed here. It was set to my sprint speed so no wonder you fell off.” He chuckled. “Put on the goggles.” He handed her the equipment she had put aside. “This control gives you different views.”

“Views?”

“Put on the goggles. Adjust the strap. Push the on button. There.” He guided her hand. Three dimensional views of an ocean side path appeared. The images were a little cruder than the technology she was used to on Earth Station but unlike the viewing pods she had used previously, Suzanne found that she could step out and the path felt real under her feet.

“The tread changes. If you go up it will have a slope. Amazing it still works after all this time.”

“It is amazing.” Suzanne turned towards the sound of Rod’s voice only to see ocean and nearly losing her balance. “There’s nothing like this on Earth Station. No room.”

“The ladies I’ve had aboard have all liked the treadmill.”

“Hmm!”

“I’ve put you on 15 minutes. Rest and repeat. I expect you to be up to an hour on the toughest route real soon, or I’ll have Igor haul you down here and hold you on the track.”

“Slave driver!”

“You bet. If we do find your sister’s ship and we have to be active for some reason, I don’t want you puffing around behind me. Anyway, it’ll tighten up your figure.”

“And does my figure need tightening?” said Suzanne, suspiciously. She turned her head again and again nearly lost her balance.

“Keep jogging, Cruise.”

“Anomaly detected.”

Suzanne ripped of the goggles and paused the machine 10 minutes into her cycle. One cruise display had turned into a Nav screen showing a dot inside a red circle and a set of numbers that meant nothing to Suzanne but something to Rods.

“Doesn’t look very big, Max,” said Rods, who had been hitting the bag, now firmly braced by Igor. “But let’s take a closer look. Helm six degrees starboard, two degrees below true.”

“Six degrees starboard, two degrees below true, aye.” Suzanne felt the ship turn and dip but then her world returned to normal. The ETA for the next port of call, which she knew to be Fin’s Reef from the schedule Max had shown her last night, adjusted by half an hour.

“Could it be the Dawn Treader?” she asked.

“If it is, it’s in completely the wrong chunk of space and moving in the wrong direction, and your sister is dead, but like I said, we’ll take a closer look.”

Suzanne risked another question.

“We’ll be half an hour later for Fin’s Reef, is that going to be a problem? The schedule says no passengers.”

“It’s home base. Three couples who got stranded there when the company they were working for went broke. I bring food in and ship the ore out, they let me store stuff there and stay if I have to shut the engines off for any reason. The other ports charge me for the privilege of laying over. Might be some news. One of the women is very heavily pregnant.”

“Pregnant!” No births were permitted on Earth Station – not for any ideological reasons but because the place was simply too crowded.

“Foolish, I thought, but I guess their animal natures got in the way.”

“Why foolish? Do they have room?”

“Heaps of it, but they don’t have the system capacity to support more than six and it’s not set up for water production or food vats. It’s a non-starter as a colony, and there’s no place for a family to go. That’s where we could use your sister’s El Dorado. We could move everyone there. Now, get back to your jogging, and add 10 minutes for pestering me.”

After exercise and a shower in which she was allowed to linger – luxury – and being told that the anomaly was lifeless debris, Suzanne sat at the tiny table in her room eating breakfast and looking through floor plans. The Max had been intended solely to carry ore, but its upper bay, which connected directly through a door a few paces from Suzanne’s cabin, had been pressurised and converted to carry mixed general cargo and passengers. The modifications included slots to install movable partitions to create a series of cabins and common areas, depending on numbers. The neophyte cruise director found that she could choose from a series of floor plans, modify them according to need, and then transform the area again for another passenger run. With guidance from Max, and some juggling with floor plans she came up with a configuration in which the couples and families, two had children, had their own cabins, and everyone had a bunk.

Food consisted of pre-packaged meals which earlier generations would have dismissed as airline food – in fact it was airline food passed its best-by date. But those

taking passage to crowded mining colonies in the Rim were in no position to be fussy, as Suzanne knew too well. There were facilities for heating the meals. No alcohol was served outside the crew quarters, but there would be coffee, cordial and juices. Images of enraged passengers chasing her around the ship faded. Suzanne became absorbed. There were endless details. Sheets were not changed for short journeys but towels were. Bathrooms had to be cleaned. Ick! Igor and Ira would do the actual work but Suzanne would have to check and inspect. Did she have to inspect the four common bathrooms? That could be done remotely through visual feeds from the two robots.

Suzanne was aware that the ship had come out of phase space and was close to Fin's Reef. But she was still intent on her work when Max spoke.

"Cruise director to the bridge. Urgent!"

Cruise director? she sounds important thought Suzanne, before recollecting that she was the cruise director. She charged out her cabin thinking that she could not possibly be in any trouble yet, as she hadn't had a chance to do anything, and in her confusion turned left, almost reaching the passenger/cargo hold hatch before realising her mistake. She raced back up the corridor to the bridge where she had not previously been.

"Took you long enough," said Rods, who was sitting in the captain's chair. The bridge was a dizzying array of screens full of displays which Suzanne did not understand. One group showed views of a gangway and hatches, and the passenger area. where the passengers would go. Then there was the bridge window with its real time, direct view of space. Suzanne had spent weeks in ships getting to this patch of space without being able to see out of any of them. Now she was transfixed by an array of stars with a small planet in the foreground. Rods later told her that being able to see out of the ship the size of the Max was of little help in navigation or docking. The bulk of it was computer work and checking readouts. But it was still nice to be able to see out.

"When you've finished staring. Cruise."

"Sorry, I was told I wasn't allowed on the bridge."

"Later! Sit there." He pointed to a chair, one of the three on the bridge, set behind the two command chairs. "And buckle up."

Suzanne did as she was told, as another voice spoke from the screen in front of Rods.

"Who was that?"

"Just briefing my crew, captain."

"I'll repeat myself. This is Lieutenant Commander Dyson, captain of the Earth Ship The Adams. Prepare to be boarded."

"I was under the impression that the Earth did not exist as a political entity any more, Captain Dyson."

"Stand by to receive boarding party."

"Fin's Reef control has also told me that you've been asking after The Max. I'm flattered that you've come all this way to jack me. But try any nonsense and I'll switch on the phase drives."

"Stop any manoeuvres, or we'll blow you apart."

“Tough talk, captain, but I have detection equipment. The moment you start prepping your lasers I’m outta here.”

“You are required by law to submit to search.”

“Earth Station’s law hasn’t been relevant out here for years, captain, and I’m not registered. But I’ll tell you what, rather than you tell your superiors I refused a search you can send four people across – provided they’re unarmed and they submit to being scanned head to toe.”

“That’s unacceptable. Stand by to receive a boarding party.”

“You can take my offer or I leave.”

There was a long silence.

“Unarmed then,” snapped Dyson. “Come closer, we’ll send the cutter.”

“I like the distance I’m at, captain. Your cutter will have to make it.”

The captain cut the call.

“You’re defying the navy?” asked Suzanne, both awed and frightened, mostly frightened because she feared all this meant she would lose her nice room.

“This isn’t the navy of your dad. They may have uniforms and the ships have insignias, but they haven’t been paid for months and now basically they’re official pirates. Most of their armament probably doesn’t work anymore, but they wouldn’t use it anyway, because they want the Max. This ship is more than 30 years old... no offence Max.”

“None taken.”

“..And hasn’t been refitted in 10 years which is way too long for a space going vessel with a nuclear power plant, and they still want it because it’s one of the few things out here they can take with a show of legality that’s moveable and worth anything. That’s how far the navy of your dad – my navy – has fallen.”

“But you’re allowing them to board?” said Suzanne, thinking that she still might lose her cabin.

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to let them jack us. The only reason I’m allowing anyone on board in the first place is because I don’t want them to report I refused a search, and to delay them. While all this is going on I’m falling into Fin’s Reef which has defences on its port. Just remember those guys won’t give two straws about your sister, and just want to sell The Max for whatever they can get.”

“What do you want me to do?”

“Stay put.” He spoke into the comms. “Igor, tool up and go to the main airlock.”

Suzanne watched as a small dot on one screen, which Rods pointed out to her, grew to be a naval cutter, as they orbited above the world of Fin’s reef. Rods exchanged comments with Fin’s Reef base control and typed out a note.

Just as she was working up the courage to ask what he was writing, he told her to look at the screen to her left.

“I’ll send it out to everyone before we dock anywhere. It’ll save explanations.”

She read;

*This is introducing Suzanne Clark, the new cruise director of The Max. Officials on Lucifer III put her forward as a replacement, after Sylvia's departure. She is an English teacher with a fiancé on Earth Station out here looking for her sister who went missing with the Dawn Treader. Please make her welcome.*

"Put her forward?"

"Sounds better than being forced on me because the last flight director turned out to be a conniving, scheming, ship jacking bitch."

"I suppose.. Where did the picture come from?"

"The Max takes pictures of all visitors to The Max when they enter. No exceptions."

"Can I change it?"

"Suit yourself, but wait until our little drama is finished."

"You didn't say anything about why Sylvia departed or where she went to."

"Nope."

"You didn't put her in an airlock did you?"

"No, but she didn't ask so many questions."

After that, Suzanne watched in silence as the naval cutter, she recognized as an older model shuttle, manoeuvred to link with The Max. She knew that only a few outdated ships on patrol duties had survived the massacre at Cross Roads. The cutter docked and the action shifted to the airlock, on another screen, where Igor was waiting. This was larger than the forward airlock where Suzanne had been made to strip, but the layout was the same. Igor waited right in front of the airlock hatch, carrying what seemed to Suzanne to be a ferocious looking, weapon with a massive barrel and round magazine.

"Okay," said Rods, "they haven't tried to attach anything to the hull. The sloop is maintaining distance. Max, shut down all external comms – just leave the comm link to the sloop open"

"Done," said Max.

"They'll try to hack Max and force the airlock open at the same time, once the seal is made. Max, when the hatch opens it is to lock at first position. Igor, present your weapon through the gap."

"Aye! Aye!"

"Is he really going to fire the gun there?"

"Fires rubber bullets – they sting but they won't break the hull. Designed for close encounters aboard space ships.

"Put Igor's view on screen 12."

Suzanne saw one screen change to show the hatch to the main airlock from Igor's point of view. As she watched, the light on the hatch locking mechanism turned to green and the hatch swung open, then stopped. She heard a muffled thud; someone on the other side yelped then swore fluently. Igor looked around the partially opened hatch, gun at the ready. On the screen Suzanne could see a naval petty officer in a bullet proof jacket rubbing his shoulder. He was also holding a special space ship gun.



Another man jumped into Igor's view pointing a shotgun and shouting "drop it", making Suzanne recoil.

"The robot is armored," said Rods, speaking to them through Igor. "Gentlemen, I am prepared to humor the navy but the deal is no weapons. If you want to come in, toss the hardware."

"We're entitled to board and search," snarled the petty officer.

"Then board and search, but no weapons. Comply or I'll break the docking connection." Reluctantly the two men put their weapons down. "How many are coming aboard?"

"Three," said the petty officer.

"Quite a crowd. You first and alone. Squeeze through the opening. If the two of you try to come together, you'll find out about the robot's other tricks." Rods switched channels. "Max, Igor is cover them with his gun."

They watched while the three navy hands – one petty officer, a male rating and a female rating – were scanned. They were made to surrender two knives, one small pistol and a packet of unidentified white powder, all of which Rods insisted be put back inside the cutter's airlock.

"It's not fair," said Suzanne, when Rods scanned the slim, young female rating. "You made me strip right down."

"That's 'cause I'm going to turn my back on you at some point. I don't intend to turn my back on these guys at all."

The inspection team looked cursorily around the corridors followed by Igor. The empty hold was unpressurised so they could not get into it. They demanded access to the container carrying fresh vegetables in the stern of A deck and got it, then they wanted to get into the crew quarters. By that time, Rods had gone to the armory – a locker beside Suzanne's cabin and come back with a long, business-like rod, which he said was a cattle prod.

"Are there any cattle in this sector of space?"

"Not that I know of, but it's amazing what you find in the remainder bins in some places," he said.

Suzanne wasn't quite sure what a cattle prod was supposed to do, but she didn't like the look of it.

"One at a time, people," said Rods to the navy personnel on the other side of the crew quarter's hatch.

Suzanne suddenly noticed the ship's sound track. She found that she could shut it out entirely at times, like all the music that she had heard on ships coming out, but at other times it came crowding back. It was Gilbert & Sullivan again.

*With constabulary duties to be done, to be done  
A policeman's lot is not a happy one, happy one.*

"The deal is we all come in," said the petty officer.

"The deal is one at a time. You first. You can keep the hatch open so you guys can see each other. Anyone follows you in and the robot does his stuff.

He turned to Suzanne: "I want you to come out with me and stand behind me. I don't want us to be separated. Remember, if the navy guys get hold of the ship they'll have no interest in looking for your sister."

"I understand."

Rods confronted the petty officer in the crew quarters companionway, holding his prod like a rifle.

"Who is the other person?" asked navy. He was a tall, heavy set man with a round, unshaven face and a hint of tattoo at his neck. He kept his fists clenched as if he expected to use them at any moment.

Suzanne poked her head out from behind Rods long enough to say "I'm the cruise director" then ducked back.

"I see. Pretty cruise director for a ship with no passengers."

"Don't worry we'll get some passengers soon. Max, open all internal doors in the crew quarters." The doors slid open, and the petty officer made a show of looking through the rooms.

"You have a separate sick bay?"

"Uh huh!"

"Don't suppose you got any papers."

"Not for years. The inspection is a courtesy. We're not doing anything you guys are interested in."

"Except a convicted drug smuggler is operating an unregistered ship," said the petty officer.

Rods noted he was edging closer and tensing.

"Sure, on technical stuff, you've got us a lot of ways."

"And carrying passengers. The presence of a cruise director is enough to show that."

"No argument there."

Rods was expecting the petty officer to jump, but he did not expect the big man to be quite so fast or to have a small knife in his right hand. He blocked the knife thrust with the probe but could not bring the probe's point around to bare skin. The two men pushed against each for a few seconds, too close for kicking. At the same time the male rating jumped onto Igor's back, and tried to grab at the robot's gun. The female rating kicked at the robot, ineffectually. Suzanne dived through the open hatchway into the ward room, out of the way.

Igor, who had a clear field of fire at Rods' opponent, and ignoring the rating's attempts to grab the weapon, shot the petty officer twice in the back. The man screamed and fell away. Rods dragged his prod clear and touched it to the man's skin. He convulsed and went quiet. Igor turned abruptly, elbow out, and threw off the rating on his back.

"Inspection is over," said Rods. "You two stay where you are. Igor, drag my friend here away, and take everyone back to the airlock. Still with us, cruise director?"

"Still here," said Suzanne from the ward room floor.

Rods then thought to pick up the knife used by the petty officer, which turned out to be a form of plastic. Although there was no metal to detect, the shape should still

have been picked up. Rods went through navy's pockets to find the sheath – a decorative slip of plastic designed as a souvenir with the word Moscow on it and a picture of the Kremlin of that distant city. Once sheathed, the blade outline did not show, even to a scanner search. Ingenious! By that time, Igor had dragged away the petty officer's body – there would not be any permanent damage – leaving Rods with the knife. Spoils of war.

“How long since you guys got paid?” he called down the corridor.

The female rating hesitated, glanced at her male colleague and then said: “six months, a bit more”.

Rods gave the knife to Suzanne showing her its design, and said that as part of the job she should keep it with her at all times. She took it thinking that life was becoming considerably rougher.

“At least there'll no need for it at Fin's Reef,” the trader said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

When The Max docked at Fin's Reef Rods sent Suzanne out first, ostensibly to deliver a trolley load of assorted items in crates to the main store room, but also to see whether

he was in trouble on various fronts – whether the behavior of the last cruise director had caused angst in the colony, and for missing the birth of the new baby girl, Emily. The sick bay of The Max was better than the in-colony facilities, and had been expected to be available for the birth. As it happened the trouble with the previous cruise director had delayed him and Emily had been a few days early. To fulfil her mission, Suzanne only had to walk beside Ira, pulling the delivery trolley, until they came to a woman with dark shoulder-length hair walking up and down beside a stack of crates, with a new baby on her shoulder. She looked distracted.

“Hello Suzanne,” she whispered. “I just got the message. I’m Carol and this is Emily.”

“Emily is perfect!” exclaimed Suzanne peeping at the baby’s face. “I never get to see new babies. They just aren’t allowed at Earth Station.”

“Lord, that makes things difficult for you and your fiancé.”

“It does. I had no idea what we would do, but now I want Richard and my mum to come out here.”

“Richard is your fiancé? We can chat in a moment. I want to go to the bathroom, the others are busy, and Emily won’t let me put her down. She starts crying.”

“Maybe I could hold her for a while?”

“Let’s try.”

Emily was gently switched from Carol’s shoulder to Suzanne’s and, after a brief wail, she decided that Suzanne’s shoulder was comfortable enough. Carol gave the double thumbs up and scuttled away. Suzanne was entranced, but she was alone with Emily for just a few moments before a short, youngish woman emerged from a hatchway.

“I’m Brigit,” said the newcomer, lowering her voice for the sake of the baby.

“And I see you’ve met the most important person of all.”

“She’s just divine.”

Carol re-emerged from another hatchway, pushing a long-slung trolley with an open box on it that was the baby’s home-made crib.

“We’ll see if she’ll consent to go down in a moment.”

“How old is she – a few days?”

“Just five.”

“Oh my! Rods said you’d want her looked at by the scanners in The Max’s sick bay.”

“Yes, please. She seems healthy enough but I’d like to go over later.”

“Sure. Rods is very sorry for missing the birth.”

“She was early. It was alarming. But it couldn’t be helped. Come through. We’ll unpack the crates later. We have so few visitors here.”

The ladies adjourned to a common area with chairs and a table. Earlier generations would have called the room small but to Suzanne it was vistas of space

“We don’t have ‘a few’ visitors here,” said Brigit when they sat down. “We don’t have any at all, or when we do its Sylvia. I don’t like to speak ill of your predecessor, but I will.”

“She was alright in her way,” said Carol, hesitantly.

“My dear, let’s not sugar coat, said Brigit, crossing her arms. “She was rubbish. A fast piece no good to anyone, least of all Rods.” Carol looked upset at this blunt analysis but did not respond. “You know she propositioned Andrew.”

“What?”

“Who is Andrew?” asked Suzanne.

“My partner,” said Brigit, “he and Jennifer are helping Rods load the ore. She said she wanted some fast cash.”

“Cash?” said Carol. “But Andrew’s got as much money as the rest of us.”

“He told her that, and that was the last he saw of her. He doesn’t know where she got the idea he had money, and I don’t either.”

“She tried to jack the ship. I think,” said Suzanne.

“Did she?” The two women asked in chorus.

“Is that why she’s gone?” asked Brigit.

“I hope Rods didn’t space her,” said Carol.

“He’s already threatened to space me if I disturb him, but I don’t think he’d actually do it.”

“Automated mining colony most likely,” said Brigit. “She can flash her tits at the android guards there and see how far it gets her. Dreadful places those.”

“Don’t think I’d wish it on anyone,” said Carol.

“We tried to tell Rods she was rubbish,” said Brigit, “but did he listen? Girl shows some cleavage and they leave their brains behind.”

“Was she pretty?”

“Flashy’s a better term.”

“Very blonde,” added Carol. “But there are so few single women out here. What else is Rods to do but shop at Stacey’s?”

“Except that we have to put up with what he buys,” said Brigit. “But it is a shame – he’s such a lamb.”

“A lamb?” queried Suzanne. “I hadn’t really thought of Rods as a lamb.”

“Bit crusty sometimes,” said Carol, “but he’s really a lamb.”

From there the conversation moved to Suzanne’s fiance, his job as a controller on the docks, to Suzanne’s mother, then to Suzanne’s very recent adventures and the possible fate of the Dawn Treader. The ladies listened in polite silence to Suzanne’s idea that Eve must be stranded on El Dorado, if only they could find it.

“I really want El Dorado to exist,” said Carol. “Otherwise Emily has no place to grow up but here, and this planet has no future.”

“None,” added Brigit.

“But you have heaps of space here. On Earth Station, this would be paradise for three families.”

“I was wondering about moving to Earth Station,” said Carol, “but that’s no good either it seems.”

“No,” said Suzanne emphatically, “no good at all and Emily wouldn’t be allowed. But what’s wrong with here?”

"It needs real investment to turn it into a colony," said Brigit. "It needs massive upgrades in life support, food production, energy generation and support like medical services. It was never designed for any of that, just as a mining station but we got stranded here when the company we were working for went broke after Crossroads..."

"It seemed like a good deal when we came here," said Carol.

".. We've rigged up some food vats and the rest we can stretch for the six of us plus Emily but that's it, unless some other group wants to invest. But ore from the mining colonies is cheap."

"Three couples plus Emily?"

"That's right," said Brigit, "and without Rods and The Max we'd be screwed. He takes the ore out at cost and brings in stuff we need. He keeps gear here and does his repairs."

"And fixes our equipment if we can't work it out," said Brigit.

"If either of those two jacking attempts had worked, we'd be dead," said Carol.

"Either? The navy was one."

"The fight on Lucifer III was another. If they could have got Rods down and hurt him, they'd have tried for the Max."

"The rim can be such a tough place," said Brigit shaking her head.

"What really worries me now is Emily," said Carol. "She'll have no one to play with when she gets older. There are children and babies on the other settlements.."

"And in the penal settlements, poor things..." added Brigit.

"But we can't buy our way in. We need a place where you can walk on the surface, without getting too much radiation, and be able to breathe so that life support isn't such a problem. Then everyone would agree to go there. We need El Dorado to be true. We need a planet for Emily."

"I see," said Suzanne, "a planet for Emily."

Now in her crib in another room and not caring yet about these hopes for her future, Emily woke up wanting to be changed and fed.

Meeting the other inhabitants of the colony and general chat meant that it was some time before Suzanne returned to the ship with Carol and Emily in tow. She had barely looked in the sick bay during her brief time aboard The Max, but Carol seemed to know her way around, so she watched. After the med scanner had pronounced Emily to be in good health, Suzanne found Rods in the gym studying a holographic projection of a boxing match.

"Can I accept an invitation to dinner?"

"No problem," said Rods, "we're loaded but I always lay over a night here."

"You're invited too, of course."

"Hmm! Have they finished kicking the memory of your predecessor around?"

"Don't know if they've finished," replied Suzanne cheerfully, "but she's been kicked all over the mine shift, as they say out here."

"You go on ahead, just in case they want to get back to the subject. I'll be along before they start serving. If you've been invited to dinner, incidentally, you're already streets ahead of your predecessor."

“Can I take something?”

“Oh right, um, take some of the vegetables you were raving about, and there’s a proper cot for Emily they wanted and I forgot to send, and a couple of toys. Max knows where it is. It’s my present for the baby.”

“You know, Brigit and Carol think you’re a lamb.”

“A lamb? I’ve been compared to animals before but not to a lamb.”

When the crew of The Maxwell and the colonists were all wedged around the communal dining table, the conversation turned to the missing Dawn Treader.

“You know Rod has a list of possible planets they might have been going to,” said Jennifer, the third woman in the tiny colony.

“You do? But I haven’t seen it.” said Suzanne.

“Things have been busy since you came,” said Rods, “but it’s on the system, with that stuff your sister sent. Just ask Max for it.”

“I’ve seen the list, the quote and the poem but couldn’t make any headway,” said Andrew, partner to Carol, a thin man with the air of a scholar. “I’ll send you what I’ve done, but it won’t help you much.”

“You said they were going to Bell’s Curve,” said Geoff, Carol’s partner. He was a plumpish, middle-aged man and leader of the group in that he was the only one who knew anything about mining or geology before the group came out there. The three couples had got the job because of him. A Susan and a Wayne completed the party, but did not have much to say for themselves.

“That’s what they told me,” said Rods. “I dunno why they wanted to go there. I even asked that captain, Robin, by link when he was here why they were going to a system with a gas giant and he muttered something about getting his bearings.”

“What was he like the captain I mean?” asked Suzanne.

“He’s alright personally,” said Rods “and knows his way around a space ship, I’m pretty sure. His mate, the second in command is Hospers – Rob and Hos. They’re romantic partners too. I met them when I did a couple of long runs two years ago. I was surprised they came out this way, and I was surprised that they didn’t seem to know anything about Bell’s Curve but I think the mention was just smoke.”

“You don’t think they went there?” asked Suzanne.

“No I don’t, and there’s certainly nothing there now. No wreckage, no distress messages. But for the life of me I can’t think where they would have gone.”

“You said jacking also wasn’t likely,” said Brigit.

“The passengers were colonists with their backgrounds checked and a lot of them would have known each other. No strangers. Hoss left us his manifest and passenger list in case he did get into trouble and I’ve been over them. No obvious jackers or problems. Anyway, if the ship’d been jacked it would have turned up by now. The onboard AI has to be replaced for it to be of any real use so they’ve gotta sell – usually to the Oids or at the Oid planet and I’d have heard about it because they’d want to offer it around. Turn a quick profit. So far, nothing – and something should’ve happened by now, if it’d been jacked.”

After dinner Suzanne and Rods walked back to The Maxwell together.

“Can we take a look at a couple of planets on the list, on the next trip.”

“I run a space ship not a tour bus,” grumbled Rods. “But after we get rid of the next lot of passengers we can take a look at one that’s not too far from our route.”

“And can we install a spectro-spectrographic analysis package?”

Rods eyed her curiously.

“Is that what you were talking to Geoff about? We discussed installing his software before but it’s too high powered for the Max. It’s a geological package designed to look for minerals, and The Max doesn’t have the high-grade optics for that stuff.”

“He did say he thought he’d adapted a version for use by Max.”

“The Max – the ship is The Max, the AI is just Max – did he now, and he mentioned it to the newly appointed cruise director, rather than the captain?”

“He said he was going to talk to you about it tomorrow. He just didn’t want to say anything at dinner, but he thinks it may be useful in detecting signs of life.”

“Uumph!”

They walked on in silence for a few seconds.

“Rods can I work at the bridge work station instead of my room?”

“Why?” There was a suspicious edge to Rods’ voice.

“There’s more room on the desk and the chair is more comfortable.”

“Uumph – suppose it doesn’t matter – but touch any of the controls or keyboards in any of the other control areas and your career as a cruise director will be tragically short.”

“I won’t go near them.”

“That’s what your predecessor said.”

“Oh.”

“Training tomorrow, after breakfast,” said Rods when they got to the passage way outside their cabins.

“Training in what?”

“You’ll find out soon enough. Don’t go outside The Max until I do. I set all security systems even here.” Rods opened the door to his own cabin and was gone. Suzanne realized just how tired she was, but first she would look at this list of worlds she had been told about. These included both the local names which mostly came from the imagination of the early explorers, and the official catalogue number.

She read:

Xeno’s Dive III	9257610
Fermat II	9888392
Everest Folly	9645819
Mickey’s Dive IV	9142891
Suman IV	9557141
Jupiter VIII	9322893
(“Busy system,” thought Suzanne.)	



Honmen II	9980672
Schrodinger III	9765813
Porter's Place II	9874336
Concord Down III	9934221

("Hmmm," thought Suzanne. "Blake's poetry is about the American colonies.")

Logan II	9546721
George's Claim	9122445
Getty IV	9399221
Hamish II	9654983
Sabrina III	9224472

What a collection of names, thought Suzanne. What could Eve have meant?

## CHAPTER FIVE

“Okay, so jacking attempts will almost always involve you.”

“They – they will?” said Suzanne alarmed.

It was the next day and they were in the top cargo hold with Igor and Ira setting up partitions around them, according to the floor layout Suzanne had selected.

“That’s right. They’ll try to hack Max through the onboard network connections and at the same time one of them will grab you from behind like this.” Rods grabbed Suzanne around the neck and put a small piece of plastic pipe to her neck. The hold was a gentle one, but when Suzanne tried to push against his arm and turn she thought that it was like trying to struggle with a tree – or at least what she imagined struggling with a tree must be like. She had never encountered one outside a simulation pod. Rods, for his part, was aware of the softness of her body and her scent but, having so recently made such a fool of himself over a woman, he was not about to make a fool of himself again so soon, and with someone else’s fiancé. He dragged his mind back to the job.

“What should I do?” asked Suzanne, unaware of any of the byplay.

“Nothing. It’s important to do nothing. Don’t struggle or attempt to get away. You can talk to them, however. They’ll be yelling threats into the intercom. Things like” – Rods raised his voice for realism – “‘open the door or I’ll cut her. Open the door or she starts bleeding!’ And they’ll be really shouting.”

“More than you,” said Suzanne, who felt deafened.

“Way more than me. Maybe they’ll also tell you to shut up and ‘don’t resist and you won’t get hurt’.”

“But can they cut me with that pipe thing you have.”

“Cruise, pay attention. This is just a demonstration tool I keep around. Believe it or not I don’t want to cut your throat – not yet, anyway. No, it’ll be some piece of plastic they’ve smashed to give it a hard edge, or even a toothbrush handle they’ve cut and lightly glued back together before they got on board. So, as I was saying they’ll be yelling stuff like ‘shut up bitch’ to you and ‘you want this on your conscience, do you’, into the intercom. ‘She’s a real pretty thing’.”

“You said something nice to me.”

"It's what they'd say, and you don't thank them. You're a hostage, remember, and you've got something nasty and pointy at your throat. Let's get with the program."

"I'm a hostage. Nasty; pointy; alright."

"Now the ship is being jacked and they've got you. They're saying things like 'Real shame if I had to cut her man'. And it'd all be loud."

"I get the picture, but I do nothing."

"Correct. Just go with him. He may push you towards the door or he may hang back a few paces. The one thing you can do if you want, is to tell him he's going to die."

"Is he going to die?"

"Yep. He has just a minute, maybe less, to let you go and throw away the weapon or he dies."

"But wait, I'm being held tightly by him – aren't I in danger?"

"Maybe if he moves suddenly, but I have done it before and the guys died and the cruise directors were unharmed."

"My many predecessors?"

"Yes, two of your predecessors, in fact. Two attackers down, no cruise director casualties."

"But how does my attacker die?"

"Never you mind about that, Cruise. The less you know about that the better. You can talk to him, tell him that I'll never open the door to save you, and you have a fiancé and it's not me, and we hate each other, or whatever. You can tell him that if he doesn't release you he dies. Tell him this isn't a regulated ship. We're a long way from Zard controlled space. He messes up, we kill him and put the body out the airlock. One less person at the other end, one more vacancy for someone else."

"You want me to say all that."

"You won't be able to say all that. I'm just giving pointers. But if you say something you may feel more comfortable later - 'cause this guy is going to die on top of you. You may want to feel that you tried to save him."

"I see. I'll certainly remember the hating part."

"You're trying to make a desperate man give up a big-risk gamble, which isn't likely to happen, but the hating part may help. Assuming it doesn't work and he dies, you'll feel his grip go slack. He won't have time to cut you. Fall to the ground but fall clear so you're not trapped underneath his body. When that happens all the lights in the hold out here will go off. Jackings always happen at night after we've dimmed the living area lights, so there won't be much light to start with, but by the time you hit the floor it'll be pitch black."

"I stay there?"

"No. Whenever you go out into the passenger area you must have these echo - infra red goggles in your pocket. They are kept in the locker by the door. If you forget Max will prompt you, and she won't let you into the passenger area until they're in your pocket."

"I fall to the ground and put on my goggles. Then what do I do?"

"Make for the door and put yourself on the other side of it. As it's pitch black no one else can see. Igor and I will come out the other way. Igor has infrared vision and I'll

have goggles. Then we sort out the other jackers. Once we've cleaned up, and taken away the bodies and prisoners, you come out and reassure the passengers. The crew have full control of the ship after an incident. We will arrive at our destination at the time previously advised. No further details will be given for security reasons but there will be no further events. Go back to sleep."

"The captain I hate says no further details; we will arrive at our destination as previously advised. Go back to sleep. I can do that."

"You're meant to say you hate me to the jackers not the passengers."

"I've just been in a jacking attempt; I'll be upset; I won't be thinking straight – but wait, why am I in the passenger section at night in the first place. You said not to come out after dinner unless it's an emergency."

"Good point. It will be an emergency. Probably a medical emergency. A woman, or a child maybe down with an unspecified but violent sickness because they've been slipped some poison. You'll think food poisoning."

"This sounds dire."

"Only the patient can go through the door into the crew quarters – an exception is a mother with a sick child – and they won't be able to move beyond the sick bay. Max has lots of tricks up her sleeve to ensure they don't. But the whole point behind the poisoning is to get you to come out. If they can't get back inside the crew quarters then they threaten to kill you. We'll run through it a few times, with me playing the part of the nasty jacker who wants to slit your throat."

After playing at jacking for an hour or so, Rods took Suzanne off the ship, to a large, mined-out gallery, facing a pile of low grade ore that was not worth the trouble of the colony to process. He gave her a pistol and ear muffs. Suzanne had seen guns in films, like everyone else, but had never been anywhere near one and did not care for the development.

"Just as I don't want you panting around in the background if and when we do find your sister, I don't want to have to break off fighting for my life to show you where the safety catch is," Rods had said.

"Will we be fighting for our lives?"

"Can't see how we would be, but I'm not ruling it out, and that means you should know where the safety catch is."

Suzanne banged away at the ore pile, which she could not fail to miss, with what Rods called a Glock G-20 and then with a lighter, more compact weapon which he called a SIG Sauer. Suzanne was not enthusiastic about pistol shooting, but she was sure that she was better off and certainly a better shot with the lighter weapon.

"If I have to take someone to a fight, Mr. SIG Sauer is my choice," she told Rods. "He's cute and easy to handle. I can hit stuff with him."

"Maybe. Mr. SIG Sauer has superficial attractions, I admit, and he's fine in his place for precision work, but Mr. Glock is really your choice. I don't see you shooting much unless you're up real close. So, you'll have time for one shot, and then you really want Mr. Glock as your steady, reliable partner.

"The way I see it, you flash that winning smile of yours, let them come up close, maybe a body length, then say 'get a bang out of this' and blow them away."

“Why should I say anything at all?”

“You see people make remarks all the times in films, before or after shooting someone.”

“If I’m going to shoot anybody, I’ll be too horrified to say anything.”

When Rods finally released her from training she went back to her main job of organizing the cruise and, with help from Max and the files, organising the ship for its paying guests. She said a quick goodbye to her new friends on Fin’s Reef, Emily in particular, knowing that the ship’s schedule would take her back there in a week, and worked like a demon on the hop back to Lucifer III. The work paid off. With the partitions in place, the upper hold of the Maxwell looked like the interior of a low-rent passenger liner that might have sailed the oceans in earth’s distant past. There were printed signs pointing the way to the bathrooms – an innovation of Suzanne’s of which Rods approved – plus printed notices in each room explaining how the beds would not be made during the trip, and other notices about the dos and don’ts of being a cruise passenger. Rods glanced in a couple of the rooms and decided that his new cruise director had handled the details of beds, chairs and coffee machines well. There were even plans for a table tennis tournament, using one table stored in the rec room. He walked through to the crew quarters meaning to say something, only to be startled by a whole new Suzanne in the corridor.

“Wow!”

She smiled. “You like it?” She wore a blue skirt, a grey shirt with turned up sleeves, a hostess cap and was wearing makeup for the first time since Rods had known her. She had also turned blonde.

“You look great!”

“You’ve actually said something nice to me.”

“Enjoy the sun while it lasts. So where did all this come from?”

“One of my predecessors was my size, and left clothes in lockers on C Deck. I also found the blinding agent. Couldn’t do much about the shoes.” She was still wearing her ship-board slip-ons.

