



# THE MORGAN AFFAIR



**J. S. Lyne.**

# *The Morgan Affair.*

*Written by J. S. Lyne,  
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*Twinkle, twinkle little star,  
How I wonder what you are.  
Up above the world so high,  
There's more to you than meets the  
eye.....*

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## CHAPTER 1. INTERVIEWS.

Captain Stephens felt unreasonably nervous as he sat in the plush seat of the appointed waiting room. Outwardly there was no sign of any distress; years of training had taught him to control any sign of weakness. He had sat and watched five others suffer similarly but now he was the last one sitting there and he began to notice things within the room. Ironically his eyes kept wandering back to the only item in the room which had emitted any sound, the intercom. It was a superb looking instrument but he had nearly laughed out loud at the disappointing tinny quality which it had reproduced when the other interviewees had been summoned to the inner sanctum. Six men for one command and they all looked to be quietly confident and competent.

There was another fascinating item in the room, a kind of executive toy. To the observer it consisted of a base plate on which was mounted two metallic circles made out of a channel section which contained and trapped a small metal ball which was cleverly, decoratively drilled. The whole thing was built out of high quality stainless steel and polished to a mirror finish. The metal ball travelled slowly round and round the vertical tracks for no apparent reason and gave the impression of "Moto Perpetuo." It took the Captain several minutes to figure out that it was a cleverly designed magnetic trick using powerful, tiny, concealed magnets within the stainless steel track and powered by a simple solar cell.

The rest of the decor was very tasteful and finished off with some exotic hybrid plants which had been originally developed in the vacuum and weightlessness of space with beautiful and spectacular results. Captain Michael Robert Stephens went over the questions he expected to be asked for the last time. He admitted to himself that he had not forgotten anything and finally stopped worrying and committed himself to the inevitable discomfort of the forthcoming interview.

He was jerked out of his thoughts by the tinny intercom which gently requested, "Captain Stephens, would you please be so kind as to step into the interview room?"

The Captain swallowed hard and gathered his thoughts, stood up and strode purposefully into the room. The designated interview room was quite stark in contrast to the waiting room. The walls were wood panelled and bare, the blinds on the windows were closed and there were no ornaments. In fact there was nothing to distract attention from the interviewing panel. There were five people sitting at the highly polished table in plush chairs with a single plain chair carefully placed at a uncomfortable distance and precisely in the centre of the main table. Each chair had a radio microphone discreetly fixed to it.

Captain Stephens smiled inwardly, continued his purposeful walk up to the chair and promptly picked it up and moved it three feet nearer the table and placed it slightly off centre.

Then, without waiting to be asked, he sat down, crossed his legs and looked directly into the eyes of the centre person in the interviewing panel.

Now it was their turn to look uncomfortable. In one simple movement he had broken their rigid, stranglehold on the interviewee and they were unsure what to do about it. The person in the centre recovered his composure very quickly.

"Please would you state your name so that our A.T.M. can identify you."

Captain Stephens desperately wanted to know what an A.T.M. was but instead, complied with the request.

"Captain Michael Robert Stephens."

"Thank you Captain. So that the interview is fair our A.T.M. will provide us all with a written transcript of the interview just as it happens."

The penny dropped. A.T.M. stood for 'Automatic Transcription Machine. 'It was a neat job which identified each individual voice pattern and typed everything that was said, as it was said and by whom it was said. It even had a device which made it type in larger capitals if words were shouted, so it was important not to lose your temper and keep a level voice. The gentleman in the middle was not, an imposing man. He was of slight build, pale and grey haired. However there was nothing nondescript about his piercing blue eyes and cool self confidence. The only disappointment was his voice which had a reedy quality to it. Captain Stephens remembered the intercom and revised his opinion of its sound production which, on reflection, had, been perfect.

The gentleman spoke again. "I will start the interview by introducing the interviewing panel. On my far left is the Senior Personnel Advisor of the Crest Interplanetary Trading Company, Miss Charlotte Linaker."

Captain Stephens looked across and saw perfect features, blue eyes and dark hair tied back into a tidy business-like style and even though her attire was a little severe he was able to recognize a very beautiful, competent woman aged about thirty. They acknowledged each other with a nod.

"On my immediate left is Mr. Frederick Ford, the Operations Manager of C. I. T. C."

Captain Stephens looked at a man of about forty-five years old, smartly dressed but going a little grey around the temples.

Surprisingly he stood up and offered his hand.

"Pleased to meet you, Captain, I have followed your career with great interest."

Captain Stephens stood up and accepted the proffered hand. It was like iron. He got the immediate impression of a very straight hard business man who would be a bad man to cross.

"Thank you," he replied simply and sat down again.

"On my far right is Mr. Clive Twist, the Senior Officer of the Civil Astronautical Federation. He is a neutral observer and technical adviser to this panel."

This time it was the turn of Captain Stephens to be impressed. Clive Twist was well respected, even in military circles and in the past had performed with

great distinction as the Chief Test Pilot of the European Space Consortium, an extremely hazardous job in the early days.

“My pleasure, Sir,” replied Captain Stephens.

Clive Twist was a man of immense presence but had an air of modesty about him. “In your case my job should be relatively easy, Captain,” he replied.

“The gentleman on my immediate right is Lord Lamont, our major shareholder and financial adviser.”

That confused Captain Stephens, he did not know whether he should bow or curtsy. Sensing his confusion Lord Lamont stood up and shook hands. “Just call me George, Captain, it saves a lot of bother.”

“Thank you, “ replied the Captain, “But I think I will stick to ‘Sir’ at least until the end of the interview. They both smiled and sat down.

“It just remains for me to introduce myself. My full title is Sir Richard Crest and I am the Chairman of C.I.T.C. and of this panel. I am empowered to make any appointment I see fit, so may I wish you the best of luck and we will get down to business. We need another Captain very urgently.”

Captain Stephens was momentarily taken aback. This was the Grandson of the great Professor Peter Crest, the man who had revolutionized space travel. The British had made no impression at all on space travel for over one hundred years and had seemingly been content to let the Americans and Russians develop their rocketry.

Then on the eleventh of May 2061 the British suddenly leapt into space and left all other modes of Space flight obsolete. They had secretly constructed a non-rocket powered spacecraft. The breakthrough came when Professor Peter Crest had secretly isolated the poles of the magnet and learnt how to single-pole various metals. He had gone one step further and invented C.A.M.I.D. which was the abbreviation used for the ‘Concentration and Amplification of Magnetic Influence Device.’

With this device a metal object could be single-poled and its influence could be concentrated on other magnetic masses and the attraction caused could be amplified until there was a movement of the object towards the magnetic mass. By reversing the polarity the repulsion could cause movement to happen. Massive lumps of metal could be made to float in the air without stress or strain.

The British were quick to see the practical value of this to space travel. They fitted the device into an old submarine, made a few extra seals and took a few other precautions and promptly put it into orbit round the Earth. Once the device had been fitted, anything, no matter how big, could be made to float through the air by harnessing the attraction or repulsion of magnetism. The first genuine British spacecraft had been a beautiful flying saucer-type vehicle which had simply risen into orbit without any sign of outward propulsion.

It was a miracle. These vehicles did not have the breathtaking acceleration of the rockets, but, in truth, they did not need it. Their acceleration of about 0.4G. produced some phenomenal speeds after two or three days and nothing

was stressed. The device was still a great secret held only by the British. It was this man, Sir Richard Crest, who held the patents. This was playing in the big league.

The surprising offshoot of the invention was how little it cost to operate the craft. It was not necessary to have huge rocket pads; ordinary airports were quite adequate. In fact the extra-terrestrial submarine had started its historic voyage from a point ten miles South of Barrow-in-Furness in the middle of Morecambe Bay. It was obvious that the British had now cornered the market in the highly lucrative interplanetary trading which existed between the various colonies on the Moon, Mars and the Asteroid Belt.

Mining in the Asteroids resembled a modern day 'Gold Rush' with prospectors risking their all for fame and fortune. Some had made it really big, but others had simply disappeared and perished due to lack of supplies. However the Crest Interplanetary Trading Company had done much to relieve the situation and had transported huge amounts of merchandise to the Asteroids.

The Company had set up a trading post on Ceres, the largest of the Asteroids, and here they liased with the Americans and Russians who ran their own companies distributing the supplies with their conventional rockets which were more suitable for this work than the magnetic drive vessels.

"For the sake of the record would you care to give us a brief Curriculum Vitae?" asked Sir Richard.

"Of course.. I was born in the year two thousand and sixty seven, forty two years ago, on Moon Base Delta. My Father was an interplanetary pilot and my Mother a doctor. She served mainly on Moon Base Delta and sometimes as a ship's doctor whenever there was a large movement of personnel to other planetary bases. All my schooling was done in the College on Moon Base Delta and at the age of sixteen, I visited Earth for the first time and enrolled for training with the Western Alliance Space Patrol Corps.

At the age of twenty, I qualified as the youngest Interplanetary Commander ever commissioned. Although qualified, I served as First Officer for five years to gain experience, as is customary. Originally I served with Captain Hunter and later with Captain Steele, both very fine Officers. In twenty eighty-two I was given my first command, an armed escort vessel named *Ajax*. It had a crew of ten and for the next five years we did convoy duty in most sections of the known Solar System.

After this I was surprised and grateful to be given a brand new interplanetary frigate named *Vega*. I was given a roving commission to explore the Solar System beyond the Asteroids, which we did for a full five years. We were lucky enough to discover and map several sources of potential mining operations and charted several Jovian Moons which we did not know existed.

In addition we did an in-depth study on the Rings of Saturn. On my return I was promoted to a Galaxy Class Destroyer named *Orion*, a heavily-armed vessel. My commission then was to protect our interests in the Asteroid Belt.

After five years of this I resigned my commission and lectured at the Moon Base Delta College until applying for the appointment as Senior Captain in your Company, which is why I am here. Is there anything else you would like to know?"

At this point Clive Twist spoke. "Mr. Chairman, Captain Stephens is far too modest to put in all the details. His first appointment was with Captain Hunter in the frigate *Pegasus*. They were assigned to the transportation of prisoners and maintenance of discipline in the Martian penal colonies. In the year twenty ninety there was a break out of prisoners on board the *Pegasus*. The Captain and crew fought against overwhelming odds but were soon taken prisoners. Captain Hunter was killed outright.

It was a serious situation, a heavily-armed frigate in the hands of criminals. First Officer Stephens had been wounded, his head badly cut, he was suffering from concussion and had a broken arm, but he kept his cool and never gave up the struggle. He was able to access one of the wiring ducts and neutralize the C.A.M.I.D. control system and the Oxygen Plant. The crew sealed their cabin with tape as best they could, then the First Officer identified the wiring for the rear airlock and opened it a fraction. The air pressure quickly fell throughout the rest of the ship and the convicts soon collapsed due to the effects of the depressurisation. In fact thirty of the prisoners perished, which greatly upset Mr. Stephens at the time. After he had restored the air level and opened the door of their cabin, order was reinstated and the ship retaken.

In the original fighting a good deal of damage had been done to the navigation systems. However Mr. Stephens brought the ship back manually in spite of his injuries and was awarded a medal for outstanding bravery and devotion to duty.

In fact there have been several instances where people have benefited from the bravery and resourcefulness of Captain Stephens. One particular instance was the rescue of the survivors from the American rocket *Arizona* which was crippled by a freak explosion. *Ajax*, the accompanying escort vessel, quickly docked with the stricken rocket and sent a team across to rally the crew and passengers and to repair what damage they could. The vessel was capable of supporting life but was without engines.

Captain Stephens had the idea of extending his C.A.M.I.D. wiring to the hull of the other vessel. It worked and although under reduced power, he was able to bring both ships safely to their destination and thus invented what is now a standard rescue procedure.

Gentlemen, Captain Stephens is a master navigator and a superb engineer, in addition to being a first class Captain and pilot. "

"Thank you, Mr. Twist, " said Sir Richard. "Are there any questions for Captain Stephens, please?"

Charlotte Linaker raised her hand, was given the floor and addressed the Captain. "From what you have said you have been away in deep space for twenty years. According to my research six of the ten men from your original



command have stayed with you throughout this whole period. Do you feel that you deserve this kind of loyalty?"

"In the forces there are rules which give a captain almost God-like powers over his men. This creates two kinds of Captain, the 'Browbeaters' and the 'Motivators'. I like total reliability and efficiency but if you browbeat your crew the only things that will be followed are the rules, and that is not enough. You need total interdependence and trust to get the best out of your crew and you can only create this by motivation, leading by example and being totally fair. When you are in close proximity with each other for years on end this is the only kind of relationship you can have with a crew. Captain Hunter taught me this very early in my career.

Miss Linaker, you ask if I deserve this kind of loyalty? Well, I give it to my crew and I demand the same from them. Fortunately, their loyalty has always been freely given, for which I am most grateful. I trust this answers your question?"

She nodded her head and spoke again. "Again, according to my information, Captain, you are one of only four people who have served so long continuously in deep space. Other Officers show signs of psychological breakdown and distress, even after two or three years. Do you feel that you are simply well adjusted, or do you have misanthropic tendencies?"

"You must understand, Miss Linaker, that I was not born on the Earth. I was born on the Moon and that is my natural home. Living on a Moon base is very similar in most respects to being aboard a space vessel. So you could say that I have known little else. Space is my natural environment. I do not believe myself to be misanthropic. In truth, I do not like large crowds, but I do enjoy good company. "

"Mr. Chairman, may I ask a Question?" The request came from Fred Ford.

"Please do, " replied Sir Richard.

"Pardon me for being blunt, Captain, but you have been in charge of armed spacecraft for more than twenty years. Can you tell me what you expected to fire at, or, indeed, did you ever use your weaponry in anger?"

Captain Stephens stiffened visibly. There was an uncomfortable pause before he answered. "The operation is preventative rather than curative. The only time I have used weapons for real was in the incident Mr. Twist spoke of earlier. My commission was to guard against any malefactors who might come along. You never know what might be out there.

If ships fall into the wrong hands there is a good chance that piratical attacks could be made on our vessels, or worse, some revenge-seeking lunatic could run amok amongst the unarmed traders.

In addition to these situations there is still a certain amount of animosity between the East and the West. Both the Americans and the Russians would dearly like to get their hands on our C.A.M.I.D. system, so our presence stops certain people from getting unsavoury ideas. "

"Are you utterly convinced that your work was really necessary?". insisted Mr. Ford.

"Totally, Sir," retorted Captain Stephens in a voice that discouraged any further questioning along these lines.

The cultured voice of Lord Lamont broke the ice. "It seems to me, as an outsider, that a flawless career was ruined when you resigned your commission. Would you care to tell us the reasons why you turned your back on the service you served so well for so long? You were obviously Admiral-type material."

This was the crunch. This was the inevitable question he had been dreading. He flushed slightly and spoke with a calmness he did not feel. "I cannot see that my reasons can have any relevance to this application. All that I am prepared to say is that my reasons were personal and not disciplinary."

"That may be so," urged Lord Lamont, "but I am sure that my colleagues here would like to know them anyway."

"Even if I felt like discussing them, which I don't, I am not allowed to. I am still bound by the Official Secrets Act. "

"Your words only make me even more curious," mused Lord Lamont. "Is there any way round this, Mr. Chairman?"

"My Lord, I must first of all respect the feelings of Captain Stephens, but I do feel that the Official Secrets Act is not a problem in this case. All persons present here are cleared to the highest level. All I need to do is to switch off the A.T.M. while the point is discussed. I must be frank, Captain, I feel it has relevance."

Captain Stephens felt very uncomfortable, it was a sore point with him.

Clive Twist came to his rescue. "Gentlemen, if Captain Stephens is reluctant to tell his story, may I have your permission to speak with him in private?"

The Chairman asked if anybody had any objections and, since none were forthcoming, gave his approval.

Clive Twist and the Captain retired to a small anteroom.

"Captain, I know how you must feel. Firstly, you feel that if the truth is disclosed your chances of being offered this appointment are zero. I firmly believe that the opposite is true. Secondly, I know the full story from both sides and would be prepared to recite the facts on your behalf. Thirdly, I can do it in the room with your permission or out of the room without your permission. Fourthly, I would not do it at all unless I thought it was in your best interest. Now, what do you say?"

"I feel that I was made to look a bloody fool by the so called Authorities and I don't want to be made to look another today," fenced the Captain.

"Do you still stick with your story?" demanded Clive.

"Of course I do," insisted Stephens fiercely.

"Well then, let me tell it to them," urged Clive.

Captain Stephen's temper dissipated and he thought for a moment. "I'm sorry, but even after two years I am still very touchy about it. We'll go back and

tell them what they want to know. I have nothing to lose and, what is more important, I have nothing to hide."

"Good man, that's what I wanted to hear."

They returned to their places in the interview room. Sir Richard looked over quizzically. "Well Captain, what is your decision?"

"Mr. Twist has permission to speak on my behalf, but please remember, we are all bound by the Official Secrets Act."

Sir Richard leaned over and deactivated the A.T.M.

"Right, Mr. Twist, the floor is yours," he added.

"It is rather difficult to know where to start," began Mr. Twist. "As you are all aware, in all our years of space exploration we have never made contact with any alien life form. This fact does not surprise many eminent scientists who firmly believe that we are the only life form in this Galaxy. Others, even though they are unable to produce any firm evidence to the contrary, are not so sure. There have been interceptions of strange radio signals and many sightings of, UFOs reported. They have all been inconclusive.

However there was one sighting by a highly respected Officer in the year twenty ninety. That Officer was Captain Stephens and the vessel was the frigate *Vega*. They were involved with their study of the Rings of Saturn at the time. Captain Stephens is a very careful man and at all times he had visual lookouts in the observation turret in case there should be any rocks or boulders which the onboard sensors did not pick up. As you know, collisions are to be avoided at all costs. On three occasions the vigilance of these lookouts was able to avoid what could have been serious, or even fatal collisions."

"May I clarify a point, please?" asked Sir Richard. "Are you saying that your instruments failed, or were inadequate, Captain?"

"No Sir! The instruments worked excellently. The problem lay in the immense numbers of rocks and ice chunks. At times the screen was just blanketed and could not be correctly interpreted. In spite of all our efforts, we still recorded twenty-seven collisions with smaller masses. Fortunately they caused little, or no damage."

"Thank you, we now understand the problem perfectly," said Sir Richard. "I have a subsidiary firm which produces these high quality instruments and we pride ourselves on their perfect performance. I would have been very upset to learn that any of them had failed in normal service please carry on Mr. Twist."

"The problem was so acute that Captain Stephens himself took a lot of the responsibility on his own shoulders and the Log showed that he spent many hours personally in the lookout turrets. On one such occasion he noticed an object close to his ship which he did not believe to be the usual type of debris.

At first glance it appeared to be another vessel but that did not make sense. As far as he was aware, his was the only vessel within one hundred and fifty million miles of that position.

He quickly summoned his First Officer but, before he arrived, the other object accelerated away and was lost to view. They both quickly went to check

the instruments in the command room but the Officer of the Watch had nothing to report and was quite perplexed when questioned further by the Captain. A playback of the tapes confirmed that no signal or contact had been made.

The Captain remained convinced that he had seen something odd and sent a communication to Earth asking if there were any other vessels in the area. The reply from Earth was flippant and suggested that the Captain should have forty-eight hours rest to rid himself of his space sickness. However Captain Stephens was so convinced that he has always kept a man on surveillance duty in his ship since that day."

"It is a strange story, " observed Lord Lamont. He swung round to face Captain Stephens, "Is that the end of it, Captain?"

"No Sir, I observed the same vessel when I was in command of *Orion* whilst patrolling the Asteroids in the proximity of Icarus. This time I was not alone. The First Officer, the Officer of the Watch and at least twenty crewmen all saw the same object. Again there was no recorded evidence, the instruments simply did not show it to be there. We only observed it for a few seconds, but there was no doubting what we saw."

"What effect did this have on your crew, Captain?". Asked Charlotte Linaker.

"They were all a little stunned by the incident. The big problem was that nobody could answer the billion dollar question. "

"Oh! Pardon my ignorance, but which question do you mean?" probed Charlotte further.

"Sorry, I thought it was obvious. Nobody knew if it was a human working the controls or an alien. It certainly did not look like any Earth Ship I have ever seen."

"What course of action did you take this time?" asked Mr.Ford.

"Would you like me to continue?" queried Clive Twist.

"Please do," said Captain Stephens .

"Captain Stephens decided to play safe and broke off his patrol. He headed directly for the nearest Military Operations Base on Mars, or more correctly, on Phobos. Here he told his story to the Fleet Admiral who listened with great interest.

The question of doubt never crossed his mind. He suggested that the newest Cosmos Class frigate *Meteor* the most powerful and sophisticated ship in the Fleet be put at Captain Stephens' disposal with orders to seek out the unknown vessel and attempt to make contact. This was to be done peacefully, if possible, but if the other vessel showed any sign of hostility it was to be summarily destroyed.

Things happened very quickly after that. When the orders went to Central Control for ratification the Fleet Admiral was summoned to Central Headquarters and was dishonourably discharged for incompetence. Captain Stephens was reprimanded for breaking off his mission. His new orders were torn up and he was sent back to resume his original patrol.

It is not surprising that forty-eight hours later Captain Stephens resigned his Commission. He completed his final tour then he, too, was summoned to Central Headquarters. Here he was told that he must not speak of these imagined incidents. He was accused of trying to stir up panic amongst the investors and customers and was told to withdraw his statement. This he refused to do, so they classified it and bound him by the Official Secrets Act.

Captain Stephens has now had a two year rest, and well deserved I might add. This is the first time he has shown any interest in returning to space since this previous sad business."

"How did this attitude effect you, Captain?" asked Miss Linaker.

"At first I felt ashamed and let down. I even doubted myself for a while after that. Eventually I became extremely angry, particularly about the way they had treated Admiral Williams. He was a fine and loyal Officer who had the respect of all his men. He deserved better than the ignominious dismissal he received. Worse still, I felt dishonoured myself.

My official record does not show it but their refusal to accept my word, twice, shows a lack of trust and an irresponsibility bordering on being criminal. The Admiral had taken the correct course of action and the Authorities should have backed him up. I know that there is at least one rogue ship within our sphere of operations and nobody seems to care. It is an insane situation."

Sir Richard looked directly at Captain Stephen. "I know how you must feel, but I can assure you that nobody here doubts your word, Captain, and I would like to thank you for being so frank with us. None of us will betray your confidence and there will be no more reference to this incident during this interview." He leaned over and switched the A.T.M. back on.

The interview then continued covering mundane matters such as salary, conditions of service, a retraining programme to convert the Military Commander into a Company Captain with all the extra responsibilities that it carried and a discussion on the types of vessel which the Company used. In his heart Michael Stephens felt that the whole business of resigning his Commission had gone against him, but he battled on trying to regain the lost ground. He had no family left now and he was far too shy to be a ladies man, so his hopes of ever getting married were very slim. Space was his first love and he needed to get back there.

He had even considered buying his own ship but when he had inspected those he could afford he had decided against it. They were all old rockets which were inefficient and expensive to run. So he had decided to return to work if anybody would have him.

Eventually the interview finished. Formalities were exchanged and Captain Stephens was taken to rejoin the other five candidates who were having a good time in the entertainment room which had a well stocked bar.

## **CHAPTER 2. A FEW FACTS AND AN OFFER.**

The happy atmosphere died down as Captain Stephens entered the room. The other candidates were all younger men and a little in awe of the older man. They were all from different backgrounds and walks of life and the others all had one thing in common. They all held a command anyway and that would still be waiting for them whatever the outcome of this interview.

Michael thought that he had better break the ice. "That was damned hard work," he said ruefully, then, addressing the beautiful young lady behind the bar, "Please could I have a beer so that I can enjoy this little party?"

"Certainly Sir, " she replied and took an iced glass from the fridge, "What would you like?"

"Do you have a Budweiser, please?" He did not really expect an English Company Bar to stock this fine old American recipe and was quite taken aback when she replied, "Certainly, Sir Richard said you would probably ask for that, so I had a supply brought in."

She poured it with infinite care and handed it to the Captain. He looked at the others raised his glass and said, "Cheers everybody!"

The others laughed and replied to the toast, then they returned to their conversations and the atmosphere returned to normal. Soon Michael was just one of the crowd swapping jokes and experiences with the others. After about twenty minutes and another Budweiser, Michael was feeling much better.

The door to the room opened and Mr. Ford entered. "Please could I have your attention, gentlemen! I have a message from Sir Richard. If you are no longer a serious candidate for this appointment, would you please give me your identification tag and you are free to leave and thank you for the interest you have shown. If you remain and are offered the appointment you will be expected to accept. The decision is yours, gentlemen!"

Without hesitation two of the other candidates immediately handed in their tags and, after a short consideration, another one handed in his.

"Thank you," said Mr. Ford, "We should have our decision within the next quarter of an hour." He turned and left the room. The remaining candidates looked at each other expectantly. It was going to be a long quarter of an hour.

It actually took only ten minutes before Lord Lamont came through the door and announced, "Gentlemen, we have made our decision. All the candidates have been of high quality and as other vacancies occur you may rest assured that even if you do not get this appointment we will consider you for others.

It only remains for me to ask you, Captain Stephens, to accompany me back to the interview room."

Michael could have shouted for joy. His pulse doubled and he felt like kissing the bar maid, but, instead, he solemnly shook hands with the unsuccessful candidates. He wished them luck for the future and stiffly followed Lord Lamont back to the interview room. It had changed, somehow. He could not put his finger on it for a moment, then he realized that the chair had been

moved back to its original position. "I won't spoil their little game this time," he thought to himself.

Sir Richard invited him to sit down which he did.

He then spoke. "Captain Michael Robert Stephens, the panel has unanimously agreed to offer you the post of Senior Captain with the Crest Interplanetary Trading Company. I now make this offer to you officially." He leaned back in his chair and waited for Captain Stephens to speak.

Captain Stephens looked at the panel, something was wrong, what was it? Then it dawned on him, "They are afraid I am not going to accept," he thought, "They must be anxious to have me." That in itself was a reassuring thought he reflected.

He smiled to the panel and said, "Sir Richard, I am absolutely delighted to accept your offer and thank you for the trust you have shown in me."

"Nonsense," said Sir Richard. "You have earned it and you are just the man we are looking for."

"When do I start, Sir Richard?"

"Do you have to rush off anywhere?"

"No, I have made no plans at all."

"Well, in that case, you can start right now. Put Captain Stephens on the payroll straight away, Miss Linaker, and we will retire to the Executive Lounge for a drink and a chat. It has been a long day and I'm gasping for some refreshment."

"I'll second that," added Lord Lamont.

They turned to leave by another door and Clive Twist grabbed Michael's hand and shook it vigorously.

"Congratulations, Michael, this is just what you need. You handled yourself very well this afternoon."

"Thanks very much for your help," returned Michael. "I thought this UFO business had blown my chances."

They reached the Executive Lounge and settled down into sumptuous chairs. Their drinks were already waiting for them.

Michael knew it would be his favourite beer before he tasted it and he was not disappointed. Fred Ford was also drinking a beer, Lord Lamont and Sir Richard were enjoying ample gin and tonics and Charlotte was sipping at a strange blue concoction which Michael had no idea about whatsoever, although she was obviously enjoying it. They relaxed and chatted for ten minutes or so. Sandwiches were brought round and Michael started to feel more human.

Suddenly Sir Richard spoke, "Fred will you please show Michael where he can get a wash and brush up and can you both meet me in my office in half an hour?"

"Certainly Sir," replied Mr. Ford finishing his drink .

"When you are ready, Michael."

Michael reluctantly finished his drink and followed Fred to a room which was a cross between a gymnasium and a bathroom. The jacuzzi looked very inviting. They went to a cubicle and changed into the trunks which were hanging up in there. The water in the jacuzzi was invigorating and relaxing.

The two men bathed for a while in silence. Eventually Fred said, "Sir Richard is a hard man to work for but he is also very fair. He gives a lot and expects a lot."

"He strikes me as being a competent administrator who puts a lot of trust in his staff."

"That is a fair comment but he is more than competent. Believe me, in his own way Sir Richard is a genius at his job... come on over here and lie down on this couch."

Michael did as he was told and Fred pressed a button. The bed started to move and vibrate and Michael received a thorough massage. It felt absolutely marvellous and by the time they assembled outside Sir Richard's office he felt like a new man. The 'Enter' light came on and they went through into Sir Richard's office.

"Please make yourself comfortable, Gentlemen," he said, gesturing towards two business-like chairs in front of his desk.

The office was tidy and functional. It contained the latest Video-com and a superb computer with a large V.D.U. There were no ornaments but there were two pictures on the wall. One was of a beautiful coral reef with some attractive multi-coloured fish and the other was a picture taken from inside the rings of Saturn with Jupiter in the background. Michael recognized it straight away; it was one of many he had brought back aboard the *Vega* and felt a little surge of pride.

Sir Richard followed his gaze, "I call it Inner Space and Outer space. Your pictures of Saturn were really spectacular, Michael. It is a pity you could not have cashed in commercially. The other is one that I took myself when I had a short holiday in the Caribbean at a little island called Grand Cayman. You should visit it sometime. The sea is really beautiful."

He then pressed a button on his desk and the video-com lit up with the calm, attractive face of his personal secretary.

"Good evening, Sir Richard, how may I be of assistance?" she asked.

"Louisa, I do not wish to be disturbed for any reason until I communicate with you again. I am putting my office into 'Secure Mode' for a while."

"As you wish, Sir Richard!" The screen went blank. He pressed another button and immediately the windows started to disappear as metal shutters came over them. The same thing happened to the door and the lighting compensated automatically. Two sensors came out of hidden recesses in the wall and scanned the room.

"The room is now secure and soundproof; no transmissions can get in or out," explained Sir Richard. "What I am going to say is for our ears only. I will get straight to the point because time is against us."



He took a deep breath and continued, "Mr. Ford has lost contact with two of our ships and we do not know why. We do not believe that the losses are due to failure. There have been no distress signals and no debris has been found."

"It is just as though they have been spirited away..." added Mr. Ford.

"Or captured?" queried Captain Stephens.

"That, literally, is our billion dollar question," conceded Sir Richard.

"Did both ships go missing at the same time?" asked the Captain.

"No, the first one went missing eight weeks ago and the second ten days ago. In both cases there was no warning. The twelve hour report, which is company policy, simply did not come in. We have no information at all, we do not know if the crew is dead or alive, It's very spooky."

Fred Ford did not seem quite as hard when he added, "The families have been informed of the circumstances and have promised not to talk until we can make an official announcement. We feel that secrecy is important both for financial and political reasons."

"But if you keep these matters secret you will never know if others have had the same problems," observed Captain Stephens.

"You are right," conceded Sir Richard, "But logic suggests that since this is the only Company which makes the big shipments, then ours would be the only Company to get attacked."

"Have you thought about motives? Were the vessels carrying anything of actual or intrinsic value? Even personnel, were there any VIPs aboard?"

Mr. Ford looked a little lost but answered, "No, to both questions. Both shipments were of the usual nature; fifty percent food and fifty percent mining spares and basic survival equipment. There were no armaments in the freight at all and the crews were the same men who had served for two years on the same vessels. All good competent personnel but not what you would describe as VIPs. It's driving me crazy not knowing what has happened."

Sir Richard spoke again, "Captain Stephens, you have an open mind and you are experienced in space patrols. We want you to investigate this sad business and bring us some answers. Anything you need in the way of equipment I will get for you. Your UFO experience has taken on a new and frightening meaning as far as we are concerned. I, personally, believe every word of it and I am going to give you the chance that the Admiral was going to give you. Needless to say we must take action as soon as possible."

Sir Richard reached into his desk drawer and pulled out a file which he handed to Captain Stephens, "This dossier contains every scrap of information I have been able to compile on both flight plans. I have arranged some secure quarters for you within this complex and would appreciate your cooperation in maintaining this security, at least for the time being. Anything you need, anything at all, please ask Fred or Miss Linaker and it will be arranged. Please give this matter your total attention and report back to me in forty-eight hours with your formulated plans and we will discuss them. I think we have all had enough for today so we will finish now. I have taken the liberty of preparing a

voice command document case for you. Keep this file in it and use it at all times please. "

Captain Stephens took the document case and examined it. Apart from the handle there were no other signs of locks or anything else. "How do I use it?" he asked quizzically.

Mr. Ford said, "You simply instruct it to 'Open' or to 'Lock' and it does the rest itself. If you say 'Self Destruct' it will do that as well. It will also immobilize anybody who happens to be carrying it, so be careful what you say. It will obey your voice only."

"O. K. here goes. ...' Open' ..," commanded Captain Stephens.

Miraculously the case opened and he placed his documents inside.

"Lock," he instructed and the lid slid smoothly back into place.

\* \* \* \* \*

Ten minutes later he was in his new quarters. Michael had always travelled light and had come prepared for this eventuality. All his clothing, personal belongings and documents were in his personal transport. Michael, being a Lunar Resident, had bought himself a small moon shuttle. It was a sporty little job, quick and manoeuvrable, and capable of being used in the Earth's atmosphere as well as in space. It was the very latest model that the Aviation Division of Ford Motors produced. It could make the Moon trip in eight to twelve hours depending on the prevailing conditions. The thing Michael really liked about it was that it could be piloted manually or automatically. It was nice to have the 'Feel' of the little craft, also it helped to keep his hand in.

He looked around the quarters which were neat and functional. There was a bedroom with built in fittings and a deluxe super-helium filled bed which floated so relaxingly at its moorings. Most people who were used to low gravity preferred this kind of bed nowadays. There was a lounge with a sunken floor which contained the usual standard television and a holographic video which projected three dimensional productions of various kinds and the very latest in audio technology which played the new micro-chip recordings. These units were now about the size of a pill box and could be easily held in the palm of the hand.

He lowered the helium bed to the floor with the electronic winch, threw off his shoes and laid down luxuriously on the top cover. He then pressed the 'Release' button and the bed gently floated up again. He laid there quietly for quarter of an hour, slowly regaining control of his racing thoughts.

Eventually he dissipated all his excitement and exuberance. As he glanced through the solitary window he realized that it was still light. According to his chronometer it should have been dark. Then he noticed that nothing was moving at all and then the realization dawned on him. It was not a window at

all. It was a holographic back projection which made these secure quarters a little less claustrophobic.

He had previously pressed the 'Secure quarters' button next to the door and although nothing visible had happened he had heard the smooth hum of electric motors doing their job.

"Eight O'clock," he said to himself, "I'll slip over to the launch pad and pick up my belongings."

He deactivated the 'Secure Mode,' picked up the remote control, went outside and re-secured the quarters. He found the elevator and pressed the button to call it. A voice spoke from the grille, a mechanical voice, polite but official, "Please give your name."

"Captain Michael Robert Stephens."

"Please hold."

After a short pause the voice spoke again. "Captain Stephens, you are not cleared to leave this floor. Please return to your quarters and call Security." Michael realized that an argument with a machine was going to be futile, so he obediently returned to his quarters and did as requested. A man from security was there within thirty seconds.

"Good evening, Sir. Can I be of any assistance?"

This was a very smart young man with an extremely intelligent face and as the Captain scrutinized him he noticed that the man was of a powerful, athletic build. "A useful chap to have on your side," he thought.

He then noticed that the man's I.D. card had only a number on it. "Do I address you as 762?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, Sir," replied 762. "In security we only use numbers, this way we can preserve our anonymity."

"Well, 762, all my personal belongings are in my Moon Shuttle over on the launching pad and I do not have clearance to leave this floor. I have only just joined the Company and it has not been attended to yet."

762 smiled gently and replied, "Your restriction to this floor is on the specific instruction of Sir Richard. He said you would understand this temporary restriction since you have a lot of work to do. It also takes twenty-four hours to run the clearance checks on new personnel. No offence Sir, but everybody has to suffer this indignity including Sir Richard himself."

"Thanks for the information, but what about my belongings?" asked Michael.

"You will find them all in your store room, all inspected and carrying security clearance. Also your beautiful Moon Shuttle has been moved to our private pad. It has been serviced and refuelled for you and our engineers have corrected the small fault on the In-flight Giro. Two fuel lines which they considered to be unserviceable have also been replaced. They have also taken out your standard radio transmitter and replaced it with one of our own powerful deep space transmitters which is also fitted with a Company scrambled channel. This is a standard procedure with new personnel."