“We can find shoes at one of the ports, but there is a problem in that you now look too attractive.”

“That’s a problem?”

“Uh huh! A few of our passengers are hopping to an all-male mining colony. There was a time when those colonies used to offer young ladies as an incentive to get guys there.”

“Oh.”

“And regular visits from those same young ladies. No one does it now, ‘cause the guys are lucky to even get a berth with Earth Station so crowded, but they’ve heard the stories and they’re hoping. They’re guys. They’re always hoping. And where they’re going they won’t see a real woman for a long time.”

“Do you want me to switch back?”

“No. Igor and I’ll be in the security enclosure.” To take on passengers, Rods set up a small area with a portable scanner the passengers had to walk past. “Any problems and we’ll be there in moments. Igor and I can make them back off.”

“You’re not going to hit anyone in front of the other passengers are you?”

“Me? I’m supposed to be a lamb, remember.”

Suzanne was in her fourth day as a cruise director when she met her first passenger. She had no idea what she was getting into when she agreed to work for Rods, but the experience pushed concerns about her fiancé and even the gnawing fears for her sister, into the background for a time. It helped that The Max offered tolerable value for money. Her passengers were getting their own beds and couples even their own, small rooms for the trip – rare for the down rim operators carrying people fleeing Earth Station to anyplace that would take them. There were three other ships operating regularly in the same area of space, Suzanne later discovered, and two of those had taken full advantage of those refugees, and the traders at each port trying to scratch a living. No one in the area would recommend them or deal with them, unless they had to. The third, The Kiev, run by an older husband and wife team was ethical, but The Kiev was too slow and small to take many passengers.

That left The Max and a full roster for Suzanne’s first hop as a cruise director. Her initial job was to sit at a small table with a screen to check in her passengers in a narrow walkway to The Max’s main airlock. Rods was in his screened off area to her left, with the scanner and temporary door. If the passengers and their luggage checked out, they got through the door to the open airlock hatch.

Suzanne had just processed her third passenger, and enjoying herself, when a shadow fell across the table and someone grabbed her wrist. It was a gigantic young man with massive arms and shoulders, a spade beard, and small, mean black eyes. Behind him were a string of young men giggling over their leader’s actions. Suzanne had noticed them before, but thought they were further back in the queue.

“Hey!” spluttered the passenger who should have been next.

“Now you’re a pretty thing,” said beard. “What’s your name?”

“I’m the cruise director. Let go of my hand.”

“She’s the cruise director, boys,” he called out. “That’s a new name for what you do, isn’t it? I’ve heard about girls out here helping out us lonely miners.”

Suzanne stared at him coldly, fairly sure that Rods was not far away.

“Take your hand away, please,” she said quietly.

“Oh now, come on lady,” said Beard, not moving his hand. “I know the deal here. I need some entertainment.” His friends sniggered.

“You heard the lady!” said Rods. He had emerged from a door in the security enclosure a few paces from Suzanne’s table, with Igor in front.

“Oh no,” said Beard, in mock horror. “The security.” He put his hands up to his shoulders. “Take me away.” His chorus line was, by this time, in a continual state of merriment. The other passengers in the queue looked apprehensive. “Why don’t you and tin pile here vanish, I’m talking to this young lady.” Beard put his hand on the table again, but Suzanne moved hers.

“Igor, bring him.”

Igor extended one hand to grab beard by the right wrist then pulled him towards the enclosure door. Beard’s knowing smile turned into a frown. He tried to pull back only to be yanked almost off his feet.

“You wait until I get in there!” Beard roared, as he was dragged through the door which Rods closed.

“This’ll be good,” sniggered one of the chorus, “Maceman’ll pound that guy to a pulp.”

There was shouting then several dull thuds. The enclosure door burst open and Maceman flew through it, to land beside Suzanne’s table, doubled up in agony, one eye already starting to swell. The chorus line fell abruptly silent, aghast. Rods came out rubbing his right hand knuckles.

“He took some putting down,” he muttered. “My friend, I’m glad we’ve had this talk about the in-flight amenities.” The big man glared wordlessly at him. “We also have an on board code of behavior which comes down to guys like you being nice, or Igor and I come around to discuss the issue in our own colourful way. You gentlemen!” Rods pointed to the chorus line, who were doing their best to vanish into the concrete. “Drag your friend here out of the way of the other passengers and wait by the bags. You’re all going through last. Now, move!”

They nodded and hauled their leader away. Rods turned to see Suzanne frowning at him.

“Whaaat?” he said, spreading his arms. “I didn’t hit him in front of the other passengers.” He went back to the security enclosure shutting the door, damaged by Maceman’s abrupt exit, with difficulty.

“Does the captain know about that man,” asked one woman in the queue.

“Madam, that was the captain,” said Suzanne.

## CHAPTER SIX

When they emerged in the system that contained Concord Down III, Suzanne got out of her seat and leant forward to peer through the flight deck window as if she expected to see something with the naked eye. All she saw were dots of light.

“Look at the top screen, Cruise,” said Rods. “That’s your Concord Down.” Suzanne could see a small, grey disc. “We can spend half a day scanning it and then we’ve got to get on, or we’ll be late at our next stop.”

Suzanne had talked Rods into going to Concord Down as it seemed the best fit for the material. The Blake poem had been about the 13 colonies that eventually started the United States; their War of Independence had kicked off at Concord and in that long ago film the replicant had said down rather than up.

The planet had been checked briefly by one of the doubtful operators in the area, mainly concerned with salvage rights, and Suzanne hoped that something had been missed. It was a long shot but not out of the question as it was Mars-like, in the terminology of planet hunters, Rods had told her.



“Mars-like?” she had asked.

“Sure. A rocky planet that formed like earth and plate tectonics, where segments of the outer crust move around, got started. Volcanoes erupting gave the place some sort of atmosphere, but then the system slowed then stopped. On Earth, it kept going but on Mars it seized up, leaving one gigantic rift valley and some really big volcanoes. Similar stuff on all the planets on the list. They could have been like earth but they just didn’t get going.”

Suzanne had heard all this from a poorly remembered science documentary.

“What made Earth so different?”

Rods had shrugged his broad shoulders. “I think they’re still arguing, but one point about the Earth is that the Earth-moon system is something like a double planet. The moon is much smaller than Earth but its size in proportion to earth still makes it stand out compared to other moons. It’s a freak occurrence. Just why the existence of the moon meant the tectonic plate and carbon cycle kept going on earth is a long story, but the bottom line is that there are a lot of Mars-like planets out there and Concord Down is one of them.”

Suzanne now stared at the small disc of Concord Down on the screen as if she could see some sign of Eve.

“Will we be going closer?”

“Not much. It has a 12-hour day so we won’t even be able to scan the whole surface but we will see the big rift valley where life is more likely to be as the thin atmosphere is a lot denser at the bottom of the valley. If there is any life the scans should show something.”

They did not speak for some time while Suzanne watched the scan data which Max put on the screen. It meant nothing to her but Max promised an analysis. Rods went off to do something with the engines then came back just as the analysis came back negative for any form of life.

“I felt sure that was it,” said Suzanne.

“Um, well, never mind,” said Rods. Suzanne was aware that was all her boss could think of to say on the matter. “On to King’s Foil II and another load of passengers  
Later that day, Suzanne looked at the list again. What had her sister meant?

As well as dealing with passengers at King’s Foil, Suzanne was handed a new role. Rods gave her a list of traders and goods to be delivered a picked up and what each owed, or was owed. The amounts involved were comparatively small but they added up to a profitable sideline to the ores hauled in the Max’s main holds and passengers on the top deck, provided someone kept all the trades straight, ensured there was room on The Max’s mixed goods cargo section, and collected money owed – the most delicate job of all. Suzanne had suspected she had a knack for wheeling and dealing before but had never made much of it. Now she plunged into it with a zest. Occasionally she resurfaced to recollect, with some guilt, that she still had a fiancé and a mother way back on Earth Station. At some point she knew she would have to go back to swap identity cards with the girl she had saved from a mining colony. She couldn’t let the other girl keep her card. Sooner or later there would be an audit. She could go back,

swap the cards with her DNA codes, and come out with her mother and Richard. There was still the problem of where they would stay apart from on The Max. Her mother might fit in but she could not imagine Rods and Richard on the same ship without friction. Even Suzanne clashed with Rods but held her own without being unpleasant.

“Oh Rods,” she would say when she came in for breakfast.

“What?”

“Don’t ‘what’ me in that snappish way, please!”

“I’ll ‘what’ whom I want to ‘what’ aboard my own ship, Madam Cruise, now what do you wish to discuss with me?”

She was able to send off the occasional brief messages – anything longer was too expensive to send by squeezed light link or would take weeks by trading ship – and then plunge back into new life with a zest. Rods rewarded her by leaving her to do the job, and permitting side trades by which Suzanne was able to acquire a few more clothes.

After studying the list she picked George’s Claim, which also seemed like a reference to the American War of Independence, but a quick inspection of it with Rods grumbling about the cost, had no result. Thoroughly puzzled she went back to organizing another load of passengers. A slight misjudgment in her duties brought another problem which required a delicate discussion with Rods.

“You want to have a barbecue for the passengers?” Rods exclaimed when Suzanne put the concept to him one morning, just as they came out of phase drive to pick up another load of passengers at Lucifer III. He scratched his head. “I dunno if you’ve noticed but we’re aboard a spaceship.”

“It wouldn’t strictly be a barbecue as we’d do it on the grill with the hood down and take the meat out to them.”

“Meat? You mean the meat in the freezer, that I – and you – are going to eat sooner or later.”

“You’ve got heaps of it and a lot of the passengers have never done anything like that. I’ve never done anything like that.”

“The poker tournament on the last trip was a great idea. But a barbecue? Unless ..” Rods looked at her quizzically, “this is all about you messing up the numbers on the pre-packaged meals?”

Suzanne colored slightly. “I followed the ratios your guide sets out, and lots more wanted beef on the last trip. This way, just a few’ll have to make do with chicken or fish before we pick up some more. It’s all from food vats anyway, just in a different form, so what does it matter?”

“What matters is that it’s my meat.”

“If we don’t do this, the passengers will start to complain – more than usual anyway – and want to see the captain of this fine ship.”

“Hmm. Oh, very well. A barbecue, but at least I should get a plate. I want to taste the meat that’s going down the gullet of these passengers.” He almost spat the last word.

“Of course,” said Suzanne, smiling sweetly. “You’re the captain.”

The news that the ship would have a barbecue for the evening meal half-way through the trip was announced by text, which was reviewed by three men sitting in a crowded bar waiting to board.

“A barbecue?” said the leader, a tall, dark man with a shaven head. “That night might be the time. May be easier to touch the food plates of others if they’re going to have a barbecue – less formal and you eat together.”

“What’s a barbecue?” asked the youngest. He looked like an undergraduate who had strayed from campus and was now nervous that his absence would be noted.

“You cook the meat on a grill or maybe an open fire, and put it on the plate with salads and stuff. It’s meant to be in an atmosphere, but I’m guessing it’s just meant to be an informal way to have lunch.”

“Sounds like fun,” said the undergraduate, “but how can you have an open fire on a spaceship?”

“Must cook it on the ship’s galley stove and send it out.”

“So, we strike then?”

“No, and keep your voice down. Not with all the passengers still awake. We’ll doctor the food when the plates get handed around – the stuff takes a few hours to take effect, right?”

“Should take about ten hours, if it’s a kid,” said the third man. He was heavy set with long, brown hair, and eyes that darted around the bar.

“We’ll know when to go when someone starts shouting on the flight deck intercom demanding help,” the leader told the undergraduate. “That’s when you’ve got to start the jacking script.”

“It’ll get past the inflight passenger system,” said the undergraduate. “It’s real powerful. But I’d be happier if we knew about any changes they’d done.”

“The ship’s old,” said the leader. “They’re all old out this way, and that’s the best script there is. It’ll blow away the on-board AI. It did last time.”

“Do we know anything about the crew?” said the undergraduate.

“We know enough. There’s just one permanent crew – calls himself Rods – and an occasional cruise director he gets out of brothels. They say this one’s a looker. Probably sweet on her. Should make it easier. He’s also got a drug conviction back in Zard controlled space and there’s talk that he gets high and sings in his engine room. With any luck he’ll be stoned and out of it when we go.”

“Druggie?” said the quiet man. “Heard of him. Hard man, they say.”

“I thought jacking was endemic out here,” said the undergraduate. “And this guy’s survived, so he can’t be high all the time.”

“Maybe so,” said the leader, “but we’re the best and we’ve done this before. Just remember, we go on board separately and no one even looks at anyone else until the yelling starts. Then be ready and it’ll all fall into place.”

“Hope so,” muttered the undergraduate.

Suzanne finished giving the passengers their dinners and came into the crew quarters to get her own, to find Rods sitting at the ward room table.

"I thought you would have eaten already." They sometimes had meals at the same time, but rarely when they had passengers.

"I have. I just wanted to tell you that the risk of a jacking attempt has gone up."

"But why?" Ira put a steaming bowl of vegetable stew in front of her. Rods found the sight repugnant. He never understood any meal without meat.

"Because someone's tried all three hatches out of the passenger area, apart from the main door. A few passengers try the hatches at some time each trip but not all three so soon after boarding, and when I can't see who on the security cams. Maybe it's nothing. We have a few kids and a few guys in transit to the mining colonies so maybe it's them, but worth remembering."

Suzanne nodded. She had heard Rods talk about possible jackers among the passengers often enough. "I thought the main film tonight should be that remake of Emma."

"A romance at Earth Station? The place has forced abortions, Cruise. Why not an action film?"

"A Jane Austin classic is worth watching no matter where it is set. She wrote in early nineteenth century England but her plots are still classic."

"I know who Jane Austin is and what she did, Cruise. I do occasionally venture from the engine room. Elizabeth Bennet was a gold digger, Emma an interfering snob and Marianne Dashwood an hysteric."

Suzanne crossed her arms and glared at him.

"What got me was that they're all completely idle. Put them to work in engine rooms and, I say.. or as cruise directors." He added as Suzanne continued to glare.

She smiled. "And have to deal with hateful, evil captains I suppose."

"At least it would get their minds off their love lives. But it's really hateful, evil jackers that are the problem. Just remember, if you have to go out there, you want to be extra careful."

"I'm a careful girl, Rods. You know that."

The next day was the barbecue which turned out to be success but a busy time for the cruise director, who forgot all about Rods' warning. Suzanne got to know some of the passengers, as she always did on each cruise, and there were party games. Rods watched some of the action on a screen in the bridge, and decided two things – that if there was a jacking crew on board they were taking care to blend in, and that he could never understand the appeal of charades.

That night, the alarm on the passenger intercom in the passenger common area, just outside the door to the crew quarters, jerked Suzanne awake. Someone was thumping the alarm button hard.

"Suzanne! Suzanne! We have to get into the sick bay. Quickly!" The last word was a shriek.

Suzanne glanced at the intercom screen brought up automatically by Max. It was Holly the mother of four year old Oscar, youngest of just two children on the trip and a

favorite of Suzanne. She could see on the screen Oscar was writhing in his mother's arms, screaming.

"Goodness! Holly, I'm coming. Hold on!" Suzanne hopped out of bed and grabbed slacks from the wardrobe. "What's wrong?"

"I don't know he just went into convulsions. We have to get him to that scanner. Hurry! Please hurry!"

Suzanne dashed into the passageway, bare footed still pulling on her pants and touched the lock on the door to the passenger area, which was all that was normally required to open it. This time it did not open.

"Night vision goggles," prompted Max. "In the box on your right."

"But he's only four. He and Holly aren't going to jack the ship."

"You still have to take your goggles."

"Hurry!" screamed Holly. Suzanne could hear her through the bulkhead. "What's taking so long!"

Suzanne grabbed the goggles from the box and crammed them into her pocket.

"Fine! There."

The door opened. Suzanne was aware, as she stepped out, of other passengers awoken by the noise standing around wondering if they should help, but her attention was taken up by Holly, holding a writhing Oscar. Then an arm wrapped around her throat. Rods had done something like that in training but his pretend grip had been soft. This arm choked her. She glimpsed her attacker's shaven head, and felt the attacker's breath on her ear. It occurred to her he had eaten the fish.

"Shut your trap," said a voice somewhere near her left ear, "and you'll live."

"Oscar, sick," she managed to gurgle.

"I said shuddup."

Holly was screaming about Oscar.

"Shut her up."

That last remark, Suzanne realized, was addressed to someone else. She was aware of long haired man swinging something and Holly abruptly falling silent.

"Get it open."

To Suzanne's horror, the crew door opened. She heard someone yelling at the other passengers and then she was dragged into the crew passageway.

Rods was on the bridge. He had also been woken by the alarm but ignored the unfolding drama of Holly and Oscar to get to his command post.

"Sniper screen," he told Max.

A display of the drama but from above and behind the action around the intercom came to life. He tapped a button underneath the screen and a joystick popped up into his hand – a control he had never showed Suzanne. He saw her step out into the common area to be abruptly seized by one passenger. Another man hit Holly and yelled at the passengers to stay away.

"Got you," he muttered. Both men had been on his list of suspects but it had been a long list.

“No helmets,” he said to Max. “Target the one holding Suzanne.” Crosshairs appeared on the bald head. Rods hand moved to the firing button.

Then everything went dead.

Shutting down all the comms ports to the passenger deck had never been possible. Max controlled too much. But Rods had done everything short of physically disconnecting them to ensure a hacker couldn't get through. Even then, he and Max should have received some warning. Instead, nothing. Suddenly he wasn't in control. This jacking crew had a powerful hacking code. Rods thought he still had the bridge, but then the screens started to flicker into life. It may not be Max coming back. Rods opened the flight deck door a fraction and peeked out. The crew quarters lights had come on when the alarm sounded. He could see two men, one with an arm around Suzanne and something sharp at her throat, coming down the passageway. They had already opened the hatch to the passenger quarters. Worse, Igor standing at his jacking post just beside the passenger deck hatch, was now beginning to stir. If the jackers ever gained control of Igor, the game was over.

Only one thing left to do. Rods slammed the door shut and shot the very old-fashioned, simple bolt he had installed for just such an emergency, then lifted off an avionics inspection hatch, flinging it to one side with a crash. He crawled in. The panel he wanted was half a body length inside, protected by a casing with a simple metal lock. The key was out of sight, underneath another panel where Rods had put it months ago, hoping he would never have to use it. Now he did. He unlocked the casing. A dim light came on, illuminating a boarding pistol and night goggles in one compartment and on a panel a set of controls that would have been familiar to Edison – the oldest remedy for a computer malfunction, switches and buttons. Rods used them. He thumbed one button that said I-kill, for Igor kill, and turned the power off.

Not everything went off. The engine controls switched to an independent system as they were designed to do. Nuclear reactors should not be left without controls. But everything else went off – the life support systems, the passenger entertainment systems, the coffee machine and, of course, the lights.

Out in the corridor all Suzanne knew of Rods struggles was that suddenly she was in total darkness with her captor cursing fluently while jabbing hard with what felt like a wooden spike.

“Power's gone,” said the third man. Suzanne thought he sounded young.

“I can see that,” snarled Suzanne's captor.

“No emergency lights,” said the young man. “Old tub.”

In fact, Rods had ensured that if he ever had to pull the ultimate kill switch, the emergency lights would also be disabled.

“Turn on the panel light on your device,” snapped Baldie

“Oh, right.”

A light in the hand of the third man turned utter blackness into one where people were shadows and the passageway a black tunnel. Beyond the hatch to the passenger quarters, which the jackers had closed behind them, Suzanne could hear the other passengers calling out to one another.

“Now then,” said Baldie, “tell your boyfriend to open the door to the bridge.”

“He’s not my boyfriend,” gasped Suzanne. “I have a fiancé back on Earth Station. He won’t open the door for me.”

“We’ll soon see about that. Hey man! I got your girl here. You want me to do a number on her throat? Open up!”

Suzanne finally remembered her training. “You’re going to die.”

“Shuddup bitch! I’m getting real impatient here man! I got her carotid right here under my spike! You better open up.”

“He won’t open the door for me,” said Suzanne. “He told me to say that to any jacker.”

“Sure!” sneered the jacker.

“He told me to say you’re dead, if you don’t throw away the spike thing.”

“Shuddap! You in there, open up! I’m gonna do this.” Suzanne was aware, in the dim light, of another figure standing by the door - the long haired man keeping quiet.

“You better pray this Rods guy opens the door, or you’re dead.”

“You kill me and you’re dead!” Suzanne was certain of that, at least.

Then the bridge hatch opened.

While the bald attacker had been yelling, Rods had been debating what to do. He had night goggles on and the boarding pistol in his hand. The gun firing rubber bullets was safely locked in the armory, a closet on the passenger side of Suzanne’s cabin. The boarding pistol was a less satisfactory back-up. Its shots were deliberately low powered so that there was less chance of stray shots tearing the hull open. But stray shots were still undesirable – Rods was hazy about what happened if the hull was punctured while the phrase drive was on, and didn’t want to find out first hand. Then there was the question of keeping the cruise director alive. At two metres he wasn’t going to miss by much, but he didn’t want to miss at all.

He opened the door and moved to the left.

Baldie waited, straining his eyes to pierce the gloom.

“Push that light out there.”

The young man came up beside him and held the hacking device at arm’s length. The jacker thought he could see a dark shape looming on one side of the door. He wasn’t going to rush in.

“You come out man, or I do her,” he snarled. Suzanne felt the pressure on her neck increase, her artery throbbing under the spike.

Rods moved. He saw two men, one holding Suzanne and another holding a device. He darted forward and fired. Suzanne felt Rods loom, closed her eyes and was almost deafened by the bang, then felt the pressure on her artery relax. Her assailant fell. But the third, quiet man stepped from beside the door to swing his weapon of choice, a club – a thick rod of heavy plastic picked up from a workshop. Rods registered the movement out of corner of his eye and, with boxing reflexes, swayed his head out of the way, only for the club to smash down on his gun hand. He dropped the boarding pistol with the cry, then turned and charged, smashing his forehead into the man’s face.

Blood spurted. It was the long-haired man's turn to cry, and stagger back. Rods followed it up with a kick to the solar plexus.

Remembering her training, Suzanne fell clear of the bald man then fumbled for her night goggles and put them on. She saw the third man, the young undergraduate, still holding the hacking device as a light, staring as Rods slammed the long-haired man into the bulkhead and head butted him again. The younger man looked around. The balance of power needed to shift quickly. He saw the pistol Rods dropped at the same time Suzanne did. The cruise director thought of her sister, thought of her comfortable room and dived on it, grabbing it just before the undergraduate got to it. Her hands closed on the grip, her finger tightened on the trigger and she swung around holding the gun out, steady in front of her, backing away through the open bridge hatch.

"Stop or I shoot!"

The undergraduate hesitated. He hadn't signed on to do the grunt work, and the pistol was pointing at his chest.

Rods looked around, startled. The long-haired man kned him the testicles, then shoved him away. Rods stumbled then fell.

"Chris, rush her," called the long-haired man. "Get the gun."

"Try it," said Suzanne.

The undergraduate, who could barely see the cruise director in the gloom, stayed put.

Rods had fallen near the spike baldie had dropped, the butt of a toothbrush that had been cut in half filed to a point and then taped together again to get through inspection. Some things never change.

Rods picked it up, still bent double in agony. This was no time for respecting life and no room for playing nice. Long-haired, who had not seen Rods pick up the implement in the gloom rushed the spaceman, arms flailing, to be stabbed twice, hard, just under the rib cage. Rods thrust up, hoping to reach the heart with his borrowed implement. He didn't but it did not matter. The jacker fell back, the implement still in his stomach. He had time to look at the instrument and at Rods.

"You guys were the best I've ever faced," said Rods.

The long-haired man nodded then died.

"I surrender," said the undergraduate, throwing up his hands and backing into the bulkhead.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

It took the crew of the James Clerk Maxwell the rest of the night and part of the next day to attend to all the post-jacking details. Suzanne got Holly, with a nasty lump on the head, and Oscar, whose convulsions had fortunately eased, to the sick bay scanner. Rods started the long process of rebooting Max, and got the life support back on just as the passengers were beginning to notice that it was getting stuffy. Suzanne used the public-address system for the first time to announce that an attempt to jack the ship had been unsuccessful. The crew was still in control. The ship would dock at their next destination as planned. The route would be maintained. Breakfast would be at the usual time. For security reasons no other details would be given. The rest of the trip should be uneventful. Thank you for travelling with us.

Back at the sick bay scanner Oscar's blood samples analysis showed a trace compound that was dissipating. Holly's lump was treated and both mother and son were sent back to bed, with pain killers. By the time breakfast had been served, Rods had restored Igor to operation and had time for the jackers. Chris was moved from where he had been left, handcuffed and lying face down on the crew quarter's companion way, to be installed in a makeshift brig under the ladder/stairs on the engineering level. Rods then felt free to put ice on his arm and put it into a sling.

Suzanne clucked over it, which Rods found comforting.

"The real frightening part was Igor going down as well. I've only had to reboot Max once before but Igor didn't go down then. That jacking script was powerful stuff. Check the bunks of all three jackers. They'd have some luggage. I want to look at everything, especially anything digital. Take Igor."

"Maybe we should leave it until the passengers go?"

Rods shook his head. "Do it now, before the passengers realise who is missing and look for themselves." Then he said, "I'm glad you grabbed that gun."

She smiled. "I'm just glad I didn't have to fire it."

"I caught a glimpse of your face when you had it. You looked determined. I knew that sweet, girl next door routine of yours was just a front. You can be a tough egg when you want to be."

"Why Rods," she said, crossing her arms. "Sometimes you can be almost charming."

The fight with the hackers proved to be a turning point in Suzanne's dealings with Rods and The Max. She was given access to all parts of the ship, even the sacred engine room – not that she wanted to go there much, especially as Rods was likely to be

singing along to the ship's music - and to most of Max's systems. She was accepted and that meant a lot to her.

Before either Rods or Suzanne could put the stressful jacking incident behind them, there was the small mater of the third and least dangerous of the jackers in The Max's tiny brig. This cell had been created by simply welding plate steel on one side of the under-ladder space, and bars in front. One section had been made to swing out in a basic door. Plumbing was a bucket with a lid and a bottle of water. A mattress and bedding judged too tattered for paying passengers made up the cell's furnishings. When Rods returned to this makeshift brig, right arm in a sling, the jacker was lying on the mattress, asleep. The spaceman banged on the cell bars with the cattle prod brought from the upper decks for the occasion.

"Wakey, wakey!"

Chris, looking all of a fresh faced 18, got up. There was just enough head room for him to stand right up close to the bars. He had been made to strip down to his shorts.

"I want a lawyer."

Rods touched the prod on Chris's hand. The jacker yelled and jerked back, only to bang his head on the cell ceiling.

"What did you say?"

"I said I wanted a lawyer," said Chris, holding his head.

"That's what I thought you said. There are no lawyers out here, Chris, just degrees of pain. My little cattle prod toy here, incidentally, is on its lowest setting and it has an impressive energy source"

"You can't do this to me."

"On the contrary, I can do whatever I damn well please. This is the rim, and you've just tried jacking my ship." Rods unfolded a seat attached to the bulkhead for just such sessions and sat down in front of the cell, holding the probe so that the bare end rested on the bars within poking distance of the jacker who eyed it nervously. "Your identity card says Christopher and the long-haired man called you Chris, so that's the name we'll use?"

Chris nodded.

"It's not a good idea to know the name of people you may be pushing out an airlock real soon, but it's done now."

"You - you wouldn't push me out of an airlock?"

Rods banged the bars again.

"Chris, focus. We're not in controlled space here. This ship is not registered, insured or in any way regulated. Out here each port has its own peace offices, such as they are, but they haven't any jurisdiction over spaceships on a trip and a lot of people depend on The Max maintaining its routes. They're not going to inquire about missing jackers. In the unlikely event of them doing so, they'd accept any story I told them. Digital records will confirm my story, when I decide what that story will be. So, a lot depends on your answers. If your answers are truthful I could drop you off at one of the less reputable mining colonies where you will live - you won't like your life, but you will

live – or, if you are un-cooperative, I could stop over at one of the lesser star systems and open the airlock with you in it. Are we clear here?”

“Clear,” said Chris nervously.

“Good.”

Igor walked up. “I have finished.” This meant he had finished putting the bodies of the two remaining jackers near the port airlock door.

“He’s an old colony model isn’t he?” said Chris. Zap! “Ow! Stop doing that!”

The would-be jacker sat down and tried to curl up, away from Rods’ prod but his cell was too small.

“Chris, the information flow here is one way – I ask questions, you answer. Anything else aside from an answer to a question – such as questions of your own, observations, conversational gambits, asides, curses or remarks of any kind – will be dealt with. Are we also clear on that point?”

“Cl - clear.”

“Good. Now, how did you get into your happy band of jackers?”

“They sent me messages through a friend. I was on Bryson Three, stuck in a cubicle maintaining software for big mining systems with everything going to the Zards.”

“Your ticket out?”

“No one I knew had anything. We were running as hard as we could to stand still, and if you lost your job or had any sort of trouble you were shipped out. Never heard from again. They wanted me to run the jacking script for them.”

“They didn’t have anyone before you? This wasn’t their first time.”

“They’d done it couple of times before – maybe – just once with a major ship, but I also knew the guy they’d worked with before and he died on the last one.”

“He died, so you took his place? You were living dangerously?”

“Yeah, well, like I said, any slip meant being shipped out and they told me about this El Dorado deal – a place where you could go outside...”

Rods suddenly became considerably more interested in the conversation, but he was careful not to show it. Instead he yawned.

“.. you just had to wear hats, no fancy suits, and just once I’d like to feel the wind on my face. They said one more time and they’d have a good place to live, and live like lords in some community with machines to do the work. And I wouldn’t have had to do anything else – didn’t have anything else.” Chris’ voice trailed away.

“Walking around on a surface around here?” said Rods. “The El Dorado thing is a local myth and you fell for it.”

“No, no – at least, that’s what they told me, and they said they’d been there. El Dorado. Paradise. You could walk on the surface and the Zard’s weren’t there. Some sort of terra-formed valley.”

“I see. None of this is helping me very much Chris – El Dorado is still a legend – and you want to help me, you really do. You want to give me some details. Did these guys happen to mention the name of the ship they jacked – the one where your friend died?”

“If they weren’t dead you could have asked them.”

Zap!

“Owww! Hey, I was answering your question!”

“You were making a suggestion. Admittedly it was not on my list of don’ts but now you know it is. Do I have to repeat the question?”

“They told me the name, but I don’t remember it; something Trader, I think.”

“The Dawn Treader?”

“Sounds right. Remember thinking it was a funny name.”

“These guys jacked the Dawn Treader then they need my ship? Why didn’t they sell the Treader and go? Sell it and set up far away from here.”

“They didn’t sell it. It’s still sitting there; something wrong with the engines.”

“You can’t leave a ship around here without crew, and I haven’t heard of it on the market, busted engines or not. Start making sense.”

“There’s some other dude they’ve left with it.”

“A fourth jacker? Chris this is getting alarming. I thought once I spaced you or dumped you at a mining colony that would be the end of your happy little band, but it seems not.”

“The other guy’s not a jacker, he’s a colonist. He was one of the ones still on the ship when they jacked it.”

Rods banged the cell bars.

“Chris I’m a man of limited attention span and low boredom threshold. How come the jackers were fighting the colonists and how come they won? There were more than fifty colonists on the ship, and the crew knew what they were doing.”

“I dunno exactly, but the other guys told me a bit about it. They were part of the expedition. Most of the others had gotten off the ship; were setting up camp. Then my guys started the jacking script. Those still on board who weren’t jackers put up a fight.”

“That’s when your friend got killed?”

“Guess.”

“The survivor was left in this ship and, what, he can’t use the comms to call for help?”

“Don’t think he has control over the ship, so he just sits there. Like a prison except that someone’s on the ship, so no salvage.”

“A technicality out here Chris, there must be something more. But you don’t know where this ship prison is?”

A calculating look flitted across Chris’s face. “No, but I could get you on it easily, with my device.”

“You mean this?”

Rods put down his probe and used his one good arm to take the jacking device that had just caused him so much trouble out of one of Igor’s body compartments. Previous generations would have mistaken it for a large calculator with an unusual keypad.

“Sure, it’s the same system – the key to it, in fact. You get me to the ship, I do the interface, a couple of commands and we switch to voice control.”

“Hmmm!” Rods looked at the device. He could always chance the Max could work it out.

“Your AI’d be pretty old,” said Chris, as if he knew what Rods was thinking. “And this is state of the art – even if the box doesn’t look it.”

“I wouldn’t call Max old while aboard ship. AIs that have been around a while develop a personality, and she may decide that there is a problem with life support on engineering deck.”

“The life support systems on engineer deck has always been a problem,” said Max. She had been listening to the conversation all along, just as she did many other tasks simultaneously. “We have discussed the difficulties before.”

“I remember. Shame if they should suddenly fail, leaving me with just a few seconds to get to a hatch. No time to unlock cell doors.”

“Safety procedures would forbid it.”

“All right, all right,” said Chris. “This ship is a fi..” He stopped short as Rods put down the device and slid his prod through the bars, to almost touch Chris’s bare flesh. Rods put the prod down and picked up the device again without a word. “Okay, what is it worth?” said Chris after a long silence.

“You’re asking questions again, Chris,” said Rods, picking up the prod. “But I’ll indulge this one question. What is what worth?”

“Being able to get you into the Dawn Trader.”

“It’s Treader, as in heavy tread, and your co-operation is worth a more comfortable post-jacking experience. Maybe if you impress me with your zeal I’ll call in a favor and drop you off at one of the better mining colonies – one where the supervisors are neglectful, rather than actively sadistic.”

“That’s not enough. I want guarantees of a decent crib.”

“Or I could drop you off at that colony with the mad doctor who does experiments by exposing people to hard vacuums – how long it takes them to die, the damage to human tissue caused and so on. Last I heard he was exposing individual limbs with the people still attached to see what would happen.” (Rods had heard of such a doctor but thought his base was back in Zard-controlled space.) “If you can get me into the Treader, assuming we can find it, I will have some interest in your welfare. Not much interest, but I will keep you alive. Afterwards I may not give you to the vacuum doctor.”

“That’s not enough...”

Rods reached for his prod again, and Chris fell silent.

“Rods, near planet fall,” said Max.

“Where I get off,” said Chris.

Rods hung the prod on a specially fitted bracket on the wall. “We have a monitor on you. I’ll be back to finish our chat in a few hours. If you have to go the bathroom remember to use the bucket, and close the lid.”

“You can’t leave me like this,” Chris called after him.

Rods did not bother to reply.

When Suzanne had waved off the passengers, and finished chatting with a handful she had come to know, only to drop them into a very uncertain future, she came back on board to find Rods waiting for her at the ward room table.

“Are you going to let me look at that arm.”

Rods could have done with a little more comforting, but instead he said “sit down”.

Suzanne sat down, thinking that Rods abrupt tone meant she was in trouble.

“There is at least a chance your sister is alive.”

“You know this how?” she said sharply, now very intent on the conversation.

“The surviving jacker downstairs has an interesting story.” Rods then told her what Chris had said.

“The Dawn Treader got to wherever it was going and the colonists got off onto the surface. Could they have survived this long?”

Rods shrugged. “Maybe. They were setting up camp, he says, so they must have off loaded some equipment, some food, and he said they could walk on the surface. All this is second hand but it adds up to a chance they’ve survived. But now we have to find it. I didn’t believe in an El Dorado out here because I was thinking of a whole planet. A terra-formed rift valley deep enough, and it’d have to be real deep to keep its atmosphere, might work. It’s still like finding that dragons exist, but it might work”

“What’s the first step?” said Suzanne. This was a new, excited Rods she had not seen before.

“We find the Dawn Treader. It must be at the Oid planet.”

“The planet you said we shouldn’t go to.”

“We can visit. It’s just not a good idea to go out onto the port or the settlement without serious backup, and you don’t go out at all. The Oids are always asking to buy earth women.”

“Oh.”

“Yes, ‘oh’. No one knows what for, and no one has been desperate or callous enough to do it – yet.”

“But there are so many people coming through, and everyone is broke.”

“True. We don’t know of it happening yet, but let’s not have you out in the dome when you go there.”

“Okay.. we’re going there?”

“Only place where the ship could be docked and left alone around here, so these guys must have done a deal with one of the clans. The planet is basically a lawless refuge of the Oids race, but it’s still got a lot of different clans who don’t want to mess with one another. If the Treader is still around here it’s docked out the port there out of the way, under the protection of one of the clans.”

“We go there and get it?”

“First we go through all the stuff our two late and unlamented jackers left behind for clues as to what deal they had done and with which clan, and then I think we’ll need Chris to co-operate on our terms. Maybe you can help with that.”

Chris had finally drifted off to sleep to dream of women pleased to see him in a place far away from his cell on the James Clerk Maxwell when Rods banged on the bars of the cell. He sat up to see both the captain and the cruise director of the Max seated opposite, with Igor standing to one side in what was now a crowded area of the Maxwell. Rods and his electric prod were only too familiar to Chris, but the cruise

director he remembered as being all smiles and charm for him as a paying passenger. As his fellow jackers in the bar had noted, she was also “a looker”. He tried a smile. Suzanne glared back.

“So, it’s this one,” she said, in her best stern voice, leaning back in a chair that had been brought in from engineering. “Tell me again why he’s still alive.”

Chris’s smile died away.

“It’s this colony ship business, Cruise.”

“Oh yes, still around, he’s saying.”

“You’ve a financial interest in the medico on the colony ship.”

“Bitch owes me thirty Cs.”

“You said twenty.” They had previously agreed on 20.

“Interest,” she said, without taking her eyes off Chris.

“Thirty it is. So, Chris, you will be pleased to learn we can spare a few moments to discuss your future. Ships with busted engines are not of much use to us, but some idea of where the colonists are would bring you a longer, less miserable life.”

“But I don’t know anything about where they are,” whimpered Chris.

“You must know something, Chris. Everyone knows something, even if they don’t know that they know it. A chance remark; a comment.”

“If I tell you all I know, you’ll kill me.”

Rods banged the cell bars, and brought the tip of the prod to the point of almost touching Chris’s shrinking body. “That wasn’t an answer to a question, Chris!”

Suzanne sighed. “Look, we’ve got enough from the digital stuff we took from the other two. We’re only after confirmation and this bunny is useless. Why don’t we get Igor to just snap this guy’s neck and stick him in the air lock.”

“Why kill him first?” Rods leaned back, leaving the prod to rest on the cross bars, within easy poking distance of the captive’s flesh. “It’s more fun if we space him alive.”

Suzanne rolled her eyes. “More fun for you. I have to clean up, and it’s so messy if they hang on and blow up while still in the lock.”

“Ira cleans up; why not let me have some fun.”

“Sure Ira cleans up, but I supervise. There’s always stuff left over – some icky bit that I have to point out. It’s horrible. Snapped neck and a nice, clean disposal or find yourself another cruise director, mister.”

“Then what about wrap in clear plastic with duct tape, so I can see his expression when he’s sucked out?”

Suzanne shook her head. “Had to throw out the last lot of clear plastic; too much blood on it, and we’ve used all the duct tape.”

“We have?” Rods let his eyes wonder from Chris, who had an expression of sick horror on his face, to his cruise director, wondering if they really had used all the duct tape, as he did occasionally need some.

She folded her arms and glared at him. “You and your games. Makes me sick.”

Rods shrugged. “Oh alright, snap his neck then, see if I care.”

“Igor!” said Suzanne. Igor moved forward.

“Wait,” shrieked Chris who had been watching the exchange with growing horror.

“I like to see necks snapped Chris,” said Suzanne, putting on an evil grin. “Slow motion is better. Fun to watch.”

“I can still be useful,” Chris whimpered, on his knees, hands on the bars.

“If you’re not going to let me have any fun, then let the man speak.”

“Oh, very well! It’s always about you men and your obsessions. Igor: hold.” The robot’s extendable arms had almost reached the jacker’s throat. And in what way could you be useful?

“If we go to the Oid planet I can take you to the Dawn Treader.”

“You do know where it is?” said Rods

“I’ve never been there, and never seen the ship but the others gave me the dock number and contact details for the clan. It’s in my PA somewhere in notes; subject heading ‘ship’.”

“We’ll check it out. If there are problems we’ll be back, and we won’t be as nice as we’ve been this time.”

“Should snap his neck anyway,” said Suzanne.

“I can open up the ship for you,” whimpered Chris, “I think I know how to do it from the device.”

“Think?” said Rods. “You want to do more than just think, Chris. Cruise, let’s not dispose of him just yet. He may be of use.”

Suzanne glared at Rods then at Chris. “Oh, alright,” she said standing up. “My fun can wait. But if you’re going to torture him, keep the hatches closed. The screaming is irritating.”

“You were always so nice,” whispered Chris, aware that Rods was hanging up the prod.

“I’m nice to all the passengers,” said Suzanne, “I get better tips.”

Suzanne and Rods waited until they got back to the crew quarters, closing the hatches behind them, before bursting out laughing – Rods’ barking easily drowning out Suzanne’s giggles.

“Arf! Arf! Arf! You.. you and your games make me sick! Arf! Arf! Arf! Too... too much blood on the plastic. Arf! Arf! Arf!”

They fell with their backs against the forward crew quarter hatch and slid down until they were seated. Their faces turned in and were almost touching and Suzanne knew she should turn away but she didn’t. Instead, Rods did. He stood up and shook himself, smiling now rather than laughing.

“Interrogations with you are fun!” he said and walked off.

Suzanne thought it was the best compliment he had ever given her before recollecting, with a start, that she had a fiancé.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Chris was given back his clothes, and entertainment tablet – which Max would carefully watch for any hacking attempts – and permitted to use the engineering level bathroom, with Igor in close attendance. Rods rejected Suzanne’s suggestion that Chris be put in the spare cabin. They had reputations as monsters to uphold. Monsters did not give spare cabins to prisoners.

“We should make him sleep in the air lock, just to prove a point,” he told her, “but it’s not all secure and he might damage something.”

With jacker Chris languishing in his cell and the usual layover at Finn’s Reef put to one side – the tiny colony there would forgive them once all was explained – they made straight for the Oid planet at top speed, Rods keeping a careful eye on the engineering displays and on his likely future schedule. When not conveying passengers, The Max kept an irregular round and so was not expected at any particular port at any particular time, but lengthy absences would be noticed, and he did not want to draw attention to what they had found. Suzanne had been sternly warned that if she did tell a soul about El Dorado she would be sharing Chris’s cell.

“Well, that makes a change from being threatened with a spacing,” she said, “so is something wrong with the airlock?”

“You’re now known to a lot of people, and spacing you might upset them. If I put you in a cell they would understand.”

“Doesn’t make sense to me, but Chris’s cell is too small for two.”

“I’ll build another in the same space on B deck but, seriously Cruise, you can’t tell anyone. It would cause pandemonium. No one would talk about anything else, and the Zards would inevitably get wind of it. They might send a squadron which we wouldn’t have a ghost of a chance of resisting and they could even know where to look. Then your sister becomes a Zard slave and you may never see her again.”

“Oh alright, I wasn’t going to tell anyone.” Later she deleted the long notes she had been writing to her mother and Richard, replacing them with the cryptic comment that they were making progress.”

Chris was dreaming of available women again, on his third day in his tiny cell when he was woken by his cell door being unlocked. Igor slapped handcuffs on him, grabbed one of his upper arm and started to lead him. Chris now knew not to struggle against Igor’s grip, but he never knew when to shut up.

“I need a shower”.

No answer.

“Have we reached another planet?”

No answer.

“Where are you taking me?”

“To Rods.”

Chris was led through the main airlock down a transparent tube into another airlock and out into a wide passageway made of what to human eyes seemed to be grey stone with a life support duct running along one corner and bare electric lights every few meters. The tall, grim Rods took out a remote, pressed a button and the cuffs unlocked.

“Does this mean I can go?”

“Sure, if you want to go and talk to those guys?” said Rods as he took the handcuffs, pointing down the passage, to a group of creatures behind a waist high barrier. “They’d welcome you. There’s some obscure ritual thing they like to do with human bodies. They’d prefer a woman but a guy is still worth something.”

The creatures were tall and gangly with grey fur and a face inset with big, square, pearly white teeth never covered by any lips, so to a human it looked as if they were always grinning inanely. They all wore black hats, similar to a nineteenth century stove pipe hat but somewhat shorter and slightly bent - all part of some deep, dark aspect of Oid culture. Chris had a vague recollection of the story The Cat in the Hat from his childhood. The Oids were a grey version of the cat.

“The colony ship is this way,” said Rods, pointing down the passage, in the opposite direction to the Oids. You can choose what direction you want to go in.”

“Your way sounds good.”

Watching through a monitor from the ship, Suzanne thought the Oids looked evil. She did not like the way they stared at the small group from the Max, and then at the Max itself when the group moved off, as if expecting a woman to emerge that they could kidnap. She had been in half a mind to disobey Rods and follow them to the Dawn Treader for first hand news of her sister, but after seeing the Oids she decided to stay well away from the airlock.

The Treader was a long walking distance down the passage, and Chris still could not shut up.

“Did you do a deal with the clan guys?”

Rods looked at him.

“Hey, just asking. It might be useful information when it comes to getting in.”

Rods decided that, for the moment, more could be gained by being civil.

“Two mountains is the name of the clan. I won’t even try to pronounce it in Oid language, but that’s the English equivalent according to the translator. If they’d been able to get into the ship without damaging it and knew enough about the engines to get it moving the Treader would be long gone. I told the clan head’s representative that I can get in and may be able to fix the engines so they said go for it.”

“Aren’t they worried you’ll take off with it.”

“It’s locked in. We’ll have to do a deal. If any cargo is left aboard we can always give him that in exchange for taking it away – or give them the ship in exchange for the cargo.”

“The colonists won’t be happy.”

“Chris, you’re a jacker, remember, and your gang stole it in the first place, so why should you care what the colonist think? Here we are. Do your thing.”

Chris saw an airlock door, just like the one they had left and through an oval shaped porthole he could see the Dawn Treader - a two-deck ship as opposed to The Max’s three but a touch longer than The Max. He flicked on the jacking device which soon synced with the airlock security.

“Shall we go in?” said Chris.

Rods took the device from him. “What do I do to get voice command?”

“Difficult to tell by the screen. What’s it worth?”

“Igor, pressure” said Rods without looking up.

Igor’s hands shot out and, before Chris could move, grabbed both his upper arms. The robot then started to pull Chris apart.

“Ahh! You said you wouldn’t hurt me.”

“If you think I’m hurting you now, wait until I tell Igor to really start pulling. He doesn’t have any of the behavioral blocks about hurting humans they used to build into robots, and he’s very powerful.”

“Go in front or behind,” said Igor.

“The instructions on the screen are unclear Chris. Shall we go over this now, or do you want to wait until you are in greater pain?”

“I need to see the screen.” Rods held it up for him to look at. “Tap on the third line, reads Vin3000. Then say something.”

Rods did as instructed, and the screen disappeared to be replaced with a single "good to go".

"Voice command," he said to the gate.

"Voice recognized. Identification?"

"Rods, with two others. Igor and Chris. Voice commands only from me."

"You call me Dawn. Enter."

The gate clicked. Rods found he could pull it open.

"Igor stop!"

"Ow!" said Chris, indignantly rubbing his arms. Rods grabbed him and pushed him into the gate. "Hey!"

"You first and yell for the colonist who should be on here somewhere. Igor, you're the rear."

"I like in front," grumbled the robot.

"If it's dangerous I make you go in front. That's fair."

Chris halloed for all he was worth as they walked the passageways. Rods pulled out his boarding pistol. He meant the colonist, whoever he was, no harm but the colonist may not know that. The Dawn, an old ship like The Max, had a similar layout except that with only two decks, there was no lift. They found the connecting ladder and moved up to the crew accommodation.

"You should yell before you open the main hatch," said Rods.

"Huh!" said Chris, turning to look at Rods, with the hatch already half open.

"Yell something."

"Oh right." Chris turned back to the hatch and opened it to be confronted by a person of about his own age with a wispy beard who plunged a kitchen knife into Chris' chest.

"I got one," he yelled.

Chris screamed and slumped to the deck.

Rods clamped one hand on the hatch and brought up the pistol.

"Stand away, and leave the hatch where it is."

"I got one of you," hissed the man, raising his hands.

"Very good, but we're the rescue party. I've got a relative of one of colonists on my ship."

The colonist's mouth fell open and he looked down at Chris, now lying motionless in a pool of spreading blood.

"Oh!" he said.

"Whadda you mean you don't know the name of the planet you went to?"

They had moved Chris's body into the cramped wardroom of the Dawn, removed the knife and wrapped the body in a ground sheet found in the hold. The colonist, known as Logan, had spoken with Suzanne via the ship's port link and had accepted that Rods was telling the truth.

"I'm telling you I don't know. None of us knew. We weren't told the co-ordinates and we weren't told the local name. We weren't told the last two ports we went to and I don't even know when we stopped. I don't think it's in the ship's log or backup."

"It isn't. The jacker script messed things up but if location was ever entered it was later removed. Not even the navigation log shows where the ship came from. What a mess. Coming back to here after the fight at el Dorado, how many nights?"

"Two, I think, but I just can't be sure. I was out for most of it and then they drugged me."

Rods sighed. "Let's move on. You still seem to have a lot of the equipment on board?"

"One pod was unloaded. Some food, some survival stuff, and there was already a building."

"A building? I thought the place was deserted."

"Oh it's not deserted. There are animals and apparently intelligent life forms."

"Intelligent? Human, what?"

Logan shrugged. "I was just going to unload one of the cargo pods and then check it all out myself. Then everything happened real fast. I've been here ever since. Only other bit I heard was that the building was deserted. They were talking on the comms about how they could just move into it. Whoever terra-formed the valley must have left it."

"These intelligent other things weren't living in it?"

"Seems not. There was talk of a big mound North of the building, towards the rift valley wall."

"And you have no idea where this planet might be?"

"No, sorry."

"Then we're back to the poem."

"Poem?"

Rods explained about the cryptic message. "You don't know anything about Blake do you?"

Logan shook his head.

"Never heard of him before. I'm on the logistics side. Would really have liked to get out on the surface."

"You may yet, if we find it. In the mean time you've got to stay here."

"Wait, what? Here? Can't I come with you?"

"I can't move the ship and I don't want to leave it unoccupied for the same reason you jacker pals didn't want to leave it. The Oids check there's someone on board every couple of days right?"

"Yep, but I dunno what I could do to stop them if they decided to take the ship over."

"That's true but they'd have to damage it and now you have some control over Dawn they'd find it difficult. Anyway, the Oids have some idea that humans tend to notice if one of them goes missing, although they don't really understand why. They'd be reluctant to do anything with you still on board. I'll leave you in control. Look active, move cargo around. Go onto the wharf once a day and walk up and down for 10 minutes as if you're expecting something to happen."

"You mean actually go out?"

“Yep, but don’t move more than a few meters from the gate. If any of the locals approach then get back inside quick, and don’t open up. Tell ‘em to go away through the translator. If they refuse, then call the Clan contact I’ll give you, and get him to shift them. You don’t tell them anything else. If an official-looking delegation turns up, check with the clan contact that they are official and then deal with them through the gate translator. Strict instructions not to let anyone on board, that sort of thing. If they press too hard, close off comms.”

“Got it – I think, but how long is all this going to take?”

“We’ll try and check back in a couple of weeks?”

“Another two weeks of this ship.” Logan spread his arms. “I’m getting real bored with this place.”

“We’re trying to unravel a situation here – deal with a mystery involving a sizable chunk of the galaxy, Logan. You’ll have to do your part.”

Logan sighed. “I guess so, but what about your friend here?” he said gesturing at the sheet wrapped form on the floor. “What am I going to do with this body for two weeks?”

“Everyman’s death diminishes me and all that, but Chris was no friend of mine and the deed is done. You can try cutting the body up and cycling him through the ship’s disposal system which, trust me, is a messy business. Or you can wrap him up a bit tighter, wait for rigor mortis to set in and stick him upright in your freezer. It should be large enough to take the body without becoming unduly crowded. Tie him or duct tape him to one of the shelves so that he doesn’t fall over unexpectedly. That can be scary, even when you know he’s there. Again, trust me on this.”

“Can’t you take him and tip him out an airlock at a convenient point.”

“That’ll be his eventual fate, but I’m not parading around the port with a dead body. As I said, the Oids don’t know much about humans but they do know the difference between a live and a dead one, and I told them I wouldn’t take anything off the ship. They’ll be watching.”

“Oh! And we can’t move the ship?”

“There’s nothing wrong with the engines as far as I can tell. The problem is the operating system. Rob and Hoss built a failsafe into it which has triggered and I can’t untrigger it until I find them.”

“I’m stuck here, then. Just me and Chris.”

“Chris is more congenial the way he is,” said Rods getting up to go, “not to mention more trustworthy. You two have fun now.”

“Now we know what happened,” said Suzanne when they were well on their way to the next port and she had chewed over the events with Rods, “we just don’t know where it happened.”

“That’s about the size of it.”

Like Rods, Suzanne had taken Chris’s death lightly. He had no immediate family to notify. More distant relatives would, eventually, be informed of his death in a mining colony.

“We can still search planet by planet,” she said

“That’s going to take months, even if now we know what to look for.”  
“Or we can try and work out my darling sister’s puzzle.”

## CHAPTER NINE

Another port came and went. Suzanne was aware that the flood of immigrants was now easing, as all possible places in the mining colonies were taken, which worried her – what use would Rods have for her if there were no complaining passengers? But at the least for the moment the next load of passengers was two ports away and she had some spare time to take another look at her sister’s message. She arranged the texts underneath each other.

*Fiery the Angels rose, & as they rose deep thunder roll'd  
 Around their shores indignant burning with the fires of Orc  
 And Bostons Angel cried aloud as they flew thro' the dark night  
 Tiger, tiger burning bright.  
 In the forests of the night,  
 What immortal hand or eye  
 Could frame thy fearful symmetry?*

Then the numbers - 136746622211131

And the planet names.

Xeno’s Dive III	9257610
Fermat II	9888392
Everest Folly	9645819
Mickey’s Dive IV	9140891
Suman IV	9557141
Jupiter VIII	9322893
Honmen II	9980672
Schrodinger III	9765813
Porter’s Place II	9874336
Concord Down III	9034221
Logan II	9546721
George’s Claim	9122045
Getty IV	9390221
Hamish II	9654983
Sabrina III	9224472

That night in her room she studied the riddle for what seemed to her to be an age, until the figures danced and the planet names whirled around her. Her sister’s numbers had no zeros, she realized, but the planet catalog numbers had zeros. Did that mean anything? Tired out by this endless go-round of verse, planet and numbers she eventually put her head on the table for just a minute, so she thought. She dreamt of her sister.



Eve was just as Suzanne remembered her, when they last spoke in one of these few nooks at the crowded Earth Station where privacy was still possible, if you whispered. She was a larger version of Suzanne with a preference for button up shirts and skirts which she thought more professional, as opposed to Suzanne's T shirts and jeans and she spoke, as she often did, one hand to her face, her elbow resting on anything convenient – in this case a ledge. That was the conversation in which Eve had told Suzanne that she was leaving on the quest for El Dorado, and that she would send for her, Richard and her mother as soon as she could.

"If I don't come back, look at this," she had said, passing her a folded slip of paper with the clues. "But you must never, ever put it in a computer system. The Zards knew about this place once, but it's been forgotten somehow. The other colonists weren't going to tell me where it was, but I wouldn't agree to anything unless they told me where it was and they needed a medico."

"Oh Eve! It's still a risk"

"Don't 'Oh Eve' me. Of course it's a risk, but what choice do we have for a future with the Zards squeezing us. They don't care about us. They'll just keep squeezing until the human race goes under. This may be a way out, at least for us. Now go ahead and look."

Suzanne unfolded the note.

"But what does this mean?" she said after glancing at it.

"I thought you might like Blake. I had to assemble it in a hurry."

"The Tiger is the Blake poem?"

"First verse, yes."

"Is this some literary code? And what's the replicant reference?"

In real life, Suzanne recalled later, Eve had not answered. She had kissed on the forehead said "love you, love mum" and had left. But in the dream Eve answered, sounding like Rods.

"I didn't do literature Do you think I'm like those people in films who know ancient mysteries and make up riddles in Greek for others to solve. I tried to just use the first lines of Blake, but I was missing something."

"What?"

Eve leaned forward to whisper in Suzanne's ear. "I needed an M".

Then she was gone.

Suzanne woke abruptly, looked down at the paper in front of her, her gaze falling on the numbers, then up at the poems.

"No," she breathed, "It can't be that simple."

For his part, Rods was dreaming of engines that needed fixing and women who were getting him into trouble, when he became aware of someone pounding on his cabin hatch, shouting. He jumped up and flung it open to be confronted by an ecstatic Suzanne.

"I've worked it out! I've worked it out!" she yelled. Then did a double take. "Is that what you wear to bed?"

"Just be thankful I have shorts on, Cruise. Next time you'll think better of disturbing the captain's much needed beauty sleep."

"Come to the table. Quick," she said and dashed through the ward room hatch.

He came in a minute later, unshaven and bleary eyed but had taken a moment to put on pants. Suzanne thought he looked good unshaven and then wrenched her mind back to the topic at hand.

"What's all this fuss about, Cruise." He thought he had not seen her looking so cheerful. "What have you worked out?"

"The numbers are just a code," she said, putting the paper in front of him. "Look at the numbers."

Rods saw 136746622211131, but with slashes after every third number – 136/746/622/211/131/412/422.

"It's line, word number in line then letter. It spells out F E R M A T I I."

Rods checked for himself then said, "Max get me the scans on Fermat II, everything we have, and keep all this stuff tightly quarantined. No leakages. Project it on the table."

"Coming right up," said Max.

"Okay, a rocky planet comparable to earth in size," said Rods, as the projection appeared. "With a single rift valley along the equator more or less. Mars-like as planet classifiers say. The rift valley is 16 kilometers deep. Now that's a hole. Quite a scar on the surface. How old is the scan Max?"

"Twenty years."

"Hmmm! Well, they would have to have atmosphere in the whole valley. There doesn't look to be any vegetation but it was 20 years ago and the scans were about minerals. Max, bring it right up and let's scan along the valley. They studied the image in silence for a few moments."

"There," said Rods, pointing. Suzanne could see an area in the middle of the valley where the image was slightly fuzzy. "Max, they would have done a thermoscan at the same time. Bring up the temperature contrasts."

The fuzzy area turned a light blue, as did several other areas in the scan."

Rods grabbed one of Suzanne's hands and held it between his own, smiling at her.

She could not decide whether she was alarmed or pleased at this new, smiling Rods.

"You're a genius, you know that."

"I'm sure I am," Mr. Rods, "but why am I a genius because those areas are blueish?"

"I'm pretty sure that means they're clouds, so it had an atmosphere 10 years ago and might have developed a lot since. This is El Dorado." Rods gesturing at the map. "If your sister is anywhere in the Galaxy it is right here."

Suzanne was initially pleased but when she later looked at the map in detail, she thought the place looked barren.

## CHAPTER TEN

The next port of call was Karl's Rift, which Rods thought they should go to, and dispose of their business quickly, without seeming to hurry. They could wave aside the schedule for a few days, and explain the absence by saying that the engines were giving trouble. That trouble could only be fixed at Fin's Reef.

"You've been asking too many people about El Dorado, Cruise," said Rods when Suzanne questioned him about the need to explain anything, "and I didn't stop you because I didn't think it important. Fortunately, no one's paid much attention, but if we disappear for any length of time then reappear, and you've replaced your endless questions about El Dorado with furtive looks, people will wonder."

"I don't do furtive looks," said Suzanne. "You remember the interrogation? I'm a good enough liar when I need to be."

"Better not to lie at all. Shut up about El Dorado. If asked just say you've given up asking. Above all, you must not even breathe that you know it's for real and have a location. As I've told you before the news would cause pandemonium. No one would talk about anything else. Then the Zards will hear about it."

"Can't I tell a couple of people who should know?"

"Cruise, that's the same as telling everyone. Those people will tell just a couple of people they think can be trusted, and before you know it a Zard fleet is on our doorstep. Those guys will then enslave or execute whoever they can get their hands on while denying the massacre and complaining bitterly that their rights under interstellar law are not being respected. There you are, El Dorado is gone, you sister probably is gone, and all because you couldn't keep your mouth shut."

As it happened, Rods was the one who had to lie, getting stuck with a valuable cargo of semi processed ore for ship lift crystals, despite his protestations that he would have to go back to his stock of spare parts at Fin's Reef. That's on the way, he was told, and that he was the only one the valuable cargo could be entrusted to. Eventually they departed and at meal times Suzanne found herself sharing the ward room table with assorted pieces of equipment and weaponry which Rods insisted on bringing up from the lockers on C deck. One such item was a container about the size and shape of a pack that hikers on Earth might have worn. Like those packs the container was also designed to be worn on the back, but had an arm arranged so that it wrapped around the body of the wearer to present a small instrument panel to that user.

"It's a lift pack," said Rods, noticing Suzanne looking at it.

“And why is it on the table at breakfast?”

“I could use it to drop down into the valley. It’s anti-gravity. Switch it on and you go up. Have it on when you’re falling and can fall at whatever rate you want, or go back up. It’s fun to use.”

“If you like that sort of thing,” said Suzanne, “so is this how we’re going to get into the valley?”

“Nope. The pack is for when it gets up close and personal. We’ll leave The Max out of the way somewhere just above the cliffs and take the shuttle in.”

Suzanne had only become aware that The Max had a shuttle a week after coming on board, and only after seeing an area marked shuttle while working on floor plans, and asking about it. She found that it was by far the newest part of the ship, being a mere ten years old, and capable of seating maybe 15 people plus the pilot and co-pilot, in comfort and even style.

“Yep,” said Rods, when Suzanne mentioned this. “It was salvaged off some swanky cruise ship but with the engines all fouled up. I was able to fix it and paid for it with some cargo hauling. It’s not much use to me normally – we don’t do the sightseeing side trips it was designed for – but I’ll want it someday.”

“You could work on your bits and pieces in the shuttle,” Suzanne said hopefully. “There’s enough room and the annoying cruise director wouldn’t be trying to eat her breakfast next to them.”

“The annoying cruise director has to be shown these items – the information could come in useful if we’re cornered by hostile life forms and have to shoot our way out.”

“Will we be cornered by hostile life forms?”

“No idea, but there was something about creatures on the surface. You need to practise with the comms, and strip and clean Mr. Sig Sauer and Mr. Glock, whom I’ve laid out of you, ready for those intimate encounters.”

“I don’t want to take Mr. Glock,” said Suzanne, regarding the pistol sourly. “I feel we’ve grown apart.”

“A couple more dates, Cruise, and when the action gets heavy, you’ll learn to appreciate Mr. Glock’s qualities. If we find your sister, and we’re still in ammunition, you can introduce her to Mr. Sig Sauer.”

“I don’t think any gun is Eve’s type.”

“Well, the date Igor is bringing to the party will be the real decider. He’s taking a machine gun I picked up at a bargain sale. An older model, but 7.62 millimeter shells at a good delivery rate will keep hostile aliens away from the annoying cruise director and friends.”

As Suzanne had feared, Fermat II proved to be a forbidding, desolate lump of rock with a huge, deep gash along the equator. Rods brought The Max in and left her suspended, the engines ticking over, just above the surface and back from the northern edge of the gigantic rift valley. They took the shuttle through the thin winds that howled along the precipice top and over the chasm, to give Suzanne the first proper view of the

valley that had swallowed her sister. Below them clouds drifted slowly along the valley, and below the clouds was a green valley floor cut by a single, wandering band of blue.

"Must be plant life," said Rods, "terraforming has gone on apace since the last survey, and that must be a sizable river if we can see it at this distance."

Suzanne pressed her face against the port side flight deck viewing screen of the shuttle as they descended hoping to see some sign of her sister. Instead she noticed several giant cones rising at intervals from the valley floor.

"Are those hills natural? They look regular."

"Dunno," said Rods, but there's supposed to be a building somewhere. On a hill, close to the river. We'll look for that first. They cruised up the valley – in the same direction as the rotation, or East – for a time until the vegetation become distinctly sparser, revealing more of the valley's dark, rocky floor and there were no more hills, so they turned back and dropped lower, following the river, which flowed west. The shuttle had telescopic lenses that could be set to scan, revealing a landscape of stunted trees and bushes growing out of a tortured landscape of rocks covered by green plants that Suzanne realized, with a start, must be a form of grass. There were groups of roaming brown dots which closer inspection showed were mini-buffalos.

"Quite an eco-system," muttered Rods, but otherwise neither human said much. To someone had spent their life on earth, the landscape would seem monotonous and unappealing, but for the sheer size of it. The valley was wide enough for even the vast cliffs to seem distant and for the sun to shine on the river and much of its catchment. But to Rods and in particular Suzanne, who only knew earth through holograms, it was a magical place. The atmosphere on the surface was about the equivalent of three thousand meters above sea level on Earth meaning that they could breathe easily but should not do any violent activity until they had acclimatized. They both wanted to get out, but finding the building that the Dawn Treader colonists had discovered came first.

They cruised on, drifting lower until Suzanne could see the mini-buffalos drinking at the river with her own eyes. They came to a line of small, irregularly shaped hills, boulders heaped on each other with grass growing out of them at all angles and beyond that the ocean – on Earth it would have called a large lake but to the two humans it was a huge, rolling ocean stretching across the valley and west as far as they could see.

"My stars!" exclaimed Suzanne. "We could go swimming! Would it have fish?"

"Swimming?" said Igor, who had been sitting in the passenger section for the trip but now came into the pilot's cabin.

"You go in the water, Igor."

"Questions and recreation later Cruise," said Rods. "That must be the building."

Gazing at the water, Suzanne had not noticed the structure, which was a collection of loosely linked one and two story buildings built of bricks cut from the valley sub strata, so that it seemed to grow from the valley itself. Beside it was the missing supply pod from the Dawn Treader but no signs of any of the colonists.

They put down at what was meant to be the landing field, a flat, overgrown field just beside the structure, and stepped out. They had coats on with the hoods tied up over peaked caps and cream on their faces, as they knew ultraviolet radiation would be a high, but Suzanne could still feel a slight breeze wafting up the valley, on her face.

“Oh my,” she said, realizing what she was feeling for the first time in her life, natural wind on her face. “Oh my! Oh MY!” She stood for a moment, enraptured. It was cold but crisp. Invigorating.

“Now this is the place where little Emily should grow up,” she said firmly, coming out of her rapture. “She should live in a house near the river and play here under shade with her friends and have a fairy party for her birthday.”

“Fairy party?”

“I read about very young children having them on Earth, a long time ago. Some girl dresses up as a fairy with a wand.” She raised her hand as if it was holding a wand. Or they could have clowns come. I would have liked to have had a fairy party when I was a child.”

“Well at the moment before little Emily gets to her fairy party she’ll have to avoid being eaten.”

“Eaten? By what?”

“By that! See in the slight dip in the ground, about mid distance in front of us, before the tree line.”

Suzanne saw a wicked looking snout, just visible in the grass, and before she knew it Mr. Glock was in her hands, safety catch off.

“You and Mr. Glock are getting along better.”

“I could grow to like him,” said Suzanne.

Rods laughed. “Finger off the trigger, Cruise. Lay it alongside the pistol. I don’t want to shoot this guy unless I have to. It’s just doing its job - although that job includes trying to eat us.”

“Another creature. East. Short range,” said Igor, who had also been taking in the view, but for different reasons.

“Say, what?” Rods whirled, picked up a stone and threw it hard at a clump of long grass. Something shrieked and shot into view. It was another creature, like the one in front of them. It was lion-like but with a longer snout comparable to that of a lizard.

“A Zard lizard lion. A Lard! These are predators from the Zard home planet,” said Rods. The Lard hissed loudly at them, flicking a forked tongue. “These things wanted to ambush us. No wonder the Zards are so good at ambushing. Keep an eye on our other friend.”

Suzanne looked around to see that the other Lard had crept out its hiding place and was edging towards them. She brought up her pistol and it stopped. Rods picked up another rock and threw it at the second Lard.

“G’on, get lost!” The Lard started when the rock hit it, hissed noisily and reluctantly circled away, glaring malevolently at them. “Typical predator behavior. Not sure what it’s up against, so it leaves. Now you get rid of yours.”

“Huh?”

“I got rid of mine. You get rid of yours. Throw something at it and shout insults.”

“I don’t know any insults,” said Suzanne, lowering her pistol. She and the first Lard eyed one another uncertainly.

“Sure you do. You and your sister must have fought when you were kids?”

"I suppose we did sometimes." Suzanne picked up a stone, threw it and yelled: "Go away, Lard, I thoroughly disapprove of you!" More by accident than design the stone hit the Lard on one shoulder. It hissed and stalked off to join its colleague, and both creatures sauntered off into the forest of pocket sized trees. Just as they reached the tree line, the bigger of the two Lards snarled over its shoulder at the humans.

"There you go, it went away" said Rods, holstering his own pistol "but it's a shame."

"Why is it a shame?"

"I think it's a male-female hunting pair. Maybe they have hungry Lard cubs back in their den."

"Oh!" Suzanne had not considered the animal's point of view. "We could get them something."

"Little Emily would make a nice snack."

"They can't have Emily! I was thinking of meat in The Max's freezer."

"Let's not start feeding the animals, Cruise. They have what looks to be a whole food chain out there to snack on. This is a partial recreation of the Zard home planet it seems and a thriving one. Whoever put all this together really knew what they were doing."

"But it's Zard, not human, won't the Zards still be around?"

"Maybe not Zards as such but I think the cone, the hill over yonder," Rods pointed South to where one of the hills that were a regular feature of the valley, loomed over the structure, "may hold the intelligent creatures we've been warned about". As Suzanne watched, three objects flew out of the top of the bare crown of the hill and circled towards them.

"Okay let's move smartly to the structure," said Rods, who had also noticed the moving specks.

"Are they birds?"

"Look too big."

They jogged into what was obviously the building's reception area. A big display window was still intact, there was a couch, paintings on the walls, and a desk. The furniture was tattered but otherwise they might have been in a reception room anywhere. Rods and Suzanne knelt behind the desk, Suzanne still clutching her Glock, the weight of which she now found to be reassuring. Then she remembered her sister would have been there.

"Eve!" she called.

"Cruise, quiet a moment, until we see what's up with our new arrivals. If you have to look, look around the desk, don't poke your head over it. Igor, back into that passage just behind that door. No action until I command."

"No action, I am behind," said Igor.