Captain Stephens was quite taken aback. "Please convey my thanks to your engineers, I knew about the Giro but not about the fuel lines. Were they faulty parts?"

762 smiled knowingly. "The Chief Engineer did mention that the craft had been flown to its absolute limit in its 'Manual Mode,' a thing he disapproves of, and that chaffing had occurred due to the violence of prolonged acceleration. Our Chief Engineer loves machinery much more than he likes people, Sir!"

Captain Stephens smiled back ruefully. "I suppose that I should consider myself well and truly told off in that case."

"Oh no, Sir!" retorted 762. "He actually called the other engineers in to show them how a real pilot keeps his craft. He was very impressed with its cleanliness and its practical management. He said you were to be congratulated."

"Well that is nice to know. You spoke of a store room, could you tell me where it is because I can't see one?"

762 crossed the room and went to the window where there was a switch. Michael had thought it to be the holographic projector control. 762 explained, "Used normally the switch controls the hologram, in fact you can choose one of a number of scenes, ten to be precise, but if you push the knob down firmly and turn it to the right, as you can see a hidden panel slides to the side to allow access to the store room."

Sure enough the trick worked and it was a neat piece of engineering. "What happens if you turn it to the left?" asked Michael.

"In that case you get a much better result, because it opens the Bar over there," grinned 762.

Needless to say the bar was well equipped and the glass fronted cooler showed an adequate supply of his favourite beverage. He mused that his enforced captivity might not be too bad after all. "Are there any other secrets I should know about?" he asked.

"Yes Sir, just one. There is a fire escape chute in the bedroom close to the bed. It is automatic and opens when there is a genuine need to escape. It is not ultra-sensitive but I would not smoke in the bedroom if I were you. Just one last thing, Sir! The store room works only when the room is in 'Secure Mode.' I am assigned to be your personal attendant and bodyguard. When you press the 'Security' button, you will get me. You have had a long day Sir, would you like a proper meal?"

Michael thought for a moment and the idea seemed quite attractive. He said, "762 that is the best idea I have heard for a while. Do you think you could rustle me up a steak with all the trimmings, some ice cream and a pot of coffee?"

"No problem at all, Sir. I'll be back in about twenty minutes." With that he left the room.

Michael unpacked his cases and arranged his room. Just as he finished 762 returned with his meal. He ate heartily, helped himself to a final beer while he

watched an interesting television programme concerning Buggy racing in the Lunar Sea of Tranquillity. Earlier he had selected a holographic projection of a Moonscape from his 'Window' and by the time he retired to bed he felt relaxed and at home. He soon slipped into a deep satisfied sleep and slept undisturbed for a full eight hours.

### CHAPTER 3. PLANNING AND TESTING.

Michael awoke at eight o'clock next morning alert, refreshed and ready to work. He called 762 and ordered a full breakfast of bacon, scrambled eggs, tomatoes, toast and marmalade and the compulsory coffee pot. He felt slightly foolish as he spoke to his security case to open it. He pondered how far he was supposed to trust 762 and decided to play safe. He locked the room in 'Secure Mode' by using the manual override which negated any remote control; 762 would have to wait until he let him in.

He took out the documents and read through them quickly, picking up certain, salient facts. He then started a more thorough perusal and was in deep concentration when a buzzer disturbed him. It took a few moments for him to realize that it was 762 with his breakfast. He replaced the documents in his case, instructed it to lock and opened the door having first verified that it was indeed 762 by a quick look through the one-way observation tube.

762 entered and set down the breakfast which smelled delicious. "I am pleased to see that you are security conscious, Sir. It makes my job so much easier."

"I have been security conscious since before you were born 762, it has been a way of life for me," replied Michael. "Please see that I am disturbed as little as possible this morning and would you please pass on a message to Mr. Ford. Tell him that I would appreciate a couple of hours in the Space Simulator so that I can brush up on my piloting. Thanks for breakfast, I will not be having lunch and I will contact you again concerning dinner. You may go now."

"Very well, Sir, have a nice day."

762 left the room and Michael returned it to the 'Secure Mode'. He took out the file Sir Richard had given him and continued to read it thoroughly. In military terms 'Intelligence' is defined as the gathering of information concerning the enemy. As he expected the file gave him no real 'Intelligence' whatsoever. It transpired that the first vessel, a freighter named *Hercules* under the command of Captain Collins had left Earth carrying a full cargo of food.

It had travelled uneventfully to Lunar Base Beta where it had off-loaded half of its food cargo and replaced it with some instruments and rocket spares. It had then proceeded to the base on Deimos, the tiny Martian Satellite, where it had delivered the rocket spares.

The low gravity there had made this base very suitable for dealing with some of the heavy jobs conventional rockets needed. Heavy machine parts could be simply and delicately manhandled.

There had been a further cargo of mining equipment and myriads of different spares for shuttles, space suits, oxygen bottles and luxury items for sale or trade round the claims in the Asteroid Belt.

The *Hercules* had then left for Ceres and routine reports every twelve hours, which were given in transcript form, had given no hint that anything was

wrong and then shortly after the vessel had entered the rock fields of the inner Asteroids nothing.

Another high-powered craft had been sent at full speed, under a cloak of secrecy, a week later and had executed a fruitless search. There had been an unconfirmed sighting of a space suit by a crew member but further investigation had found nothing so the sighting was discounted.

The freighter *Titan* had taken an even less exciting route. It had left its normal base on Moon Base Delta and had taken the direct route towards Ceres. Everything had been strictly routine. It had entered the inner Asteroid Belt millions of miles away from where the *Hercules* had entered it. Captain Gorrie had made his routine report and then again nothing: no clues, no evidence, no distress signals. It was all very disturbing.

Michael tried some deductive reasoning. *Hercules* could have been sabotaged on Earth, on the Moon or on Deimos. *Titan* had left from the Moon so the only common factor was that both vessels had visited Lunar Bases, but so did hundreds of others, he mused. He then thought about the security which Sir Richard had clamped down. "Perhaps he believes that there is a traitor within the Company," thought Michael to himself. Now that was a real possibility.

What about Aliens? Two attacks by intelligent beings on unarmed transports, millions of miles apart, was not the way he had imagined any Alien would first make contact, particularly if it had been the one he saw. Then, again, his frigate *Vega* had been heavily armed and his second vessel had been a flying arsenal, enough to deter any sane aggressor. But it still did not make sense. Finally he had to admit to himself that he thought it was more likely to be humans rather than aliens which he was looking for, although he would keep an open mind.

Another curious thought crossed his mind. What about mutiny?

There had been no recorded instances of mutiny in the history of space flight, but there was a first time for everything. He thought about the cargoes and the last known positions. If the vessels had been taken over by the crews they stood to make personal fortunes. Firstly they could trade their goods directly to the Wild-Cat Miners who eked a living out of the rock fields. This would give a high return without a lot of effort.

Alternatively the Freighters were carrying enough mining equipment to stake out and work a sizeable mining operation. By selling to unscrupulous ore dealers ( Of which there were many) huge sums of money could be made. Michael thought it was improbable that two crews would try the same trick in such a short time, unless it was a deliberate conspiracy. However it was still a possibility.

Another situation he conceived was that of a rogue ship running an operation of organized crime. It seemed a little far fetched and it would be expensive to set up, but there were still some immensely rich and active crime syndicates on Earth. Michael felt a pang of uneasiness about this notion.

His final chilling thoughts on the subject were that it could be a deliberate act of war by another Nation. He said a silent prayer begging that this was not the case. Co-operation in space was essential; the whole operation could fall apart if distrust crept in.

Bearing all these things in mind he prepared his plans in detail and made lists of his requirements. He considered using a code then thought better of it. The case would not leave his quarters and he would see Sir Richard tomorrow anyway. He slipped all his papers into his security case, locked it and activated the store room door. As an added measure he concealed the case inside some of his personal luggage. As he closed the door he thought he had done well and was happy with his plans. In this state of elation he opened the bar while he was still at the switch.

He looked inside the cooler to see what he could find. To his intense relief there were some non-alcoholic drinks included in the store. He picked out a small can of orange and another of lemon, mixed them added some ice and settled down for a few minutes to enjoy the drink. After all, he thought, he did not want to disgrace himself in the Space Simulator. He still had to prove himself to be a top notch pilot as far as the company was concerned. That was his next job.

\* \* \* \* \*

Fred Ford sent for him at precisely 2.53 in the afternoon. At precisely three o'clock he entered the Space Simulator where he was introduced to the Chief Company Training Officer.

Fred Ford made the introductions. "Captain Stephens, please meet Mr. John Langley."

Michael perceived a dedicated middle-aged man with sparkling blue eyes, a little 'Thin on top' and a sense of humour. "Pleased to meet you, Sir, I hope I make a good pupil," he said.

John Langley laughed, shook hands with Michael and said, "We'll see if we can dream up a few trying situations for you Captain. "

Mr. Ford continued, "You have two hours, Captain. We are going to make this official and give you your competency test. It is a Company policy that each pilot is re-tested every two years and should you be unfortunate enough to be involved in any flying accident at all, you are instructed to ground yourself immediately. Then, for your own sake, you must come back for re-testing before re-assuming command. It is not intended to be a show of lack of confidence but a way that the Company uses to dispel any doubts about the competency of its pilots. Our renewal of the Flying Certificate is a show of our confidence in our staff. However if there are flaws in any persons performance, the certificate will not be awarded until extra training brings their performance up to an acceptable level."

John Langley continued, "Your session will be in three parts, Captain. Firstly, you will have an hour to brush up on your C.A.M.I.D. procedures. Then



you will take your test in two parts. Section A will be on a C.A.M.I.D. powered craft and will be the major part of the test. Section B is a test on a conventional rocket-powered craft and quite candidly this frequently causes problems for our pilots; I hear you have a shuttle of your own, so I expect a high level of performance from you.”

“I will leave you in the extremely capable hands of Mr. Langley, Captain Stephens,” added Mr. Ford. “I will go so, we do not waste any more time. ...good luck.”

With that Mr. Ford left and Michael dressed himself in the Simulation-suit that added so much to the realism of the Simulator by providing sensations of 'G' and other uncomfortable stimuli.

Eventually Michael was seated at the controls with his harness on and was quickly familiarizing himself with them. He felt a slight surge of panic when he realized that although they looked similar to the military vessels he had piloted there was a lot missing from the instrument panel. It seemed to be oversimplified. Then it struck him like a thunderbolt: there was no armament on these craft. He had never really appreciated the complexity of the armament system until now; it would be un-nerving piloting a defenceless craft for awhile.

“All systems set and awaiting your instructions, Captain,” called Mr. Langley through the headphones.

“Roger, Control,” returned Michael. “I will go through the pre-flight checks.”

Mr. Langley was good at his job. He picked Michael up on a few points and taught him some new checks peculiar to the freighter-type vessels which the Company used. Michael quickly picked these up. He had a good memory and a gifted recall facility which he had developed with years of military training. Lists and sequences were child's play to him.

He practised take-offs in atmosphere, getting under way in space, landings in atmosphere, docking and undocking procedures in space, anti-collision drills, changes of vectors while under way, reverse polarization procedures and several navigational problems using the excellent Planetarium environment in which the Simulator was set.

He soon felt confident and the skills which he had not used for two years came flooding back to him; he relaxed slightly as the realization came that he was still, at least, a good pilot.

“Close down all systems please, Captain, ” said the voice in his headphones. “Relax for five minutes while we prepare your test.”

Michael obediently complied and quietly waited for his next instructions. While he was waiting he studied the Freighter Manual and he was amazed at the simplicity and ingenuity of these vessels. The freighters themselves consisted of a front and a rear with a connecting tube. The length was variable to suit the requirements of the amount of cargo which was carried.

The cargo was carried in purpose-made containers which could be linked together side by side and in tandem. Usually the freighters carried twenty containers in two columns of ten: the most that could be carried was thirty

containers in two columns of fifteen. The front of the vessel contained the C.A.M.I.D. unit and the controls along with the power pack. It was also the bridge of the vessel from where it was piloted.

The rear unit contained the living quarters, galley, essential stores and the life support systems. The two units were held together by immensely strong, slender, hydraulic tubes which clamped the containers firmly between the two modules.

"Very efficient," thought Michael and a thought crossed his mind which caused him to alter his plans a little.

John Langley's voice crackled through the head phones, now very much in control. "Stand by, Captain. Prepare for an Earth take-off and select a trajectory for Mars. You will be required to simulate a landing on Deimos later on."

"Roger, Control," replied Michael who was automatically adjusting the dials and controls. He had already mentally worked out the trajectories of the obvious destinations and this was one of them. "Give me a count down from twenty, please."

The test was soon under way. Michael executed a power efficient take-off and was soon approaching maximum speed (using time lapse techniques). Next came an order to change course for the Moon. Michael complied instantly only to have the order cancelled and a further instruction to resume his original course. "Typical," he thought.

John Langley did not leave much to chance; he treated the Captain on test to a taste of the great calamities which can occur in space flight. There was a fire signalled in the rear module and no sooner had he dealt with that when there was a serious pressure leak. "I hope the real ships are in better condition than this," thought Michael frantically.

The simulated vessel was travelling at maximum speed when he received the order to 'Heave to'. This was not an easy one to bring off. The C.A.M.I.D. system in all vessels had the facility to single polarize each half of the vessel independently so Michael tried a technique which he had used before. He reversed the polarity in the rear section to give maximum attraction from the Earth and then selected maximum repulsion from Mars which was dead a head. It was a tricky manoeuvre which could actually break the ship in half if the synchronization of power between fore and aft was wrong.

Michael gently balanced the attractions and repulsions then started to turn on the power. The simulated speed dropped off at an amazing rate; now that the craft was slowing he really gave it full power and there were several loud protesting noises from within the Simulator. At this point the ship began to spin; Langley had fed him a faulty giro.

Michael cut the power and applied the trimmer-jets to stop the violent rotation, this was soon accomplished. He re-applied the power and brought the stricken craft to a stand still. He then noticed that he was perspiring badly. That

last manoeuvre had been very real and Michael had actually forgotten that he was only in a Simulator.

Langley was remorseless, "Obstacles in the form of a rock field ahead; guide the vessel through it."

Michael concentrated on the screen and the collision indicators and automatically carried out the necessary avoidance procedures. This particular section was child's play to him after his first hand experience in the Asteroids and inside the rings of Saturn.

The final part was the simulated landing on Deimos. This was an extremely low gravity situation. The temptation for the pilot is to use the gravity of Mars itself as the basis of movement but Michael knew from experience that this was wrong. Too many crumpled nose-cones had been caused by that method. This was the true test of a C.A.M.I.D. pilot; the ability to isolate one source of magnetism from another.,

Michael landed perfectly and was told to cut power. Instead he replied, "Secure the landing legs with the bolt down harnesses and report back when it is done. "

One minute later, "Legs secure, Sir."

Michael gently applied power and the front, right leg lifted slightly. "Recheck the front, right leg. It is not fastened down."

One minute later, "Leg secure, Sir."

Michael re-applied a little power, very gently. This time there was no movement. The gravity on Deimos was so low that huge objects could simply drift off towards the Martian surface if not correctly tethered. At this point he cut the power and went through the wind down procedures. "That was a trap," he thought to himself.

His headphones crackled into life, "Thank you, Sir. That is the end of this section of the test..

A few minutes later Michael was seated in the Rocket Simulator and thoroughly enjoying himself. He blasted off from a simulated Moon Base and went through docking and anti-collision manoeuvres followed by an obstacle course and finally an Earth re-entry and landing. John Langley gave nothing away. "Your results will be sent to Sir Richard and he will discuss them with you when he sees you at ten o'clock tomorrow."

Michael left the Simulator Complex feeling drained, hungry and in need of a quiet nap. He returned to his quarters, relaxed with a cat nap for half an hour, showered and changed, then summoned 762.

"Good evening, Sir, are you ready to eat?"

"I certainly am," replied Michael. "A large Spaghetti Bolognese and a Banana Split would go down very well, if you could arrange it."

"No problem at all, Sir," grinned 762 and left to get it.

While he was waiting for his meal to arrive he made a few alterations to his plans in accordance with the idea that had occurred to him in the Simulator. Michael enjoyed his meal and was starting to relax with a beer when the video-

com bleeped and lit up with the rather beautiful face of Charlotte Linaker. "Good evening, Captain. Am I disturbing anything important?"

Michael looked at the beer in his hand and pondered its importance for a moment before replying, "Of course not, Miss Linaker, what can I do for you?"

"I am off-duty and wondered if you would like me to come up for a chat and a drink. You have not had much in the way of company for a while, have you?" "I would be delighted to entertain you, Miss Linaker, my work is finished until ten o'clock tomorrow. Have you eaten?"

"Yes", she replied. "I have finished my meal. I just need a wash and brush up and I will be along in about twenty minutes."

Michael thought that a wash and brush up would be superfluous to someone with the looks of Charlotte Linaker but said instead, "I look forward to your arrival then."

The video-com went blank. At this moment Michael panicked. He had very rarely been alone with a lady and did not have a clue what he was going to talk about. He shot round his quarters putting things right, washed himself again, had 762 remove the dinner plates and, finally, finished his beer with a gulp.

He was only just in time. The buzzer sounded after precisely twenty minutes. He checked that it was his guest and then let her in. The sight of her simply took his breath away and left him foolishly speechless. "Please come in," he managed to gasp at last.

Charlotte looked resplendent in a pale green dress with matching shoes. Her hair had been carefully let down and brushed to a perfect black sheen which subtly softened her features. The make-up and manicure was exquisite and perfect. She could have been an alien as far as Michael was concerned.

"Miss Linaker," he stammered, "Y..you look absolutely beautiful."

"Thank you kind Sir," she mocked gently and stepped boldly into the room then sat on the settee.

Michael recovered a little and in a voice which was a little more controlled he asked, "Would you care for a drink, Miss Linaker?"

She gave him an admonishing look and spoke softly. "Captain, my name is Charlotte, Charlie for short, this is not a formal visit and yes, please, I would very much like a drink."

"Then you must call me Michael. Incidentally the only thing I know about your drink is that it is blue. Could you tell me its formula, please?"

"Of course. It is a measure of Blue Bols and a measure of Coconut Rum topped up with lemonade and a little ice."

Michael raised his eyebrows in mock horror, returned to the bar and to his great surprise found all the necessary ingredients. He diligently mixed the concoction with exaggerated care and with a final flourish handed it to her. "Is this the formula of the official Company Rocket fuel?" he asked innocently.

She laughed an infectious laugh and took a sip. "Thank you, it's very good for a first attempt."

He grinned back at her, thought about mixing himself one of the mind blowing cocktails he enjoyed but decided against it and opened another beer. This time, however, he used a glass to keep up appearances. Feeling a little awkward and self conscious, he sat down opposite her and to his intense relief Charlotte started the conversation.

After a while he realized that he could actually talk with this lady on subjects that other women would scorn and he had a very nice evening indeed. He showed her the unique collection of photographs which he had taken in the course of his exploration of Jupiter and Saturn. She was genuinely enthralled. Their conversation covered a wide range of topics until it was finally time to say goodnight.

Charlotte then declared her intention to go. As she crossed the room Michael stood up to let her out but instead of leaving she shyly slipped her arms round his neck and gave him a gentle kiss on the cheek. "Thank you for a lovely evening, Mike," she breathed in his ear, "We must do it again soon."

With that she released him and left. Michael was in a daze ; he had never been kissed by anyone as beautiful as Charlotte.

Later, as his bed swung gently at its moorings, he concluded that it had been a very pleasurable experience. Then he slept like a log for a full eight hours.

## CHAPTER 4. A TRICKY OPERATION.

Michael had just finished showering when 762 requested entry. He had with him a large amount of clothing in two large, luxurious, leather suitcases which he stood on the floor.

"This is your Company uniform, Captain. Your Security Tag is also in there; it should be worn at all times and you are cleared to level Black which is the highest level clearance available, unless you are an actual Director of the Company."

"Thank you," replied Michael. He had never given this obvious notion of uniform a thought; naturally, all Aviation and Mercantile-type Companies had their own distinctive dress. It would seem strange not wearing his usual military one

"How did you know my size?" he asked.

"That's easy," said 762, "When you arrived for interview, you passed through the Security Tele-scan system. It weighs you, photographs you, measures you and does a sonic scan for weapons which also picks up your dental record. The Company Tailor has every dimension he needs exact to a hundredth of an inch. Don't worry, Sir, your uniform will fit perfectly. Every Captain receives the same issue as you. There is only one item missing and that is your hand weapon. You will find that in the safe in the Captain's quarters when you board your vessel. "

"Is the weapon the standard issue electronic stun gun?" inquired Michael.

"The standard weapon is the basis of the design but we have added a few little refinements for our own use. For instance there are two highly compressed gas cylinders inside the weapon: one is a knock out gas for quickly and harmlessly immobilizing a lot of people and the other is a foam device which could put out a fairly large fire if required. It is a tidy, useful piece of hardware."

Weapons with standard bullets and high velocity muzzle speeds had been outlawed following the disaster which had befallen the American Cruiser *Apache*. A soldier, who had been standing guard over some prisoners they were transporting, was attacked by a crazed inmate. In the struggle which followed two prisoners and the guard were shot; another bullet shorted out some essential wiring and yet another smashed a large viewing panel.

The ship depressurised very quickly and the Captain was unable to seal the doors due to the damaged circuitry. Apart from three crew men who managed to scramble into space suits, all one hundred and eighty seven prisoners and crew perished within ten minutes. The other three died an hour later due to the fact that they had picked up bottles which were nearly empty; they could not get full ones because the doors were jammed by the faulty circuitry. It was still the worst space tragedy on record.

The result was that a new stun gun was developed which had enough power to disable a man and render him unconscious but did not have enough power to harm the ship or cause fire.

"I think I had better have breakfast before I dress," observed Michael who had horrendous visions of a brand new uniform with egg and coffee stains down the front.

"Will it be your usual, Sir?" asked 762.

Michael decided to be contrary because he did not like to think of himself as being predictable. "No thanks," he replied, "I will have a slice of cantaloupe, two boiled eggs done three minutes and three rounds of toast."

If he had expected any reaction from 762 he was disappointed. He simply said, "Very good, Sir," and left to organize it.

He inspected his uniform while he was waiting for his breakfast. It was very smart and was a combination of white and slate grey with the gold trimmings of a Senior Captain. There were other items in the issue apart from the full dress uniform. These included a lightweight lounge suit, several coverall-type working garments, thermal spacesuit undergarments, a selection of shirts and an array of hats and caps with the appropriate boots and shoes. Each garment bore the Company logo or the appropriate insignia of rank. "A better issue than the Military," thought Michael.

His breakfast arrived and Michael quickly finished it. He immediately wished he had ordered the other but was too stubborn to ask for more, so he suffered in silence. As he dressed he went over the plans in his head again looking for obvious flaws: he found none. Eventually he went over to the mirror to inspect the results. The clothing fitted perfectly and was extremely flattering. The insignias were all done in genuine gold thread and the full dress hat sported a solid gold Company emblem. The perfectly polished shoes finished the image off.

Michael looked at the face in the mirror. he wondered if he was too old to be starting another career, then remembered that they had chosen him in preference to younger men; experience had to count for something. The eyes were still blue and alert; some said they held a hint of cruelty. Personally he thought that was a little unfair but then again he had never had the misfortune to look at himself when he was annoyed. He knew that he could be ruthless in matters concerning duty but that was not cruelty, it was merely determination.

He looked again and noticed that his hair was still plentiful although there was a little frost round the edges. He was physically quite fit and not overweight; he was six feet one inch tall but the uniform made him look bigger. All in all he was quite pleased with what he could see and, most importantly, he still had that certain air of authority which a Captain needed.

A curious thought crossed his mind. What did Charlotte think of him? Would she see him as dashing and debonair? Perhaps ruggedly handsome and mature? He hoped it was something reasonably flattering.

He pulled himself together with an effort and stopped his day dreaming. It did not really matter what Charlotte thought, it was what Sir Richard thought that really mattered, at least for the time being. In his heart he knew it was a lie even as he thought it.

Fred Ford arrived at precisely 9.53: at 9.58 they were standing outside Sir Richard's office, The 'Enter' light flashed on at exactly ten o'clock. They walked straight in and Sir Richard stood to greet them, "Come in, Gentlemen and please sit down!"

The office was put into 'Secure Mode' immediately and Sir Richard sat down to join them. The room had been rearranged since their last visit. There was now a beautifully polished, circular hardwood table with three matching upholstered chairs. There was no attempt whatsoever to give anybody a dominant position. Michael liked that and appreciated the psychology that went with it.

There was a pitcher of water on the table which was standing on a refrigerated tray along with three matching goblets. They were not made of glass but from a special quartz which was now mined in some quantity in the Asteroids, particularly in the Trojan group. It had the peculiar quality of always being ten degrees centigrade cooler than its surroundings, a phenomenon which nobody had been able to explain yet. The quartz was very easy to machine, fine grained, infinitely colourful and enormously expensive.

The material had been very useful in the development of C.A.M.I.D. Electronic circuitry went back one hundred and fifty years when Professor Crest developed the new system. Transistorised circuits were unable to handle the huge currents which were generated and the long extinct valve which had been invented by Lee DeForrest in the nineteen twenties had, from necessity, been resurrected.

For many years large, energy consuming fans were installed to dissipate the heat from these immense electronic dinosaurs and there was an unhealthy failure rate due to burn out. Simon, Sir Richard's father, had been working with the new quartz and he had decided to experiment with the material in the production of these troublesome valves in preference to the silicon glass they normally used.

The results surpassed all expectations and failure in these valves became a rarity. It was the crowning touch to the whole system.

Sir Richard picked up the pitcher and poured water for everybody, "You can always tell a man who is used to wearing a uniform. You look very smart this morning, Captain."

"Thank you, Sir Richard," murmured Michael self consciously.

"Well... we had better get down to business," said Sir Richard, taking some documents from his security case. "Captain, I have the results of your Competency Test from the Simulator."



He inspected the papers closely and showed about as much reaction as a poker player. "Well, Captain, it would appear that you gave Mr. Langley a hard time yesterday."

Michael was a little taken aback; he was convinced that Mr. Langley had given him a hard time. "How do you mean, Sir?" asked Michael with as much politeness as he could muster.

"Apparently your response to his instructions was so quick at times that his computer had difficulty coping with it. In fact he said that your 'Heave To' from maximum speed was so expertly done that you nearly burnt out his Simulator. He had to slow you down by throwing you a faulty giro: even that did not work, he says, you sorted it out so quickly that he still had to replace some badly burnt circuitry after the test."

Michael was now feeling uncomfortable, "Will I have to take another test then?"

"Good Lord, no," smiled Sir Richard. "Mr. Langley informs me that you are the best pilot he has ever had the pleasure of testing. He was most impressed by the thoroughness of your procedures on the Deimos landing. He has studied the tapes of what you did and will now introduce this sequence into our training programme."

He reached into his case and presented Michael with his Certificate of Competence and a small black box.

"Congratulations, Michael! In the box are two, solid gold, matching comets which are to be worn on the lapels of your uniform. They signify a pilot of outstanding ability, so be proud to wear them. The only other pilot with a pair of these is Clive Twist, so you are in good company."

"I am honoured, Sir," said Michael blushing slightly. He realized that he had stood up so he sat down again.

Fred Ford was grinning all over his face. "Well done, Captain Stephens! I knew you were the right man for us."

Sir Richard became serious again. "Have you come up with a workable plan that can be quickly executed, Captain?"

"Yes, there is a specific course of action I would like to follow, Sir."

"Good! Do not hesitate to ask for anything you need, my private vessel is at your disposal, as are the whole of the resources of the Company."

Michael pondered the enormity of that last statement for a moment, then he began to unfold his plan.

"First of all I feel that secrecy on this mission is vital and, under the circumstances, I would prefer to run it as a military operation. I do not wish to draw attention to the mission so I would like to use a conventional freighter, similar to the ones that disappeared. I want real cargo and I want a flight plan which takes me straight to Ceres. However there are a few alterations which I would need doing.

In addition to the normal twenty containers, I would like another four stowed immediately behind the Command Module. These four should be filled with as

many extra power packs as we can fit in and then wired directly into the standard C.A.M.I.D. power pack already on board. I will need as much extra power for the system as possible. The mission stands a much better chance of success if I do not have to be power efficient".

"Can you arrange that, Fred?" asked Sir Richard.

"We have never had to do it before but I don't think it is beyond the limit of our ingenuity. May I ask why you need this vast amount of power, Captain?"

Michael replied, "I am used to piloting very fast craft. With this extra power I can prolong acceleration to gain much higher speeds and cut down the E.T.A. There would also be plenty of power left for pursuit if that proved necessary.

They both nodded. "It makes sense, Fred," said Sir Richard. "Even in my own craft I would be short of power when I arrived at the rock-fields. Yes, you're right, Captain, a modified freighter it is. What about armament?"

"I was very tempted at first to ask for some external armament, such as missiles, but I feel that it would deter any aggressor if they could see obvious armament. It would also draw attention to the freighter as being something different."

Mr. Ford looked directly at Michael and said, "It is becoming obvious that you intend to set yourself up as bait. You want whatever is out there to attack you, don't you?"

"Considering the vast volume of the Asteroid Belt our chances of finding them if they choose to hide is practically nil. I fail to see any other alternative."

Sir Richard spoke again, "Captain, you do appreciate that you are subjecting yourself and the crew to a considerable risk?"

"I fully understand the risks we are inviting. However, we are going into the situation with some knowledge. We will at least be expecting trouble, the other Captains were not. That in itself gives us some edge. Also we will have personal weapons on board, with your permission, Sir, and I will have exercised the crew to expect trouble."

"You seem to have thought everything out, Captain Stephens. Are there any other details you wish to tell us?" asked Sir Richard.

"Yes Sir, I want the launch to look as routine as possible and I will not be on board when the freighter leaves. It is my intention to board the vessel and assume command a little way out from Moon orbit. I will bring the weapons on board there. Also I will need a container left empty for my Moon Shuttle, which could be very handy for searching among the rocks. That also means that an adjacent container will need to be carrying spares and fuel for the shuttle."

"Any other problems?" inquired Mr. Ford who had been taking notes.

"The big problem is the crew. They will need to be briefed that they are on a special mission. I would prefer volunteers and they must be prepared to train in a military way. The Captain who pilots the ship from Earth must be prepared to stand down and become co-pilot. It would be essential to have at least two pilots anyway on this trip. The detailed briefing would be given by myself when

I assumed command. The crew must be good loyal men, Sir Richard. Without their full cooperation the mission is doomed before we start."

"I think we can guarantee some excellent crew," said Sir Richard knowingly.

"How long do you think it will take you to prepare for launching, Fred?"

"I would think about seven days, Sir Richard, if everything goes smoothly."

"Make it go smoothly please, Fred. I want the vessel ready in five days; the loading of the cargo and the preparation of the containers can start immediately. Final assembly will take place on the sixth day and the launch will go ahead exactly one week today.

Captain Stephens, you will have a chest of personal hand weapons installed in your Moon Shuttle by tomorrow evening and you can return to your Moon Base the following morning. Before you leave you should give Mr. Ford the co-ordinates of the rendezvous and the exact time."

"I already have these written down, Sir Richard," said Michael and passed the sheets on to Mr. Ford.

Sir Richard continued remorselessly. "I will deal with the question of the crew. It would probably be a good idea to increase the crew to a total of twelve instead of the usual ten, so I will pick an extra man if you think you can use him, Captain."

"There is an extra duty to cover, Sir. From Mars onward there will be a constant visual lookout posted, so an extra man would be a great asset."

"Is there anything anybody wishes to add in conclusion?" asked Sir Richard.

"Yes Sir," said Michael. "It is not pleasant but I think it needs to be said. I am not hopeful of finding any crew members of the other two ships alive, unless they have mutinied."

Fred Ford sat up with a jerk, "Mutinied ? What a preposterous notion, what would they have to gain by mutiny?"

Sir Richard interceded, "It is a possibility we must face up to, Fred. The financial gains for the crew members would be enormous; greed does do strange things to people."

"Well I don't believe it for a minute," insisted Fred.

Michael spoke again, "There is nothing to be gained by closing your mind to any eventuality. I am a newcomer to the Company and, at the present time, can think without emotional involvement. In a few years time I might adopt your attitude, Mr. Ford, but for the present I must remain cynical for all our sakes."

Mr. Ford and Sir Richard nodded in agreement.

Michael continued, "The most we can expect to gain is the recovery of the ships and the hides of the men or things who have perpetrated this atrocity, if, indeed there has been one. I personally do not believe that any untrained man would have a clue how to pilot a C.A.M.I.D. powered vessel, however in time they could learn. These vessels must not be allowed to remain in the wrong hands. If I cannot recapture them, I intend to destroy them any way I can."

There was a stunned silence round the table. Finally Sir Richard spoke, "It is inevitable, I suppose. At the bottom of my heart I hoped to find the ships and

crews still intact but, in reality, it is probably very unlikely. Your appreciation of this situation is very pragmatic, Captain you're a hard man when you have to be."

Michael smiled coldly, "I do not enjoy it, Sir Richard, but conjecture will get us nowhere. Only straight facts acquired the hard way are going to get answers in this case."

"Again your thinking is correct. Have you anything else to add?"

"One last item, but an important one," continued Michael. "Communications are going to be very important. I want to be able to contact the Company Base anytime I think fit, so please could you arrange to have a station manned twenty-four hours a day specifically for this mission. The twelve hour report will still apply, but only as routine. Any important messages will be sent on the scrambler and even if we lose contact, please keep the station manned for a while afterwards.

It would also be a good idea to have a remotely controlled distress beacon hidden inside the hull of the freighter which could be activated by any search vessel if the worst comes to the worst and we are taken. This would give them a clue where to search, even if it was discovered after only a few minutes."

Fred Ford was amending his list and added, "This really should be standard equipment on all our vessels from now on, Sir Richard."

"Yes I agree, see to it please, Fred."

The three men sat silently for a moment, it seemed as though the talking was over.

"Well it seems that it just remains for me to wind up this meeting," said Sir Richard finally. "Captain Stephens, we endorse your plan and give it our full backing. I would personally like to thank you for the selfless attitude and clear thinking which you brought to this meeting.

I hope you do not need it but I am going to wish you 'Good Luck' anyway. We all have our separate tasks to do, so let us not waste any time and be about our business. Captain Stephens, you now have our high level security clearance and I would appreciate it if you would tour this complex and familiarize yourself with its departments and facilities before you leave tomorrow. I will arrange it for you.

That is all Gentlemen. Please seal your security cases."

They obediently complied and Sir Richard released the room from its 'Secure Mode'. As they left the room Fred Ford turned and said, "Look Michael, I know everything is happening very quickly, too quickly for me, but can we have a quiet chat before we do anything else?"

Michael suddenly felt very concerned for him and replied, "Of course Fred, will my quarters do?"

"Yes, they will do nicely and thanks for sparing me the time."

Ten minutes later they were inside Michael's room and the bar was open. Michael mixed an ample gin and tonic for Fred in the English way with a little

ice and a slice of lemon, then he mixed another fruit juice and sat down opposite Fred.

"What's on your mind, Fred?" probed Michael.

"I'll come straight to the point," he said and took a pull at his glass. "It isn't common knowledge but there was a crew member in the *Titan* called Frank Jennings. He was the First Officer and looking forward to a very promising career."

"Is he one of your relatives?"

"Yes, he is, or was, my Son," confessed Fred sadly.

"Now I understand your emotional attachment and involvement in this case. Does Sir Richard know?"

"The answer to that is probably yes: he knows most things about the Company. We have never discussed it, I just wanted the boy to succeed on his own merits. My wife and I were divorced before he was born; it was the pressure of my work here. I was never at home for long and she got fed up and left. Frank was born when I was halfway to Mars; I hardly saw him at all as a baby. My wife had reassumed her maiden name before he was born, but he is my Son."

Michael felt very sorry for him. Even a hard-nosed business man like Fred had his problems underneath that rugged exterior.