In the subsequent stillness, Suzanne heard rustling and scrapings outside. She peered around the side of the desk and glimpsed one of the creatures through the grimy display window. Reptilian wings folded back, the creature was a cross between pictures of gargoyles she had seen and of Earth monkeys, moving on bent legs and arms as monkeys do. She lost sight of it and then heard Chee! Chee! Perhaps the creatures were

deciding what to do next. Looking around she realized there was a tablet on a shelf just under the desk. She transferred Mr. Glock to her left hand, took the tablet out and flicked it on. There was no security, somehow it still had power, and the last page accessed was still up.

The screen was headed:

“The Hermitage Safety Warnings”

“Hermitage?” thought Suzanne, and then remembered that the big sign in the reception area, above the desk behind which she now cowered said “The Hermitage”.

There was a list of dangers, including one which said “flying creatures”. She opened it.

“Flying creatures, akin to flying monkeys from the mound,” it read. “Hostile. Very dangerous. Do not approach. If you see them run for The Hermitage. Call for assistance. They can open doors. They will enter rooms.”

She tapped Rods on the shoulder with the screen. His eyes widened as he read it.

“They’re looking around the shuttle, I think,” he whispered. Suzanne could hear them calling. “And Max says she can see more creatures moving from the mound, not flying. It’s time to leave.”

“What about Eve?”

“Don’t seem to be anyone here, Cruise and we won’t help her by getting trapped in this place. We’ll come back at night and..”

They heard a “Chee! Chee!” And a breath of air as the doors opened. She could hear bare feet flapping on the carpet. Suzanne just had time to grab Mr. Glock in both hands when one of the gargoyles jumped on the desk above her, arms upraised, fangs bared. Suzanne pushed Mr. Glock in front of her, arms straight and steady as she could, as Rods had taught her, and let her finger slip onto the trigger. At the last moment, another fragment of Rods advice leapt into her mind about firing too high and she dropped her aim to the creature’s waist.

Blam! Blam!

The creature vanished. Another shot from Rods, echoing in the room.

“Igor! Fire!”

A single burst of machine gun fire blew out the display window, deafening Suzanne, her ears already ringing from her own shots.

“Up Cruise,” he heard Rods say through the ringing in her ears. “We’ve won this round.”

Suzanne got up. The gargoyle that had jumped onto the desk lay dead, one hole in the chest – she had been aiming lower- and another which had made a mess of its forehead. She thought the creatures looked more obscene dead than alive. Rods had disposed of his creature with a single shot and Igor had almost cut the third in two with one burst of his weapon.

“I always wanted to see the machine gun in action,” said Rods, gleefully. “Cruise, well done!”

“Huh!” said Suzanne, still in a daze.



“Well done!”

“Oh right, yes. Thank you,” she said without conviction.

“But you left one bit out.”

“Oh! What was that?”

“You should have said ‘take that’ or ‘eat this’, or ‘don’t snarl at me’ or whatever, before you fired.”

“I wasn’t concerned with bandying words with the creature,” she said, “just killing it”. She put Mr. Glock back in her coat pocket, aware that her hand was shaking.

Rods was by then too busy peering out the reception area door to pay much attention to the response. “Two more of those creatures keeping their distance, wondering what’s happened to the advance party, and scouting for the party of creatures I can see coming down that mound.”

Suzanne could also see them through the hole where the display window had been, but at that distance they looked like dots.

“Time for us to go,” said Rods. “Igor! Quick scan through the structure. Double time. You’re looking for any colonists; and grab another of the screens on the way through. We’ll see what Max can do with it.”

“Scan for colonists, Take screen. Return here.”

“No, come out the far end,” said Rods, pointing deep into the structure. “The western end. We’ll pick you up in the shuttle. And keep in Comm.

“Exit western end, keep in comm.”

“Good robot. Now go.”

They made it back to the shuttle without incident, Suzanne took Mr. Glock out again and kept him ready, one eye on the flying dots she could see to their North, until they got inside. Rods shifted the craft to the far end of the structure. Igor emerged carrying a screen but without having found anyone. They were just about to lift off again, the two remaining flying creatures obviously keeping an eye on them, when Suzanne spotted movement at the edge of forest of stunted trees. It was a colonist – a bearded man, stumbling, dragging one leg and waving frantically. Suzanne got up to help him, but Rods restrained her.

“We’ll send Igor and move the shuttle to him. We need to be fast now. I think our friends from the mound, whatever they are, are almost on the other side of the structure. See our flying friends?”

Suzanne looked up. The flying creatures – there were now five of them – were almost directly above them. Igor jumped out the port hatch on Rods’ orders while the trader let the shuttle drift towards the forest. Igor had picked up the colonist and was jogging back, when Suzanne first saw the walking creatures. They were quite different from the flyers, and something like Zards she thought – lizard creatures – but the features were much coarser and bodies heavier. The Zards she had seen in pictures were slim and graceful. To her astonishment, the newcomers were carrying large shields and spears.

“Those aren’t Zards,” she said.

“No – Igor, get moving! – they’re early Zards, like Neanderthals are to us, a branch of the Zard family evolutionary tree that didn’t work out.”

“But what are they doing here? The Zard home planet is on the other side of Earth, and aren’t they supposed to be extinct? And aren’t they going to charge the shuttle?”

About 10 of the proto-Zards had formed up and brought their spears down.

“All very good points cruise...” Igor staggered in through the side hatch with the colonist and Rods lifted off with the creatures a few paces away. Suzanne could hear a deep-throated roar. “But we’ll save the big picture questions until we’ve spoken to our new friend and looked at the stuff on the screens we took. Just as well they didn’t throw those stickers they’ve got. Might have done some damage.”

They did a slow circuit of the building at a safe distance. There were perhaps 50 of the proto-Zards all starting malignantly at the craft, shaking their spears. They appeared to be yelling. The flying creatures kept their distance from a craft that was many times larger than they were.

“Can you shoot at them?” asked Suzanne.

Rods smiled.

“You’re enthusiastic. The shuttle is a civilian craft. It isn’t armed. We’ll bug out and let them think they’ve chased us away. We have some research to do.”

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

His name was Con. His beard was matted, his clothes were shredded. He was badly bruised and cut, starving, and his leg was broken, but he had the spear of a proto-Zard as a trophy from a fight which he had been using as a crutch. There was dried blood on the spear blade, but it was a Zard’s not his, Con said. They had treated the leg and the cuts under the direction of The Max’s medical unit, and propped him up on the bunk in the spare room while they talked.

“Unusual to find one alone,” said Con, munching on a food bar. “But he was prowling around, looking for a stray human to massacre and make a name for himself, probably. He walked right by where I was hiding, so I hit him with a rock and grabbed the spear. The blow would have felled a bear on earth, but he kicked out and broke my leg, and tried to come after me. That’s when I stabbed him.”

Con had been bucked up by the food and pain killers to the point of going through the motions of hitting and stabbing with his spare hand while telling his tale.

“Quite a fight,” said Rods. “When did this happen?”

“‘bout a week ago.”

“When were the other colonists taken?”

“A few weeks before that – three, maybe. They didn’t bother us much to begin with, except for the flying creatures which are horrible things. We didn’t have any weapons, except clubs and pointed sticks and sling shots we’d been able to make, but that was enough for a while against the flyers, although we had some bad injuries. The soldier proto-Zards you saw were hostile if approached, but otherwise didn’t seem bothered. Then one colonist took it into his head to go up there, up to the mound. Keep talking about universal peace and how communication was everything. That was the last we saw of him, but we didn’t dare go up and ask for him back. Then they came for us. We had set a watch but they must not have seen anything. The Zards were efficient about it, I have to give it to them. They surrounded the building, rounded up everyone and marched them off. Left a few behind to comb through the forests. I only slipped out by a miracle, and avoiding them was even tougher. Just me as far as I know.”

“Was my sister among those taken?” asked Suzanne.

“As far as I know,” said Con. “I saw her the day before the raid and I didn’t see her afterwards.”

“Your own partner?”

“Emma. She must’ve also been taken, but there was no way I could confirm that. I looked for bodies, but if anyone was killed they took the bodies.”

“But what do they want with humans?” asked Rods. “Use them as slaves?”

Con shrugged.

“We looked at what we had on Zard cultures and these creatures, and decided that, unlike their evolutionary cousins, the proto-Zards probably just didn’t know what to do about us. We weren’t a danger and weren’t competing with them for food, so they just left us alone. The guy who went up there – Tod – must have changed that somehow. Must have made them realise we were useful for something but I dunno what. Say, what is this music?”

Suzanne then became aware that the ship’s music track had returned to Gilbert and Sullivan.

*Three little maids from school are we  
Pert as a school-girl well can be  
Filled to the brim with girlish glee  
Three little maids from school*

“It’s from the Mikado,” said Rods.

“Is that supposed to mean something?”

“Having been snatched from sure death, you should accept the musical tastes of your hosts.”

“Umph.”

“To return to our narrative, what I can’t understand, Con, is where did all this come from?” said Rods. “Why these primitive Zards here of all places?”

Con shrugged again.

“Near as we can tell, and we did our best with what we could find and check, the terra-forming side of it was started by a group from Earth. They thought it would make good real estate – a place that would be a focus for all the surrounding colonies. Make a separate republic. The hermitage was built by them. Then the Zards arrived, after Crossroads we think, killed the humans who had put in the terra-forming work and added all the big animals you can see. Then they brought the proto-Zards back from extinction, complete with basic weapons. Early scans showed some sort of facility in the uplands at the other end of the valley, so maybe that’s where all the work was done, but we never had a chance to go there. As to why, maybe it was some lunatic fringe group that wanted to give the primitive Zards the homeland they never had, or something.”

“Maybe whoever did this will come back checking on their work, backed by the Zard fleet,” said Rods, “and not be impressed to find humans shooting up their test subjects?”

“Maybe,” said Con, “but I don’t think the Zard government knows about it, or will be much pleased with an alternative Zard species coming to life many thousands of years after evolution had ruled it out on the home planet. Would a human government be pleased at someone restarting the Neathertals, particularly if they’re carrying basic weapons? You say the ones you saw today had shields of some kind and charged in an organized way?”

Rods and Suzanne nodded.

“That’s new. I’ve seen them with spears, but shields? And they didn’t charge in a group before. Maybe they’re developing. There’s something deep going on here, with powerful financial backing, but I don’t think it’s official Zard business.”

“Well, okay, we’ll put the origins story to one side for the moment,” said Rods. “We still have a lot of missing colonists who must be in that mound.” He was going to add if any were left alive, but stopped himself in time. “So we have to go in.”

“How are you going to do that?” asked Con. “You’ve got weapons I suppose. You going to go in guns blazing, like in those old movies?”

“Maybe it’ll come to that. But the basic social structure is, you’ve got the queen on top, the one with the brains who stays inside the mound and has some sort of telepathic link with the rest, then there are the flying gargoyles as scouts, as a sort of dependent species. Then there is a separate warrior caste for the guards-muscle work and the workers who do the dirty stuff.”

Con nodded. “We saw the workers once. There should be images of it I can access from that tablet you took. They came out to cut some wood and drag it into the mound.”

“Wood? What they’re making fires in there.”

“Never seen any smoke. Must be building something.”

“Anyway, it’s the workers that worry me. Like messing with worker ants in an ant colony. They’re not fighters but they can rip and tear and are strong, and care nothing for their own lives. But they’re daylight animals, right?”

“We’ve never seen of the proto-Zards at night,” said Con, “although they must be able to come out at night, they would mostly prefer daylight.”

“So they sleep? What I’ve read of the Zards, the hive of actual Zards has a distinct sleep cycle. Some of the fighters and gargoyles keep awake. The rest have downtime.”

“Yes, I suppose,” said Con. “If you can take out the sentries and the gargoyles who are always hovering above the vent entrance, and do it quietly you may have a chance. But you don’t know where the prisoners are, and if you wake up the hive looking for them you’ll be in a world of hurt.”

“Won’t be any internal guards, except maybe around the prisoners. Why should there be? It’s close to being one organism.”

“Well sure, but think,” said Con. “If you fire your guns at any point, that’ll wake the hive. If you find the colonists, they may be sick or too weak to walk, or wounded or crippled. I thought a lot about it while I was hanging around wondering what to do next. If you had a few extra people with machine guns and a flame thrower, maybe to take on the workers.”

“Igor here is pretty good.”

“You’re going in?” asked Suzanne.

“Can’t leave the colonists there, Cruise. Gotta try.”

“Then I’m coming with you.”

“You are not.”

“I am too,” said Suzanne folding her arms.

“Your captain says you can’t come.”

“Then you have a mutiny on your hands. Last time I checked the airlock was in good working order so you can always threaten me with being spaced again; or with being chucked in that brig of yours, but it’s my sister in there and a load of potential passengers who you might scare off.”

“They’ve been in there five weeks. Being scared is the least of their worries. They’d follow the devil if he came for them”

“They’ll need sympathy and someone to move them in the right direction. It’s not a one man, one robot job. It’s a one woman, one man, one robot job, and I have family in there.”

Rods thought for a moment and threw up his hand. “It’s your funeral Cruise. I tried to talk you out of it.”

“I’d offer to come,” said Con, but I might slow you down.”

“You stay here,” said Rods. “There’s a few things you can do from the ship if things go badly. We’ll set things up to keep in contact. I’ll put comms links in spots so you’ll know what’s happened. If worse comes to worst you can use Ira to plant explosives to blow a hole in the mound.”

“Explosives?”

“Sure, plastique. C4 – venerable technology maybe, but still good.”

“I know what C4 is,” exclaimed Con, “but wherever did you get it out here?”

“Surprising what you can pick up in the remainder bins in some places.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Suzanne pulled on the protective coat Rods had given to her, only to find that her arms were completely lost in the sleeves. The image she saw in the mirror in her cabin was that of a shapeless blob. The coat was meant to be a jacket but fell almost to her knees.

"It's too big for me," she yelled.

"Roll up the sleeves and put on the belt, Cruise," Rods yelled back from the wardroom.

Suzanne rolled up the sleeves, belted up the coat and strapped on a soldier's helmet which Rods had also produced from the lockers but again was too big for her; inspected herself, despairingly in the closet mirror and went into the wardroom.

Rods laughed.

"A fiercesome sight."

"I look ridiculous."

"What do you want to be, fashionable or alive? Do you have any trouble moving?"

"No, the coat is light. The material is strange."

"It moves like cloth but if you hit it hard it forms into panels. Should stop bullets, and maybe even knives which are a different proposition, but you will be sore afterwards. Amazing stuff."

"Is this another item from these remainder bins?"

"Something like that. The military that escaped the Zards ended up selling whatever they had just to eat. What about your head? That helmet is too heavy for you."

"It's light, and I strapped it on tight liked you said." Suzanne moved her head from side to side to demonstrate.

"Good! You've set your ear piece in place? Remember your mike." Rods pulled the microphone on Suzanne's helmet down and switched on the helmet comms unit. "We'll be able to talk to one another." He touched a switch on his own helmet and the earpiece in Suzanne's left ear came alive. "Everyone online. Con, Igor, Max?"

"Here," they chorused. Con was on the bridge and Igor was already in the shuttle.

"Suzanne?"

"Roger!"

"Who's Roger?"

"Isn't that what people say when checking in?"

"It's good enough. You have Mr. Glock for close encounters and Mr. Sig Saur as a backup date?"

Suzanne produced both weapons from different pockets, demonstrated that Mr. Glock had been tied onto her belt with a lanyard and put them back.

"Ammunition loaded?"

"Full magazines and spares in pockets and boxes more with Igor in the shuttle, sir." She gave Rods what she imagined was a military salute.

"Battlefield conditions, Cruise," said Rods rubbing his hands together. "No saluting. We're set. The equipment's loaded and the nest's had time to settle down for the night. Let's get some in Cruise!" He held out his fist to her. "We're assault infantry."

She looked at Rods and then at the fist, puzzled.

"You're meant to hit my fist with yours."

"Oh. Okay." She did so, gently.

“That’s not the assault infantry style.”

“I’m not assault whatever,” she protested. “I’m a cruise director with a gun.”

Rods positioned the shuttle well above the gargoyles guarding the hive entrance. He attached the mask to the vacuum-suit he was wearing, as he would be starting in thin atmosphere, and strapped on the grav pack he had shown to Suzanne when they were preparing to visit the valley.

“Stay in the shuttle cockpit, Cruise,” he said through the radio link. “If I can clear the entrance without raising the alarm Max will drop the shuttle close to the hole, then get out and join me. Take care.”

With that he stepped into the airlock and dropped out the other side.

Rods had jumped before, but only in vacuums and was surprised by the rush of thin air. He tumbled and gasped.

“What’s wrong?” said Suzanne, who was watching the whole thing on Rod’s helmet cam.

Rods slowed his descent then flipped on his front. A faint memory of pictures of people falling through an atmosphere on earth – parachutists, was the term – made him spread out his arms and legs. After a couple of tries in the steadily thickening air, he found he could balance.

“What’s happening?”

“Cruise, this is fun!”

Back in the shuttle, Suzanne sniffed.

Rods checked the screen strapped to his wrist, set up to show his height and where he was in relation to the hive entrance. Almost right above it, but drifting. The grav pack could also move laterally. He adjusted it to drift back and looked for the gargoyle sentries. The planet had no moon to speak of but only a few, thin clouds to obscure the starlight. Once low enough to depressurise he did so, pushing back his breathing mask – after years of controlled atmospheres, the cold wind on his face was a delight – and slipped on light-amplification goggles. There they were! The airborne gargoyle sentries were just below him; one a hundred meters or so higher than the other. He drew his favorite pistol – the latest in a long-line of Heckler & Koch weapons equipped with a laser sight and, at a small additional cost, a silencer. Rods had got the weapon in a side deal at about the same time as the shuttle (where the special forces grade weapon had come from wasn’t his concern) and had practiced with it in stopovers at Fin’s Reef until he was lethal. But he had never had a chance to use it in earnest. It was far too high-powered for anti-jacking work. Now the weapon’s time had come, however, he found he had trouble fitting his gloved finger between the trigger and trigger guard. For the moment any killing that had to be done would be up close and personal.

The higher gargoyle called – a caw! sound much like that of a crow on Earth but high and clear in the wind. Thinking he had been spotted, Rods stayed his descent for the moment, hanging there, adjusting for wind drift. It was just a routine call. The other gargoyle answered, fortunately without even looking up. Rods continued drifting slightly



down towards his target. The creature sensed the trader's presence a moment before Rods wrapped one arm around its body and pressed the muzzle of his silencer against its skull, and pulled the trigger.

The dead creature proved surprisingly heavy, dragging Rods down. He dropped the pistol – it was tied securely to his belt – and yanked on the control stick to prevent an unseemly collision with the second sentinel. He steadied and, still holding the first gargoyle - he dare not let it fall – Rods dropped on the second, wrapping his legs around it, and grabbing the pistol with his free hand. The creature's head turned to see a huge alien creature about to engulf it, and opened its mouth to call an alarm. Like its fellow the creature took a hole in its skull before being able to utter a sound. Burdened with two gargoyles plus a human the grav pack whined in protest. Rods started to fall in earnest.

There were four lizard guards around the round entrance to the hive, which was a hole in the top of the mound. These were mostly looking out in different directions but two were together, apparently in conversation. As the spaceman watched one of the other proto-Zard sentries glanced at the two in conversation, and then went back to its own chore of staring out into the dark landscape. Rods wondered what the guards could be talking about considering that they had spent all day together in the hive and had some link to the queen's communal mind. Soon it wouldn't matter. Holding a dead gargoyle under one arm, with his legs wrapped around another he had one hand spare for the joy stick. He used what little capacity the grav pack had left to influence his fall to drift to just above the chatter-box guards when he let the gargoyles fall.

The chatting guards yelped and staggered, making the other two turn around. But it still took a few moments of staring at the dead flyers before any of the sentries thought to look up. Released from its extra burdens the grav pack braked Rods fall. He was able to turn, out of sight in the darkness, touch down lightly and lie flat, stripping off his gloves. The four guards couldn't see anything above them or around them. This was not how an attack from any of the other colonies along the valley was supposed to occur. Where were the attackers? Rods thought he had moments before they called the alarm. He crept forward

“Are you alright?” whispered Suzanne.

“Shhh!”

Now he would see if his hours with the pistol, and considerable cost in ammunition, had paid off, not to mention the pistol's laser sights to mark targets and his light amplification goggles. He put the red dots on the skulls of the two closest guards, the chatterers, as they looked down at the gargoyle bodies. Already bent forward they collapsed on top of the two gargoyles. One of the other two guards, who had still not seen Rods, hurried forward to see why his companions had collapsed. The other, with greater presence of mind, opened its snout to let out a yell and got out a yip before passing into proto-Zard Valhalla. The now sole survivor turned his head to see his companion collapse. That was enough for an alarm, but before it could give the warning cry the creature was hit in the shoulder – firing on the run, Rods had missed – which spun it around. It got out a single yell before also being hit again in the head, falling to its knees to teeter on the lip of the entrance. Rods raced forward. Nothing would

announce his arrival like having a body fall through the entrance to land with a messy thud below.

Deep within the hive Ja-lar broke her meditation. Something had happened in her hive, she thought, irritated. Those who disturbed her meditation with un-hive like activity would pay dearly. She listened, felt for unusual vibrations and reached out with her mind to her many children. Nothing. She drifted off into meditation again.

Rods grabbed the creature around the neck and pulled, just stopping the heavy Proto-Zard from toppling into the entrance. He braced himself, flipped the grav pack over to pull and, with another whine of protest from the pack dragged the creature away from the lip. It had been like wrestling with a tree. He switched off the grav pack and listened. Nothing. He went down on his stomach and crawled forward pistol out, and listened at the lip of the hole. He could hear a faint twittering from somewhere in the hive, rising and falling in slow rhythm, but it was not changing. Rods supposed that the guard must be changed at some point, but as he had expected, the security plan did not take into account the possibility that all six sentries would be taken out, quietly, by a gun wielding lunatic Earthman with a grav pack.

“Suzanne, all clear,” he whispered into his mike. “Max, Con , send the shuttle down quietly, as we discussed.”

“I really don’t want to be a sentry in any place you want to get into,” said Suzanne.

Rods smiled.

The shuttle was landed, stern towards the nest entrance, some 50 meters down the mound, much to Suzanne’s disgust.

“Why not go right up near the hole?” she asked, having jogged uphill with Igor. Many hours on the treadmill had paid off. She was not puffing.

Rods had stripped off the vacc suit and changed into his own short, protective vest..

“Voice down, Cruise,” he whispered. “Because I want to disturb the nest as little as possible before we go in, and the best way to do that is not to park alien space ships right up against the entrance. There are thousands of worker gargoyles in there and if they wake up they’ll swarm on any intruder.

“Oh.”

“Igor, no shooting until I say otherwise.”

“No shooting,” repeated Igor. “Am I ahead or behind?”

“Behind for now.”

“Always behind,” said the robot, a little sadly, Suzanne thought.

“Don’t worry you may be in front later and not like it.”

“I like being in front.”

“Enough chit chat,” said Rods. He attached a cable from Igor to the grav pack. “Remember Cruise. We need to be quiet down there. If you see something dangerous, you do not shriek, yell warnings or otherwise make a noise. What do you do?”

"I tap you on the shoulder and whisper 'look, we're about to be killed', in a quiet, orderly way. Anyway, I do not shriek, I'll have you know. I cry with measured alarm."

"That still means being loud. You ready? This is the intimate part."

He stood on the lip of the entrance. Suzanne nodded stepped up and wrapped her arms around Rods neck, turning her face away. She found his hold comforting.

"Were you ever married or engaged?" asked Suzanne. She had asked that question before, without getting a reply.

"Shhh, Cruise. I was engaged once. She made me read Jane Austin. Now shut-up."

They jumped. Suzanne, her eyes tightly closed, was aware of a floating sensation, the whirl of the grav pack and then she hit the floor with a thud, her arms still around Rods neck.

"Sorry! Grav pack has trouble with both our weights."

"You shouldn't be so heavy," she whispered back, stepping away and putting on her light enhancement goggles. The inside of the mound was still dim but she could see they were in a vast cylindrical space rimmed by a series of galleries that were like human floors, connected by ramps at precise intervals, running up to the entrance hole all made out of what might have been a calcium shell, like that of a sea shell. All was still and silent, but for a faint twitter, rising and falling in a steady cycle.

"See the ramps," whispered Rods into Suzanne's ear.

"Yes."

"If we find lots of colonists they'll have to walk up those, unless I blow a new hole in the hive."

"Can you do that?"

"Not keen on it as that will excite the proto-Zards no end, but if we walk up I think it means we have to pass the entrances to the big worker dormitories part way up."

"Oh."

Rods dropped a relay so that Con and Max could keep track of them – Max would make maps as they went – and they moved out. After delving through what little was known of Zard social organisation, and the even sparser material on proto-Zards, Rods' best guess was that any humans left would be held somewhere in the western part of the hive, as that was where the queen was likely to be.

Suzanne quickly lost all sense of direction in what proved to be a honeycomb of chambers joined together haphazardly, without the benefit of doors. A number were empty. One was the armoury for the fighting proto-Zards they had seen, with racks of spears, helmets and shields. Other rooms had primitive electronic equipment – "look at that, vacuum tubes" whispered Rods excitedly. Suzanne got the impression that he would have liked to have stayed and played. They moved on. Another room had what appeared to be giant mushrooms, and a few long, low cocoons, which they moved through quickly. There was no sign of the colonists, and their uninvited tour of the colony was becoming extended.

"Taking too long, guys," said Con through their earphones, as if reading Suzanne's thoughts.

“Any movement on the mound?”

“Nothing, yet.”

“Why can’t these guys build corridors and put up signs,” grumbled Rods.

They heard shuffling behind them. Both Rods and Suzanne saw two proto-Zards at the far end of the chamber they were in, carrying one of the cocoons between them. Why they chose the middle of the night to move the cocoon, neither human found out and did not care. The important point was that the guards saw the humans, even in the dark, at the same time as the humans saw them, dropped the cocoon and hissed. One died with his mouth still open, the other dodged into the next chamber, missing a date with one of Rods’ bullet by a whisker and, to judge from the noise, knocking over one of the trays of equipment they had passed.

“Wait here,” snapped Rods. He ran to the next chamber but was back almost straight away.

“Damn things probably still running, hissing as it goes.”

Suzanne was suddenly aware that the twittering had stopped cycling. Now it was increasing in volume.

“Guys there’s movement on the mound,” said Con. “One of the flying gargoyles is wondering why everyone is dead.”

“That’s torn it,” said Rods. “Okay there is only one thing for it.” He filled his lungs. “DAWN TREADER!”

“EVE!” yelled Suzanne.

Above and behind them the mound began to stir.

Not far away Eve Clark was trying to get some sleep. Another of them was due to be taken soon. They knew this. There were now 34 of the 52 who had stepped on to the surface of the planet and then watched in horror as their ship took off without them. At first, because they were on the best piece of real estate in that section of the galaxy they thought that someone would turn up. The planet’s location had been kept a secret, but they thought the traitors who took the ship would at least come back to enslave them. Slowly they realized that the traitors must have decided not to come back or pass on their location. No matter, they would make a life for themselves with what they had and eventually they, or their descendants, would be re-discovered. Then the proto-Zards turned hostile and they were herded into the chamber in which they had now spent weeks.

Hours after their captivity had started the first person had been taken out the back entrance of the chamber. That person, a man, had started screaming in what soon became a familiar cycle. The screams, echoing in what must be a large chamber below them becoming weaker over several days until they just faded away. Then another would be taken. The captain had been the last to be taken and his screams had become weaker. That meant another colonist would soon make the one-way trip through the doors. Rather than face the possibility of being chosen for that ordeal, one colonist had managed to commit suicide by opening an artery with a small fibro-ceramic knife she had managed to smuggle through the rough searches of the guards. When the other colonists realized what had happened they hid the knife and discussed what to do.

One person dying just meant that another would be chosen, so why shouldn't they all go, using the knife one by one? Those unable to do the deed would have it done for them. If a few wanted to hold on to life and go through the ordeal that was their choice. Eve had decided to take the knife. She did not mind dying. She had walked on the surface of a planet unprotected and that was a lot for one lifetime. She did not regret coming.

Her husband John stirred uneasily next to her. His left leg had been broken; the price of a moment of defiance. They had set and braced it as best they could but there was nothing for the pain. All the more reason to take the knife. She lay next to the double doors at the front of the chamber. Like the back doors they were made of what looked like wood – at least as far as Eve knew what wood looked and felt like. There had been some debate about rushing the door when they first arrived, until someone pointed out that they hadn't been able to resist the proto-Zards and get away out in the open, what chance did they have deep in the mound? And what about the injured, would they be left behind?

No, Eve had long decided, their fate was sealed so she should at least think of happier things until they undertook their suicide pact. That would be soon. She thought of the clues she had left her sister, strictly against the group's rules, and thought that Suzanne had not been able to work it out in the end. Well, she did not want her in the clutches of the proto-Zards. She thought of her mother back on Earth Station, about being courted by John and then her thoughts wandered back to Suzanne. She even thought she could hear Suzanne call her name. She smiled. The dream was so real it was comforting.

"I keep on hearing my sister calling," she said to the man opposite. The man's wife was among the first to be taken and he now lay opposite Eve and John. He had confessed to Eve two days ago that his wife often came to him in his dreams, so he was likely to understand. He smiled in the darkness.

"Memory is a blessing." he said and sat up. "Jennie was just telling me ..." He stopped.

"I hear something, too," said the man, Gregory. "Someone calling Dawn Treader."

In a moment both Eve and Gregory were at the door, yelling "In here! In here!" and pounding on it for all they were worth. The rest of the colonists, those who were able, stood up.

Rods and Suanne did not hear Eve and Gregory, but they did hear the proto-Zard guards at the human cell door hissing at the noise the pair were making, and ran towards the sound. Rods knew that if there were going to be guards anywhere in the mound they would be with the colonists. They ran through two more chambers and turned a corner to be confronted by the only door they had seen since entering the mound – a wooden door with two proto-Zards hissing. The last act of the two creatures was to turn to face the intruders.

"Igor get these creatures out of the way. Shut-up in there, people." The door was held by a simple bar which Rods threw to one side, and the colonists spilled out

including Eve, a taller and broader version of Suzanne. The two sisters fell into each other's arms.

"I told you I'd come for you, I told you."

"Why so .. so you did, so you did!" said Eve. She craned her head back to look at her sister as Rods ordered the helmet lights of the rescue party switched on, set to dim. "You've turned blonde."

"Everyone quiet!" said Rods sotto voice. "Cruise, reunions later. We're not out of it yet."

"There's a rescue party?" said someone.

"You're looking at all of it, the crew of the James Clerk Maxwell, and your Con on the ship. We've got to move fast. Our cruise director will hand out survival chocolate, sport drinks and weapons."

"Did you find The Dawn?" asked another colonist.

"Explanations later. Who's in charge? Get organised. Two people on each of the sick and wounded. We'll have to drag them out. Here's a grav pack. It'll take two. Grab any weapons you can find off the guards. There are some more guns in the bag Igor is carrying. People with weapons training take them. Where's The Dawn's captain?"

"He was taken," said someone. "The mate's down there."

Rods pushed his way to the back of the room to find the mate, Hospers, his thin faced streaked with tears. He had not moved.

"He's down there," he said, pointing at the door. "I heard him just half an hour ago. He's weak but he's still alive. It's not far."

"Okay, we'll take two minutes, and I mean two minutes. "You!" He pointed at one women colonist, also concerned for the captain, who had come down with them. "Tell the others we're taking two minutes to find the captain. Then we're leaving!" Rods grabbed his assault rifle from the bag he had been carrying and thrust it at Hosper. "There's a light on this so you can see what you're doing, but you don't fire unless I say, got it?"

"Okay."

"Leave the firing up to this." He showed the mate his silenced pistol. Rods inspected the double doors. "It's just like the front door with a bar on the other side." The trader fumbled in one of the zippered compartments on the side of the bag, pushed what looked to be a stick of gum with a red tag hard into the space between the two doors at the level of the bar, then pinched the end. The tag glowed and began to hum.

"Get back, and cover your ears."

The explosive cracked. So much for keeping quiet. Rods kicked the doors hard. They swung open. Hoss charged through, rifle at the ready, Rods just behind. A few paces beyond was a ramp which took them down to a large room, filled with large pieces of equipment. And they found the captain.

"Stars," said Rods.

Hos screamed.

Ja-lar broke her meditation again. What was wrong with the hive tonight? There were unfamiliar vibrations. The soft creatures taken for breeding had sometimes been

active at night; but she knew those vibrations. When she had used them for incubating they made noises she found irritating, but they added to the process, particularly if they were kept alive during it. She had discovered their value by chance when experimenting with the first creature who had come to the mound burbling, through a translator, something about good will – a concept she did not understand. No matter, her embryos had fed well, and soon she would have many more servants than at any time in her long life. If the soft creatures made a noise during the process what was that to her? In any case, she knew those noise and vibrations. This was different and the hive was waking up. Ja-lar thought briefly of the report of more soft creatures in the valley who had fled after killing her flyers. She dismissed the thought. They would not dare come into the mound. But what was wrong. She would now have to deal with this, but first she would summon her personal servants and check on the breeding chamber.

“Rob,” sobbed Hoss. “Oh Rob!”

“Rescue came at last,” said Robyn gritting his teeth in pain. He was lying on a wide table his arms bound to rails on either side, but his body up to his chest inserted into the side of a vast, semi-transparent tub. Tubes inserted into his body from inside the tub were obviously the only thing keeping the captain of the Dawn Treader alive. They could see vague shapes moving in the tube in and out of the area where the captain’s body should have been but wasn’t. What they could see of the captain’s upper body was pasty and grey. He would not have lasted much longer and would then, Rods supposed, be replaced by another colonist.

“Too late for me, Hoss.” The words came with difficulty.

“Oh Rob!”

Rods cut the captain’s hands lose. They fell uselessly. The bonds around the wrists had been tied so tightly that circulation to the hands had been cut off and the flesh had died. It mattered little now.

“You found the Dawn?” asked Rob, Hoss still sobbing.

“They got it as far as the Oid planet, then your anti-jacking script kicked in. We only found it when the guys who jacked you, tried it on me.”

“Dead?”

“All gone.”

“Good... I let my guard down, and got caught out, and now I’m taking the punishment. Hoss can unlock the engines. What about the remaining colonists?”

“We’ve got to get them out, and that means we’ve got to go.”

“Yes, go! Don’t worry about me. I just want this to end, I want the pain to end. You got guns, do me and go, now!”

Rods had already unslung his bag, thinking that Rob would make such a request and produced a block of C4 with a timer. He pulled Rob’s useless hands up to near his face and placed the explosives with the timer face up, within easy reach.

“You can check yourself out. I’ve set it for 10 minutes but there’s a default red button. Press that hard any time with your nose and it’s over. You can see the display. But not right now,” he added hastily, “give us at least three or four minutes to get clear.”

“At last I’ve found a use for my long nose,” the captain of the Dawn said joyfully. “Four minutes and it’s over. Hoss, I don’t want you to see me like this. I really want to end this. You must go.”

“Hoss, you have 10 seconds to say your goodbyes,” said Rods, “then you’re coming. The colonists will need you.”

Hoss nodded.

The trader stepped away to give the two privacy and slowly scanned the chamber with his helmet cam. The soldiers had spears and shields but the hive had machinery like this? And how did the equipment with vacuum tubes fit in? There were deep forces at play, but this was not the time to work it out, if they ever did.

“Time to go,” said Rods and, when Hoss showed no signs of moving, stepped in, grabbed the mate of the Dawn by the arm and pulled him away.