"I can't promise much, Fred, but I can promise you that I will be thorough in the search and if he is still alive I will do my utmost to find him. If not, I will try to bring those responsible to justice, or administer my own if that proves to be necessary."

"I cannot ask for anything more, but I wanted you to know before you left just what the circumstances were. You know, of course, that I will be doing everything I can to assist you in your mission."

"Yes I do," said Michael, "And thank you for confiding in me. Like you I will not discuss this matter with anybody."

Fred pulled himself together with an effort, drained his glass and said grimly, "Well, I'd better get started, I don't want to be the one responsible for holding you up."

With that he turned and left the room. Michael sat there a while longer pondering this latest piece of information. It did not really change anything, he would have done the mission anyway for the unknown crew members; still he hoped that he could help Fred but in his heart he felt that there was little hope. He was jerked out of his thoughts by the buzzer of the video-com. It flashed into life and Charlotte Linaker spoke to him from the screen. "Good morning Captain, I believe Sir Richard has asked you to make a tour of the complex this afternoon?"

She looked very efficient in her Company uniform and her hair tied back. Michael replied equally formally, "Yes, Miss Linaker, you are quite correct."

Her face softened as she smiled, "Well can you be ready for one o'clock and I will conduct the tour personally?"

"I will look forward to that and thank you."

"You're very welcome, Captain. Goodbye for now." The screen went blank.

Michael started to do his packing in readiness for his trip tomorrow. He changed out of his full dress uniform and into his working attire which was still smart but less ornate. He transferred his security tag and suddenly remembered the little black box with the golden comets in it. He took them out and studied them; they were beautiful.

He felt quite proud of himself as he pinned them on his lapels and adjusted them until they were perfectly matched. He had half an hour to spare and suddenly felt hungry. He contacted 762 who quickly brought him a bowl of soup and some sandwiches. He sat down and ate them appreciatively and prepared himself for what he hoped would be an interesting and informative afternoon. He was quite sure that he was going to enjoy it, simply because of the company he would be keeping.

That company arrived at precisely one o'clock, as promised, complete with a clipboard and an itinerary. They exchanged greetings and set off on their tour. Charlotte was deep in her official role as Senior Personnel Adviser and it soon became apparent to Michael that she was deeply respected throughout the Company, furthermore she turned out to be articulate and knowledgeable in every aspect of the Company's affairs.

Their tour took them through some of the component assembly lines. C.A.M.I.D. systems were made only on this complex and the Company produced every single component themselves. Michael found it interesting to see the entrails of the system which he used so well. The systems were always made to be inaccessible in the military vessels and it was the first time Michael had seen the huge valves with their strange convolutions. He realized that although he was a good practical mechanic and technician this was a specialty way above him; he found it to be absorbing and informative nonetheless.

The high point of the afternoon was the visit to hangar 'G.' Here Michael met his next command, the freighter *Atlas*. This was the one Sir Richard had assigned to the mission. It was a fine vessel and only six months old. He tried hard to show only a passing interest but he soon noticed two technicians gently easing back what was normally an ordinary panel in readiness for the distress beacon which he had requested, and was on a work bench close by.

He was amazed at the size of the vessels which were at least sixty feet wide and varied between three hundred and twenty-five and four hundred feet long, depending on how many containers they were carrying. He was surprised that he felt a touch of excitement at commanding a vessel he would have scorned five years ago.

From hangar 'G' they went to the 'High Security Cargo Preparation Compound.' At this point they both had to give their tags and submit to voice recognition procedures before being allowed entry. The security guards were carrying weapons, conventional types, and there were two manned machine gun posts to deter any would be aggressors or thieves. Michael also

recognized the latest ground to air missiles, the G.A.350s, which would definitely deter any airborne attacks on the establishment. Sir Richard certainly did not trust to luck. There were many containers grouped here with vast quantities of merchandise in the warehouses.

The loading sequence was quite fascinating. The items were stacked inside the containers using adjustable shelving where necessary. The inside of the container contained a heavy, plastic-type, loose sheeting which was quite elastic and pliable. When the load was completed the outer doors were sealed and a polystyrene foam was pumped in between the outer casing and the plastic sheet which, eventually, firmly gripped the articles inside without damaging them and so prevented them from moving and vibrating.

The foam itself was a valuable commodity in the Asteroids where it was used as insulation against the intense cold.

The containers were transported to the hangars by underground railways where the final assembly of the loaded freighters was completed prior to launching. The whole business a skilful operation and Michael was impressed.

The tour continued, taking in the Workshop and Servicing areas, the Catering Centre, Security H.Q., Sales Offices, Communications Centre ( an amazingly hi-tech operation), and finally the Armoury.

The Armoury was a surprise to Michael. Considering that the Company did not overtly carry weapons, the stock of the different types of weapons was staggering; everything from hand pistols to advanced missiles were included. There was also a weapon under wraps that he was not allowed to see. He was simply told that the world was not ready for this one yet. What was most certain was that anybody who came here looking for trouble would definitely find it.

Eventually the tour finished and to his astonishment Michael realized that it was six o'clock in the evening.

"Would you care to dine with me tonight?" asked Charlotte as they walked back towards the living quarters.

"I would be most honoured," said Michael gallantly.

"Oh no," quipped Charlotte. "I will be the envy of every female in the Company, so it is me that will be feeling honoured. It isn't every day that you get to date a man who is wearing a pair of Crest Comets."

"Oh, you noticed them, they really are beautiful, aren't they?"

"It's what they stand for that counts, Silly," growled Charlotte, "You do realize that the fact that Sir Richard sees fit to let you wear those gets you the immediate respect of every employee in the Company. Yours are the first I have ever seen."

"I don't know what all the fuss is about," complained Michael, "I didn't do anything special."

"Well, they think you did and that's all that matters," chided Charlotte.

They arrived at Michael's quarters. "Are you fussy about what you eat?" asked Charlotte.

"No, I'm very easy to please."

"Good, we'll take half an hour to shower and freshen up and I will send my Maid to pick you up. I am going to cook dinner for us, and by the way. ..."

"Yes?"

"Dress will be informal, No new uniforms, please."

He laughed and they parted company. Michael found the Earth's gravity to be rather tiring after a while, so instead of showering he ran a bath and relaxed in it. He shaved and dressed casually as instructed. When the buzz came from the door he felt like a new man. He opened the door.

"Hello, I'm 294, Miss Linaker's Maid."

She was a very pretty redhead with a trim figure which even the security uniform could not hide.

"Good evening," replied Michael. "I'm very pleased to meet you."

She smiled sweetly, "If you are ready, Sir, I'll take you there straight away. Miss Linaker says I can take the night off and I would like to make the most of it. Nights off are very rare."

Michael laughed, "I know what you mean, this will be my last one for a while, lead on 294."

Charlotte's quarters were on the floor above. The Maid let him in, opened a beer and asked, "Do you think you can manage on your own until Miss Linaker is ready?"

"I'm sure of it," he replied, "You go and enjoy yourself."

"Thank you, Sir," she giggled and ran out.

Charlotte emerged about five minutes later, "I take it 294 has left, she said she had a heavy date?"

"She did seem to be in somewhat of a hurry," agreed Michael. "She seems to be quite a girl."

"That is an understatement. She is an excellent markswoman with both conventional and electronic weapons. She is also an expert in unarmed combat, sabotage and explosives. Her I.Q. is 140 and she is everything you could desire in a Maid. It is her choice that I call her my Maid; she is actually the Head of the female personnel in Security."

Michael was impressed. He was even more impressed when Charlotte took him through to another room where there was a balcony with a barbecue just about ready to cook on.

"I assume you like steaks?" she said unnecessarily. She cooked them to perfection and produced a lovely tossed salad with all the trimmings. It was delicious and they both ate their fill; Michael's fill being a lot more than Charlotte's.

When they had finished they relaxed inside the living room with some gentle music in the background and swapped experiences and amusing incidents. It was soon eleven o'clock and Michael was loathe to leave, but he had a trip ahead of him tomorrow and he always liked to be on his best form.

He stood up and thanked her for a lovely evening. She said that she had enjoyed it too and hoped there would be a next time.



"You can count on it," said Michael, "I'll be in touch as soon as I get back from this mission."

Charlotte smiled a mysterious smile and slipped her arms around his neck. This time the kiss lingered a little longer, mainly because Michael relaxed and actually returned her kiss.

He returned to his quarters feeling more alive than he had done for years. He laid out his clothing for the following day, finished his packing then fell into a deep untroubled sleep.

## **CHAPTER 5. THE NEW COMMANDER.**

Even though it was only a routine Earth to Moon shuttle, Michael still felt a ripple of excitement at the approaching launch; he always did. He had breakfasted early and 762 had transferred his baggage to the Shuttle which was now sitting prettily inside the launching silo. He was dressed casually and outwardly gave no indication that he belonged to the Company.

He checked with the Control Tower on the telephone by the doors before stepping out on to the tarmac walkway which connected the twenty launching silos. There were only eight silos occupied that morning and his was the first scheduled for departure; his shuttle was in silo fifteen and Michael was soon standing beside his pride and joy.

Michael was a thorough man and started his pre-flight checks on the outside of the craft. He checked the twin rocket orifices and opened the rocket access panel. He was immediately impressed. The Company Engineers had literally polished the working parts of the engine and it gleamed beautifully. In spite of this he still checked the new fuel lines; he checked that they were not touching anything else and that the unions were not leaking. Everything was just perfect.

He replaced the panel and had a cursory glance at the outside of the little vessel; he checked for dents, found none and checked the compulsory navigational lighting to see if any of the lenses had been damaged on entry to the Earth's atmosphere. The Stellar Police who patrolled the popular orbital paths were very unforgiving in these matters. They had to be; low level orbits were flown visually, often without instrumentation and there had been some nasty collisions on account of inadequate navigational lighting. The fines were very high for Orbital Offences and licence suspension and even vehicle confiscation were not unknown. Michael unlocked the hatch with his master-key and climbed in. There was little room to move about in but he quickly donned his space suit.

When he had done that he checked the hold and was pleased to see that his luggage and uniforms had been loaded. At the back of the small hold was a medium sized metal chest sealed with security padlocks and chained to a stanchion to prevent its removal. He knew it was the weapons. 762 had handed over the keys before he left and he was anxious to see what he had been allocated. He decided that he would check them enroute, away from inquisitive eyes. A strange thought crossed his mind and he decided to search his luggage in case an attempt had been made to sabotage him.

A thorough search of the cases and the rest of the shuttle revealed nothing and he wondered if he was being paranoid. He remembered Fred's Son and decided that he wasn't.

Michael secured the hatch and climbed up into the pilot's seat which was, at present, in the vertical position since the craft was balanced on its tail. When the craft reached orbit, or was flying in a horizontal attitude, the seat and controls rotated through ninety degrees so that the pilot could see ahead more easily.

He switched the systems on with his master-key. His first thought was for the giro which had just been repaired. A simple push of a button actuated it and when it had reached its working speed, he checked it out with the aid of the onboard computer.

It was perfect. He thought back and admitted to himself that the little shuttle had needed correcting several times for wandering off course, only fractionally but that was enough over a long distance. The Company had done a good job.

He settled down now to his pre-flight checks; controls, fuel, oxygen, electronic systems and, finally, the sophisticated new radio. It was a fabulous piece of equipment and with a few minutes perusal Michael quickly familiarized himself with its controls. Next he sealed the hatches and called the Control Tower on the radio.

"M.B.Delta 344 to Control Tower, request clearance for launch in sixty seconds."

"Negative, M.B.Delta 344, I repeat negative. Delay your launch, another ship is on final approach," replied Control.

"Roger, Control, message received and understood, I await your instructions," acknowledged Michael.

Two minutes later a medium sized commercial Moon Shuttle dropped gracefully through the clouds and landed with pinpoint accuracy in Silo 2.

The voice in his headphones spoke again, "M.B.Delta 344, this is Control, you are cleared for launch in sixty seconds. I will pick up the count at twenty."

"Roger, Control," returned Michael. He started the primary ignition sequence, tightened his seat belt and ran his eye over the instruments.

"Twenty, fifteen, ten, five, four, three, two, one, zero."

Michael hit the 'ignite' button. Both engines fired simultaneously and the little moon shuttle rose willingly into the air with ever increasing speed. Soon he attained orbit and cut his engines; he moved the seat into its normal flying position. As he approached his escape window on the second orbit, he donned his space helmet as an extra safety precaution. Ground Control gave him the necessary clearance to go and at the precise moment Michael fired both engines.

The little shuttle shot off like a thoroughbred and quickly accelerated to about sixty thousand miles per hour, way above escape velocity. Then the engines were shut down and Michael did his series of in-flight checks which confirmed that every thing was running smoothly. He removed his helmet and relaxed for a little while enjoying the view and the solitude. This was his domain; he loved space.

After a while he put the craft onto Autopilot and went back to check the weapons. He opened the case and found twenty-four weapons. There were twelve standard issue hand pistols, four more powerful electronic rifles, four gas guns and four laser blasters which could actually kill. They had two settings, 'Stun' and 'Kill' but were not favoured or usually found to be necessary in space situations. Again, Sir Richard was taking no chances.

Michael was well pleased with his small arsenal and he re-sealed the case and put the keys in the tiny safe which was standard equipment on this model. A couple of hours later he had a quick lunch from the flexible packages that had to be used in non-gravity situations. Eating brought back the memory of the previous evening, the barbecue, the touch of his desirable Hostess and he smiled to himself. He had really enjoyed it.

A few hours later the Moon was floating into view and growing larger by the minute. Earth was still visible and looked stunningly beautiful in its various shades of white and delicate, colourful hues.

Michael selected the Moon channel on his radio and turned up the power a little. He attached the neat throat microphone and transmitted. "M.B.Delta to Moonbase Control, please acknowledge."

A few seconds later his headphones replied, "Moonbase Control to M.B.Delta 344, receiving you very loud and clear. Good Lord, Michael, what are you using for a radio."

Michael smiled grimly to himself, the new Company radio was obviously much stronger than the standard fitment. He replied, "I treated myself to a new one down on Terra Firma, it appears to have a higher output." He did not want to give too much away.

"It certainly has," agreed the voice from Moonbase. "It's nearly bending the needle on my meter."

"Sorry," laughed Michael. "I'll turn it down a bit. ...is that better...one, two, three, four, five?"

"Much better, Michael."

He loved the informality on Moonbase. "What can we do for you this fine day?"

"Returning to Base, E.T.A. in one hour."

"Roger, your usual silo is available. Air traffic is light today. Please check in on final approach and it's good to have you back again. ...over and out."

An hour later, on his final approach, he requested clearance, got it and took over the controls manually. He always liked to put on a little show for the Tower. He gradually reduced speed to about one thousand miles per hour and swooped in over Moonbase Delta, pulled a bone jarring upward turn, then cut the power and corkscrewed up to about two miles above the Base altered his seat to the vertical position and dropped backwards towards the silos using the trimmer jets for correction. At the last minute he briefly applied power and landed like a feather with pinpoint accuracy in his allotted berth.

He went through his wind down procedures and was about to leave when an Official arrived in his hovercar. To Michael's horror he realized that he had overlooked one very important fact,,,, Customs. He had enough weapons in the shuttle to get him locked away for about ten years.

"Anything to declare?" asked the Official.

"Five crates of beer, Sir," replied Michael.

"I'm sorry but there will be some Duty payable on such a large amount."

Michael looked a little crestfallen, "Do I pay you?"

"No, if you report to the Office in the Main Building you can settle up there. I'll report in by radio. Is there anything else?"

Michael never hesitated, "Erm...yes, I have twenty-four assorted weapons locked up in the hold."

The Official laughed, "You pilots will have your little Joke, but that is too outrageous for me to take seriously."

Michael held his breath as the Official signed his clearance papers. He certainly was not going to argue the toss, he was glad to get away with it. He still wanted his mission to remain a secret and he would have had to answer a lot of awkward questions at high level to escape prosecution. He did moan to the Customs Officer about the punitive tax on beer. The Officer sympathized but said he could not do anything about it. Michael paid up grudgingly and made the day of the Customs Officer.

The surface tube car quickly transported Michael to his home. It was nice to see it again. He donned his space suit and opened the airlock into his garage. He jumped into his Moon Truck and drove it straight to the Space Port. He loaded his beer and his luggage but left the weapons and the new uniforms securely locked in the hold and also locked the outer door of the Shuttle. This door was fitted with an automatic alarm which would actuate a 'Bleeper' which Michael carried with him. It also acted as a 'tracking' device in case of theft to help locate the craft.

He returned home, unpacked his things then laid down quietly with a cup of coffee and just let the events of the week sink into his brain. After a while he got up, made himself another coffee, drank it then went to his gym. He worked out for a full hour then showered and went to bed. It was a different Michael who woke up the following morning. He was a man intent on getting into top physical and mental condition, a man with a mission. He only had five days so he worked very hard indeed, working out, studying manuals, bringing himself up to date with the planetary configurations and plotting trajectories. He never left his quarters and he never spoke to anyone else.

On the seventh day, the designated day for the rendezvous, he woke early, packed his manuals and personal belongings, locked up his quarters and took the surface tube back to the Space Port. Once at the space port, he set to work with a lot of determination. Auxiliary fuel tanks were quickly fitted to the little Shuttle and Michael personally refuelled the craft.

To his great relief the weapons were still intact and his uniforms were untouched. He did a quick security check on the Shuttle but found nothing untoward. The rest of the luggage was soon loaded. He called up the oxygen contractor and the tanker refilled all his oxygen and life support systems. The oxygen man was a life long acquaintance of Michael.

"Are you going far?" he asked .

Michael had already worked out his reply to that question.

"I'm taking a long vacation and I'm going to do some travelling on Earth, so I'll be gone quite a long time. In fact, I have no idea when I will return."

"You lucky man," retorted his friend. "Footloose and fancy free, I wish I could just up and away like that. Anyway have a good time and spare a thought for us workers."

Michael laughed and said his goodbyes and was finally ready to fly. He climbed in, sealed all the hatches and requested take off clearance when all his systems were running.

"What is your destination ?" enquired Control.

"I'm going to Earth and I will be staying for a while, at least three months," lied Michael.

"Roger, M.B.Delta 344. There is a small hazard enroute a small convoy has just left Earth for Moon Base Alpha, be sure to give them plenty of room."

"Roger, Control, and thanks. Give me a countdown from twenty when you're ready."

As the count reached zero Michael thumbed the ignition button and used full power in a blistering and bone wrenching takeoff. He felt good but was slightly behind schedule. He knew from experience that time was difficult to make up . As he cleared the sensor indicator zone he eased up and checked his screen; it was clear. He was on nobody else's screen and was therefore undetectable. He changed course towards the co-ordinates he had chosen. He had an hour and a long way to go. He gunned the motors to give him the exact required velocity.

It had proved useful to have the extra fuel on board, he was burning it up at a very fast rate. He put the craft onto autopilot and went to his suitcases. He was going to take over his new Command and he intended to look the part when he arrived. He donned his official uniform and packed his own clothes. Michael firmly believed that first impressions were important, particularly with a crew he did not know. He pondered whether he should wear a pistol but thought that it would be too provocative, so he decided against it.

He took over manual control and started to study his screen. The *Atlas* was there; faint at first but getting steadily stronger. Soon it was in visual range travelling quickly towards him. He went out in a wide circle and inspected the other vessel to verify its identity. No signals were sent or received, which was what he had ordered; the docking was to remain secret.

He fixed his full spacesuit helmet and manually matched speeds and carried out a splendid docking manoeuvre by flying straight into the container which

had been reserved and left open for him. He immobilized the Shuttle and actuated the magnetic chocks on the undercarriage which were used when the craft was landed horizontally rather than vertically. When he was satisfied that all was secure he slowly depressurized the cabin and opened the hatch.

He picked up a pair of remote-controlled magnetic anchors and secured them to his safety belt. These were very useful for moving about the outside of the hull. The electro-magnets were controlled from a small panel at the opposite end, so you could float to the end of the tether, secure a second magnet then release the first. Using this technique he leapfrogged to the air lock, which he opened. He coiled his safety lines and shut the hatch.

The airlock was repressurized by pressing a large red button and when the job was complete a large 'Safe' sign flashed on. Michael started to feel a little nervous and self-conscious but pulled himself together, removed his helmet, opened the inner door and stepped into the Receiving room with as much dignity as he could muster in a space suit.

Michael had rehearsed his opening speech. He knew exactly what he was going to say, he was going to thank them and compliment them on the accuracy of their secret rendezvous. However the dignity of the occasion was broken as he stepped through towards the assembled crew and a familiar voice called, "Gawd, Sir, you ain't 'arf put on weight."

Michael was so startled that he spun round quickly, forgetting all about the weak gravity, lost his footing and fell in an undignified heap on the Receiving room floor. He blinked up at the grinning faces of the crew and a slow smile started as he recognized one face after another. The final face he saw was the last one he ever expected to see on a mission like this and the grin faded a little.

"Welcome aboard, Captain," laughed Charlotte Linaker.

"Would somebody please help me up from the floor?" roared Michael.

Two men leapt forward and assisted him to his feet.

"Thank you," said Michael a little more calmly. "What are you bunch of reprobates doing here and where is the Acting Captain?"

The man who had spoken first answered. "The answer to both questions is Miss Linaker, Sir."

Michael was incredulous. "Have you piloted this vessel from Earth, Miss Linaker?"

Charlotte was getting a kick out of his discomfort. "Of course," she replied. "I was the only suitably qualified Officer available. Also it is Company policy for the Chief Personnel Officer to accompany new skippers on their inaugural flights. So I exercised my rights and here I am."

"Oh I see," mumbled Michael, a little at a loss for words.

He decided to take command. "We will discuss these matters later. Arnie, take three men and bring the metal box and my personal belongings from the Shuttle, we can't stay hove-to here all day. Seal the container and report back

to me personally when everything is aboard. Will the rest of the crew please return to their posts and keep a sharp lookout. I don't want a collision and I don't wish to be detected. Miss Linaker, please accompany me to my quarters; please lead the way I don't know where they are."

The crew leapt into action. Once inside his quarters Michael confronted Charlotte. "What the Hell are you doing here?" he asked severely.

"I thought I had just told you," she replied sweetly.

"Charlotte, this could be a very dangerous mission and it is no place for a Lady like yourself."

"The facts are the facts, Captain," snapped Charlotte. "You are the Commander of this mission and of this Ship, but I am an Executive Officer of this Company. It just happens that I earned that position on merit. Sir Richard does not promote people because he likes the way they look. I would not undermine your authority as Captain. You should not... no...will not undermine mine. I have my job to do, so do not interfere. You may have noticed that there are familiar faces in the crew. They are here because I recruited them, they are also new to this Company. One of my jobs is to report on the performance of every new Company employee. That is on the job spec of the Head of Personnel. It just happens that I am a damned good pilot as well. The crew accepted me without question. You must do the same."

Normally Michael would have agreed that it made a lot of sense. Sir Richard had fastidiously followed the normal Company procedures and if Charlotte had stayed on Earth it would have been an obvious break in routine. Charlotte had become expendable for the sake of security. "And Sir Richard had said that I was a hard man," he thought grimly. To Charlotte he growled, "I suspect that I know you a lot better than the crew... I apologise, Charlotte, but the problem is that I have grown very fond of you and the thought of any harm coming to you as a result of this mission is very disturbing."

"The feeling is mutual," blushed Charlotte. "But if anything nasty happens I would prefer to be here anyway."

The intercom crackled. "Captain... the luggage and supplies are safely stowed aboard and the shuttle is secure and sealed, Sir."

"Thank you," replied Michael curtly. "Set a course on vector four, nine, two point zero, six. I will be up immediately to get us underway."

"Four, nine, two point zero, six it is, Sir." The intercom went dead.

"Come on then, Miss Linaker, let's get this Ship underway. May I call you Charlie, it's so much easier."

"Of course," she replied.

Five minutes later everybody was strapped into their seats waiting for the acceleration sequence.

"Status, please," requested Michael.

"No vessels within twenty thousand miles, Sir," came the reply. "The computer shows no evidence of any other logged flight crossing our path on this vector."



That did not surprise Michael. He had selected a vector which would take them uncomfortably close to the Sun, just outside the orbit of Mercury. There would be an uncomfortable period but he would be travelling very quickly at this point so it would soon pass.

"O.K. Charlie, give me a countdown from twenty and mark the computer time please."

"Aye, aye, Captain. twenty. ...fifteen. ...ten. ...five, four, three, two, one, mark."

There was a slight movement at first with a firm pressure in the back and the speed began to build up smoothly. Michael was using maximum power on the gravity of the Sun which was the most acceleration he could achieve under these conditions. The acceleration lasted two hours and the ship was moving quite quickly, a lot faster than some of the crew had been before. He then shut down the power and allowed the craft to free fall.

"Status, please?" requested Michael.

"All clear to the limit of our sensors, Captain."

"Thank you," said Michael. He then spoke into the intercom. "This is the Captain speaking, there will be a crew inspection and formal meeting in thirty minutes time. You may stand down until then."

## **CHAPTER 6. THE CREW.**

Michael did a thorough check of his instruments and detected no faults or leaks.

"Charlie, will you oversee the bridge and controls until after I have spoken to the crew?"

"Do I not count as crew then?"

"With respect I do not think you need to hear what I have to say. I assume that you, being an Executive Officer of the Company, already know the nature of our mission."

Charlotte looked puzzled. "Well...no, not exactly. We were all told that this was initially a trip to Ceres and that it was a special Mission to be run on a military type basis. I thought it might be exploration seeing that you are a specialist in that kind of work."

Sir Richard certainly knew how to keep a secret. He thought hard but could not remember telling her anything specific. Another thought occurred to him. "Why did you go to so much trouble to find so many members of my former crew if you did not know the nature of the mission?"

Charlotte looked hurt. "I simply thought that it would be a comfort to you and to them, for that matter, to work together again they know all the ropes. There's nothing sinister in that is there? My job is to look after the personnel of this Company and efficiency is enhanced if the crew can work in harmony, that way it is good for all concerned. Have I done something dreadful Captain?"

"No, not at all, you have unwittingly been a great help."

The bridge was now cleared of all personnel except for the two pilots. "Charlie, I am going to tell you the situation as I know it. You have added two and two together and made five. Our mission is nothing whatsoever to do with exploration or anything else remotely pleasant. The truth is that the Company has lost two vessels in mysterious circumstances. Our mission, quite simply, is to find out what happened."

Charlotte had gone very pale. "Which two vessels?" she asked quietly.

"The *Hercules* and the *Titan*, said Michael gently.

"Captain Collins and Captain Gorrie." She was obviously very distressed. "Were there any survivors?"

"None were found, but we must not give up hope yet."

Charlotte sobbed quietly for a moment, then, with a great effort, she pulled herself together and dried her eyes. "Thanks for telling me Michael, I realize now why you were so upset to see me. When you spoke of harm coming to me earlier I thought you were just being melodramatic. I realize that I would not be much good in a fight but I will do my best never to let you down, no matter what the circumstances are."

"There will be some drilling done enroute to help us protect ourselves in case we need to," said Michael. "As you are such a good pilot then that will be your job and I'll do the fighting."

Michael left the bridge and went to his quarters to prepare for the inspection. He scrubbed and shaved himself then changed into his best boots and uniform. He had made a poor entry by falling flat on his backside in front of the crew: that loss of face would have to be made up.

He did not consider himself to be a fanatic on perfect turn out but he certainly encouraged it and there were limits which he simply would not accept. The uniform was a good way to get them to start thinking in a military way. Most of them knew the ropes anyway: they had already served with him for years.

Feeling and looking like a Commander now, Michael stepped on to the bridge at precisely the correct moment. The First Officer called the Parade to attention then stepped forward and saluted the Captain smartly. "Parade ready for inspection, Sir."

Michael returned the salute. "Thank you Mr. Rimmer, we will proceed. Carry on," he said formally.

Michael was astounded and disappointed that Benjamin Rimmer did not have a Command of his own. He was an expert pilot, fully qualified and very experienced. He deserved much better than an appointment as First Officer. However Michael was grateful to have him; loyal and dependable men were never easy to find.

The inspection was cursory; it did not need to be anything more. The turn out was immaculate but the veterans of the service had that indefinable edge on the Company men. "They would soon learn," he thought.

"Stand the Parade at ease, please, Mr. Rimmer. I wish to meet the men individually."

The Parade stood at ease on the command. Michael stepped over to the first man who sprang to attention, took one pace forward and saluted.

"David Boothman, Sir, Second Officer." He was about twenty-two years old and probably the youngest on the crew. Everybody knew that age did not always count when it came to ability and this youngster seemed to be alert and keen.

"Pleased to have you aboard Mr. Boothman," replied the Captain. "How long have you been with the Company?"

"Six years, Sir. They took me through their Officer Training Course which I finished two years ago. Postings are not easily come by."

"Is that why you volunteered for this trip?" asked Michael

"One of the reasons, Sir. You have to gain experience wherever you can. Another reason is because this trip is going to be different. It isn't routine and that attracts me as well."

Michael smiled to himself; the young man liked the element of danger, just like he, himself, used to. "Are you a pilot. Mr. Boothman?"

"Pilot first class on conventional rockets and an advanced student on the C.A.M.I.D. powered craft, Sir."

The Captain turned to the First Officer. "Mr. Rimmer, I will need every pilot I can get on this trip. Work with Mr. Boothman and let's see if we can qualify him before we reach our destination."

"Very good, Sir."

The young Officer was very pleased and he took one pace backwards and saluted. Michael grinned and returned it.

The second crew-man was aged about thirty-five. Michael studied him closely; he looked to be an extremely intelligent and calm man. It was obvious that he had not seen any military service, so he must have been a long standing Company employee. There was no reluctance or embarrassment when he offered his compliments, he was just a little awkward...not used to it.

"Neville Johnson, Communications Officer, Sir." His voice was quiet and cultured but very correct. Here was a very articulate man.

"I'm very pleased to make your acquaintance Mr. Johnson. I would be grateful if you would spend a little time with me and show me the 'ins' and 'outs' of the Company radios. They installed one in my Shuttle and I nearly deafened the poor fellow at Moonbase."

"That's very easily done, Sir. It's the purity of the signal. These radios are extremely efficient. I helped to design the scrambling system on them and we did a few modifications on the conventional side as well."

"You're an electronics man then, Mr. Johnson?"

"Yes, Sir, it's a fascinating topic."

"You could be a very useful man to have on board," said Michael, who was already formulating plans for him.

There was nothing awkward about the next man. He was the epitome of a military man, ramrod smart and proud of it.

"Archie Murphy, Engineering Officer, Sah." he said in a loud voice.

Michael remained formal even though he wanted to slap him on the back. Archie had been a staunch, skilled and loyal Officer in all three of his previous Commands: he was a wizard with anything appertaining to space craft construction. More than that, he was a ferocious fighter which was in keeping with his Irish temperament. His curious name had come about because his Mother, who was Scottish had insisted on having a Scottish first name.

"Been with the Company long, Mr. Murphy?"

"Nearly a week now, Sah, " he replied. "My first job in eighteen months."

"I thought you were still in the Forces."

"Not the same after you left, Sah. A lot of us resigned shortly after you did."

It seemed that the Service had paid heavily for its imprudence.

"Well thanks for signing on for this trip, Mr. Murphy. I'll do my best to keep you busy."

The next crewman to step up was the one who had caused all the commotion when the Captain had first boarded the ship.

"Arnold Sidebottom, Captain's Coxswain, Sir."

"Still as insolent as ever, Mr. Sidebottom?" grinned Michael.

"Don't know what you mean, Sir," lied the Coxswain.

There was obviously a very strong bond between the two. The Coxswain was a big, powerful bull of a man, about ten years older than the Captain. They had originally served together in the *Pegasus* and Mr. Sidebottom, then a private crewman, had been a great help in putting down the riot in the break-out of prisoners. He had fought alongside Michael and had done much to protect his back.

When Michael had been given the *Ajax* it was customary for a new Captain to choose his own Coxswain, which was a privileged position. The Coxswain was the Captain's keeper and bodyguard. He accompanied him on visits to other vessels and frequently chauffeured the Captain whenever circumstances allowed. He looked after the personal needs of the Captain, mundane essential things like clean laundry, meals, dressing and was frequently the subject of abuse when Captains became irate.

Michael had chosen Arnold Sidebottom and had never regretted it. What he did regret was the fact that he had lost touch with men like these over the past two years.

"I hope you are not going to continue to nag me all the way to the Asteroids and back," growled the Captain with mock anger.

"Well, you do look a bit out of shape, Sir," complained Arnold. "You obviously have not been eating properly."

"Thank you Mr. Sidebottom. We will discuss it later."

The next man stepped forward. "Roy Naylor, Sir, Cook and Quartermaster."

"Good to have you aboard again, Mr. Naylor. Mr. Sidebottom seems to think that I have been eating too well. I'm sure you will change all that," he said mischievously.

"Indeed, Sir, I have been working on a low calorie vegetarian diet for the crew and I have stocked the bars with non-alcoholic beers. This should keep the crew fit, happy and healthy, Sir," lied the Cook.

Ron Naylor had been the assistant Cook in the *Vega* and Chief Cook in the *Orion*. He was a high class chef and could have earned vast sums of money in the Private Sector but he had always stuck to the frugal limitations of the service and now here he was again, off into space aged fifty.

Michael eyed him fiercely, "If that is the case, Mr. Naylor, we are very likely to end up cooking and eating you."

The Cook just grinned, but there was a positive look of relief on the faces of the Company men.

The Captain moved along the line. Another very military man presented himself.

"Crewman Frank Brody, Sir."

"Sergeant Brody, I never expected to see you on a merchant vessel."

"Not a sergeant any more, Sir. just a crewman." "Well we will have to alter that straight away. This mission is to be run on a military basis and I will need a Sergeant. Mr. Rimmer, please see that Mr. Brody is entered in the log as

'Sergeant'. Mr. Brody you will see that skinflint of a quartermaster after this parade and pick up some chevrons. If he has not got any tell him that I say he is to make some."

"Thank you, Sir, but that will not be necessary; I never go anywhere without my chevrons, you never know when you're going to need them."

"Good to hear that you still hold on to your old 'Boy Scout' ideal of being 'Always Prepared'..... get them sewn on." He passed on to the next man.

"Crewman Gary Mitchell, Sir."

"Well, this is a surprise, Mr. Mitchell, and a pleasant one at that. Did you resign with the others?"

"I did, Sir, couldn't work for anyone else they were sloppy, Sir, no standards," moaned Mitchell.

"Are you going to try and get some promotion this time, Mr Mitchell?"

"No, I don't think so, Sir. I'd rather be a crewman with you than Admiral of the Fleet, Sir."

Michael felt flattered, but he knew Gary Mitchell very well. He had turned down all kinds of promotion just to stay with him. He had joined the *Ajax* in the third year of Michael's command. There had been some trouble on another ship. Two crew members had ganged up on Mitchell who had been falsely accused of stealing a sum of money from one of them.

They had foolishly attacked him, knowing that he was normally a quiet, introverted man and easy prey. They were wrong: it had taken Mitchell about thirty seconds to render them both unconscious, one with a broken jaw, two broken fingers and a dislocated elbow, the other with three broken ribs a broken nose and a fractured collar bone. He, himself, had not even sustained a bruise. Mitchell had then surrendered himself to the Captain and had meekly allowed himself to be secured in a room to await trial for assault.

He was transferred to the *Ajax* to appear before Captain Stephens who represented Authority as the Senior Military Captain. Mitchell had been brought in handcuffed by his ship's Captain and two other crewmen; he had also been treated quite roughly enroute. They were, in reality, scared to death of him. Captain Stephens was livid with their treatment of him and ordered the handcuffs to be removed.

"Mitchell had simply stood to attention and thanked the Captain for his concern. During the rigorous questioning of the three men it came about that one of his accusers had stolen from his friend and tried to blame it on Mitchell. Captain Stephens could find no guilt in what Mitchell had done, being a fighting man himself. Mitchell could have easily killed them both, but he had stopped when he had immobilized the pair of them and he had not been the original aggressor. He sentenced the thief to two years in the Martian Penal Colony and the other to six months for assault. A hefty sentence, but it had been a conspiracy to pervert the course of justice.