“Go! Go!” said Rob. “It’s over for me. It’s finished. Be happy for me.”

At the bottom of the ramp Hoss allowed himself one last look and then followed Rods. They found the colonists all lined up behind Igor. The two badly injured, including Eve’s partner John, were supported by the grav pack. All but the wounded had some sort of weapon, although for many it was just a knife from The Max’s galley. There were three assault rifles, including the one carried by Hoss, three shotguns and four pistols, including Mr. Glock carried by Suzanne and Mr. Sig Saur now in the uncertain hands of Eve.

“Did you find the captain?” asked one woman.

“What was left of him,” said Rods. “Explanations later. Hoss, if you can handle that rifle you’re at the end. Keep everyone closed up.”

“I’ll be okay,” said Hoss, making a noticeable effort to pull himself together.

“Until I say, nobody fires but me and no one speaks.” Rods tried to keep his voice down, meaning that some of the colonists had to crane forward to hear him. “Follow Igor. He’s kept track of where we went. Now move.” They shuffled off, Rods walking behind Igor.

The noise of the hive was increasing.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

The colonists could see little beyond helmet lights on the cruise director and Rods, dialed down to gleams. They could do little but shuffle after one another as chamber followed chamber and the twittering from the mound rose in volume. They whispered to one another as Eve did to Suzanne, choosing that desperate moment to discuss recent events in her sister's life.

"Who is this Rods person?" she said to Suzanne, "And where is Richard?"

"Richard is back at Earth station waiting for me," said Suzanne. "He knows I've taken a job out here looking for you."

"Hmm.. so does he know about Rods?"

"Why does he need to know anything about Rods? He's my boss," said Suzanne who now wished, momentarily, she had left her sister unfound.

"He's not bad looking and certainly big enough, and you're alone with him on voyages."

"Rods is nothing..." the last statement made in exasperation with her sister, came out louder than intended. She was aware that Rods looked back to see what the

noise was and she lowered her voice back to a whisper. "I mean he's been great, but it's not like that. Now can we please wait to discuss my romantic life until we're out of deadly danger."

Eve finally shut up just as the need to whisper obviously came to an end. They had reached the entrance shaft and the hive sounded like a tree full of birds on Earth. Despite that noise only a few of the worker gargoyles – smaller, wingless version of the flyers – had appeared. Those who tried to attack the column were dispatched, mostly by Rods. One was killed by a spear and another by knife. The colonists did not stop or even pause.

"There's a ramp over there," said Rods, now having to shout to make himself heard over the din. "Follow Igor – keep going."

The colonists shuffled on. A few looked up but in the dim light they could barely see to the walls, let alone the main ramps they had to climb, which was just as well. Suzanne, looking up through her goggles, could see how far it was and did not fancy the climb, and she was in good shape.

The colonists clambered up the ramp, built for gargoyles with claws that gripped, not out of condition humans with worn out shoes hampered by the sick and injured. It was slow – too slow.

"Where are we going?" asked one woman who had to be helped up.

"The Max's shuttle will be at the top," said Rods. "Max, Con, let's move the shuttle so the rear ramp is hanging right over the edge but keep it closed up. Ira is to stand by the winch with the prod. This is going to get real busy. Cruise, keep them all closed up."

At the second ramp Rods thought to hack foot and handholds in the cartilage-like substance that made up the structure and let out a wire from Igor to give the colonists something to hold onto. Suzanne stayed at the ramp to ensure the colonists helped each other up. On Rods' orders one colonist, larger and in better shape than the others, a Karl, armed with a shield, remained by her side. Karl had found that by bending down while holding the shield and then pushing up and out, he could throw any worker who came at them onto the floor of the hive.

They moved onto the third ramp, too slowly. The flying gargoyles had found them and had to be discouraged with knife and spear thrusts and an occasional shot from Rods.

"You should leave me behind," John said to Rods. "The pack will lift people up to this shuttle."

"No one gets left behind," said Rods sharply. "We can't send people up with the flyers about." He stepped back to yell, "everyone keep moving!"

They got up the third ramp, with the rear guard of Hoss and others backing up the steps, lashing out with boots, assault gun butts and a knife, their opponents barely visible in the dim light. The workers hissed.

A rumble from ahead made Suzanne look up, to see a dark, moving mass of workers on the walkway, heading straight for the front of the column. Her heart sank. Further ahead, Rods could see that the workers were pouring from what must be a

dormitory chamber just ahead. The escapees were going no further. Maybe this was where they all died – but not yet.

“Igor, contact front. Fire!”

“I am in front,” said the robot and fired.

Ja-lar shrieked with alarm. There were loud sounds from the entrance way. The soft creatures had got out, and were killing her children – so many that they caused her pain. Their deaths were not important, her pain was. What had caused this disaster? They had been captured easily and caused little trouble since. How could they now cause deaths? She would go out and put this right and the creatures would pay for the insult to her person. But first she had to make sure of the breeding chamber. She hurried forward.

The continuous ripping sound from the machine gun echoed around the chamber, building up into a wall of sound that assaulted Suzanne ears. The fire from its barrel hurt her eyes. But in the light, she saw the front rank of workers die. The second rank swept over their hive comrades to die on top of them, some tumbling over to fall in front. Yet more workers rushed straight into the fire of Igor’s machine gun, added to the mound.

Rods sensed an opportunity.

“Hoss,” he screamed. “Close up! Close right up, build a wall with their bodies.”

Hoss did not hear the order over the din but he could see the rushing tide of workers in the flaring light from the machine gun. He and the rear guard – a handful of colonists with weapons were close to panic. Suzanne, who heard over the comms, pushed back to him.

“He wants you to close up,” she screamed, tugging at him. Through her goggles she could see the growing mound of workers at the front and understood what Rods wanted. “Come back and build a wall with their bodies so they can’t get in, like in front.”

The colonists calmed visibly. A plan. They backed away from the workers at the rear, now firing the occasional shot, Hoss barking at them to save ammunition, just as Suzanne heard Rods call “cease fire” to Igor, and the noise stopped. After the roar of the machine gun, the twittering of the hive, mixed with hissing from the workers, seemed almost like silence. Another, dense mass surged up from the rear, with more workers swinging down from the walkway above them – there was another dormitory chamber on the upper levels – to join it. Suzanne helped shepherd the colonists into some sort of formation. The injured and her sister with the few medical supplies they had brought were along the wall. Rods pushed the colonists with weapons into a line along the edge of the walkway. Just in time.

“Now,” said Hoss from the rear. “Fire!”

The assault guns barked, the shot guns roared. More workers tried swinging down from the tier above. A few from below. Karl stomped on the hands of one and then pushed another swinging down from below with his shield. It flew backwards to land with a distinct thump on the floor below.

“Igor to the rear,” yelled Rods. Contact rear.

"I am now behind," grumbled the robot as he passed Suzanne.  
The battle raged.

Three workers swung down close to Suzanne to engulf one of the colonists. The colonist stabbed one, but was bitten hard by the others before Suzanne could react.

"Cruise!" screamed Rods, "Mr. Glock, quick!"

Suzanne, took one step towards the fracas, brought up the weapon and shot both remaining creatures at point blank range, the impact of the shot flinging them off the walkway. Eve helped drag the injured colonist to the rear.

"So, is this Mr. Glock yet another man in your life?" she asked.

"This is Mr. Glock," said Suzanne showing her the pistol, "and we're just good friends."

Two guards appeared on the walkway opposite and flung spears that injured a colonist before Igor gunned them down. A group of flyers tried to snatch a women colonist close to Rods, triggering a sharp fight. The spaceman shot two only to be bitten hard on the arm, the flyer's sharp teeth tearing through the tough fabric of the trader's tunic sleeve to cut the flesh underneath. Rods bellowed and thumped the creature's head with the butt of his pistol. It went limp. He kicked it over the side.

Eve came to look at the wound.

"Nasty!" she said, then ripped the cloth further and dabbed it with disinfectant.

"Ow!"

"Baby!" she said. "There are others worse."

"Then go and help them. Got one of those small, smart bandages? Put it on and go."

Rods turned and shot one of the flyers before Eve had finished. She left thinking that Rods was snappy, and wondering how her sister had put up with him. A new wave of workers swung in from the walkway above. More clambered up from below. Across the way, the few remaining flyers gathered for a rush. There were too many.

In the breeding chamber, Rob eyed the timer on the explosive charge Rods had left him, cradled in the arms and now useless hands folded across his chest. The agony had been unbearable. He had screamed constantly as he had heard others do, to no avail. Now he hoped for one last thing from life but as he eyed the timing he could hear the gunfire from the entrance chamber. An explosion might be the distraction the colonists needed in the fight for their lives, and end his agony. He was tossing up whether to tap the button when he heard the distinctive scrape of the Queen, or whatever it was, coming to inspect him. As many times before the vast grey bulk of the lizard creature stood over him, staring down. Rob registered a snout with a formidable array of white teeth and green eyes that registered alarm at the sight of the strange device.

"There is justice after all," chortled Rob, clutching the explosives close to him.  
"Take this you bastard!" He jammed his nose on the red button.

The sudden, rumbling blast shook the galleries, making the colonists stagger. A cloud of dust surged out of the western access tunnel below them. The proto-Zards

abruptly stopped attacking and let out a collective, ear-piercing wail, throwing up their arms. "Owwwww!" Then, as one, they streamed away from the colonists, towards the cloud of dust.

"What was that?" said one colonist.

"That was Rob, ending it," said Hoss. "Rods left him with explosives."

"I think he got their queen," said Rods. "That's where they're all going, to try to save their queen."

"Does that mean we're out of it?" asked one of the women.

"We're not out of it, until we're out of here. I dunno what happens when the queen dies, but I don't think it's good for strangers in the hive. That means we've gotta get moving now."

The colonists groaned.

"So how do we get out here," said Karl, looking around. It was a good question. There were enormous mounds of bodies in front and behind them.

"Straight up," said Rods. Suzanne noticed that he holstered his pistol and was cradling his left arm where he had been bitten. "We'll climb the body wall in front and go straight up through a hole Igor is about to tear in the roof," he said. "Igor, walk up, now fire above you just there." The robot complied, ripped a larger hole and climbed through. "C'mon people start walking through. The first through help the others. The bigger guys can lift the wounded through."

"The grav pack will only take two wounded," said one of the colonists.

"You should leave me behind, with an explosive," said John.

"Will you stop volunteering to die," snapped Rods. "There's no need. Max, Con," he said into his comms unit. "Open the shuttle's back hatch and let out the winch cable we're going to start reeling in colonists. At least until the flyers come back."

The colonists roused themselves at this news and start filing out of the hole. All they could hear of the proto-Zards was a distant "Owwwww!"

"Hoss, I can see the cable," said Rods. "It's two levels up directly on the other side. That's as far as it will go. Get to it, then start taking the wounded from there, with the grav pack attached to the winch. Just grab hold and drag them up. No time for safety protocols. There's a spare comms unit in Igor's bag so you can speak to Max and Con on the ship."

"I should stay with the colonists," said Hoss.

"I need someone reliable who understands the equipment and we'll move a lot faster if we start taking up the wounded and then the slower movers by winch. I also want you at the shuttle controls for takeoff, we'll be real overloaded when we go, with a lot of weight on the back. That needs a pilot. Max, Hoss is cleared to take over the shuttle."

"Aye," said Max, over the comms.

"Now people get moving. Hoss, hand your weapon to this guy," he gestured at Karl.

"Alright!" said Karl.

"Now everyone move! Cruise what are still you doing here! Get through the hole, grab one of the explosive blocks from Igor's bag and hand it down!"

“Alright, snappy, snappy,” grumbled Suzanne under her breath, but she went, handing down the explosives with a show of grace before returning to chivvying the colonists along. Some thought that a slow walk was enough.

“C4!” said Karl, on seeing the explosive. He and Rods were the last left at the site of the battle. “I didn’t think anyone used that stuff any more.”

“Call me a traditionalist,” said Rods. “It’s set for ten minutes. Put is on the walkway, pile a couple of worker bodies on it and let’s move.”

“This stuff still has punch?” asked Karl.

“In 10 minutes, this part of town will represent an extensive renovation opportunity.”

For the colonists the escape settled into a long session of shuffling along walkways, clambering up ramps and then more walkways, being urged on by Rods and more politely by Suzanne to keep moving. Somewhere, deep within the hive, came an “Owww!” Hoss started taking up the slower colonists. Eve went up, to look after the injured, giving Mr. Sig Saur back to Suzanne – she had never fired it – and the cruise director put it back in her pocket, there being no need to hand out weapons.

“Don’t lie people on seats,” Rods told Eve. “The shuttle site 12. We have to fit more than 30 in it.”

“Only twelve!” exclaimed a colonist who overheard this.

“If you don’t like the transport you’re welcome to take the next bus!” snapped Rods.

By this time, Rods’ behavior was a cause of concern to Suzanne. He stumbled along, cradling his wounded arm with the other. ‘An infection?’ she thought.

“You should go up with Hoss,” she suggested, gently.

“Go and mother someone else,” he snarled.

“Infection doesn’t improve his mood,” she thought. She told one of the colonists to stay, discreetly with the spaceman, and went back to urging on the others. They moved up another ramp.

Halfway up the next ramp, the distant “owww” stopped with a deafening shriek, “What in stars is that,” exclaimed one women.

“Think it means the queen is dead,” said Rods, lifting his head briefly.

“Does that mean they’ll die too?” asked someone, hopefully.

“No, I think it means they’re coming back, and this time they’ll be upset.”

The colonists sped up.

They heard a distant rumbling, and growing, discordant shriek “eeeeee”, “eeeeee”. A banshee wail.

“Karl, when’s our bang going to happen?” asked Rods, swaying slightly.

Karl glanced at the timer he had set on his watch. “One minute.”

“One minute to a big bang people. Hoss, get under cover.”

“Up at the shuttle.”

“Stay there. Hug the wall people!”

The first explosion had caused the walkways to shake. The second explosion almost knocked Suzanne off her feet. The wall seemed to shift. The floor tilted. Through

the goggles, she could see a column of smoke shoot up past her. The screeching stopped. She looked down but could see nothing. Then she looked up and realized the top was in sight. She could see the rear of the shuttle hanging over the edge, with the rear hatch complete with steps hanging down. They could reach it if they got up there!

“Okay, old stuff but still good,” said Karl.

“Cut price lot, worth the money,” said Rods, eyes half closed. He was swaying, but kept going.

The wailing started again.

“Eeeeeee, eeeeeee”

They staggered up another level. They could hear rumbling and screeching lower down. Suzanne glanced over the side and, in the now clearer air, he could see the floor of the hive littered with bodies and bits of the walkways.

“Suzanne, the last block in Igor’s bag. Get it,” snapped Rods. The robot was now with the rear guard. Suzanne got the block for Rods and held it while the spaceman tapped on it.

“There – thirty seconds before it blows. Throw it over the side, quick.”

“Yikes!” yelled Suzanne, realising what she was holding, and threw it away from her. The block fell out of sight. “Fire in the hold!”

“Hug the walls!” yelled Rods.

That explosion was not as bad. It still shook the wall that Suzanne was hugging but it was much lower down. The colonists kept their feet. The wailing stopped.

“So much for the explosives,” Suzanne heard Rods mutter. “They were a good deal. C’mon people. Let’s go. Big effort to finish.”

They moved on, up another level. The wailing started again - “eeeeeee”, “eeeeeee”. Another level, and Suzanne was aware of a rumbling below them. Rods was allowing himself to be helped along.

“Karl,” he gasped, “in the bag. Grenades. Pill pin! Throw! Three seconds. Try to build a wall at the last ramp. Don’t hang back. No one stays.” Then his head hung down.

“Grenades!” enthused Karl. “More tradition. I like it.”

“Igor, hang back with Karl,” yelled Suzanne, taking charge, somewhat to her surprise. “Hoss, we’re coming, get ready to lift off.”

They were at the last ramp. Rods staggered up, half pushed by Suzanne and another colonist. They were at the top and there was the shuttle with colonists already hanging onto the back ramp. It was full. Then she saw that the cable from the winch was being woven around the struts for the late comers to wrap around themselves. The rumbling increased in intensity.

Whump!

“Yeah baby!” whooped Karl.

“At least the boys are enjoying themselves,” Suzanne sniffed.

A flyer appeared but was blown away by a shotgun. Another whump and a whoop from Karl. Igor’s machine gun chattered briefly. Then they were at the shuttle ramp. The cruise director sat right on the end step, colonists standing on either side and the cable was winched tight around her. Rods, barely conscious, was tight tightly on one side.

“Karl! Igor!” screamed Suzanne. “This cruise is leaving.”

Karl and Igor came running, with a horde of screaming workers and guards behind them. The rumbling had become deafening. The proto-Zards were bearing their teeth and – Suzanne had not noticed before – their eyes bulged out seeming to the point of popping.

Igor grabbed hold of one strut, hanging there effortlessly, facing the onrushing horde. Karl jumped for the other and wrapped himself around it, assault gun jammed between himself and the strut.

“Hoss, everyone is on, lift on now! Now!” Suzanne yelled, uncomfortably aware that she was among the closest to the proto-Zards. “Igor fire! Hard! Full burst!”

The robot obliged. The muzzle of the gun flared. The noise deafened Suzanne. She brought up Mr. Glock, without even realizing it and added her own noise to the din. She was aware that Karl had got his assault gun free and was firing on automatic. The shuttle shuddered and whined and then lifted away, at more than double its usual passenger weight, sluggishly. The ramp seemed to pause at the lip as the vertical lift grav engines struggled. Karl’s gun clicked empty, then the roaring of Igor’s machine gun abruptly ceased, to be replaced by a series of clicks. Two more shots from Mr. Glock, then he, too, clicked empty.

The ramp inched away from the entrance lip. Suzanne could almost touch it with her toes.

“Still with us, back there,” asked Hoss, through the comms.

“Yes, just clear. Go! Go!”

The shuttle shuddered and pulled away but then a guard, leapt from the mass of bodies jamming the takeoff point and wrapped himself around Suzanne’s legs, opening its mouth to bite.

“Ohhh!” She could feel herself being dragged down by the massive creature.

Karl jammed the butt of his rifle in the creature’s mouth. Igor poked it hard with the muzzle of his gun. The creature was not to be deterred. A colonist above Suzanne tried to grab her. She was slipping. Then she felt Mr. Sig Saur in her pocket and whipped it out.

The creature shook its head, pushing away the weapons being thrust at it, and opened its mouth to bite the cruise director.

“This cruise is full,” said Suzanne, extending her pistol, and shot it three times through the open mouth.

The proto-Zard’s enraged expression turned to surprise. Its grip relaxed and it fell away to hit the mound with a thud. The shuttle surged away. The colonists on the ladder cheered – a cheer taken up by those crammed inside.

“I owe you an apology,” said Rods. The cooler night air had woken him up, and he stared at her bleary eyed.

“Why is that, Rods?” said Suzanne, thinking he was going to apologise for barking at her before.

“You and Mr. Sig Saur are a very suitable couple.”



## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Suzanne reluctantly gave a sleeping Emily back to Carol.

"Bye, darling. A few weeks and I'll be back."

Emily woke up, looked at Suzanne with unfocused eyes, yawned and closed her eyes again to doze on her mother's shoulder.

"Well, that's sort of goodbye," said Carol.

They were at Lucifer III standing by the entrance ramp to a small freighter bound coreward and thus to Earth Station, Suzanne would change ships at Tyrone III for the lengthy hop to her destination.

"I wish you wouldn't go," said Carol. "It's sounding really dangerous at Earth Station. People are being killed over food."

"I'm only staying as long as I need to convince my mother and Richard to come. You know the secrecy on – you know, the thing – the only way I can convince them to come is by going there."

Rods' first act after Eve shot a load of antibiotics into his arm was to feverishly insist on taking the lead in the project and to turn what the colonists had hoped would be idyllic hideaway into a major new city – a hub for all the mining colonies in that part of the galactic arm. Rods had told them he wanted a city with schools, specialised medical services, restaurants, sporting fields, with sports teams that would use them, colleges, banks, theatres, cinemas, coffee shops and amusement parks and that was just the start. Fermat II was not just a planet with a terra-formed valley, he told them, but a new homeland. They muttered but had little choice. Rods had the only ship – The Drawn Treader had to be traded away but they got the rest of the cargo – and he was calling the shots. In any case, it was better than living in an isolated settlement. There was also the problem of the other mounds in the valley, also all occupied by these proto-Zards, wherever they had come from. People were now working on that mystery. But the valley's existence seemed to be unknown to the Zard civilisation, so the Zard navy would not come calling any time soon, and for the moment that was all they needed to know. They would take the land around the destroyed mound, turn away any proto-Zards from the other mounds and start building their city.

In the meantime, to keep the Zards in ignorance, the valley and all the work in it had to be kept secret, and that meant total lockdown. The planet's name or designation was not to be entered into any information system except under the strictest of conditions. No hint of the discovery was to be written in an email, memo or any form of social media, or communicated to anyone except for a trusted handful outside the valley. Rods had told anyone entrusted with the secret that if they broke confidence they would find that The Max's main airlock worked well, in deep space. The handful who were told included Emily and her extended family from Finn's Reef. They were to

be among the first not from the original party to move to Fermat. Emily would be the first baby but it was expected that she would soon have plenty of playmates.

Suzanne also intended to make the planet her base along with her mother, Eve and Richard, but first she had to get them to come and that was the problem. There had been no word from either her mother or Richard, and very little news from Earth Station apart from reports of hardship. It was very worrying. Those in the secret had tried to talk her out of going. Those who knew nothing about Fermat II also tried to talk her out of going. Eve had advised against it, but in the end agreed that it was the only way to get their mother, and Richard, out. Rods, still feverish from being bitten, had received the news in silence. He had grunted when Suzanne asked for the necessary funds for fares and expenses, then agreed and turned away. She was affronted but put Rods' manner down to the infection, and made the necessary arrangements.

Part of those arrangements was to brief Eve on her duties as cruise director. Suzanne wanted to keep her job on The Max, the best she had ever had and even better now that The Max's main job would be to ferry colonists to an acceptable new home. But leaving it vacant with Rods in such a terrible mood was not a good idea. Eve protested that she was needed as a doctor on the new planet but agreed as part of the deal in which Suzanne would fetch their mother. The sisters had been joint directors for one trip and Suzanne planned to slip away leaving Eve in charge, and trust to Rods not bothering to change arrangements until she got back. Hopefully his mood would also improve. Eve also hoped that.

Carol had gone and suddenly there was Rods, looming before her out of the crowd that was shuffling between dock and the adjacent shops. He was still mildly feverish and, as she could tell, in no good mood.

"Your sister informs me that she is the stand in cruise director."

"I was going to talk to you about that.."

"I was under the impression that as captain of the ship I appointed the staff."

"Well, yes..."

"There was also an understanding that yours was a temporary appointment. You were looking for your sister. Haven't you found her?"

Oh dear! Oh no! At other times she might have thought Rods was simply being stern and turned a soft reply, but he wasn't being stern, she realised. She was going to be fired from the best job she'd ever had.

"But I thought you liked me as cruise director," she said miserably, suddenly remembering the woman from Stacey's Rods had been talking to a few weeks ago. Stella was it? A ridiculous name. "I wasn't involved in any scams and things ran well, and we got on, I thought."

"I thought we got on to, but at the first test you described me as nothing to your sister."

"I didn't...." Suzanne was about to deny this accusation indignantly but then she remembered the conversation with her sister. She had called him "nothing", she just hadn't meant it like that. So that was it! Other girls might have laughed at this fever-driven misunderstanding said "Ohhh! Poor thing" and tried to dismiss it with a smile. Suzanne, however, knew that approach would get her the sack.

“But Rods, I had just met my sister in the company of a guy who wasn’t my fiancé, down a horrible hole about to fight for our lives. I just meant we weren’t together romantically. This job is the best, and it’s been fun with you, and you’ve been really good to me, even when you’re grumpy... and, look, can’t we just forget it. I’m really sorry.”

Rods grunted.

“And I took command, when you were out of it. I was the last off. I shot that Zard with Mr. Sig-Saur. Doesn’t that count for something?”

Rods glared at her. She noticed that his fists were clenching and unclenching.

“What can I do to apologise. Did you want me to give the fare money back?”

Rods waved this offer away impatiently.

“Of course you have to have your fiancé and mother out here – it’s just that, to be spoken about like that at the first test.”

“I’m really sorry,” said Suzanne, “I just didn’t mean it like that. It’s just that you’re feverish. You should rest..”

She stopped when Rods glared at her. She was guilty of taking the matter lightly.

“It’s just,” he said, “it’s just.. oh forget it.” He thrust his hands into his pocket and strode away. Igor, who had been a few paces away the whole time, waved and followed the trader.

“Do I still have a job?” called Suzanne, but Rods was already out of sight.

“You’re Suzanne Clark?” asked one of the freighter crew, “you have to come now”.

Suzanne followed the man, near tears, but then whipped out her PA out and started dictating messages. The ship would not be out of range of the planet’s systems for another hour or so. She and her sister could repair some of the damage.

END OF PART I

# PART II

## CHAPTER ONE

Rods was on his back, half inside an access way in his engine room, doing something with the nuclear reactor's plumbing. Unfortunately, as he often did when he was in the engine room, he was also singing.

"I polished that knob so carefullllleeeey  
That now I'm the ruler of the queens' navy  
He polished that knob so carefully  
That now he's the ruler of the queen's navy"

Eve shuddered. Rods had relaxed a long-standing rule about the cruise director entering the engine room for Suzanne. Eve was not Suzanne but Rods had not bothered to reimpose the rule. In any case, as Suzanne had pointed out in happier times, no one would willingly listen to his singing.

"As office boy I made such a mark  
That they gave me the post of a junior clerk  
I served the writs with a smile so bland  
And I copied all the letters in a big round hand  
He copied all the letters in a big round hand  
I copied all the letters in a hand so free  
That now I am the ruler of the queen's navyeeee"

She kicked his foot, the only part of him she could see, and cleared her throat. The singing stopped.

"Whaaat? I'm busy maintaining the ship here, so we don't all die horribly in space."

"You'll want to read this. I printed it out for you." She held out a bit of paper. Rods slid out from the access way and took it.

"They want more money?" he exclaimed after glancing through it, "to get two people out. But I paid for a basic passage back for three."

"Everyone is desperate to get out now, so they're charging heaps more for the places, and not so many ships go there."

"Bastards," muttered Rods. "I should be in that trade. So where is the fiancé Richard? Don't see him here. Just Suzanne and your mum."

"I just got two words in a personal message from Suzanne 'Richard dead'."

"What! Any idea how it happened?"

"I checked. There was a big shoot out at the port authority between some rebel group and security, I suppose it must have happened then."

"Richard was with port control? I never knew the man but I'm sorry for Suzanne's loss."

Rods meant it. Of course it had also occurred to him that Suzanne was free but, having finally shaken off the fever and started exercising again, he was now thoroughly ashamed of the way he had acted, both to Suzanne and later. The elder Clark sister had tried to speak to him about Suzanne but too soon and in the wrong way. But for the tactful intervention of Emma, the partner of barman Matt on Lucifer III, both Eve and Suzanne would have been fired. Being almost fired twice would not make Suzanne appreciate the Maxwell or its skipper, Rods had decided, and with Fermat opening up, she would have lots of other opportunities.

"what about it?" said Eve, taking the paper back and waving it. The gesture reminded Rods of Suzanne.

"About what?"

"The extra money. There's not enough in the trading account."

"No there wouldn't be."

The extra costs of the rescue had drained The Maxwell's account and Eve, unlike Suzanne, had no affinity at all with cruise directing. She much preferred to operate the Maxwell's sick bay as a clinic which, to Rods' horror, involved having all sorts of unauthorised people in the crew area. Far worse, the issue of paying for medical treatment and drugs never seemed to arise.

"We'll have to use some of my reserve. I hate using my reserve; it's why it's a reserve."

Eve had never heard of this reserve but she was relieved there was some money. "Then can we pay the fare?"

Rods thought he was making a total fool of himself over a woman, again. Suzanne would return, declare that she had found a better job elsewhere and leave The Maxwell and its grumpy skipper behind. But he could not leave his cruise director and her mother to their fate. He sighed.

"I suppose we'll have no peace around here until all the Clarks are together, but you and I will go over the accounts later. They're in a bad state. Max'll take over what

she can, and prompt on payments for your clinic. Those fees barely cover the cost of the drugs you use. I'm not operating a charity."

Eve hated her account-keeping duties on the Max. She was a doctor not an accountant, but she nodded.

"Max release the money needed on the paper."

"Acknowledged."

"We'll talk at dinner," he told Eve. "I get nightmares if the reserve is used. It has to be made up again."

He pulled himself back inside the hatchway.

Eve fled, before the singing could start again.

"He polished that knob so carefully.."

Suzanne slipped in beside her mother on the narrow bunk they shared. She was exhausted but the shared bunk was only theirs for a few more hours. Then they had to give it up to another couple, a husband and wife. Suzanne wanted to tell them about Fermat. Before she left she had heard that design work was well underway for the mass production of comfortable three and even four-bedroom units for one family – just one family! There would be parks, playgrounds, sporting fields, schools, hospitals, theatres and restaurants - all of the amenities and amusements which previous generations and taken for granted, and even despised as part of the excesses of over-consumption. There would be law and order. During the previous rest period for Suzanne and her mother, someone had been knifed a few metres away, in the next narrow aisle along, over a bed. A bed! thought Suzanne. The ladies had heard the whole thing, from the shouted argument to the sound of the knife blow, but had kept quiet.

As conditions became worse, people had forgotten their humanity. Anyone who collapsed through sheer exhaustion, an increasingly common occurrence, were trampled on, robbed and left to die. In these conditions, the mere hint of a habitable planet, was likely to trigger hysteria. Suzanne had not even told her mother where they would go, only that they were getting out to a promise of a cabin on the Max – she hoped that were true – and that had to be soon. Up until a few months ago, Joselyn Clark could have passed as an older sister. Now she was grey and tired and willing to simply stop struggling and give up.

Suzanne was so concerned over her mother and anxious about getting out that she had no time to think about Richard, to mourn him properly as a fiancé should be mourned. When she arrived at Earth Station, her mother had been waiting in a massive crush of people hoping to get out, with a last message from Richard on her PA. It said that he loved her, then there was a single letter 'g' and nothing else. He had been executed, her mother said, along with almost 200 others, and just pushed out of an airlock. Part of Suzanne's world fell away. But conditions were so bad that she had to push his loss out of her mind. She would have felt obliged to do something about Richard's parents, her parents-in-law to be, but they had been killed in one of the many gang battles now occurring throughout Earth Station, for their bed space and rations. Richard's brother was still alive but Suzanne made no attempt to contact him. She had

to face facts. She had to admit to herself that the death of her parents-in-law to be had simplified matters. She and her mother was all she could manage, and that would be a stretch.

Passages had been reserved out for three people, but prices kept on going up. With Richard's fare no longer needed she had traded that in, but the shipping lines wanted still more. That had prompted the message to Eve, and it had to be fast, or they would put the prices up again. Suzanne dozed off, sleeping fitfully, dreaming that she was back playing cards in the wardroom of The Max. She had played cards with Rods, with the robots making up the table and had mostly won, much to Rods disgust. In her dream the beds did not have a stale, unwashed smell. She was jolted awake by a buzz from her PA.

"Yes!" Rods had come through. She couldn't be too fired. She would beg forgiveness when she got back to the Max, but they had to go now, or the price would go up again. She shook her mother.

"C'mon up, we're leaving."

"Little time yet," muttered Joselyn.

"I meant leaving Earth Station," whispered Suzanne.

"Huh!"

"Sssshh! Pack up now. Don't say anything. Just get dressed, pack and go."

They had little to pack. Just sports bags slung over their shoulders

"Exhausted!" said her mother, as they set off.

"You can sleep on the ship," whispered Suzanne. "There won't be much else to do. Trust me!"

But first they had to get onto the ships waiting for them.

"What about my friends?" asked the older women as they squeezed between the endless rows of bunks. "What about the Jenners?" That was the couple that was to take the next shift on their bunk

"You can message them from the ship – until we are out of range."

Suzanne became aware of a rhythmic thumping and shouting from the great hall, where they were heading. They had to go through the hall to get to the space ship docks, and the port authority where Richard had worked.

They squeezed down a long corridor full of people, Suzanne keeping an eye out for the thieves that were now a constant problem on the station. She could now hear the words of the chant. "This must end! This must end! This must end!" Over and over again, and everyone chanting was thumping one foot or another on the ground at every word. The authorities had been working miracles in feeding and finding beds for everyone, Suzanne knew, but they had been overwhelmed by the enormous numbers of refugees being pushed into the station by the Zards in clear violation of their treaty obligation. She had heard that some academics had justified the Zards' actions on the grounds that the Zard race had a different cultural view of legal conventions. She hoped the academics were the ones without beds.

"This must end! This must end!"

They squeezed through a crush of people at the entrance to the main hall, Joselyn clinging to Suzanne's jacket, the same one that Rods had involuntarily bought for



her when they first met on Lucifer III. This was a danger area. People had lost their lives here. She felt in her pocket for the composite material knife taken from the petty officer who tried to jack the Maxwell. She had carried it through several check points without difficulty and gripping it inside her pocket, was reassuring. It was as if Rods was watching over them, and that too she felt reassuring.

No one paid any attention to them, absorbed with listening to the drama unfolding at the far end of the gigantic, dome-topped hall. The Clarks were not going that way, fortunately, but they still had to weave their way across the hall. Suzanne wedged through small gaps, dragging her mother along behind her with her free hand. The noise was deafening.

"This must end! This must end!" The residents chanted over and over again, as if by shouting and stamping their feet, they could change reality. Dimly, Suzanne was aware of someone at the far end of the hall, on a platform behind a fence and a row of guards, speaking through a public address system. She could barely hear the words.

"We are doing.. best.. no choice.. Zards"

The crowd stopped chanting and starting howling, reminding Suzanne of proto-Zards in the mound, after they had lost the queen. That was not good. The Clarks were now about half way across the hall and making a little better time. She tripped on a body and almost fell but kept going. There was no time to look at the body, and no way to help. A few metres on she tripped on another body and almost panicked when a surge in the crowd kept her off her feet for a moment. If she had fallen among the others that would have been the end of her, but she clutched at the back of someone's collar and, by pulling the man's shirt down, managed to keep herself upright.

"Hey!" The man turned around with some difficulty in the jostling crowd. "Watch it!"

"Sorry," said Suzanne.

The man's eyes widened at the sight of her. His hair was long and unkempt and he was unshaven, as most of the men at Earth Station now were, but with heavy jowls that made being unshaven most unfortunate. He was also heavily built, and thought Suzanne might be an easy mark.

"You owe me," he said, grabbing Suzanne's left arm, the same arm which Joselyn Clark was now holding onto. She was angled away from him, her hand in her pocket, clutching the knife.

"I said I was sorry," said Suzanne, her voice barely making an impression against the howling. At the same time, she flicked off the knife's scabbard with her thumb, as it was designed to let her do. Rods had taught her a few things in the occasional session on combat aboard the Max and she was now trying to remember all of it. Act fast, he had said. Act hard and fast.

The crowd started chanting again.

"This must end! This must end!"

"Whasat! Just don't go yet, darling, until we've talked about this."

No one was paying attention to them. Suzanne abruptly jerked her knife upwards into the man's forearm, then whipped it back into her pocket. The man yelled and let go grabbing at his suddenly bloodied arm. Everybody started yelling "what's the

matter". Suzanne pushed her way into the crowd, dragging her mother. By the time her assailant looked again she was gone.

"She had a knife," Suzanne heard him yell over the din. She took her hand out of her pocket.

"A knife? Who?"

"That girl.."

She heard no more and, after another minute of hard trudging, it ceased to matter. Suzanne almost lost her feet again when the crowd surged. This time Joselyn, not yet a spent force, saved the day by leaning against another man, who did not object, and wrapping one hand around Suzanne's waist. They battled on. If they could get to the space port entry they only needed to present their PAs for scanning and they would be in.

Ahead of her, Suzanne became aware of yelling, quite different from the chanting they were retreating from, then she saw a wire barrier above the heads of the crowd. The semi-circle of reinforced wire mesh had been added since she had been there just yesterday. She battled on against the thickening crowd to the barrier. People were pleading with guards wearing crash helmets and armed with batons, to be let in.

"But we'll die out here," she heard one shout above the din. "You have to let us in".

Suzanne didn't hear the response, as she struggled on, but she heard the pleader say "I don't want to die here".

She saw that the crowd was simply too thick around the gate. So she left her mother wedged between two men who looked too big to be moved easily and pulled her way forward so that she could just reach the wire to one side. She opened her PA, set it to show the tickets they had been sent and pushed it against the wire. The guards were standing with their eyes downcast, so as not to look at the pleading crowd around them. Suzanne banged on the wire a couple of times, but they were used to people banging on the wire. She set her screen to flash. One of the guards, a woman, finally looked up, meaning to yell at her to stop then paused, and strode forward.

"Stop that!" she yelled, but it was a cover for a furtive glance at the PA's screen. She looked at Suzanne, mouthed "gate" and stepped back. They could do nothing for the thousands pleading to get in, but Suzanne had tickets. The guard backed away, yelled "stop that" again, and turned to walk as casually as she could to her supervisor.

The chant continued to roll in from the main hall. "This must end! This must end!" But now it was mixed with the occasional bangs and screams.

Struggling to get her mother and get as close as she could to the gate, Suzanne had little time for the bigger picture, but she could just hear the distant echo of someone trying to make themselves heard over the din through a PA system. The crowd heaved and jostled. Then she heard "the fence is to be electrified. The fence is to be electrified." Warning beeps followed.

Goodness!

With the strength of desperation, Suzanne grabbed her mother and wormed her way through the crowd, just as everyone was trying to back away from the wire. Red lights were flashing.

“Owww!” someone had been caught on the wire. It wasn’t designed to kill, just to discourage. Port officials, all armed with the cattle prods Rods had used, opened the gate just in front of Suzanne. She put her PA in front of her and set it to flash.

“That’s her,” said the guard Suzanne had seen before, “with the flashing unit”.

“Quick,” said someone.

A burly guard reached in, grabbed Suzanne’s arm, and hauled. She wiggled. Her mother grasped what was going on and pushed and suddenly they were through. The gate was slammed and barred behind them and Suzanne and her mother were on their knees.

“Thank you! Thank you!” she gasped.

“What’s this? Who are these people.” It was the port overseer, three layers above Richard in the hierarchy, but he remembered Suzanne the moment he saw her.

“Oh right,” he said more kindly. “Richard Bright’s partner, umm..”

“Suzanne,” said Suzanne, “this is my mother, Joslyn, and we’ve got tickets.” She held up her PA. The older man, round-faced and a full head of grey hair, glanced at it and nodded.

“Very well, get them in quick. Tell their ship to hold. No clearance until those two are on board.”

“Thank you,” said Suzanne.

“Sorry about Richard. It was a tragedy.”

She was about to reply that it was all a tragedy but the overseer abruptly turned back to the guard supervisor. “Anyone else to come?”

“Bout five more,” said the supervisor. Suzanne, still clutching her mother’s arm starting walking towards the oversized hatch way entrance “But we had enough trouble getting those two in.”

“We’re going to have to call it soon. There’s just nothing we can do.”

“Poor people,” muttered the guard who had first checked Suzanne ticket and was now walking with them.

In the main hall, there was a deafening bang and a flash. The deck trembled beneath their feet. From her time in the mound Suzanne knew what an explosion felt like, and that a really good response was to run in the opposite direction, which she did, dragging her mother towards the port authority entrance. The crowd had the same idea but, with nowhere to run, became a panic-stricken, seething mass of immense power that surged away from the bomb blast, crushing those nearest the wire barrier. The barrier beginning to crumble, the supports tearing away from its anchors in the floor. Suzanne started to run. It was only a few metres but her mother stumbled over someone knocked down as the guards rushed about.

“Now we go,” yelled the port overseer. “Everyone inside, now!”

Suzanne pulled her mother along by main force as the older lady tried to regain her feet. A guard grabbed Joselyn’s other arm and they took the last two metres in flying steps.

“We have to turn off the generator,” Suzanne heard on guard scream above the din.

“Forget the generator, Lisa,” screamed another. “Get in.”

There was a mad rush through the port entrance and Suzanne fell headlong onto carpet. The supervisor pulled the hatch shut and pulled the lock across, just as what remained of the wire barrier, and a wall of bodies, propelled by a massive crowd behind them, hit the wall with a whump, that shook the whole lounge.

"Lock down all windows and doors to the port," said the port overseer into his communicator.

Suzanne heard several distinct clicks, then a tremor and lights went out.

"What happened," exclaimed someone in the darkness.

The blue emergency lights came on.

"Whoever is behind this," said the guard supervisor, "must have blown the main reactor transmission lines – maybe one of the reactors."

"The idiots," said the man who had helped Joselyn through. "It'll take too long to repair. A lot of people will die."

"Did everyone get in," asked the supervisor, looking around.

"Lisa isn't in," said the guard who had spotted Suzanne's tickets. "She went to turn off the generator."

"Idiot," said the guard that had pulled Suzanne through the gate.

"A dead idiot now," said the supervisor.

Outside the vast crowd started baying as if they were wolves howling at the moon. Then the banging started. At first it was just rapping, up high as if the people outside were standing on the bodies of those crushed to get at the wall. Then it became louder. Two more explosions could be felt through the station's decks. The howling increased in intensity and the tapping became a rhythmic thumping.

"I don't like this at all," said one of the guards.

"That's it," said the port overseer. "I'm calling it. We have no choice. General evacuation. Everyone to the ships. You all have places. We'll have to up and go."

The guards sighed.

"Yes, but go where?" said someone.

"Beg mercy from the Zards," said another.

"Precious good that'll do us," said the guard who had helped the Clarks.

"We'll decide when we get aboard," said the overseer, "for now it's all out and hold those ships for our passengers. They will be there in a few minutes."

The unmistakable sound and vibration of a drill started up on the outside wall.

"We really need to go," said the overseer in alarm. "Everybody go, go!"

They all headed off, the same guard who had helped, supporting Joselyn. They went through a second hatchway which the overseer slammed shut and locked. Suzanne looked around. The other guards were out of ear shot. She tugged on the overseer's sleeve.

"Nowhere to go, right," she whispered.

"No, nowhere," said the official. "No space on any of the colonies and the Zards are likely to just blast us out of space."

"I'll say this once. Don't put it in any digital system. Don't tell anyone else. Just tell the other ships to follow you."

"Go on." Her conspiratorial tone caught his attention. She was aware that her mother was also listening.

"Head for Lucifer III," she whispered. "Ask for Matt the barman or Justin a law man there. Say Suzanne Clark of The Maxwell sent you, and say Emily."

"Emily?"

"Yes, Emily. Don't try and search for it. There is a child Emily but it's just a code word."

"What happens then?"

"Don't ask. Don't tell anyone. Mum, this conversation seriously didn't happen. Write it down, but don't above all, put it in any sort of digital system. Don't even go directly to Lucifer III. Don't tell the other ships anything at all, if you can help it."

"Matt the barman or Justin the law man," said the overseer, also lowering his voice. He repeated it twice.

"Write it down. Nothing digital."

"Nothing digital. Got it."

A whump and the shudder of another explosion, this time close at hand made them all jump.

"They must've blown a hole in the other bulkhead," said the overseer. "Let's go people, let's go."

They jogged down the corridor to the ship lounges, Joselyn having recovered enough to keep up. With a brief thanks and "we've only got minutes", the supervisor and guards went down one exit and Suzanne, after glancing at her ticket details, down another with her mother trailing behind.

There were two groups of two men in front of different, microscopic departure lounges, packing up their equipment. One group on the left leered at her, while the other group just seemed sad to see the two women. Suzanne was relieved to note that she was to go with the sad group, but then she saw one of the leering group, a man so fat that he seemed to be about to burst out of his space freighter uniform, sidle over to whisper to one of the sad group, eyeing Suzanne as he did so. The second sad man continued to look at the screen he was holding, and tapping on it.

Another explosion rocked the station. Suzanne thought there was a draught then it was cut off.

"All hatches are being sealed now," said the sad man who took Suzanne's PAs to check her ticket. "Life support has been shut off. That's the end. The final, stone cold end. You two are the last."

"Okay, Madam," he said to Joselyn, go through."

"Just a moment," said the other man in the sad group. "There's been a change of plans."

"What?" said Suzanne.

The man with Suzanne's PA looked around in surprise.

"What change?"

"Ms Clark, here," said the first man reading her details on the screen, "will have to go with the other ship, The Paris."

"George what are you doing?"

Suzanne was aware of the two officials from the other ship staring at her hungrily.

"Sorry, we're full. We can take your mother, but Ms Clark will have to go with these two gentlemen."

"I can't be separated from my daughter," said Joselyn.

"Our tickets are for this ship," said Suzanne.

"Can't be helped," said George firmly. He was a balding man with a receding chin who would not look at "We're full up."

"We are?" said the other man.

"Normally only one could go, but as it happens the other ship has a vacancy for an assistant cruise director, and I see you're listed as a cruise director."

"Well sure, but.." Suzanne had changed her job description thinking it might help her get passage.

"So that's settled," he said, backing away, "The Paris is going in much the same direction and has similar ports of call. Geoff they're screaming for us to get on. Mrs Clark, you have seconds to get on board."

"Sorry," said Geoff, also backing away. No-one wanted to be left on Earth Station. "Your mother will be well taken care off." He turned. "If you want to get on, Mrs Clark, you must come." George and Jeff headed for the door.

Suzanne had a pretty good idea what was happening but thought of the knife in her pocket and that there would be plenty of people on board the ship, and she could hear banging on the hatch to the departure lounge area.

"Mum, you must go."

Geoff stayed by the airlock hatch, but there were shouts telling him to close it and come.

"Not without you," she protested. "I just can't without you."

Suzanne pushed her towards the hatch.

"I'll be alright, just remember Rods and The Maxwell. Eve is on The Maxwell."

"I understand, the Maxwell but we can't be separated."

"I'll take care of her," said Geoff, who seemed upset at this turn of events.

"Please drag her in," she said to Geoff. "She won't go, otherwise"

"Okay," said Geoff, relieved that he could end this scene.

"Tell Rods what's happened, and that I've gone on The Paris."

"The Paris," said her mother, But.." Geoff pulled her through the airlock hatch which shut behind them.

Suzanne turned back to the other two men.

"C'mon darling," said the fat man, "we've gotta go too, and now."

Suzanne went, thinking that the scanners had been turned off, so that they would not detect the still bloodied knife.

**CHAPTER TWO**

Suzanne's eager recruiters turned out to be Sam, the fat one, and Woody who's only redeeming feature was that he was less assertive than Sam. Their immediate boss, a dour man they called Nod because he was always nodding his head when he spoke to anyone, looked her up and down in an appraising way that Suzanne did not like at all and nodded at the other two. But then he treated her like the crew member she was supposed to be, assigning her to the top row of a three-deck bunk squeezed into a corridor, in defiance of safety regulations, and set her to work as a kitchen hand. That was what was meant by the title assistant flight director on board the Paris, it seemed – kitchen hand.

Suzanne did not mind the hard work which could easily have been done by machines, or that there was no ladder to the bunk – she had to haul herself up the rickety structure, stepping on the edge of the bunks below – because she had been used to far worse on Earth Station. At least she had the narrow bunk to herself, and it had advantages.

On the first night as she settled in, having exchanged messages with her mother before their ships got out of range of normal comms traffic, Sam appeared in the corridor besides the bunks. She had not had a chance to put up screens as the girls in the lower bunks had.

"Hello darling," he leered, looking up at her. "You want company?"

"No!"

Rods had once told her that the Zards preferred to authorise shipping companies with poor reputations for the Earth Station trading routes, but of course there had been no choice in the matter. She was lucky to make it out and she knew it.

"I c'n keep you warm."

"I'm warm enough, thank you," said Suzanne, grasping her knife under the pillow. "There are others you could visit."

"None as fine as you, darling."

"Will you two sort it out," said the girl on the bottom bunk, crossly. "I'm trying to sleep."

"Yer, right, we should sort it out," said Sam and he started to climb up the bunks. Being heavier than Suzanne and nowhere near as graceful, the bunks creaked alarmingly.

"Hey watch it," said the girl on the lower bunk.

"Whadda you doing?" said the girl on the second tier.

"Keep away or we start screaming," said Suzanne raising her voice.

"Not so loud!" snarled Sam.

He tried to hoist himself into Suzanne's bunk. As it was only just big enough for her, with barely room to turn over, he wasn't going to get very far, but as it was he stopped with Suzanne's knife pressing hard into his testicles. She was on her side with



the hand holding the knife underneath her, where Sam could not get at it, and with a blanket over her for good measure. Sam could not see the weapon, but he could feel it.

"Is that a knife?" said Sam. He didn't look any better close up, and his breath stank.

"It's not you," said Suzanne. "It's me. You're not welcome." She prodded with all her might and kicked at the foot Sam had on the edge of her bunk. His foot slid off but he kept hold with one hand and tried to grab Suzanne's knife hand, through the blankets, with the other, with Suzanne trying to push his bulk off the bunk.

"Sam! What are you doing?" said Noddy, who had arrived wearing a thin, tattered dressing gown. "You're making enough noise to wake half the ship."

Sam dropped down in front of him, with a distinct thud.

"Bitch has a knife, Nod."

"He tried to come up here," said Suzanne.

"I'll handle it," said Nod, glancing at her. He led Sam away, whispering. Suzanne heard "captain" and "doesn't" but the rest was a murmur.

One of the other girls tossed her up a spare sheet and she made a screen by hanging it over duct that passed just by her bunk. With the sheet in place she managed some sleep but the words "captain" and "doesn't" echoed in her dreams and, when awake, she recalled the way she had been forced aboard, as part of some sort of deal between the two groups in the departure lounge, helped by the fact that there had simply been no time to call for mediation. Perhaps, she thought, the captain had no idea there was an extra person aboard. It was a big ship.

As the days went by, her suspicions were confirmed. Nod rebuffed any attempt at questioning him and kept her hard at work. However, he insisted that she not stray from the kitchen and the crowded living area at the back of it. On no account was she to serve food. The most worrying part was that she also didn't have a card like all the others had to draw food or even gain bathroom access. Sam told her with an annoying smile that her card was being processed and that he would have to make do with meals drawn by others, or borrow a card when she wanted to use the bathroom. The one bright spot was that after the incident at the bunk, Sam restricted himself to occasional grope and leer.

When Suzanne realised that she wasn't on any passenger or crew list, she decided not to draw attention to herself. If the captain did find out, well, she was not sure what they did with stowaways in space but being put in an airlock and spaced, as Rods had occasionally threatened to do, was a possibility. Instead, she kept busy, kept her distance from Sam and made friends with the two girls on the bunks beneath her. Henrietta, just beneath her, and Annette on the bottom tier were both about her age but were trapped in the catering section of a "fifth rate cruise ship ripping people off" as they put it, because they simply had nowhere else to go. They were separated from their families, but fortunate in that their parents and siblings were in settlements here and there, where at least they would live, for the moment. There were plenty of people in the ship, they told Suzanne, who had been forced to leave or had been unable to reach mothers, fathers, sisters, brothers, boyfriends, girlfriends, lovers, cousins, second cousins and best friends for ever.

In the meantime, Earth Station had turned into a squalid dictatorship that refused to accept any more people forced on them by the Zards. No one knew what happened to the humans that the new government turned away, and no one really wanted to know. The Zards issued bulletins that certain regrettable but necessary decisions had been made, due to the "limits to available resources". There was nothing any human could do.

Suzanne was strongly tempted to tell her colleagues about Emily and Fermat, but she knew that the moment she opened her mouth it would be all over the ship, then everyone would message everyone they knew in the settlements and the Zards would quickly find out about it, and organise an expedition to take it over. So she kept quiet and comforted herself with the thought that when she was back with the Max, assuming Rods had not fired her and Eve, she would ensure they were enticed to Fermat II by one means or another. For the time being, she told them tales about being a cruise director for Rods.

"I think I've heard of him," said Annette, a short girl with dark hair who also had to fend off Sam's occasional attentions. "He's an identity up where we're going. He did well at boxing, got thrown out of the navy, tried drug smuggling and ended up way out there."

"I never saw any drugs," said Suzanne, remembering that Rods had been taunted by being called 'druggie' on the day they met, and rumours of the deals her predecessor as cruise director had been making, "but the boxing and the navy part is right, and he doesn't cheat people. They respect him up that way."

"Heard he was pretty tough," said Henrietta, stout and easy going.

"I saw him throw someone through a doorway once," said Suzanne.

"Was the door open or closed at the time?" asked Annette.

"It was closed," she said, after a moment's thought.

Rods did not like his picture taken with or without others, but he had grumpily agreed to a couple during his travels with Suzanne, and these were shown around.

"Seems alright," said Annette. "What's he like personally? Nice?"

"He can be grumpy, but if you're bad tempered right back he doesn't mind. And he is a gentleman, in many ways. He has his moments."

"Sounds like you like him, even when he's grumpy."

"I want my job back," said Suzanne, quickly. "I left my sister in it but she's no good at things like that and he's had a bad habit of picking blondes from anywhere to be cruise director, before I took it on."

"Did you get the job because you were blonde?"

"I wasn't blonde when I got it. I was around when the last one got thrown off the ship because she tried to jack it, and his friends told him to take someone .. better."

"Helps if you're around at the right time, but what were you doing up there, and why did you go back to Earth Station?" asked Annette.

Suzanne stuck as close to the truth as possible by saying that she had swapped identities to visit her sister and had a fiancé back at Earth Station.

"You should have paid for the other girl, your mother and fiancé all to come out. Maybe you could have owed Rods, you know, convinced him to pay." Henrietta said this with a sly smile.

"To pay for my fiancé to come out too?"

"Hmmm! Well, the plan isn't perfect, but then what plan is?"

"I wish I had done something like that, believe me, but we didn't part on very good terms." That led to another explanation which required Suzanne to leave out just where the chance remark to her sister had occurred.

Annette, the sharper of Suzanne's two new friends, got the sense that the newcomer was leaving out parts of the story but thought that if Suzanne did not want to tell them everything she must have a reason.

"Three weeks of this, and you'll be in that zone," she said, "If this Rods has got any more openings you'll keep us in mind?"

"Of course," said Suzanne, "if I still have the job."

The days passed slowly. The work in the kitchen became easier as Suzanne understood more about what she was doing, even preparing some of the meals. The whole job should have been mechanised as it almost was on The Maxwell, so that a single cruise director could handle deck loads of passengers, provided they were not very fussy, but labor had become cheap. Why bother with expensive mechanical devices when people could be forced to work their passage? Suzanne concentrated on one day at a time, avoiding Sam, trying to get the work done, chatting to Annette and Henrietta, and watching films on the entertainment systems, although she was mostly too tired when she stopped work. There were no days off.

Brusque and business-like, Nod never responded to Suzanne's efforts to break the ice. He occasionally hustled her out of the way, and even once insisted that she lie on her bunk while someone visited the galley, which was fine by her. Woody eyed her but kept away. It was Sam's knowing smiles that worried Suzanne most of all, even more than his occasional gropes. She got the feeling that the Sam, Nod and Woody trio had something in store for her, but what? She had Annette and Henrietta talk about Rods in Sam's hearing, as a very good friend of hers, status indeterminate, who threw men through doors, had close connection with organised crime bosses and law enforcement officials, and tortured men in his space ship. Sam just smiled slyly, as if he knew it was all a trick and moved away.

After too many days to count, as far as Suzanne was concerned, Annette told her that the stop after next would be Janice IV. She knew the port! It was on the edge of Rods' area. In fact, she knew the resident law enforcement officer and his wife, and that they owed money to Rods, or at least did when she had kept the books. This point had been the subject of a business-like discussion between herself and Mrs Law Enforcement. What was her name? Suzanne had in fact kept records of her dealings in the area on her own PA – no one had told her not to – and had the name in a flash. Anne Levinson; husband's name John. She would dash through the air lock, and drop the Levinson name. With any luck the port officials would remember her, and she wouldn't even need to do that. The galley of The Paris would then be a not very fond memory.

She could survive on the money owed by the Levinsons, until Rods arrived, assuming, of course, that he had not already picked up an interesting blonde from Stacey's to be the next cruise director. Men! He had paid for the passage back, but that was weeks ago now and Stacey's was still there.

Suzanne worked out just how to get to the main air lock, from a plan Annette downloaded from the ship's system, and briefed both colleagues to tell her when the way was clear. Fortunately, ship security was not concerned about people leaving the vessel. The problem was keeping unauthorised people out of it. Her escape should be a piece of cake.

Two days before they reached Janice IV, with Suzanne trying not to count the hours, Nod complained about some missing salad containers.

"But I checked them off this morning," said Suzanne.

"Well they're not there now. They're gone missing. You ladies haven't been eating the salads now have you?"

"When do we get time to eat?" asked Annette.

"They just walked off by themselves, I suppose," said Nods.

Suzanne looked around. Neither Sam nor Woody were around and she had not seen them all shift.

"I'll go and check on them," she said "They've probably just been shifted."

The cramped food locker, just off the equally cramped kitchen was used to store food taken out of the ship's processors and deep freeze, so it held only two day's supply of food, but that was for 200 hundred people and it took Suzanne a few minutes of rummaging around to locate the missing containers. They had been moved, just picked up and stuck on another shelf. Puzzled by this, Suzanne picked them up and, just as puzzlement was turning into a vague suspicion, there was a step behind her. One arm clamped her in a bear hug, pinning both arms to her side, and another clamped a thick, foul-smelling cloth to her mouth. One breath and she felt woozy. Remembering what Rods had taught her she kicked back hard against her attacker's shin, and was rewarded with a yelp. It was Sam. She tried to kick again but forgot to stop breathing. By the time she kicked again she was too drugged to do anything but make Sam grunt. She dropped the containers, hoping the noise might bring someone.

"Is it chloroform?" she thought, woozily. "No one uses chloroform outside old detective novels." She went limp.

Noone except Nod heard the containers fall. He had already ushered all the kitchen staff out to hear the captain tell them the latest news from Earth Station. Many of the crew and passengers still had relatives there and the news was not good.

"But what about Suzanne?" protested Annette.

"I'll tell her," said Nods. "Just go out now and be quick about it."

"You fool," he said to Sam when he stepped into the locker. "Just as well the others were all out, listening to our esteemed leader" The last words were said with a sneer.

"Bitch kicked me," said Sam, who had let Suzanne fall to floor in favour of grabbing his leg, and hopping. He stopped for a moment, grabbed hold of one of the storage units to balance himself and kicked at the helpless Suzanne.

"Don't damage the merchandise!" snapped Nod. "We've got to move fast, while everyone's at this announcement."

They picked Suzanne up between them, Sam limping, and carried her to the main airlock, coincidentally by the route Suzanne had planned to take herself. They taped her mouth, ankles and hands and put her at the back of an equipment locker near the main airlock – a locker they knew was rarely checked.

"Stuff should last a few hours," said Nods as they hurried to catch the captain's address, which had wandered onto the lawlessness and dangers of The Rim. The chemical they had used wasn't chloroform, despite Suzanne's suspicions. "But we'll have to top her up during the night."

"Then when we're docked we heave her out, and serve the bitch right," said Sam.

"Was there anything to this business with the trader the two girls were taking about?"

"Nah, I don't reckon, anyway people go missing round here all the time – that's what the captain's going to tell us. Dangers of the Rim 'n all that."

### CHAPTER THREE

A day or so after drugging Suzanne, Sam was in the noisy, crowded port bar of Janice IV, savouring that first drink after a dangerous bit of work successfully completed. Carrying Suzanne off the ship, while drugged, had been simple. Security were not worried about anyone getting off at the Oid port. Why would they be? They had been easy to distract. Sam thought he would have nightmares about the hairy, perpetually grinning, grey figures that met them. One of the creatures dropped a memory unit with a digital transfer order in front of the earthmen, then whisked the still unconscious girl away. They had been back on board within minutes, security none the wiser. He could have enjoyed the girl, Sam thought, but he consoled himself with the fantasising over the women his share of the money would buy. Lots of women with few choices and no money in the colonies, or so he hoped.

One problem, or rather two similar problems, was that of Annette and Henrietta. As soon as they realised Suzanne was missing they wanted to know where she had gone. They didn't believe Nod assurances that she'd just been shifted elsewhere in the ship. Where in the ship? Why hadn't she told them? In the end, Nod had threatened them with a recommendation to the captain that they be left at one of the labor colonies. Plenty of others would take their place. That shut the two girls up, but now in

the bar on a brief break from their cruise directing duties they still glared at both Sam and Nod who were sharing one of the tiny bar tables.

Nod was also relaxing, day dreaming about just how he would spend his share of the money, when a tall man walked into the bar. He was followed by a shorter man wearing a trench coat and hat, then by a man and a woman who wore the blue coats of the local law enforcement. More importantly, the captain of The Paris trailed along behind.

"It's our fearless leader, look lively," Nod whispered to Sam.

"We're off duty."

"Looks to be some sort of delegation."

The man spoke to the girl behind the bar who turned the music off. Then he turned and addressed the crowd. His first words froze Nod and Sam's blood.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm looking for a colleague of mine who got on The Paris at Earth Station. Her name is Suzanne Clark."

Annette and Henrietta gasped.

"You're Rods," said Annette. "Suzanne showed as pictures of you."

"So, she was on the ship," said the captain, a small, red haired man with beady eyes. He had a poor reputation but was co-operating with the local police and Rods because he now suspected someone was running a scam on his ship with giving him a cut. "She's not on the passenger or crew list."

The bar was as silent, as if someone had flicked a switch. Nod knew he should edge towards the door, but thought that he and Sam were closer to the rest rooms.

"She was working as crew in the kitchen," said Henrietta, "and had the top bunk in our tier."

"I knew nothing of this," said the captain, indignantly. For once he could safely deny wrong doing. "How did we have a crew member aboard that I didn't know about?"

"Two of the people who know are right there," said Annette, gleefully pointing at her two bosses. "Nod was giving her orders and Sam tried to climb into her bunk on the first night, but Nod told him not to." The entire bar swivelled to look at the two men. Nod knew there was no escape. They'd have to talk their way out. He discreetly gripped Sam's arm as the younger man started to sidle away. "Steady," he whispered. "Just don't say anything."

"Captain, I'd like your men to come here please," said Rods.

"Yes of course. Sam, Julian (that was Nod's real name). You'll need to come with us, until we clear this up." The two men moved forward slowly. For Sam, the dream had become a nightmare.

"When did you last see Suzanne?" Rods asked the two ladies, while Sam and Nod took the necessary few paces.

Sam noticed, to his surprise, that the short man in the trench coat, was mechanical. He thought briefly about the ransom he could get for a mechanical man and put the thought to one side. He would have to square this incident with the captain first.

"The night before last she was in her usual bunk above us," said Annette. "Then she was with us when we started the pre-lunch shift. Then I didn't see her again."

"When the captain spoke to us about what was happening on Earth Station," said Henrietta, "she didn't come out with us. She was never there when the captain or the officers were around."

"She went along with it," chimed in Annette, "because she thought she might be in trouble, if she was on the ship unauthorised, but she was going to get out here. She had everything worked out. She said she knew people here."

"She knew us," said the female law enforcement officer, who was Anne Levinson, gesturing at both her and her husband. "Did you ask what happened to her?"

"Nod and Sam said she'd gone to another part of the ship, because the captain was getting suspicious and if we tried to find her the captain would hear about it. Said she was a stowaway."

"Well Nod and Sam," said Rods turning to the two crew men. "You're Nod, right? We should go with the good police officers here and your captain and work out just how Suzanne got aboard The Paris and how she got off again, but I've already checked the route. The captain here did a little trading with the Oids." The captain fidgeted and shuffled his feet. "Noone here cares about that," said Rods dismissively. "I've done it myself. But what we do not do is sell a human, especially a woman, to the Oids."

There was a collective gasp. Nod shook his head violently, rather than nod as he always did, but Sam felt his knees buckle. When the girls had talked about Rods he had scoffed, and dismissed him. But confronted with the reality of the tall, solidly built trader with a scar on his face and dark eyes that bored into him, and who knew everything about what they had done, his bravado turned to panic. Rods next words seemed to echo; to be unreal and distant.

"I don't have time to waste with you, gentleman. All I need to know is some basic details. Who did you sell to; the creature's name? What did his badge look like?"

"A-arrows up," said Sam, finally finding his voice.

"Shuddup," snapped Nod.

"Arrows up?" Rods frowned as he took out his PA and flicked through it. "You mean a triangle without a base pointing up?"

The captive bar audience looked from one man to another as they spoke.

Sam nodded.

"Okay, what else?"

"L-line above it."

"Straight or sloping?"

"Curvy," said Sam, gesturing.

"Okay, any name on the creature you sold to."

Both men were silent.

"Gentleman does this have to become physical? Our police officers here have a thing about cattle prods."

"Not so much a thing," said Mr Levinson, catching his queue. He had studied philosophy as a youth. "It's more an appreciation of the value they can add to certain interactions. Some crude labels can be applied to this interaction, such as physical coercion or even torture, but the action has to be understood in the context of the social structures.."



"Let the men speak, dear," said Mrs Levinson.

"A..atar, I think," said Sam.

"Azar," said Nod. There was no point in continuing to deny what they had done. "Big dude for those guys; and fatter in the face. We never got a spelling or a clan name. It was a cash sale; a straight swap. No documents. I only ever dealt with him."

Rods moved up close to them, lowering his voice to a whisper.

"Guys, I'd better recover my cruise director, undamaged, or I will come looking for you."

"And do what," said Nod loudly, as Rods was turning away.

"We won't discuss it here," said the trader over his shoulder. "Pain is a very private thing." He turned back. "Thank you captain, thank you officers. They are all yours."

"I really hope you find Suzanne," said Annette.

"I hope so too," said Rods as he left, Igor trailing along behind him, and leaving the captain of The Paris to glare at Nod and Sam. Nod's dream about what he would do with his money abruptly vanished.

"It's a real problem," Rods said to Eve and Joselyn back on the Max. "Even if I find the creature who bought Suzanne he'll be a member of a clan and the head of the clan will have Suzanne in his house on the Oid planet. Having got her, he's not about to give her up, easily."

"Will she still be alive?" asked Eve quietly.

"Oh sure, for now. She'll be held for a few days while the boss collect bids, I imagine, but when she's sold and shipped off world I don't know how I'll find her."

"Can we buy her back."

"Price would have tripled by now and it's well beyond anything I could pay even if I got Nod and Sam to give up what money they got."

"I could offer to go in her place," said Eve.

"If I ever got them to agree to the trade, Suzanne'd want to get you out. I'd spend my life rescuing people. The same goes for you Joselyn." Mrs Clark closed the mouth she had opened. "Anyway, I doubt they'd give up one for the other. They'd go for the set, if they could."

"But what do they want Suzanne or any of us for?"

"Dunno, and you probably don't want to know the details, but it's not good. The one advantage we have is that it's an outlaw sort of place. I can go in there and go cowboy and get away with it, for a time, particularly if I've got Igor."

"Go behind or in front?" asked Igor, who had been ruminating quietly in one corner of the Max's ward room.

"Behind, mostly."

"Behind. Get Suzanne. Got it."

"Another of her admirers," muttered Rods.

## CHAPTER FOUR

Suzanne dreamt of being carried by giant, grey spiders through a concrete cavern. She turned her head to see Rods, her mother and Eve all in the far distance yelling something at her. What were they yelling and why couldn't she go to them? She did not like being carried by spider, she thought in a detached way. Then she woke, her head throbbing, on a rough mattress inside a cell. It was a long concrete box with a high ceiling and one end closed off by a metal-framed, wire door. Beyond that was a plain access corridor. She could hear honking and hooting and, somewhere not far off to her

right, a creature growling. Growling? Suzanne had heard such sounds in the immersive movies she saw, but never in real life. But where was she? She got up, unsteadily. There a pan of water fixed to the door with a small hole in the wire above it so that someone could pour water into it without opening the door.

Suzanne sniffed it, then decided she did not have any choice and drank it by scooping it up with her hands.

"Hello, is anybody there!" In the few seconds she had been awake, thanks to vague dreams of being carried by grey creatures, she had a horrible suspicion about where she might be. Sam and Nod would have only gone to this trouble for a big reward, and Suzanne could think of only one planet she had been to with Rods where yet another refugee from Earth Station would be worth anything – the Oid planet. For the moment, at least, there was nothing to be lost by making some noise. "Hello!"

Her repeated calls drew assorted grunts and a tweet or two from further down the corridor. The growling she could hear turned into a full roar and some creature banged against its cell door.

"I'm being held in an animal pen," Suzanne realised indignantly, "as if I'm dog or a cat or something."

Eventually a door opened down the corridor to her left and something could be heard pacing slowly up the corridor, each footfall followed by a click. Then it appeared at the front of her cell; a gangling, grey figure with an inane grin and inevitable tattered leather hat, jacket and breeches. Suzanne recoiled, almost tripping on the edge of the mattress. She had expected that an Oid would appear but she had only seen them on screens during her first visit to the planet. The first live, in the flesh Oid was almost twice her height and stared intently at her. After staring for a few moments, the creature banged the wire door with both hands – to Suzanne it seemed as if the wire barrier almost bent inwards – put one hand over its mouth, repeated the banging and hand sequence and then left, each pace accompanied by a click, as if its knee caps popped out at each step.

She sat on her mattress and allowed herself a moment of despair. Sam and Nod had stitched her up; had dropped her in a deep, dark hole with no way out. She hoped that Rods would, at least, have a quiet word with the pair and perhaps make good on his promises concerning troublesome people and The Max's airlock. But that did not help her much now. She thought for a moment then fumbled in her pockets. Nod and Sam and the Oids might have searched her, but if so they had bothered to take away her knife disguised as a souvenir. She took it out with relief, then after looking around – she was in an animal pen, so no cameras that she could see – she unsheathed the knife and tested the edge. Suzanne knew how to open an artery, so she had a way out. But that was the end game. She thrust the piece of composite material back in her pocket, not quite believing that she was thinking of suicide, and examined her cell. Suzanne had no idea how she could get out, or what she would do if she got out, but it was better than lying around waiting her fate.

Suzanne did not know she had been drugged for more than two days and that Rods and her family had worked out what had happened and were on their way to the planet.

"For the last time you ladies cannot go into the Ord port," Rods told Joselyn and Eve Clark. They had confronted him in the wardroom of the Max inbound to the Oid planet. The Clarks had insisted on coming along which was fine with Rods provided they did not get off the ship or even show themselves at the portholes. "You'll just make it worse for everyone, including Suzanne. I'm the only one with any real chance of surviving out there, and that's only with Igor backing me up every step of the way."

"Backing up, it's what I do," said Igor.