Afterwards, Captain Stephens had interviewed Mitchell very closely and had recognized a good potential soldier. The *Ajax* was a crewman down on

account of a broken arm, so Mitchell had been offered the vacant position. He joined up, did his training with the crew and had been a first class crewman ever since. Mitchell could be absolutely ruthless when the situation required it and had become a specialist in sabotage and explosives. He had always been grateful to Captain Stephens for the chance he had been given.

"I may be needing your specialist knowledge on this trip, Mr. Mitchell," said Michael.

"You'll have it, Sir."

Compliments were exchanged and Michael moved on to the next man. He was greeted by a cheerful well-proportioned giant, probably of West Indian origin.

"Henry Hirst, crewman first class, Sir," he said without a trace of accent.

Michael greeted him warmly, looked him up and down and liked what he saw. "I'm very pleased that you are on our side, Mr. Hurst," he grinned. "What is your specialty?"

"Packing and stowing of cargo, Sir."

"You are familiar with the operation of the systems in this vessel, Mr. Hurst?"

"Yes, Sir, I have worked on these craft for ten years now."

"Good, you will have to give me a little instruction in the secrets of the system. They are all very new to me,"

Henry stepped back into line feeling quite proud. A Captain had never asked him for help before and he trusted Michael all the more for being open. The final crewman stepped forward.

"Alfred Brown, Sir, Maintenance Crewman."

Alfred was about thirty years old and a North Country man.

"Is the ship in good condition, Mr. Brown?"

"Yes, Sir, I have not had chance to do a thorough inspection yet, but what I have seen is good."

"Your first job will be to accompany Mr. Murphy and check every last nut and bolt on the vessel. We will be executing a Sun grazing manoeuvre at very high speed, so I do not want any mechanical or structural failures. Remember, Mr. Murphy is a First class Engineering Officer with many years experience behind him, but we have not worked these type of craft before, so we are counting on you Company men for information to save a lot of time."

"You can count on me, Sir."

"Thank you, Mr. Brown."

The Parade was over, the introductions had been made. First Officer Rimmer called the Parade to attention, compliments were exchanged for the last time, then the Parade was stood at ease so the Captain could address the crew.

Michael began his address. "Gentlemen, I am sure you are anxious to know the nature of our mission, so I will not keep you in suspense any longer. The situation is this. Two Company vessels have gone missing in mysterious

circumstances.” He paused to let his words sink in. The Company men were visibly shocked, the professional soldiers never batted an eyelid.

“No wreckage has been found, there were no warnings or distress signals. These vessels simply disappeared along with their crews. Our mission is not to speculate but to find out exactly what happened,” said Michael forcefully.

“The plan is simple, we are setting ourselves up as shark bait. I want whatever is out there to attack us. The difference is we will be prepared and expecting them. The other vessels were taken by surprise. We must not allow that to happen. I have deliberately not mounted external weapons, they would be spotted too easily. However I have brought on board a small arsenal of hand weapons. Every crew member, including myself and Miss Linaker, will do weapons training with Sergeant Brody. I consider us to be on a full combat mission and there may very well be hand to hand fighting. Therefore every member of the crew, myself included will get themselves fit and attend combat sessions with Mr. Sidebottom, my Coxswain.”

Michael looked at their faces. This was a good crew, they were already set to go and seemed to believe in the mission... eager for it. The problems would occur later when the initial euphoria had worn off and when the determination had waned a little. He had to keep them busy.

“Any questions?” asked Michael.

“Yes, Sir.” It was Neville Johnson. “Do you wish me to make the regular twelve hour communication to Company H.Q.?”

“Yes, please, I want everything to be as routine as possible. Important messages can be sent any time on the scrambler. A post is manned twenty-four hours a day specifically for this mission. In fact, you can report that we have made our rendezvous as planned Any more questions?”

“Yes, Sir.” This time it was Frank Brody.

“What is it, Sergeant?”

“When do we start?”

“Orders will be posted as soon as I have consulted with Mr. Rimmer. Mr. Johnson and Mr. Mitchell would you please take over duties on the bridge with Miss Linaker. Mr. Naylor, perhaps you could rustle up some food, we're all starving.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Sergeant Brody and Mr. Sidebottom, check out the weapons in the metal chest and familiarize yourselves with the different types... here are the keys. The rest may stand down until full orders are issued. Mr. Rimmer. ..”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Dismiss the Parade.”

The Parade was formally dismissed and the First Officer followed the Captain to his quarters.

\* \* \* \* \*



"Come in, Ben, it's good to see you again."

"Thank you, Sir, it's good to be here," he replied.

"Drink?"

"Yes, please, if you are having one, a beer would go down nicely," replied Ben. Michael beckoned to a chair and Ben took his hat off and sat down. The drinks were soon poured. Michael lifted his glass.

"To a successful mission." They touched glasses. "You'll have to bring me up to date on the gossip, I have been locked away on Moonbase Delta for two years. Did you resign your Commission, Ben?"

"Er... not exactly, Sir."

"How do you mean not exactly? Come on Ben, what happened to you?" asked Michael.

"I was dismissed the Service, Sir.... in disgrace."

"What on Earth happened?"

"When the new Admiral was appointed, I went to plead your case and I told him the whole story; the complete version with nothing left out and asked if he would help with this obvious sighting of a strange craft."

"Did he react quickly, Ben?"

"I'll say he did. The next day I found myself in front of a full Court Martial for a severe breach of the Official Secrets Act. I was convicted and received two sentences. Firstly, I served six months in a Martian Penal Colony and I was given another twelve months sentence which would have to be served before I was brought to Court if there was a repeat of the Offence. When I was released I was dismissed the Service without a pension I might add."

Michael looked away, horrified at the treatment his friend and loyal Officer had received. "How did you get this posting, Ben?"

"I was simply kicking my heels, wasting time and without any hope of a future. It isn't easy for a convicted criminal to get employment of any kind, let alone a position of responsibility. Then a week ago a courier of the Company arrived at the front door with a letter which simply said...if you wish to undertake an unusual mission under the Command of a new Company Captain, contact Charlotte Linaker in person at the above address as soon as possible.

I had no money and no hope of getting any. I was in a pretty poor state and could not even afford to get myself to the Company H.Q. Fortunately a neighbour allowed me to telephone and I spoke to Miss Linaker and explained what my circumstances were and why. She asked did I want to be First Officer in a Company vessel.

Well it was like manna from heaven to me and I accepted on the spot. One hour later a jet shuttle arrived from the Company with a security man who gave me a full uniform, kit and a salary advance, enough to clear my debts and a bit to spare. I reported for duty the same day and here I am. We found out it was you in command just before the rendezvous, though I must admit I had wondered when I saw the other crew members. Was it your idea, Sir?"

"No, I had nothing to do with it. Miss Linaker is Head of Personnel for the Company. She is a very special person and an Executive Officer. He has not said so, but I believe that Sir Richard thinks that the vessel which we sighted is responsible for his two missing ships. What do you think, Ben?"

"I don't know, Sir, but there seemed to be no air of menace about it. The pilot seemed more timid than aggressive."

"We were very heavily armed on both occasions, the two missing ships were not. Perhaps that encouraged his timidity?" observed Michael.

"Maybe...but I did not get that gut feeling you normally get when you are menaced. No.. I don't think that craft was really malevolent. It may very well have the capability to destroy, but I still did not feel threatened."

"I tend to agree with you," replied Michael, "But we must keep an open mind on the subject. Now we must concentrate on our pressing day to day routine matters."

The two friends sat down together and drew up a triple watch system, four in a team working eight hour duties. That did not mean that you got sixteen hours free time. The second list consisted of a gruelling six hour session of arms and combat training interspersed with space and battle drills.

"This will do us until we get beyond the orbit of Mars, but then we will go on to a double watch system, working six hours on and six hours off," said the Captain. "I will want visual lookouts posted twenty-four hours a day equipped with night binoculars. Can you work on that, Ben, between now and then. I do not intend to call inspections every day but I will give advance notice when I need to speak to the crew as an entity. We will treat those occasions as inspections."

"Anything else, Captain?"

"Just one last thing. I will need everybody on duty at fifteen hundred hours tomorrow. We will be executing an acceleration manoeuvre and course correction that will bring us just outside the orbit of Mercury. It will be pretty hot for a couple of days so we will have to put as much speed on as possible. Organize the Engineering Officer and the Maintenance Crewman to do a thorough inspection of the craft before then and to consult with me if they find any problems. Ask them to pay particular attention to the insulation, we are going to need it."

The cabin door buzzer sounded. Michael opened it with a button on his desk. It was his Coxswain with a covered plate.

"Looks like dinner time, Sir," said Ben with a smile. "I'll post the orders then get a bite to eat myself."

"Alright. ...thank you, Mr. Rimmer," said the Captain formally. "Carry on." Michael turned to the Coxswain, "I hope you have not come here to fuss me."

"Indeed I have, Sir," beamed Arnie, looking like a man who had been looking for silver and found gold. "I'll just set up your dinner table over here."

It smelt good. Michael realized that he was very hungry indeed. The Cook had prepared two lamb chops, roast potatoes, green beans and thick gravy.

There was a fresh fruit salad to follow with a liberal portion of ice cream. Arnie set everything out like a professional waiter and produced a crystal cut, glass goblet which he filled with a sparkling white wine from an individual bottle which he had previously placed in the cooler.

Michael gave in quite willingly and sat down and ate in a relaxed manner. Experience had taught that good food was essential on long space flights. In the early days nutrition had been done on a carefully calculated and balanced diet of fluids and capsules which was alright for a while, but had given rise to some unexpected side effects. Scurvy, a disease so common on the old sailing ships, had broken out on some long exploration flights, crewmen's hair and teeth had started to drop out. Hormones had become unbalanced but the worst and most debilitating aspects were the psychosomatic ailments.

Some crewmen started to get fixations about food. The thought of a real steak, or an apple, or an orange became such a craving that the crewman could eventually think of nothing else. In some it became so severe that they suffered a mental seizure and retreated into a deep fugue and eventually starved to death.

Psychologists had eventually concluded that eating was such a fundamental necessity to life that it should not be compromised.

Therefore, at great expense, the space ships had been converted from a galley which looked like an advanced chemistry set to an ordinary kitchen with proper food. Morale had been immediately improved and the incidence of sickness had fallen dramatically amongst crew members.

It was a contented Captain Stephens who sank his teeth into the juicy chops and a contented Coxswain who fussed about unpacking and storing the belongings of his Lord and Master. The trouble, if any, could wait a little longer.

After his dinner Michael dismissed his Coxswain with orders to wake him in eight hours then wrote up the daily log. He turned in and was soon in a deep restful sleep. It felt good to be back in space again.

## **CHAPTER 7. PREPARATIONS.**

Michael was woken at the appointed time by his Coxswain. "Morning, Sir I have brought you a coffee and just a single round of toast for breakfast. I did not think you would want anything heavy before your workout."

"Workout?" gasped Michael.

"Well.. yes, Sir, I knew you would want to set a good example for the rest of the crew, so I have programmed your workout at this time I could alter it if necessary," said Arnie reluctantly.

"Oh no! It's alright," replied Michael with more resignation than he felt. "I'll see you in the gym in fifteen minutes."

"Very good, Sir that's the spirit," beamed Arnie. "Enjoy your breakfast."

He just managed to get out of the door before one of Michael's shoes smacked into the wall, just where he had been standing.

"Slave driver!" muttered Michael. Then he grinned to himself. Arnie never changed, he was always thinking of what was best for his Captain.

Michael drank his coffee appreciatively then slipped into his combat suit and set off for the gym. All spacecraft nowadays had a big, well-equipped gymnasium. It helped to keep the crew fit, both physically and mentally.

Arnie was waiting for him also dressed in a combat suit. He was a fearsome sight; even under the slack-fitting suit it was possible to see his bulging muscles. He already had a slight sweat on, so he had obviously warmed up.

"Bending and stretching exercises to warm up, please," said Arnie. In the gym Arnie was in charge, even the Captain was a student. Michael was taken through a series of exercises, starting gently and gradually building up to strenuous abdominal sit-ups until he was quite breathless.

"We need to get that gut off you," threatened Arnie.

Michael did not think that his gut was that bad, but he knew it was pointless to argue. Instead, he said, "We had better do some more then."

"Oh no, Sir, you're not getting off that easily. These ships have a new multi-gym that will exercise all your muscles by resistance. I think ten minutes worth should do for a start."

Arnie led him to a corner of the gym where there was a contraption which looked like a metallic skeleton. Each limb had several straps which were fitted tightly to the arms, legs and torso. Each universal joint on the contraption could only be moved slowly; therefore any movement that was made had to be really worked at. Arnie gave him a series of exercises to work at and after ten minutes Michael felt exhausted. Eventually he was allowed to take the torturous thing off and the relief at being able to move normally again was indescribable.

"On guard!" shouted Arnie as he leaped at Michael with a padded staff, three feet long. Michael moved quickly but not quickly enough; the staff caught him a glancing blow on his left upper arm. It did not hurt but it put him on the mat.

“You would have dodged that two years ago, Sir,” yelled Arnie, leaping to the attack again. This time Michael was quicker. He grabbed the staff and brought his foot into the pit of Arnie's stomach and straightened his leg. Arnie dropped like a brick and relinquished his grip on the staff. Michael was on his feet in a flash and aimed a savage blow at Arnie's head. Arnie blocked the blow but was unable to grasp the staff. The next moment Michael had the staff across Arnie's windpipe and pressed with all his strength. Arnie just smiled and physically lifted the Captain off him and threw him five yards across the room. Michael lay there gasping and winded; Arnie showed some concern and was going to help Michael but thought better of it.

“I'm not going to fall for that one,” yelled Arnie.

Michael opened one eye and grinned. “You're right, Arnie, I've got soft. I must sharpen up considerably. Can we call it a day now, please?”

“Just five minutes more, please, Captain.” Arnie took him to where a heavy sand and foam filled bag hung from a supporting frame.

“Two and a half minutes of punching and one minute with the staff then a few stretching exercises to finish off.”

Michael gritted his teeth and laid into the bag. After a minute he was gasping but Arnie kept pushing him and in the last half minute Michael began to get his second wind. When he picked up the staff Michael began to feel more like his usual self and really laid in to the bag. Arnie was really impressed and as he gently wound down the session said, “Another week, Sir, and we will have you fighting fit again.”

“Thanks Arnie,” grinned Michael who was dripping with perspiration. “I hope I survive that long.”

Michael returned to his cabin and treated himself to a shower and a fruit drink. He felt good and alert but would probably suffer later with stiff muscles. He then sat down to do the calculations on his Sun grazing manoeuvre. He had just finished when the door buzzer sounded and the intercom crackled into life.

“Engineering Officer and his Assistant reporting, Sir.”

“Come on in, Mr. Murphy,” said Michael opening the door. “Have you finished your inspection now?”

The two men entered and stood to attention. Michael stood to greet them and then invited them to sit down. “Right, Archie, what is the verdict?” asked Michael. “Is the ship in good shape?”

Archie began his report. It appeared that the ship was in very good shape structurally, as one would expect from a fairly new vessel. The C.A.M.I.D. units were in tip top condition. However, they had found a few flaws in the electrical systems; mostly to do with insulation problems. The worst case was a lead to one of the big valves. A sonic scan had shown the insulation to be crystallizing. It would probably have lasted for several years under normal conditions but with a manoeuvre like the one planned it could break down in a few hours.

A piece of insulation was completely missing from one of the pipes in the life support system and two of the power lines in the galley had been charred and weakened due to excessive use.

"Do we have the spares to do the jobs?" asked Michael.

"Yes, Sir, it will take about two hours, but we will have to shut down some of the electrical systems and the motors."

Michael checked his watch, time was not a problem if the job was done now. "O.K start right away. I will go to the bridge, so keep in touch with me there. Take any crew members you need, but remember, I must have a one hundred percent vessel by fifteen hundred hours today."

"We understand, Sir, we will be as quick as possible."

The two engineers left and began their repairs. Systems were shut down as required and two hours later, as promised, the Chief Engineer certified the Ship as one hundred percent operational.

At fourteen forty-five hours all crew members were assembled on the bridge and given their instructions for the promised course correction. At fifteen hundred hours precisely the C.A.M.I.D. units were engaged and the preliminary acceleration manoeuvre commenced. Three hours later it was over and the *Atlas* was on her way, travelling very quickly indeed. However to an observer on board it looked and felt just the same. They would be at their closest to the Sun in six days time and the next manoeuvre would be in fourteen days time to decelerate before entering the inner Asteroid belt.

Michael had always had a fear at the back of his mind about a collision at this speed. It would be fatal if they were struck by a meteorite or a cloud of pebble sized debris. The only warning they would have of an approaching collision would be the scanning system and this, when travelling at this speed, would only give them three minutes.

The crew were exercised and worked very hard in the first few days with Mr. Sidebottom and Sergeant Brody plying their respective trades. It was always interesting to see the attitudes and the sense of purpose come together as a crew trained.

Sergeant Brody soon produced weapons experts out of the people who had never had a weapon in their hand before. It appeared that Arnie Sidebottom had met his match in Henry Hurst, the West Indian giant. When they trained it became a contest as to who would give in first; it was all good-natured but the element of competition was very real. There were some occasions when the physical combat sessions between the two became very fraught indeed with both men winning the honours on a regular basis. The end result was that the two men became very close friends; they also became very fit.

One of the surprises to both of the instructors was Neville Johnson, the Communications Officer. On the face of it he was a very mild-mannered, perfect gentleman. After a few days of combat instruction, Arnie found himself not concentrating as he should and woke up five minutes later with a nasty

lump on his head. Neville had a ruthless streak in him and had seen a chance, gone for it and laid Arnie out. Even Henry had not managed to do that .

After the event Neville was quite distressed about it. Arnie soon put his mind at rest and laughed the incident off by saying that he had learnt a valuable lesson about not underestimating men in future.

After two sessions of weapon training, Sergeant Brody was amazed with the way Neville had taken to it. He was soon handling the weapons like a seasoned veteran and Sergeant Brody was impressed with his control; his hand and body movements were smooth and adept with no fumbling fingers, an extremely well co-ordinated man. Sergeant Brody also noted the glint of determination in the eyes of the Communications Officer when he trained; this man would use the weapons without remorse or pity if the situation demanded it. Neville was a classic case of 'Still waters running very deep.'