"I've got my bullet proof vest on, my trusty Heckler & Koch with a silencer down my trousers, a sawn-off pump action shotgun inside my coat, another full length to point at obstructive individuals, plus a cattle prod and cosh for close encounters and grenades in Igor's back pack for real parties. And I'm in a bad mood. They can try to mess with me and see how far they get. Igor here has Mr. Glock and his machine gun for which we've managed to find more ammunition. As recent events have shown the machine gun does wonders in discouraging undesirables. If and when we have to use any of this stuff, you ladies will be in the way.

"Are you sure?" said Joselyn, wringing her hands. "It's just not right to sit around and do nothing."

"Suzanne came back for me. I should get her," said Eve.

"Ladies I admire your spirit but in this case, Joselyn, it is right to do nothing and Eve, correct me if I'm wrong, but I didn't see you use Mr .. um .. the Sig Saur which Suzanne gave you in the mound."

"You mean that little gun? Nothing really came close enough, I guess."

"You're not built for this stuff, trust me. You'll do a better job standing by to patch up the wounded which may include me. Hoss, you know what to do?"

The first mate of the Dawn Treader had stayed aboard, not having the heart to go with the other colonists after losing his partner, and had been trusted with limited control while Rods had been fever ridden. The arrangement had been allowed to continue while Rods busied himself with the affairs of the new colony in which he now had a considerable stake. He had also volunteered to go and Rods thought he would be a useful hand but three might be too many, and he needed someone to ensure that the remaining Clarks did not do anything stupid while he was off the ship.

"Wait three days, engines ticking over," Hoss said.

"I'll be in radio contact and you'll be able to track Igor most places in the colony. But if I'm not back by then assume the worst because it'll be true. Mind you, Igor should make it back, at least. They'd need a rocket launcher at close range for him. The real test will be night times. I'm not sleeping anywhere out there, so I'll come back here."

"I just don't know how to thank you," said Joselyn.

"It's not a matter of thanking me. I can't leave Suzanne to her fate - pain though she sometimes is. Wish me luck."

"The best of luck," said Joselyn.

"Good luck," said Eve.

"Luck," said Hoss.

"Luck," said Igor.

"Not you, you're backing me up."

"Backing up, it's what I do," said Igor.

Rods had stepped off his ship before at the Oids planet, but had never gone beyond his section of the dock. One of the creatures came to meet Rods and Hoss, as always happened, and the Earthmen questioned the creature about the badge through translators they wore as headsets, with an amplifying unit hung on a lanyard on their chests. To human ears, Oid speech sounded much like a trombone playing.

"Omph! Omph! Omph! I don't know the badge."

"There were people using that badge on the docks doing business two days ago."

"Omph! Omph! Omph! I don't know about others. All I know is that it's not my clan's badge."

Rods and Igor moved on while Hoss distracted the creature with bargaining over some goods in the Max's hold.

At the end of the dock area two guards manned a barrier which previous generations of Earth people would have considered similar to the metal detector barriers at airports. Rods suspected that the two creatures were the entire dock security detail for that shift. As almost the only visitors was the occasional human trader, it was hardly a busy port. Fortunately, the clan that loosely controlled the dock was not the one they were interested in, so he had no need to offend them. The guards would also be bored and underpaid, or so Rods hoped.

He looked at the Oids, bigger than the others he had seen and dressed mostly in white, and they looked at him. What was a human doing at the barrier? The trader produced a gold coin, a one-ounce, mint-condition Krugerrand, one of several picked up as part of a deal near Zard space. He had polished them up for the occasion. Gold was a universal language and, to judge by the gleam in the eyes of the two guards, they spoke it well. He produced another and laid one coin on tables on either side of the unbarred entry gate. He produced the shotgun, pointing up, finger close to the trigger. The creatures grabbed the coins, eyed the shotgun and waved towards the main hall.

"Okay in," whispered Rods into his mike.

The main hall was a large, dimly-lit space with lots of columns made out of local stone holding up the roof. Rods had found a basic map which Hoss was now looking at back on the ship.

"Keep straight," said Hoss.

They passed another Oid scanning a stack of the small containers favoured by that race with a device clutched in one paw, who looked up in horror at the interlopers. Further off in the terminal, two Oids who looked down and out also spotted the two humans. After a moment's hesitation they moved to a stack of containers beside a point where the Earthman and Igor were expected to come. The two Oids thought they were moving stealthily but to the Rods it looked like a pair of giraffes galloping across the hall.

"Past these containers," he whispered to Igor. "Two Oids. Present right. Do not, repeat not fire your weapon unless I give the command."

"Not fire until command, got it," said Igor.

They came in line with the stack of containers. Rods checked to his left. A few Oids down the hall had turned to watch this byplay. At least they had an audience. He took a step to his left front just as the party from the Maxwell reached the edge of the containers then whirled and aimed his shotgun at an Oid with a club raised, ready to strike. The second Oid, standing just behind the first, was holding a bag. Igor, a fraction of a second behind him, presented his weapon at waist height. Rods racked his shotgun for effect. The Oids froze. Rods remembered watching an old film where the protagonists duelled with weapons called light sabres. In the films the light sabres had been used to deflect the equivalent of bullets, but Rods doubted that they would be of much use against a good, old-fashioned shotgun. The Oid lowered his club, grinning inanely. His mate dropped the bag.

The two groups faced off for a moment before Rods took a step back and lifted his shotgun.

"Have a nice day," he said into the translator.

They moved on, with Igor keeping his weapon on the creatures for a few paces.

A little further on, two more Oids, a little better dressed than the last pair and carrying batons loomed up in front of the party from The Maxwell.

"We represent the government," Rods heard the translator unit say. "Do not .."

At the word 'government' Rods lifted his shotgun and fired over their heads, the sound echoed through the hall. The guards looked up, but did nothing. Igor brought his weapon around, aiming from the hip. The two creatures looked at the human and robot for a few seconds – it seemed like an eternity to Rods – and moved aside.

"You government gentleman have a nice day."

Rods and Igor moved on, as the human glanced around. Everyone in the hall was looking at them, but there was no point in trying to sneak around or pretend they were there on a good will visit. It was better that everyone got the message from the start that messing with the human delegation would have consequences. Rods strode on as if he owned the place, Igor trailed along looking from side to side and occasionally over his shoulder as he was programmed to do, open trench coat flapping.

Beyond the hall was a wide, paved street. Oid architecture seemed to run to concrete one or two story buildings with narrow windows, in varying states of repair. Above was the dome enclosing the whole station which let in the light of the system's sun. It was past noon and still tolerably bright. Rods soon realised that he was in a shopping district and all the shops displayed clan crests. They checked along one side of the street then the other, collecting a number of idle Oids who, fortunately, kept their distance, until they found the crest described by Sam and Nod. Rods took a deep breath, pushed open the door and walked in, to be met by another horrified stare of what he took to the store-clerk cum receptionist. Two larger Oids, the store security, appeared from the back.

"Block the door, Igor. Back into it."

The robot duly put his back to the door, just in time to stop the new, local followers of the pair from The Maxwell coming through. The business had one small window onto which a couple of Oids pressed their faces in an effort to see what the funny Earthman

and his mechanical friend were doing inside. Otherwise the establishment reminded Rods of some computer repair places he had been in on his travels, with equipment strewn over the laminated benchtops and shelves. A dusty couch, large enough to fit a pair of Oids filled one wall.

"Nice decor," commented Rods.

"Omph, omph," snapped the Oid behind the counter. "What business do you have here," said the translator.

"A girl was kidnapped from a ship two days ago and bought by an Oid called Azar. The girl's family.."

"Omph, omph... Don't know about.. Omph, omph.. any girl omph, omph now get out."

"This Azar was using your clan's badge. Surely you'd want to know about this creature using your badge for an unauthorised transaction."

"The transaction was authorised."

"You do know about this girl? Her family would like her back"

The Oid took a few moments to respond, perhaps in part because both Rods' translator and the Oid had trouble with the word family. When he did respond it was with an impatient gesture to the two guards, who stepped forward. No one on the base seemed to have guns, which was fortunate, but they did have batons which they raised. Rods brought up his shotgun and racked it again, ejecting the shell he had previously loaded. Igor aimed his machine gun. The guards hesitated.

"That is a matter for the clan chief," said the Oid at the counter.

"Where is this clan chief? I should speak to him"

"The girl does not concern me and does not concern you."

"Let the clan chief tell me this. Just tell me where I can find him."

"His house does not concern you."

"So, he is in a house at this base? Where is the house?"

"That does not concern you." The Oid's voice deepened several base levels, so that the ground seemed to tremble, "now go!"

Figuring he had got as far as he was ever going to get, Rods backed towards the door while Igor opened it then waved a sparking cattle prod at the small crowd of curious Oids outside. They moved away and the human and robot team were out on the street with the human wondering what to do next. To head the way they had been going seemed a tolerable idea for the moment. A few minutes further on they encountered an Oid, fat and short for his species, wearing an apron.

"Omph, omph.. welcome humans, hee, hee!"

'Hee hee?' thought Rods, maybe the translator was still tuning itself to the dialect.

"Omph, omph, omph.. I understand you are seeking a female of your species hee, hee?"

That was fast. The first time he had mentioned anything about Suzanne was in the shop less than a minute ago, but maybe everyone knew about the female and guessed what he was doing roaming around downtown Oidsville.

"Yes, that's right," said Rods cautiously. "Do you know of this female?"

"Of course, hee, hee, I will take you to her."

Rods was not about to fall for that one. The creature was far too friendly. But if the encounter was handled correctly he might glean a few snippets of information.

"Lead the way," he said, then muttered to Igor, "it's a trap".

"A trap? I go in front?"

"Not yet. When I say."

The pair walked with their new friend further down the street and then turned left into a side street on what proved to be a grid-like street plan. Every now and then the Oid looked across and down at Rods, still grinning inanely. The human was reminded of a ventriloquist's dummy, but at least the Oid idlers were keeping their distance.

"There are clan houses on this base."

"Of course. Up the road we were on – the main road, hee, hee."

"Are there many roads under this dome?"

"Outside this town, just one, good road, hee, hee."

They came to a store with patched up facade and grimy windows.

Just the place for a valuable, kidnapped human, thought Rods.

"Go in, hee hee" said the Oid gesturing.

"Oh no, sunshine, after you." Rods wondered what the translator had made of the world sunshine.

The Oid gestured again. Rods bowed and indicated the door.

"It would be very bad manners of me to go first. I insist."

The Oid stamped his foot and indicated the door again. Rods bowed and gestured at it. He reasoned that the Oids undoubtedly waiting for him inside were unlikely to want him dead or even much damaged. That was a part of the reason he had survived this long. Alive he had value; dead he was a sanitation issue. It was not necessary for his Oid guide to go in first, but it would be one less complication in what would undoubtedly be a frenetic confrontation. Two Oid idlers were watching this byplay from down the street, the rest apparently having decided that it was all too far off the main drag for interest.

"You will follow me?" asked the Oid after a time.

"I will. I'll be right behind you."

The Oid pushed the door open cautiously, said something which the translator did not repeat, then passed sideways through it, as if he dared not open it wide.

"You go first," Rods told Igor, remembering to mask his translator. "There is an Oid just to the left of the door and probably another behind, maybe two. Use the stunner." The stunners had been reset to suit Oids. Rods hoped the voltage was right – he did not want to drop bodies until he had to – but he had no way of knowing. "Do not fire unless I give the order."

"I go first?" said Igor, brightly.

"Yes, you're first."

The robot stepped up to the door, pushed it open and was immediately hit by the Oid equivalent of a Taser, with six thin wires attaching themselves to his coat and vest. Igor, who had been designed to be unaffected by such shocks, jabbed with his probe. Rods could not see what the robot jabbed but the result was a satisfying cry and



a thud. The trader followed his robot through the door. Three Oids were still on their feet, not counting the guide who had stepped out of the fight. One was hitting Igor with a long rubber cosh or blackjack for precisely no result. The robot responded by running full tilt into the creature, arms outstretched and extended. Surprised, and caught in the mid-section the Oid went over with a shattering crash. Rods ducked a clumsy, overhead blow with a club from the Oid closest to him – he suspected their opponents were not trained fighters – and kicked his assailant on the equivalent of the left shin. The creature yelped and grabbed at its leg, bringing its head forward. Rods grabbed the cosh from his coat pocket and thumped the presented head. The blow, which would have felled a human, made the Oid yelp and hop out of range. The third Oid had also tried hitting Igor but gave up when Rods pointed the shotgun at him and racked it. No translation was necessary.

Rods kicked the door shut, grabbed a spike – an over-sized nail from one of Igor’s compartments, and pushed it into the floor, made of some kind of wood, in front of the door. Igor stood on it, which meant that it would require a serious effort to get it out again, and the door was jammed shut.

"Let’s all go and talk in your back room," Rods said into the translator. That other one still breathing? Leave him where he is."

The back room was as dusty, unloved and unfurnished as the front one. Rods suspected the place had not been used in a long time. Whatever. As far as he was concerned the place was excellent as he was able to jam the door with another spike and there was a back door down a short corridor which opened outwards, so it could be jammed from the other side. Perfect.

"Now that we have a little privacy," Rods said "we can do some show and tell. You don't have the girl, do you?"

"Omph omph - no," said the guide, crestfallen

"I believe she is at the Clan chief's place, is that right?"

The creature spread its hands – a gesture that reached across species.

"We know as much as you."

"Okay, where would the house of this clan chief be?" Rods held up his PA unit in projection mode so that the clan symbol was displayed on the wall.

The would-be guide uttered something like a low moan, looked at Rods then back at the symbol.

"You know this clan? Where can I find them?"

"Omph, omph, omph..You don't want to find this clan."

"If I want career advice, I'll ask for it," said Rods. Whatever the translator made of that statement it got the point across. His would be guide shrugged. "If you don't want this conversation to become unpleasant just tell me where I can find this house."

Again his guide shrugged.

"Follow the main road we were on, hee, hee." The hee hees were distinctly subdued. "Long walk up the hill. Clan symbol is on the front. It is the only place this girl would be. But there will be guards, lots of guards and they will be ready for you."

Rods had hardly expected to surprise anyone. He probed. The building was maybe an hour’s walk for an Oid but it was possible to get transport, in the form of the

small electric cars Rods had seen. There was a car rental business desperate enough to deal with anyone, even a human and a robot, back by the space port.

After some minutes of questioning it was clear that their would-be assailants had told them all they knew, which wasn't much. Rods said "wait here" and marched through the back door, Igor tailing along behind. Once outside they jammed the door by driving two more spikes into the floor and walked away.

The back alley was an unpaved space between buildings but the Oids didn't seem to use them and another alley branched off it in the direction they wanted to go. Perfect. Just as they were about to turn into the second alley they heard loud omphing from in front of the disused shop.

"Come out humans," the translator said. "we know you're in there. We are from the government."

Wondering how long it would take for the 'government' operatives to send someone to cover the back entrance, Rods peered around the corner of the alley. Sure enough, two large Oids with clubs rolled up to stand by the door they had just left. With any luck it would take them a long while to sort out what had happened. Rods and Igor left. They had a car to rent.

## CHAPTER FIVE

Suzanne was lying on her thin mattress, dreaming of being back on The Maxwell when they came for her. She heard the buzz of the electric lock on her cage door and when she opened her eyes two gigantic Oids were looking down at her. They laid grey, hairy hands on each arm and heaved her upright without effort. Suzanne thought it was like being grabbed by spiders with hands. They took her out into the corridor with one Oid kicking the door shut behind her. A part of Suzanne's mind noted that the door locked automatically.

"Where are you taking me?" she asked.

The Oid on the left put his hand over his mouth to signify silence. They took her through a sliding door and what seemed to be private room – there was a mattress and pictures on the walls – and into another, bare corridor. After a minute or so they put her down so she could walk, but kept their hands on her arms as they moved through a maze of intersecting corridors. Suzanne tried to remember the way but there were no distinguishing features, or any signs that she could see. Every now and then an Oid passed them, on some other errand, and stared intently at Suzanne in a way she did not like at all, until they passed.

"Nice place you have here," said Suzanne, for something to say. "Walls are bare." Again, the only response was for one Oid to put his hand over his mouth.

After several turns they crammed into a lift which took them up, perhaps three floors, as far as Suzanne could guess from the symbols flashed on a small screen in it. She was then taken into a room with gold inlay carpet and couches with plush upholstery, but had only a moment to appreciate the décor before being flung, face down onto the carpet.

"Yeouch!"

"Stay down," said a voice near her, as she started to get up. Suzanne looked around and realised that there was a translator unit close to her, by a couch. "Do not look up at His Magnificence. You are a worm and should act like it."

Suzanne thought briefly of flinging the translator unit at His Magnificence, who or whatever he might be, but then thought she might have more of a chance of finding out what was going on by playing the role assigned.

A door opened to her right and something padded into the room. Two giant slippers came into the cruise director's field of view.

Slippers? thought Suzanne. I'm going to die a horrible, lingering death and this guy wears slippers? Then she heard the creature speak and the hairs on the back of her head stood up. It was the Omphing of the Oids that Rods had heard - Suzanne had never heard any of the creatures speak - but with a high, cold intonation threaded with a sigh that made her think of ghosts and horror movies.

"Oomph! Oomph! Oomph!. This is the vessel."

Vessel? Suzanne did not like the sound of that at all.

"Oomph oomph oomph. Creature on the floor, the men who sold you said you had no friends."

"Oh no, your honour, I don't know why they said that," said Suzanne, without looking up. "I have lots of friends – powerful, important friends."

"Oomph oomph oomph... two creatures are on the base looking for you. A man, big for a human, and a shorter creature that is mechanical."

Physically Suzanne remained on the carpet, but mentally she did high fives. "Rods has come for me," she thought, "he isn't still angry with me, or maybe he just hadn't finished yelling at me." Well, she could live with that. She would smile sweetly or be grumpy right back, as he seemed to prefer that, and she would be where she wanted to be, with Rods on The Maxwell.

"Who are these two creatures to cause trouble on the base? Why do they want you back? This man can find other females?"

"It does not work like that your excellence. Men and women form attachments," Suzanne wondered briefly what Rods would make of that, "and the man won't leave without the woman."

The chief Oid – Suzanne supposed he was in charge – garumphed, a sound which did not merit a translation. "This friend of yours", the translator seemed to have trouble with the word friend, "is causing trouble in town. I will send two of my servants to dispose of him and this mechanical creature. No-one will see what happens, or care or remember anything, but it is an irritating detail. I hope we will hear no more of your powerful, important friends." The translator paused on the words "powerful" and "important", as if the chief Oid had doubts about his newly acquired vessel's story.

Suzanne felt a moment of sorrow for the two creatures. She hoped they had no families, but they were trying to make her into a vessel, whatever that meant, and she did not want to be a vessel.

"Your magnificence must be very famous to have many servants to do your bidding?" she said, hoping to get him talking.

"I once was very great," said the creature, through the translator. It now sounded bored and disappointed. "But I had too much pity in me. I will not make that mistake with your friends. Take the meat back to its cell. Keep it well fed."

The meat snuck a quick peek at the creature. Its face was turned away from her but it seemed taller and thinner than the Oids she had seen and its fur a shade or two lighter. It wore a turban, an elaborately decorated blue shawl and pants. Great, thought Suzanne, a fancy dress Oid.

She was jerked off the floor and turned around by her two guards before she could see much else.

"You can never have too much pity," she said over her shoulder, as she was marched out of the room, but if the chief Oid heard he did not bother to respond.

The journey back was a repeat of the journey out, but this time Suzanne looked about more, desperately hoping to see something that might give her an edge in a break out attempt. Suzanne had never broken out of anywhere, but she did not want to be a vessel and knew that Rods was close, so The Max must be in port. Although Rods and Igor had proved useful when a hive of creatures wanted to kill her, a whole base of these big creatures might be a different matter. If she could get out and get to the port somehow – perhaps she could cover herself and walk there – they could all slip away without troublesome shoot outs. So how could she get out?

In the corridor leading to her cage, Suzanne noted big, blue buttons up high, beside each cell door. When her captors reached her cage, one Oid slapped the button and the cage door clicked open. So that was it. Suzanne had just a moment to try to fix in her mind exactly where the button was in relation to the door, before her guards literally threw her into the cage. She staggered and fell forward, fortunately half on the mattress.

"Ouch! Hey!"

One guard pulled the door shut, testing that it was locked, and they both left.

The cruise director picked herself up. Previously she had just glanced at the wire on the door. As there were also strong bars she could not squeeze between the wire had been just a detail, but that was before she had known of the button to release the lock. If she could cut the wire, she thought she could get her arm and hand between the bars. Hmmm! Suzanne was about to reach for her knife when one of the guards returned. She pretended languid indifference, leaning against the wall, careful not to meet the creature's eye while it pushed a bowl of something hot through the slot at the bottom of the door, then left.

Suzanne knelt down, sniffed, and tentatively nibbled what looked to her like porridge, with an enormous plastic spoon stuck in the middle of it. Had the Oid cooks read up on the care and feeding of humans? Suzanne used the spoon to take another bite, suddenly realising that she was very hungry. She didn't start choking or vomiting so she took some more. Before she knew it she had finished half the bowl, then thought she might as well finish the serving. She had to keep up her strength for any escape.

Then the lights went out. Around her, the animals held in their pens, squeaked or called or growled. Suzanne stood quietly letting her eyes adjust. There was a faint light from the desk she had seen at the far end of the corridor. She took out her knife and began to climb up the bars on the door. There was work to be done.

Down near the docks, after creeping through some back alleys, Rods had found the car hire business. The premises of this independent enterprise had more furniture than the abandoned shop into which Rods and Igor had been lured, which was about all that could be said in its favour. The proprietor was older than the Oids Rods had

encountered so far, at least to judge from the flecks of white in his hair and in the face, but almost as hostile until he realised that Rods wanted to hire a car. The trader produced one of the gold coins he had brought along, which the businessperson Oid examined suspiciously, to the point of biting it. He then took them to a shed at the back in which stood three, dusty electric cars. These looked like oversized versions of the golf carts Rods had seen in films but with closed in sides.

Rods had never encountered electric cars before but he knew of them and a brief fiddle with the controls told him most of what he wanted to know about driving one. The real surprise was the rental fee, which was outrageous. He did not want to buy the car, he explained through the translator, just rent it for a day or so. That was not the owner's problem. A human was a risk and had to be priced accordingly. After some haggling, Rods handed over two more gold coins and a lot more of his credit balance then he thought wise, to gain access to a pre-loved vehicle which happened to be the only one charged up. After some further argument, the proprietor produced two of what might have been Oid towels which Rods arranged around the side panels and part of the front wind screen. No point in drawing any more attention to themselves than they had to. An inquiry about road rules drew a puzzled response. You drove on the road, what other rule did the human want to know about? Fair enough. Rods and Igor piled into the front and only seat which was so large that Rods had to perch on the front to reach the steering wheel, and drove off.

This time they were not troubled by idle locals. They passed two Oids who did not even look at the car. A little further on another large group was moving down the main road in the opposite direction – Rods suspected they may have the same group that tried to surround himself and Igor in the disused shop – and straggling out onto the road. The trader swerved around them, crouching low in his seat, and drove on before anyone realised a human was driving.

Igor, who had said very little since the shop looked at Rods and then at the controls in succession several times.

"Don't start. It's easier to get around this way."

"Not in front or behind," said Igor. "By your side."

"Does that worry you?"

"No, just different."

The businesses and two-storey high rises of the main town quickly gave way to a long, potholed road with sprawling mansions fronted by massive walls on both sides. Each had a clan symbol prominently displayed on the front gate. The quality end of town. Rods found the one they he had been looking for, about 10 minutes' slow drive out of town on the right, playing chicken with the occasional vehicle going in the other direction – not because he wanted to but because trying to pass them peaceably on the left or right did not really work. He also found two Oids who were standing at the open, front gate of the mansion scanning the road. These two newcomers to Rods' game of survival, drew back when they saw the rental and tried to seem casual, as they just happened to be out there watching for traffic. Rods drove on, pretending that he had not noticed the huge creatures, while noting, out of the corner of his eye, the pistols

both Oids carried in wild-west style holsters. Okay, that would make it would be a fair fight – that is, if they ever got a chance to draw their weapons.

Out of sight of the house he U-turned in the nearly deserted road and drove back passing the clan house just as the two guards were getting their own electric car, identical to the human rental albeit a little cleaner, out into the drive way. One guard was standing by the car with its side door open, looking around.

Rods did not look at the Oids heavies, although they stared at him, but kept his speed down while the guard jumped in the Oid vehicle. Rods knew what had to be done and had no qualms about doing it. The real question was where? They drove on with the guards following at what they thought was a discrete distance, perhaps imagining that because Rods vehicle had no rear view mirror – it was an optional extra – the human would not realise he was being followed by two gigantic creatures. In fact, Igor was keeping tabs on them through a small camera in the back of his neck.

They had passed a couple of side roads on the way up and Rods headed for the closest which, as it happened, was to the left. He turned down it, ensuring that his new friends could see the turn.

"Still coming," announced Igor. Rods drove on, having no idea where he was going, but at least there were no other creatures or vehicles about. The houses thinned out and then gave way entirely to a straggly Oid forest consisting mainly of what looked to Rods to be palm trees, with an undergrowth of palm bushes. The edge of the giant dome that enclosed the base could be seen a few kilometres away. Off to their right, behind the trees, the world's sun was setting. The road degenerated into a track and veered off to the left, along the edge of a marsh. Rods looked again and realised the marsh was a lake with large colonies of green plants – algae or seaweed – floating in it. He did not like the look of the lake or of the creatures he could see scuttling over the floating green islands. He also thought he saw a tentacle flip out of the water, and drag one of the creatures from a seaweed pad into the water. To judge from the lack of boats on the water or homes on the water's edge, the locals did not like their little inland sea much either. That suited him, but where to do the job? The track took them over what could be called a hill – an elevation. It would have to do, particularly as he had no idea how much track he had left. The light was now fading, loading the odds more in his favour.

"When we stop," he told Igor, "I'm getting out and going into the forest. Do not follow me."

"Don't follow you," said Igor.

"Get out of the car and just keep looking around, as if you're confused."

"Confused? Looking around? How can I be confused?"

"Just looking around then."

"Looking around."

"But don't look at the car coming up behind us. Look out to sea or to the left front, as I've gone that way."

"Left front. Gone that way." The robot sounded uncertain.

"I'll still have the comms unit so I'll tell you if you're doing anything wrong. Our friends will come up soon and get out of their car. Do not look at them. If they shoot at you, you can shoot at them, but make sure I'm not in the way."

"I get to shoot. I'm not in front or behind?"

"Yes, you get to shoot, and you are not in front or behind."

"Sounds like a plan."

Rods knew that was one of the robot's standard responses, but it still reassured him. He moved into the forest, drawing his silenced Heckler & Koch, just as the vehicle of their would-be killers appeared on the crest of the hill. The car slowed, as the two Oids saw the car parked with Igor beside it, looking at the sea and along the track, anywhere but at the two Oids. The trader crouched down so that he was below the line of undergrowth and moved forward, as softly as he could. Stalking in a forest was quite a new experience for him, but the ground was covered in a form of thick grass which deadened any noise he made. So far so good.

Rods planned to head out into the forest and then loop in behind his opponents for a quick, quiet disposal. It was a sound plan, but like most plans hit a snag.

A dim shape off to his right moved. Rods slipped on light amplification goggles – he always carried them off ship – to see what looked much like a grey spider but was the size of a great dane. Rods was in its territory.

"Grrrr!"

The creature's massive teeth gleamed white against a grey, hairy body. A dog-spider.

Rods stopped, wondering what he should do, just as the Oid vehicle also stopped and both Oids got out, drawing their guns. They looked around, both through caution and because they were puzzled. One whispered something to the other, Rods caught the faint Oomphing, but his translator did not say anything. The other replied with what sounded like a high-pitched chuckle. Perhaps they thought he had gone into the forest, and the dog spiders were doing their work for them. Two other dog-spiders joined the first in front of the earthman, growling at him. Yet more of the spider dogs discovered the two Oids, also growling at them, causing the guards to Oomph nervously. Rods realised the spot he had chosen must be close to a large nest of the creatures.

The trader debated shooting the dog-spiders but he did not know just how they would react, and he was just metres from his would-be assassins who really deserved the first shot. He backed away, towards the track, keeping below the line of shrubs and watched the Oids out of the corner of one eye. His new pets followed.

While still wondering what to do, he was aware that one of the Oids was pointing out to sea, Oomphing in alarm, and the other opened the car door to grab something. Rods risked a quick look, through the goggles, and realised that the object was a missile launcher. Beyond the Oid a massive, dark shape loomed, but Rods' eye and mind dismissed it as one of the seaweed pads that had drifted close in shore. All he could think about was what the launcher could do to Igor, his main hope of survival. He pivoted, let the laser sight find a spot on the creature's skull and fired, then spun back to fire twice more, as the dog-spiders lunged at him.



He dropped two and the others vanished, just as the human heard shots, explosions compared to soft fhuts of his silenced weapon, followed by a shrill scream. Rods turned just in time to see the second Oid wrapped in tentacle of some gigantic creature, a cross between a squid and a cray fish that had risen from the little sea. The place he had chosen for a quiet encounter has proved to be very nasty indeed.

Having seen the size of the Oid fauna, Rods was now not surprised the guards had brought alone a rocket launcher. It had not been for Igor at all. But now he thought that a rocket launcher might boost the odds in his favour. Rods dashed around to where he had dropped the second Oid, just in time to see the creature's body being dragged away by one of the dog spiders. Rods stepped on the tube and, after a brief tug of war, the Oid's lifeless hands released the device. The Earthman picked up the launcher, enormous for him, and, aware that the dog spiders were now edging around the front of the vehicle, jumped in the car.

"Igor, back in the car quick."

"It's now full dark," said Hoss. He had been listening and watching on Igor's in-built cams the whole time but had wisely kept his mouth shut. The two Clarks had also been watching from the ship, but only Hoss was allowed to communicate. "Are you going to come back tonight?"

"Not yet. I think I have a plan here."

The Oid car was identical to the one he had been driving. No key was required. All Rods had to do was press a start button and thump the accelerator which he did, running over one of the dog-spiders with a satisfying crunch and yelp, in the process.

He drove up beside the rental.

"You've seen me drive?" he asked Igor over the Comms link. Igor was smart enough for that, especially when still in contact with Max.

"Yes."

"Then do that now. U turn behind me, and quick."

He turned his newly acquired vehicle to see, with alarm, a host of the dog spiders on the track. Off to the right. In the forest, he thought he could see the beginning of a mass of webs. He had blundered into a colony of the things. It was time to depart. Igor finished a clumsy U turn.

"Follow me and don't stop!"

"Don't stop. Gottit."

They drove off. Rods hit one of the creatures, the impact echoing through the car, leaving a red smear on the road. The rest scattered. Off to his left, a grey body loomed out of the water, tentacles waving but the creature left the two cars alone. Once out of spider danger zone, Rods slowed to a more sedate pace. He wanted to mull over his plan, although there was not much to mull over. He had now dropped two bodies, or had dropped one and had been present at the death of another. Fortunately, it had happened well away from the settlement and it was a lawless place. The bodies were not going to be found any time soon. But when his recently departed playmates failed to report in, the list of suspects in their disappearance would not be a long one. There was no comms unit in his newly acquired vehicle and the Oid heavies did not seem to have such equipment, from the little he had seen of them. So maybe there was

a chance for his plan, if he and Igor went right away. If it worked and they did find Suzanne, he would tell her this was not a good planet for Emily.

## CHAPTER SIX

Suzanne sawed away at another strand of wire, stopped to feel the nick she had made with her finger, then pressed hard with the knife. It did not give. She wished, again, that her plastic knife had a serrated edge. If and when she got out of the cage, she promised herself, every knife she owned would have a serrated edge. Every knife in the kitchen of the Maxwell, should Rods have anything to do with her, would have a serrated edge. She cursed the wire and the knife, as much as Suzanne could curse. She bore down on the nick in the wire with her full weight, such as it was, and it broke. She was standing on one of the cross bars in her cell, barely able to see the wire

in front of her in the dim light, cutting a half circle in the top right hand corner of her cell door. She hoped to be able to cut enough of the wire to force her hand through to the door release button she knew was there. But it was a long job and, she thought, it would be quicker if she weighed more so she could bring more force to bear on the knife. The thought made her smile.

The culture that had insisted women should be slim had mostly died along with the navy's defeat at Crossroads. The problem had become getting enough food to survive, rather than avoid eating to keep slim. But enough of this weight consciousness had survived in cultural memory for Suzanne to find the thought that it would be useful to be heavier an amusing one. Then she remembered that she didn't want to be a vessel and started sawing at the next wire.

Several wires later she tried forcing her hand through. Yes! She stood up on her toes and reached around to where she thought the button should be.

The lights went on. Suzanne jerked her hand in; too quickly. Her jacket sleeve caught on the edges of the wire. After a moment's struggle trying to free it, she pushed hard on the wire to give her arm room, pushed the whole sleeve out to free it, then pulled it in again. That left a noticeable tear in the wire which she tried to fix by pulling it taut, as she heard the sliding door open to her left. Suzanne dropped down to the concrete floor, just as she heard the first click of an approaching Oid and sat on the bare concrete on the opposite side to the damaged wire, with what she hoped was a look of abject resignation. At the last moment she dropped the knife into her pocket.

The guard loomed beside the door, looking down at her. If he looked up and to the left, Suzanne thought, he could not fail to see the mess she had been making of the wire. Suzanne heard him grunt. Then he banged on the wire to get her attention and pointed at the food bowl, which Suzanne had unhooked and taken inside her pen. With her foot she nudged it closer to the hatch at the bottom of the door, so the attendant could get at it – all without looking at the creature. He picked it up and stalked off, knees clicking.

She waited. The sliding door opened and closed, then the lights went out again. She waited until her eyes adjusted and, as before, about the only illumination was what an instrument light at one end of the corridor. Now that Suzanne thought about it, she had seen no windows on her earlier trip through the building. All the light had been artificial. She must be underground. That could work in her favour, if and when she got the door open. The Oids probably could not see in the dark either. If they couldn't see her they would not return her to her cell. But first she had to get the door open.

Suzanne groped her way back to her work place at the top of the door, forced her arm through the wire and tried slapping the concrete about where she thought the button was. She stood on tiptoe and groped around the area for several minutes. Nothing. She felt the angle in the recessed door and visualised the button she'd seen earlier. Her arm should be long enough; unless she wasn't allowing for the doorway being recessed. How could she extend her reach? The knife! She withdrew her arm, with some difficulty, re-sheathed the knife and used it as a probe. One tap, another tap, then a third which hit a section raised above the wall. The button? She pushed as hard as she

could, at the limit of her reach. The Oids had just slapped it, but it was an electrical button. It shouldn't be hard to push down.

Click! The door swung open with Suzanne on it. Jubilant, she jerked her arm down, only for the sleeve to get caught again. She dropped the knife, which fell with a clatter, and struggled on the door as it swung out into the corridor. But this time the sleeve was caught fast. In a panic, as the door started to swing back, she shrugged her other arm out of the coat and fell with an indecorous thud on the concrete.

"Yeouch!"

The gate thumped against her then swung out again. Something hooted from a cell further down. The growling creature further down the corridor, which had been quiet for a time, started growling again.

Had she disturbed the guard? Suzanne rubbed her head, which had hit the concrete, and listened but heard nothing beyond the low growling. She had glimpsed a spider-like creature with teeth in one of the nearby pens as she was dragged to hers, and thought that must be the one growling. Well the creature was safely inside its pen, and Suzanne was not. With that thought she felt exultation. She had escaped, just like all the movies she had seen. The escape could have been smoother, and it was only to the corridor so far, with a whole building full of Oids and other hostile creatures between her and freedom, but it was still a step away from being a vessel. Then she thought how her fall would have made Rods laugh, and that gave her new resolve. Laugh at her falling off a door would he? If and when she saw him again she would tell him off, after she hugged him because she would be immensely glad to see him again. But what was she still doing on the floor? Rods would have been practical. You're out of the cage but not back on the ship, Suzanne thought. Get up!

She got up, still sore from her fall, groped for her knife and, after a struggle, freed her coat from the door. Now what? The guards had come through a sliding door to the left of her cell, so she would go that way, keeping her right hand on the corridor wall. The cruise director had a moment of panic when she began to grope along the wall, thinking that she might be pointing the wrong way in the near total darkness. But then she thought her right hand was on smooth concrete so she had to be pointing to the left from her cell, which was the correct direction. There were no obstacles in the corridor. Twice something hissed at her in the darkness. The growling creature kept on growling and, to judge from the sounds, started banging its head against its cage door, as Suzanne came closer. Eventually her right hand, trailing across the wall, hit a raised barrier. The door. She pulled at for a moment until she recollected, sheepishly, that it slid across rather than opened out. After some grouping and pushing in the dark the door slid across and Suzanne stepped through. The corridor had smelled of fur and animal droppings, but the room smelt more like wood smoke, or at least what she thought was wood smoke – a dim memory of an aroma machine she had been given as a birthday present in happier times.

She became aware of a soft rhythmic whistling. Straining her eyes Suzanne thought she could make out a dark mass just to her right, close enough to touch. The Oid guard on his sleeping mat? Behind her, the growling creature picked up the volume and banged louder on the cage door, and now there was no closed door to muffle the

sound. The rhythmic whistling stopped and the dark mass seemed to stir. Time to go. Suzanne stepped out, keeping to her left, away from the Oid, and kicked something. Suzanne never knew what she had kicked but from the noise it could have been a plate and cup left on the floor. The Oid sat up and Suzanne instinctively crouched. She had the impression of the creature looking around, puzzling over what had awoken him, but was just as blind in the dark as she was. He "oomphed" plaintively, then drew his breath in sharply, perhaps realising that he could hear the growling of the spider dog clearly. The dark mass of the Oid got up, off its bed – Suzanne shrank back to keep out of its way – and stumbled off to the left in the darkness. The Earth girl scuttled in the opposite direction on all fours back around the other side of the door and into the corridor, where she stood up. What to do? She had just decided to pull the door shut and look for another way out when the lights came on.

The electrical car had a single, weak headlight which Rods switched off, driving by the light amplification goggles. This time he took care to scan the bushes on either side of the road – who knew what other horrors this planet had in store for them – but apart from a shadow or two, and perhaps a flash of white fangs, he saw nothing. Back near the main road they stopped the cars. Rods pulled a small component from under his rental's basic dashboard, as the renter Oid had shown him, to disable it, and they moved to the car the two Oids had come in. He took a robe he had brought to cover up Suzanne, if and when they found her, and spread it over one side and part of the front window. A coat he had brought for himself he spread as best he could on the other side. A weak cabin light died a brutal death. They drove off.

Stars shone through the outpost's dome but there was, of course, no moon to supplement the lanterns hung at the gates on either side of the road – the Oid idea of street lighting. Rods had his goggles on but it was still difficult to see the clan badges. Without Igor, who had been automatically mapping by dead reckoning as they went, Rods would have had a lot of trouble finding the right house again.

"So how are you going to get into the house?" asked Hoss from back on The Max, as Rods drove. He had realised they were heading back. "Are you going to do it tonight?"

"Got to, and we're in the Oid car. These guys don't have any comms on them or on the car. Guess they're just not set up for any opposition that might shoot back. So, I'm going to turn up at the gate in their car with the clan symbol on if expecting to be let in. Might get us inside the house. If not, Igor will have to start his party trick."

"Good luck. The ladies say good luck."

"We'll need it."

Security cameras? Maybe he could take out a couple with his silenced pistol, assuming he did get into the building, and lose himself in the sprawling clan house but then what? He could hardly sneak around the house or pretend he was one of the guards. Sooner or later it would come down to shooting. So be it. He and Igor had an arsenal between them, and his bad mood had become worse. They and the guards would have a real party.

"In front or behind?" Igor wanted to know when told what would happen.

"To start with, in front. Anything in front with a weapon is an enemy, but make sure they have a weapon and are not Suzanne."

"Weapon, not Suzanne, gottit!"

He drove up to the gates as if he drove in every day, crouching low so that he could barely see over the dashboard. He could see an Oid silhouetted in a lighted window directly in front. An intercom on the gate Oomphed – crude technology, thought Rods – and the gate opened. At the same time, at the end of a short concrete drive, a gridded roller door, also started opening. Except that the scale was wrong they might have entering a secured garage on Earth.

Rods drove in fast, ignoring another squawk from an intercom by the garage door. The garage itself proved to be a dimly lit, small concrete box holding another of the electric cars, which he parked beside – he had been hoping the garage would be much larger. Rods muttered a "stay here and don't fire yet" to Igor then eased out the door on the side away from the control room, pistol at the ready. A guard started Oomphing and this time the translator caught enough to make sense of it.

"Hey, Jubal, Kathar," said the creature, "get out of the car next time and don't make me leave the control room. You're not off yet, there's some problem below."

Rods got up into a crouch, pistol held in both hands, at eye level.

"Jubal, Kathar, why the (untranslatable) don't you respond. The Oid took two steps into the small room and opened the car door. He pulled away the cloak to see Igor pointing his machine gun at him. Rods now bobbed slightly, until his head and gun were just clear of the car. The Oid saw this movement and registered the existence of Rods before catching a bullet squarely between the eyes. He crumpled.

Rods was at the control room door in a few steps, going through the door in combat mode. No other creature was on duty in the dimly lit room, which contained an array of screens. One bank showed the outside of the house where there was no activity, because the intruders were now inside. Another bank connected to interior cameras showed shots of Oids running to and fro. From somewhere deep inside the house an alarm, an old fashioned bell that sounded as big as one on a fire house, was ringing.

Rods wondered if perhaps his lost cruise director was causing trouble.

Suzanne looked around, blinking in the sudden brightness. At one end of the passage, past her old cell, the corridor bent at right angles. The nook featured a chair and small table with a computer screen on it. An instrument light from the screen had provided the room's only illumination when the main lights were turned off. In the pen right in front of her was a spider dog of the type Rods had been trying to avoid in the colony's wilderness area, ramming its head against the cage, glaring at her through multi-faceted eyes and growling. Able to see the creature close up, Suzanne did not like it, and the creature returned her dislike. Behind her Suzanne heard the clicking of the Oid returning.

Then the cruise director saw the red button above the corner of the spider dog's cell door and recalled that she didn't want to be vessel. She leapt up, put one foot on a

cross bar and stepped up to slap the button as hard as she could. The lock clicked open. She dropped her foot and gave the door a tug to ensure that the spider creature got the idea, then sprinted for the table at the corner of the passage, blessing Rods insistence that she should run every day on The Max's treadmill. Behind her the spider-dog's cage door smashed open, just as the Oid appeared at the sliding door. Suzanne, busy climbing onto the corner table thought she heard the Oid give a very human yelp and run, oomping loudly. The spider dog, forgetting about the human female, took off in hot pursuit. By the time the cruise director got to the top of the table, the oomps of alarm had grown distant, but had multiplied and mingled with the sound of furniture being overturned. She stood on the table for a few moments listening the mayhem before deciding that the only way out was still the sliding door, so she got down again.

She dashed to the still open door and peered around. Noone. Just that wood smoke smell some basic furniture and what to Suzanne seemed truly awful wall posters of Oids grappling with one another. The other creatures were making noises in their pens – grunts and yelps – and a couple were banging on their pen doors. Let them. Suzanne thought that one released dangerous creature was enough for the moment. They might start attacking cruise directors and that would never do.

There didn't seem to be anything in the room she could use. The second door was fully open, left that way by the Oid guard fleeing for his life. On the wall beside it was a panel of switch pads that must control the lights. But just as Suzanne reached the door she heard Oids pounding along the corridor outside. They were making for the room.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

Rods pulled the locking chip from the second electric car in the garage and threw it over his shoulder. The control room was a more complex sabotage job. He pulled open a couple of panels to discover a lot of solid state equipment, primitive even by the standards of The Max's 30 year-old avionics, but adequate for the job. He thought of just wrecking the equipment but that could take too long, so he threw in two of his diminishing stock of hand grenades in what seemed to be a key hatch and stepped out into the garage. The control room door blew out and when Rods looked in again a lot of old-but-adequate electronics was so much scrap. All the screens were shattered and dark. One metal box on the wall which had escaped damage Rods suspected of being the main electricity junction box. Why put that in the control room? Whatever. That box got its own hand grenade, with the explosion killing all the lights. A few seconds later, the emergency lights came on casting a dim red glow in the control room.

"By now they'll have got the idea we're coming," muttered Rods to himself. "Igor you're in front. Watch for our cruise director. Anything else with a weapon is a target."

"Not Suzanne, target, gottit," said Igor. "I'm in front."

Beyond the control room door was a corridor with other doors. Rods had no idea where to go, but he thought they would probably keep Suzanne in the equivalent of the dungeons which would be on a lower level. Below them, the Earthman heard a bump and loud Oomphing. Whatever was happening, the Oids seemed to be having problems besides himself and Igor, which was good. They could take advantage of the confusion. One of the doors opened and an unarmed Oid, dressed in robes rather than the work gear Rods had seen to date, came out. He stared opened-eyed at the intruders then slammed the door shut again. That suited Rods.

A few metres further on was a stair well – very big stairs for humans, but the party from The Maxwell got down them easily enough. Rods thought to check Igor's energy level on the control unit he carried. Down to 25 per cent, which was bad. Time to find their straying cruise director and skip planet. The next floor looked much like the lift area in any hotel, but with stairs rather than lifts. There was even a small table with a glass ornament on it, and a picture of an Oid in an archaic costume – it had a nautical air to it – striking a heroic pose. Right. Rods was heading for the next staircase when an Oid carrying a weapon, strolled in from one of the corridors.

The creature's face went from unconcern – he had clearly not been expecting any trouble on that level – to alarm then determination, all in the second it took to bring up what appeared to be a shotgun. Igor's machine gun barked and the creature was flung back into the corridor. Rods was just thinking that was one less guard when he heard a door open behind him. He whirled but a massive blow on his armour vest



knocked him over. Another blow smashed his right leg, causing blinding pain. He was aware of Igor firing, then everything went black.

In the second left to her, Suzanne ducked behind the door, which opened inwards, just as two Oid guards, knees clicking, burst through, pistols drawn, one giving the door another shove, almost knocking Suzanne off her feet. She saw the guards pause at the empty spider dog cell, then turn left, probably to check her cell. Suzanne wasn't going to hang around for them to come back, but she remembered the switch panel by the door. There was no time to work out what the panels meant. She jumped up to slap the one that looked most important, and was rewarded with all the lights going out. The guards in the cells gave a loud Oomph of alarm. Good. She stepped out into the dimly-lit corridor and pulled the door shut behind her. The Oids may take just a few second to find their way back to the door, so she had to go, but where? Above her and to her left there was a Whump! The corridor shock. Rods! Only Rods could make explosions like that! Hang on guys I'm coming, she thought. Suzanne turned left and jogged down the corridor.

Igor looked down at Rods. The creature that had shot the trader, an Oid in colourful robes, lay dead in the doorway of the room from which he had ambushed the pair. He had made the fatal miscalculation that a door and an interior wall would protect him from bullets. A machine gun blast had shredded door as well as the Oid but now Rods lay bleeding. Igor had a first aid kit in his pack and knew he should stop the bleeding, but he did not know how and communications with The Max had ceased when they descended from ground level. He also knew he was supposed to find Suzanne, who was somewhere in this building. Perhaps he could go up a level to check with The Max, but that would mean leaving Rods and that contradicted one of his prime directives. Like many humans in far simpler situations, Igor dithered.

Two Oids stuck their heads out of a door as Suzanne jogged by. They were smaller than the guards, dressed in rags and without the leather hats worn by all the other Oids the cruise director had seen. Workers perhaps?

"Watch out," Suzanne said. "There are dangerous aliens about."

The two creatures stared at her, open mouthed, as she jogged around them, and moved on, intending to be long gone before they got over their surprise. She looked for the lifts the guards had taken her to in her interview with the head Oid. She thought it was down the corridor and a sharp turn to the left and right, maybe. Instead she found a set of stairs. They would do. Being shorter and going up, she had more trouble with the Oid-sized steps than Rods or Igor had going down, but she tackled them with determination. She really didn't want to be a vessel. About half way up a second whump! louder this time and somewhere above her, killed the lights. Definitely Rods and Igor she thought. Who else would be making that kind of trouble? She groped in the dark for a few seconds but then the emergency lights came up and she started clambering up the steps in earnest. 'I'm coming, guys.' She muttered to herself. 'wait for me'.

The next level was a carpeted lobby with corridors running off it. The obligatory decoration was a small table with a glass vase holding what appeared to be crystal flowers. Above that was a painting of an Oid rural scene. Suzanne barely glanced at the arrangement, when she reached the level, fully intending to take the next set of stairs up when she heard a hiss and turned to see her old friend the spider creature on the stairs below her.

Suzanne had never done much jumping – long jump; high jump. There had been no room for such indulgences when she was growing up. Now she dashed for the table, small for an Oid but big for a human, and scrambled/jumped on top of it as if she had been doing it all her life. The spider dog, leapt up the over-sized steps in fine style and charged over, butting the table. Suzanne staggered. She picked up the crystal vase and threw it at the creature, scattering crystal flowers everywhere but catching it square between the eyes. It shrieked and backed off. Suzanne thought she saw its eyes go red. Oh oh! She had annoyed it. Belatedly she thought she should have smashed the vase first and stabbed the creature. Then it might be annoyed enough to go away.

The spider dog came forward more deliberately, watching Suzanne, growling. Standing on its hind legs it grabbed at the earth girl with forelegs which, Suzanne noted to her revulsion, had small, hand-like appendices. She backed into the wall, feeling for the knife in her pocket when she bumped her head. It was the picture. On a sudden inspiration and remembering a scene of a movie of long ago, she got under it, put both hands squarely on the frame and pushed up hard. The picture was heavy, too heavy. Suzanne had decided she wouldn't have it for her wall, if she ever had a wall of her own, but it unhooked and fell forward. The painting turned over as it fell and the top bar of the frame hit the spider dog square on the head.

The creature let out another shriek and dropped to the ground, struggling to get out from under the painting. It freed itself and growled at Suzanne again, but this time stayed out of painting throwing range.

"I let you out, you bully!" she said.

An Oid-yelp distracted both of them. Another worker in tattered overalls, had emerged from one of the corridors. It took one look at the spider-dog and tore off back down the corridor. Sensing easier pray than the horrible, vase chucking, picture throwing creature on the table, the spider dog chased off after it. Suzanne waited for a moment, hearing more yells of alarm from down the corridor, before jumping down, scooping up the crystal vase and running to the stairs. Moving up seemed like the best plan. She reached the next level, another hotel-like area, then another. How deep was this place? She hoped she had left the spider dog far behind but then there would be nothing to scare away any Oids she might meet.

On the next level, while panting from having climbed another set of oversized steps, an Oid emerged from the far corridor to stare at the Earth woman. Suzanne stared back. The creature was in robes, rather than overalls or rags and carried a stick, similar in size to a military swagger stick which it raised, but hesitated. Perhaps blonde earth women were in the same category as spider dogs for this individual, Suzanne thought. Then she remembered Rods saying something about frightening your opponent being half the battle. She smashed the crystal vase she had been carrying

against the stair rail. It shattered nicely, leaving a lot of jagged ends, far more satisfactory and visible than the knife. Yelling "Yaaar!" she charged. This surprised her as much as it startled the Oid who, despite being three times Suzanne's size, turned and ran from the horrible alien.

"Scaredy-cat," she said, then turned and ran up the next set of stairs, trying not to cut herself with the vase. Above her she heard gunfire. Two shots, then a short burst that, to Suzanne's untrained ear, sounded as if it came from Igor's machine gun.

"Rods! Igor!" she cried. One more set of stairs. Too late. She did not hear or see the guard, but somehow it materialised out of the dark and gripped her shoulders.

"Rods! Igor! Help!" She stabbed the shattered vase into the creature's arm. It yelped and released her and she bounded up a couple of steps before glancing back. This Oid, dressed in what appeared to be formal blue and red uniform, was still staring at the blood spreading over his arm. He looked up at her and his expression changed from horror to anger. He screamed at her. But of real concern to Suzanne was that, as she could see through the railings, the Oid she had scared off two levels below was climbing up, with another, uniformed Oid. Oh-oh!

Suzanne leapt up more stairs. "Rods! Igor! Help!"

She turned on the landing, as the Oids thundered after her, still moving and yelling for Rods. Hairy hands grabbed her legs and pulled, jerking her off balance. She hit her head on the stairs and dropped her vase.

Then she heard a plaintive "I am in front". She looked up. Above her, on the stairs, was a familiar figure.

"Igor! Fire, action, shoot!" She ducked her head.

The robot's machine gun chattered briefly, the noise deafening in the confined space, and the grip on Suzanne's ankles vanished. She climbed to the top of the stairs before risking a look back. Two of the guards would not be troubling her again, lying huddled on the landing below. The other, the one she had originally scared off, peeked around the rails but abruptly withdrew when Suzanne looked back.

"Where is Rods?"

"There."

The cruise director's head hurt and her arm hurt where she had hit the ground, she felt sick and very tired from scrambling up so many stairs and thought she could do with someone to cart her away, but she forgot it all when she saw Rods lying, still on the carpet, his leg in a pool of blood.

"Rods!"

She knelt by him. Was he alive? Where was the blood coming from? To her immense relief the trader stirred and his eyes opened.

"Whasits.."

"Rods, how bad is it?"

"Oh no, we've found you," he muttered weakly.

So much for hugging, she thought. Then he smiled and she hugged him anyway.

"We've got to get moving," said the trader.

"Where are you hurt?"

"Leg. Bad! Bumped my head."

"Your head is hard. Got any bandages? Scissors? We'll cut away the pants."

"No surgery here," protested Rods. "We've got to go."

"We have to at least bind it up."

"Then hurry. We might have just minutes."

Igor handed her the first aid kit, and she cut away the pants leg.

She gasped. "It's really bad."

"It's agony, but we must move. Eve is on the ship. Let's move."

Suzanne handed Rods pain killers from the kit and took out the bandage.

"Just wrap it around, Cruise, and pull the strip. It'll hurt but it'll stop the bleeding.

"Youch!"

"You said it would hurt."

"Igor, help me to my feet."

"Energy store low."

"Just pick me up and I'll lean on you. Cruise grab anything left over and stuff it in Igor's pack. Mr. Sig Saur is in there. And give me my gun!"

Suzanne felt much better with Mr. Sig Saur in her hand. Let the spider dogs and Oids come now. But it was slow going at first.

"Pain killers kicking in," said Rods, half way up the stairs. "I'll hop. We've really got to get moving."

Suzanne noted that Rods normally healthy complexion was pale, but he hopped up in style, only to notably flag after the second stairs, falling against a wall.

"The pain," he gasped.

"Take some more pain killers."

"Not a good idea with those things – got them second hand - the car's not that far away."

Car? thought Suzanne. She had never been in one.

"And you're driving."

"I'm driving?"

She pulled him away from the wall and did her best to drag him up the stairs. She hadn't thought how they would get away from the building, but a car sounded good, even if driving would be a new and no doubt terrifying experience.

At the top of the stairs, Igor fired a burst up the corridor.

"Hostile with gun," he said.

"Good," said Rods looking up and raising his own weapon weakly.

"Forget your gun," said Suzanne taking it off him – he did not resist – and putting it in Igor's pouch. "Just hold on."

"Garage level," announced Igor, after another set of stairs.

"Igor in front," mumbled Rods. His face was against Igor's back, muffling his speech, as he hopped along but also he was starting to lose consciousness, which would not be good at all. Suzanne walked beside him, supporting the trader and muttering "not far now. Keep in there!"

"Gerroff," he mumbled, trying to shake her off. "No need."

"In front, good," said Igor.

The robot pushed its way into the control room to come face to face with an Oid who had been tapping at the room's panel, trying to make something work. The robot and the Oid stared at one another for a moment, then the creature reached for his gun and Igor shot him. The creature fell back against the observation window and slumped to the floor.

"Into the garage," mumbled Rods. "Close the doors."

Suzanne glanced down the corridor. She thought she could hear a distant crash, so maybe the spider-dog was still wreaking havoc. She hoped so. She closed the corridor door, stepped passed the dead Oid, and tried closing the door to the garage, but it had been too badly damaged. Well, she wasn't cleaning any of it up. She found Igor loading Rods into an electric car. She had seen cars before in films and thought she would like to ride in one, but it didn't seem like anything in the films.

"Get in," said Rods thickly, "on the other side, behind the wheel."

Suzanne slid in behind the wheel which she grasped – she knew that much – but found she had to stand up to see through the windshield.

"Igor, open the door and the gate and wait on the road." Rods had made sure the locks on the door and gates had been disabled before they ventured into the house. "Now let's get moving before I pass out. Hoss, are you there? We're on our way back with Suzanne. She's alright but we have to keep moving. I've been shot in the leg, so tell Eve to get ready."

"Oh, can I talk to Eve?"

"Cruise, you can talk all you want in 10 minutes. Now move. Press the red button Suzanne did so and felt the car surge with life.

"Have you driven before?" asked Rods when Suzanne still stood there.

"No."

Rods sighed. "If you want to go forward press that pedal with your foot..."

Suzanne trod on the pedal and the car shot forward, smashing into the into the back wall of the garage. Rods yelled in agony.

"Sorry, sorry. Your poor leg."

"I was about to say, if you want to go back then flip that lever and step on the pedal again – gently!"

They backed and Igor got the garage door up enough for Suzanne to get through.

"How do I stop?"

"Just take your foot off the pedal. That other pedal is for braking, but it's for emergencies," added Rods hastily, seeing Suzanne's foot move towards it.

They got out onto the road, pointing in the right direction with only minor damage to the gate and the car. Suzanne put her foot on the accelerator, reasoning that there were no gates in front of her, and the further she was from being a vessel the better, but this forced Igor to chase after them.

"Wait for Igor! Stop!"

A nervous Suzanne slammed her foot on the brake causing the car to almost bury its nose in the road surface, and Igor to cannon into the vehicle. Rods yelled again.

"Sorry! Sorry!"

"Just take your foot off the accelerator pedal and tap the brake. Most times that's enough," said Rods, thickly. "And Igor has your light goggles. Put them on."

Igor crammed in on the other side of Suzanne muttering "energy store low", Suzanne put on her goggles and they were away. After some weaving, Suzanne got the hang of steering on the road, but had to be warned to slow down several times by Rods.

"Now we have to get by the port guards," he said.

"Won't someone chase us from the house?"

"This is the only car that works – I saw to that. I don't think anyone's going to phone ahead. No one seems to have personal assistant units and their comms are shot. But I don't think we have long before someone works out there's been trouble and maybe the visiting humans are behind it."

Rods was silent for a time, leaning against the door.

"Rods!"

"Hmm!"

"Stay with me. Can't we just shoot the guards?"

"No, no, they have weapons on the docks for anyone who messes with the guards and they won't let us take off. We should just be able to walk through, however. If we look menacing enough, give them the two gold coins we have left, and unless they have a reason to stop us they won't bother. They're a different clan to the guys we shot up."

"You look nasty like you always do, Igor looks menacing and I hide my charm behind you and Igor."

"I'm not going to be looking nasty.. when I'm like this. That's the problem. If they're suspicious they won't let us through, not without a bigger bribe anyway... they won't let the ship leave the dock, and we have to leave straight away. Tell that to Hoss if I don't make it... straight away"

"I'm not leaving you behind after all this. You're making it. It's just your leg, you big baby."

"Baby! I'll give you my leg for a while and then see how you like it. For galaxy's sake slow down! You're been a driver for a minute and you're on a bad alien road."

Suzanne raised her foot a little.

"Your mum is on the ship, incidentally."

"She is? You shouldn't have let her come here."

"She's safe on the ship and it was all I could do to stop her exchanging herself for you and for Eve to take on the entire planet."

Rods started to keel over.

"Rods!"

"Eh!.. agony!"

"Eve can't be far. Igor you're in contact with The Max?"

"In contact now."

"Eve is to stand by for an operation on a bullet wound in Rods lower right leg. I think the bullet may still be in there and the bone may be broken. Hoss is to get ready for take-off the moment we hit the airlock. We'll have to do the operation as we're moving."

"You're beginning to sound like me," Rods said to Suzanne.

She saw an Oid on the road in the distance hands raised. There were more Oids on the side of the road walking away from the town they were going to.

"An Oid in front, asking us to stop."

"Don't slow down."

"No?" said Suzanne, who had lifted her foot from the accelerator.

"Tread on it."

Suzanne complied. The Oid, who was flagging down the car as a matter of routine, to ask if they had seen any of dangerous humans that were wandering around, was first taken aback, then surprised and then hurriedly jumped out of the way

Then they were in the town, with Suzanne reluctantly reducing her speed, to what now seemed like a crawl. The place was deserted, and no sign of any alarm at the docks. "Leave the car just by this container," said Rods, gasping. He was as white as a sheet, Suzanne noted with alarm, but still handling details. "It's the closest we can go. Hoss, get Max to leave our rental friend a note about where we left his car and where we put the locking chip. For the money I paid he can go and get it. Rods would happily slaughter guards and blow up houses, but he drew the line at not making some effort to return a rental car, even when the renter was an alien who charged extortionate rates. "Suzanne, ow.. put on that coat we brought and pull the hood right in tight."

He slumped sideways.

"Igor get him out," said Suzanne. She put the coat on, as directed, and then went to help Igor. "Okay, let's walk. Carry him."

"Energy store in emergency," said Igor.

"Where is the ship?"

"Through those doors. Four hundred metres. Two guards."

"Can you carry him that far?"

"Energy levels too low."

"Tell Hoss to send out Ira as far as she can go without alerting the guards. And standby the airlock himself."

They walked around the container to the port door.

This was it. Suzanne had an idea.

She took the water bottle out of Igor's backpack and slashed some in Rods face.

"Rods! Rods!"

"Umph!"

"Igor: put him down on his good leg, gently!"

Suzanne remembered what her dad had told her about navy and marines.

"Stand up, Marine!"

"I'm navy, not a marine!" said Rods coming to life.

"What happens when we get to the guards."

Rods dug into one pocket, and handed two heavy coins to Suzanne."

"Gold. Universal money... but don't hand it. Flip it so they have to chase it, while we go on by."

"Got it."

Suzanne peeked around the corner. Two guards were sitting in a small alcove. They had been playing a game on two screens but a separate security screen above their heads flashed images of the party outside the gate and sounded a warning tone. They stood up and put on belts.

Suzanne looked back. Rods was in a bad way, although still conscious – just – and Igor could not carry him all the way.

"Rods! Rods! Look at me."

"Umph"

"I polished that knob so carefully.."

Rods eyes flew open at the familiar words.

"I polished that knob so carefully.." she sang again, holding her hands above her head and clapping.

*"He polished that knob so carefully,"* Sang Rods.

"Now hop, hop."

"I polished that knob so carefully." Sang Rods hoping along with last ditch spurt of energy. "that now I'm the ruler of the Queen's Navy..." hop, hop "that now he is the ruler of the Queen's Navy"

Suzanne kept her head well down and kept one hand on her hood to make sure it did not slide off, but out of the corner of her eye, she could see the Oid guards do what amounted to a double take for the species at this strange procession. In the distance she could see Ira.

"As office boy I made such a mark

That they gave me the post of a junior clerk," sang Rods, still hopping. He too had seen Ira.

Suzanne showed one of the gold coins which the guards eyed thoughtfully. Then she threw it so that the one on the right had to scramble away to catch it. The guards on the earlier shift had boasted about getting one of those coins.

"I served the writs with a smile so bland"

Hop, hop.

"And I copied all the letters in a big round hand

*He copied all the letters in a big round hand"*

The second guard eyed Suzanne plainly wondering where his coin was. Suzanne showed it to him and then threw it as far as she could to the right, so that the guard had to scramble and hunt for it.

"I copied all the letters in a hand so free

That now I am the Ruler of the Queen's Navy

*He copied all the letters in a hand so free*

*That now he is the Ruler of the Queen's Navy"*

"How am I going on the chorus, Igor?"

"Badly."

"You always were a critic."

Those were Rods last words before Ira grabbed him and carried him to the airlock. Suzanne jogged on behind her, careful to keep her hood down. Both she and an armed Hoss pulled Igor, as he lost power, those last few metres to the airlock.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

Rods had been put on his bed, repaired leg up on a pillow. Eve had taken out the bullet, set the fracture and given him various injections, clucking that she did not have this or that piece of advanced medicine. None the less, she declared, Rods would make a full recovery. There would be some pain but he was a big boy. With that she left, and Suzanne came in to sit on the edge of the bed.

While Rods had been unconscious, Eve had reassured her that noone from Stacy's or any other potential cruise director applicant, had shown their face on the ship.

“Are there any more of the Clark clan to be rescued at great personal and financial cost to myself?” demanded Rods.

“We don’t know about our other relatives,” said Suzanne smiling. “I can find some in trouble if you like?”

“No, thank you. Looks like Hoss will have to pilot The Max for a few days, and Igor can help you keep any passengers in line, if you can spare any time from breaking out of dungeons and causing mayhem in alien clan houses – good job by the way.”

“Thank you.” Suzanne appreciated the compliment, “but I didn’t want to be a vessel. That’s what they wanted me to be, a vessel”

“Always helpful if the rescuee can do some of the job for herself. But now we have to get back to making a living and that means going straight to pick up a load of colonists to take to Fermat. Quite a crowd, we’re packing them in.”

“Does that mean I’m not fired.”

“I may have spoken harshly at our last meeting – okay, I’m sorry I won’t hold words said down an alien mound as we running for our lives, against you.”

“And I am sorry I was so dismissive of you when we were down an alien mound running for our lives, Rodney.”

“I’m not a Rodney, I’m a Graeme. They started calling me Rods at the academy because I was good at doctoring up cars that used petrol to take part in street races, when they still had such things. Hot rods is a racing term.”

“I see. This is a revelation.” The ladies on Fin’s Reef had told her they thought his first name must be Rodney. “Can I call you Graeme? I never really liked Rods.”

“I never minded Rods but it’s time to go respectable, I guess.”

“You had a record somewhere coreward?”

“A member of The Max’s crew before it was mine was found to be smuggling drugs. Under the law of the time in that region, all the crew members – me and another guy – also got convictions. We didn’t draw jail time but running The Max in respectable areas proved impossible. The other guy sold out to me and I came out here.”

“I’ve found out more about you in this conversation than I have in months.”

“It’s the drugs. I’ll go back to being taciturn later. But while we’re into revelations, I was in such a bad mood when I met you.. “

“You were in a shocking mood.”

“.. that I never told you I met your dad once.”

“What? You did?”

“Sure. My first day as a junior engineering officer aboard The Artic – the old region series, now those were ships.”

“Dad was mate on that.”

“The captain was off the ship so he did the meet and greet for the new, engineering cadet officer. Jovial guy, I remember, completely shaven.”

“You did meet Dad.”

“He walked with me back to the engineering section. Introduced me to others. Friendly guy. I only saw him that time and when the crew farewelled him just two days later to go to command The Africa.”

“The ship he was killed in.”

"Well, yes, I shouldn't have said that."

"No problem, it happened. But how come you never told me until now you knew Dad?"

"I had enough trouble getting you to pay any attention to me as it was. What would have happened if you had realised you had status as the daughter of a former shipmate, however briefly."

"I would have paid careful attention to all you said, as I always did."

"Careful attention my rear after burners."

"If we're still into revelations, why did you get thrown out of the navy?"

Suzanne thought she should find out what she could from this new, sharing Rods, while he was still drugged up.

"I hit an admiral who wanted me to throw one of my boxing matches. I boxed for the navy and won against the marines in the heavyweight division. Best time of my life."

"Which admiral did you hit?"

"Mitchell. Guy who got your Dad killed."

"And your fiancé?"

"Ex-fiance by then. She dumped me when I got thrown out of the navy, and the only job I could get was on The Max."

"Hard for you."

"Maybe, but I lived and the rest of the navy didn't. While we're on the subject of survival, let's delete the Oid planet from all our future itineraries?"

"Agreed. It's gone."

"And warn other ships. Don't say what happened, just that there were unfortunate incidents that gave rise to misunderstandings or whatever. Refer anyone who wants details to me and I'll tell them not to be nosy – or they can go to the Oid planet and be, what was it?"

"A vessel."

"Yes, a vessel, and we'll notify their families. Tell Eve and your mum to shut up too. I'll tell Hoss and we'll take all digital records off line."

"Won't the Oids say something to their own government?"

"Those guys are outlaws. Doubt if that's a problem."

"I just thought of it – you know the Oid that shot you, and I guess Igor shot."

"Guy with colourful robes lying in the doorway?"

"That's him. I was taken to see him when you and Igor were looking for me on the base. He said he was once very great."

"He was the clan chief? Well, with any luck he is now very dead, and once the clan chief goes the whole thing falls apart. That means no-one is going to be interested enough to piece together what we did, and we won't say anything and that's the end of that."

"Sounds very fair to me, so then I'm to continue as cruise director?"

"I didn't get you back to fire you – although the thought may tempt me soon. What I do want is for you to drop Eve on Fermat with my best wishes."

"Oh, but she has to look at your leg again."

"Yes, yes, but we'll be back often and I think she would be much happier doing her medical stuff. She's good at that. Can't say she's good at cruise directing, and when I snarl at her she folds. Most annoying."

"You can snarl very convincingly."

"You never found any problems with my snarling. You just snarl back."

"I do not snarl. I reply in a correct, if abrupt, manner."

"Ha!"

"Ha!"

They smiled.

"But if I am to continue as cruise director, shouldn't there be some arrangement concerning pay?"

"Pay?"

"Of course I'm grateful. More than you know. It's just that I wouldn't want you to think that this was a cheap way to get a cruise director."

"Cheap!" spluttered Rods sitting up. Suzanne gently pushed him down again. "Cheap!" She kept her hand on his shoulder and he put his hand on it. "Haven't I already paid to cart assorted Clark family members half way across the galaxy and back again? And did I tell you how much those gold coins you threw at the guards are worth? And that's just the start. Cheap indeed!"

"I understand all that," said Suzanne, "it's just that I have to buy clothes if I'm to look presentable as cruise director of a respectable ship and there are other expenses. We should also have a ground car to run errands on our home planet, which I now assume is Fermat."

"Ground car? There are now a few roads on Fermat for these errands, Cruise," said Rods, "with strictly enforced speed limits," he added hastily seeing her eyes gleam.

Rods took the hand still on his shoulder in both of his. She did not object or remove it.

"I never thought of this exercise as a cheap way of getting a cruise director." He turned her hand so that one hand curled around hers and she grasped it. They both smiled. "In fact, I think, in the end, this will be a very expensive way to get a cruise director."

*Then they rolled back the carpets and danced until dawn. There have been weddings since, but the neighbours always said that ours was the best.*

On Our Selection, Steele Rudd, 1899.

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