An unlikely friendship had arisen between Neville Johnson and Gary Mitchell, the sabotage expert. They had approached the Captain with their fears of being boarded by persons or 'Things' unseen. They reasoned that if the unidentified vessel, which Gary had actually seen, did not appear on their scanners, it may be possible for a smaller shuttle to actually put marauders aboard undetected.

It was a thought which had already occurred to the Captain who asked what their proposals were. Gary had suggested booby traps on the old fashioned basis of trip wires and pressure pads with small explosive charges, capable of being exploded remotely on the outside of the hull; a charge which would be strong enough to deter marauders, but not strong enough to damage the hull.

Neville's ideas were a little more subtle. He reasoned that if radio waves, as in advanced radar-type instruments, did not show up the vessel then they should try to detect their presence by another method. His suggestions consisted of a network of infra-red and heat sensors around the hatches based on the assumption that any living being would generate some kind of heat.

The Captain believed that both ideas had their merits and told them to get on and design their systems and monitors. This they did, with enthusiasm.

Meal times were very pleasant occasions. Ron Naylor, the Cook, prepared dishes which were simple, wholesome and nourishing. Fresh vegetables and fruit were served at least once a day on the standing orders of the Captain. There was a strict rota applied to meal-times; the Captain preferred the Crew to dine together, with just one person remaining on watch. This had three effects. Firstly, it was easier for the Cook to deal with one sitting; secondly, it was economical in time. Meal-times were over quickly and were less disruptive to the smooth running of the Ship. Thirdly it encouraged camaraderie and prevented the formation of exclusive, little cliques within the Crew.

On these occasions Charlotte brought a touch of colour and class to the surroundings. It was a new experience for all the men to be able to entertain a Lady and it kept them on their best behaviour. Charlotte and Michael had buried their feelings for each other and worked separate watches. In this way

she was able to treat all the Crew members the same, thus avoiding favouritism, which could have created bad feelings and broken up the team.

As the days passed the Crew were moulded into an efficient fighting machine. They were drilled in combat manoeuvres, repelling boarders, evacuation procedures, damage procedures, search and rescue procedures and the procedure which everybody actually believed they would have to do, docking with a hostile vessel.

Each Crew Member spent some time learning the jobs of the others. This was done to minimize the effect of the loss of a crew member; a gruesome but realistic approach to the situation.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of the First Officer and Charlotte, the Co-pilot, the young Second Officer, David Boothman completed his training and was passed with distinction by the Captain when examined for his pilots wings. A small party was held to celebrate the occasion with the Captain and Co-pilot footing the bill for the drinks.

There followed five uncomfortable days as they passed close to the Sun. The vessel was put into a slow continuous roll to prevent one side becoming too hot. The life support systems were tested to their limits and, even running flat out, the temperature inside became a most uncomfortable one hundred and eighteen degrees Fahrenheit.

To ease the situation for the Crew the duty rota was cut to two Crew members on watch for two hours at a time, while the off-duty Crew soaked in cold water or simply slept.

Eventually the traverse was completed and the temperature began to fall, but no Crew Member escaped the awesome feeling of insignificance when the Sun filled the viewing panels for as far as the eye could see in every direction. Its raging surface and flares left a deep impression on everybody on board.

When life had returned to an acceptable level the engineers inspected the Ship and apart from replacing some badly charred wiring and some blackened relays in the life support the ship had come through unscathed.

Life returned to normal and the sensor and defence systems which Neville and Gary had been working on were fitted to the hull. They were hooked up then tested by Charlotte. All the systems worked well but Arnie thought the test was unfair since he considered that 'Charlie was the hottest thing he had seen for years, except for that bloody Sun.' He thought that the Cook should have tested it since everything he served was cold.

"That would have been a real test," he argued.

As the Ship passed the orbit of Mars the next stage of the Captain's orders were instigated. The new standing orders required someone to be on duty in the observation bubble at all times. Although on the face of it this should have been an unbelievably boring chore, there were never any complaints. The Crew considered it a bonus to be allowed to stare out at the Stars which held such a fascination for them.



\* \* \* \* \*

Following a fast but uneventful journey the deceleration manoeuvre was the next big event. Again, the whole Crew were on duty as it was a lengthy operation. To make the manoeuvre more comfortable the vessel was turned into a tail first attitude so that the deceleration would press them into their seats, rather than into their securing straps.

From the pilots point of view it required some very fine tuning of the C.A.M.I.D. system to select a suitable source of magnetism to work with. It was not like a conventional approach to a Planet where you could actually use the mass of the Planet to manoeuvre off. Mars was in the wrong position, but Jupiter was accessible.

Therefore Michael decided to use attraction from the Sun and repulsion from Jupiter to slow himself down. When the sources were locked on Michael turned the power up ever so gently; at first the increased weight pushed them gently back into their chairs. The velocity indicator started to count down slowly at first but with increasing speed as the power was increased.

Michael always considered it better for both the Ship and the Crew to decelerate as smoothly as circumstances allowed; it took longer but was less stressful. Twelve hours later with the Ship on full alert the *Atlas* moved gently into the inner rock fields of the Asteroids.

## CHAPTER 8. THE DISTRESS CALL.

One of the dangers of the Asteroids is that they are not very dense. This can lead to an off-hand attitude in certain Crews who feel that their mathematical chances of collision are very small. Another problem is that different groups of Asteroids have different orbits. Certain groups of Asteroids have very eccentric orbits indeed, approaching very close to the Sun and out as far as the orbit of Jupiter and beyond. This means that danger can approach from many directions and not from just straight ahead. There were two lookouts in every watch now and their sole task was to locate and observe anything and everything which came near to the Ship.

Several sightings and subsequent avoiding manoeuvres were carried out in the first forty-eight hours. The sightings were of small rock fields, more like space debris than Asteroids, but dangerous nonetheless. The avoidance manoeuvre in a ship like *Atlas* was quite simple. The forward C.A.M.I.D. unit was set on to 'Repel' and the bulk of the vessel scattered the small rocks as the power was slowly increased.

Since the focal centre was set very close to the vessel there was no course change instigated as a result of these brief bursts of power. Soon the larger rock fields were finding their way onto the screen and the Captain now resorted to the auxiliary rocket motors for course correction which were far more suitable for this purpose; their response was quick and positive.

All of a sudden Neville looked up from his equipment with a puzzled frown on his face.

"Captain," he called, "I am receiving a distress signal."

Michael tried to remain calm. "Can you identify the vessel?"

"Negative, Captain," replied Neville. "It is an old automatic 'Mayday' repeater. It is very faint but still discernible."

"Is there anything on the screen, Mr. Rimmer?" asked Michael curtly.

"There is a large rock field on bearing zero, three, zero, Sir, but I cannot make out any kind of craft at this range. It will be difficult with so many large rocks," replied the First Officer.

"O.K. we will go to full alert. Everybody man your stations. Charlie execute a course to intercept the rock field."

A ripple of excitement ran through the Crew as the off-duty personnel reported to their particular stations.

"Sergeant Brody," requested the Captain.

"Yes, Sir."

"Issue side arms to all personnel. We will take no chances."

"Very well, Sir."

The Captain then went to his position next to the Co-pilot, Charlotte Linaker.

"I hope I am not over-reacting, Charlie," whispered Michael, "but under the circumstances I would much prefer to be safe than sorry."

"I couldn't agree more," said Charlie, "even though it would appear to be a fairly routine situation. It's probably some crazy, rock-hopping prospector who has run out of fuel, or something; I'm sure it must happen a lot."

"You're probably right," replied Michael. "But we are still an awful long way from a sizeable base, which makes the situation a little odd."

"Captain....." This time it was Mr. Boothman .

"Yes, David, what have you got?"

"I have a very large metallic mass on my scope which appears to be the source of the signal. "

"Can you identify anything yet?"

"Nothing definite yet, Sir. The large metallic mass seems to be an ore-rich rock of sizeable proportions."

"Keep your eye on it and report back when you have something definite. Lookouts, you must be extremely vigilant from now on. We are looking for a craft in difficulties. Mr. Johnson, try and raise a response on the radio."

"Yes, Sir. I will leave all hailing channels open."

The *Atlas* gently nosed her way towards the boulder field. The weapons had now been issued and medical supplies had been made ready by Alfred Brown, whose maintenance role also extended to the Crew; he was an experienced and highly qualified First-Aid man as well.

"I have located the source on the scope, Sir," reported Mr. Boothman. "There is definitely a split image in front of the Asteroid..... could be a little two man craft. If he is a prospector he has come to the right place. The Asteroid is very rich in several ores, including Cobalt, and is well worth mining."

"Any response, Mr. Johnson ?" asked the Captain .

"None, Sir."

"Stand by to heave to."

Michael had made up his mind. He was duty bound to respond to a distress call, if only to switch off the beacon and dispose of the dead. He had a bad feeling about this one. The distances were not right; it was most unlikely that such a small craft would be so far from a major Base. However, some miners did silly things in search of that 'Magic Rock' which would make their fortune.

"Visual sighting. dead ahead, Sir," called the lookout, Henry Hurst.

The Captain cut the speed again and the *Atlas* edged very slowly towards what really did appear to be a stricken craft. It was scorched quite badly down one side and the perspex domes were opaque, either from smoke damage or from distortion due to overheating. It was an old craft, at least fifty years thought Michael at first glance.

Henry Hurst called out again, "I can see a space suit tethered just below the rear hatch, but it shows no sign of life, Sir."

Michael was thinking fast. Was it just a case of a simple fire or had it been attacked?

"Any sign of a name or a registration number, Henry?"

"None on the parts I can see, Sir."

Michael skilfully matched relative orbits with the other craft so that they were about one hundred and fifty yards apart.

"Sergeant Brody and Gary Mitchell prepare to board, please."

They were ready in two minutes and assembled at the forward airlock. The Captain met them at the exit and picked up the intercom. "Mr. Rimmer, will you please get an accurate fix on this rock and have it memorized by the computer, I may wish to relocate it, also deactivate the hull defence system."

"Roger, Captain," came back Ben Rimmer's voice from the intercom.

He replaced the intercom and spoke to the boarding party. "I want you to approach very cautiously and treat it as hostile. If there is any trouble I will get the Ship to Hell out of here and you must run for the rock and stay there until I return."

"How shall we set the weapons, Sir?" asked Sergeant Brody.

"Mr. Mitchell will set on 'Stun' and will enter first. You can set your weapon on 'Kill,' Sergeant, but use it only if absolutely necessary. Is that understood?"

"Yes, Sir," they both replied.

"Off you go then," urged the Captain. "Good luck and be careful."

The two men picked up their jet guns and stepped into the airlock. They exited separately to make a more difficult target and approached the wreck from two different directions. Sergeant Brody found the distress beacon and switched it off. Gary Mitchell traversed the hull until he reached the tethered space suit; gritting his teeth he braced himself and looked into the visor, fully expecting the worst.

"Sir, it's empty," he reported incredulously.

"Is the hatch open, Gary?" asked the Captain.

"Yes, Sir," replied Gary.

"Sergeant Brody this is the Captain. I do not like this situation, there cannot be anybody alive on board, return to the ship immediately. It looks too much like a decoy to... "

"Captain," interrupted Mr. Rimmer. "I'm afraid we have company."

Sure enough a large vessel was slowly edging round from the back of the rock.

"Get those men back on board NOW," shouted the Captain.

They needed no urging. The boarding party was already in the airlock and the outer door was closing, but it was too late. The trap had been sprung.

"Orders please, Sir," requested Ben Rimmer .

"Hold station," replied the Captain. He watched fascinated as the dirtiest, ugliest and probably the oldest space ship he had ever seen slowly edged into view. Its menacing appearance was made worse by the enormous cannon which had been crudely welded onto the hull and was now pointing straight at them.

Michael rushed back to the bridge. "Mr. Johnson, try and raise this Devil on the radio and scramble a message to Company H.Q. informing them of the situation here."

"Negative, Captain, our signals are being jammed by a primitive but very effective jamming system," replied Mr. Johnson.

"Shall we make a run for it, Sir?" suggested Mr. Rimmer.

"We wouldn't have a chance if that cannon is operational and I suspect it is."

"We are receiving a signal, Sir," said Mr. Johnson .

"Very well put it through the P.A. system so we can all hear it."

There was a crackle of static from the speakers, then a cultured voice said rather bluntly, "You are wondering if the Cannon is operational. Perhaps a small demonstration will convince you? There is a sizeable boulder some eight hundred yards off your Port side."

"I can see it, Sir," called Henry Hurst.

"The Cannon swivelled quickly round. There was a bright flash of light and the boulder, which must have weighed several tons, simply disappeared.

Michael considered the demonstration with professional interest. First of all it was a very good shot and secondly it proved that the Cannon was immensely powerful. Most of all he wished now that he had a similar weapon or some ship to ship missiles. Michael went over to the radio and took the microphone from Mr. Johnson, "Identify yourselves and state your intentions, please."

Again came the crackle over the P.A. system. "This is the Captain of the space ship *Black Swan*. It is pointless to attempt any transmission for help and you have no chance of escaping without being destroyed. You must now consider yourselves to be my prisoners."

Michael noticed that the Cannon was now pointing directly at the bridge again and looked very convincing. All his plans, all his training and all his vigilance had been wasted. He had walked straight into the trap with his eyes open. In fairness to himself, the trap had been cleverly set, an ore rich rock behind which the metallic bulk of the larger vessel had been concealed.

In retrospect Michael knew that he had made what was likely to be a fatal mistake. He should have launched his Moon Shuttle and done a recce without endangering the *Atlas*. It was all too obvious now, it was also too late.

The voice continued relentlessly, "I am sending across a single boarder who will be carrying my instructions. Stand by to receive him."

"Do you want him taken when he comes aboard, Sir?" asked Arnie Sidebottom.

"It would be as well to be prepared," mused the Captain. "See to it Arnie."

Michael continued to rack his brains for a clever solution, but could not find one. Slowly the realisation came that he had lost round one and would have to bide his time and wait for round two. At that moment Arnie came onto the bridge with the boarder; he was not under guard.

"It looks like we came to the right place, Sir," observed Arnie. "This is Mr. Calvert, the First Officer of the *Hercules*, the first vessel to go missing."

"Are you here of your own accord, Mr. Calvert ? " asked Michael gently.

"Certainly not, Sir. I am a prisoner and at the present time a very dangerous one. I am wired to explode should there be any sign of trickery," replied Calvert miserably.

"What instructions does the Captain of the *Black Swan* wish you to pass on?"

"He requires you to vacate this vessel and go to the other as his prisoners."

"And if we will not?"

"Then he will kill all our crew members, one every hour, to help you make up your mind. When they have gone he will then destroy you if you still refuse to conform."

"How many prisoners has he got?" asked Michael.

"About twenty, Sir."

"Are they well cared for?"

"Yes. ...provided you comply with his wishes."

"Why does he need prisoners?"

"He uses us to mine the ore. He is currently working a rock field, not too far from here, which is phenomenally rich in metals and crystal. There is another group which he mines which is even more wealthy but is apparently in a very eccentric orbit."

"Who is he?"

"He wishes to tell you that himself, Sir."

"How many crewmen, loyal ones that is, has he got?"

"Twelve including himself. It is sufficient, they are heavily armed and ruthless."

The feeling of hopelessness increased. Mr. Calvert looked at his watch and spoke.

"Please may we make haste, Sir. If I am not back on board in seventeen minutes I will be exploded."

"Are you convinced that this threat is not just so much hot air?" demanded Michael.

"Totally convinced, Sir, he only has to press a remote control button."

Michael came to a decision. "Prepare to abandon ship. Sergeant Brody, collect all the weapons and report to me directly. When it is done I want all the weapons accounted for and I don't want any attempts at trickery, at least not yet."

Five minutes later the crew were assembled at the forward airlock. Michael was not with them. He had gone down to the engine room. One of the pieces of security equipment in the system was a twelve digit power lock. When this lock was deactivated the C.A.M.I.D. units became inoperable and unless you knew the twelve digit sequence it was impossible to switch them on again. The only way of obtaining the combination would be to contact the Company H.Q. via the scrambled channel and ask for it. Unfortunately the voice would be checked by a security device and it would

only be given to a bona fide Officer of the Company. It was unlikely that this would happen mused Michael as he deftly switched off the lock.

He moved quickly back to the airlock. "Abandon Ship... Mr. Rimmer and Miss Linaker will lead the way. Mr. Sidebottom and myself will leave last."

Michael was very reluctant to leave the ship and Arnie noticed the hesitation as he closed the airlock. "Never mind, Sir, we will soon be back... you'll see!"

Ten minutes later the crew were assembled outside the huge old rocket aptly named the Black Swan. As Michael studied it he began to realize that its odd appearance was due to the fact that it was several vessels joined together. It was not pretty but was probably very functional. The main body of the vessel was one of the early American interplanetary rockets and was about seventy five years old. It looked to Michael like a Class 'A' Space Clipper, one of the first passenger carrying vessels which operated mainly from space stations and rarely entered a planetary atmosphere. It had been a very successful vessel in its day.

Fifty percent of the main body of the rocket was devoted to fuel tanks and motors. In addition a cluster of pods around the lower half of the vessel also housed fuel. Michael had great admiration for these huge, wasteful vessels and a genuine respect for the integrity of the people who had built them and the early pioneers who had travelled on them.

Equally spaced around the main hull were six smaller vessels which had been attached to make one big conglomerate ship. The puzzle was that these were much more modern and were typical of the ships used by miners and prospectors to hop around the Asteroids. Needless to say they were also their permanent living quarters and so had some degree of comfort built into them along with all the necessities of life. In addition they had a spacious hold which could be stocked with ore and supplies which enabled the prospectors to eke out a meagre living, or, if you were lucky, an extremely lucrative business.

The mystery object was the huge Cannon mounted on the front of the vessel above the bridge. Michael knew he had seen one before but could not think where. Most modern armaments consisted of missiles or laser weapons but, none approached the size or power of this one. It simply was not necessary; anyway it was too late to worry now.

Michael looked back towards his ship knowing it could be for the last time. Even as a freighter she had a lovely line to her and it was with heavy heart that he stepped through the airlock into captivity. It was not so much the captivity which worried him but his complete sense of failure. He had let his Company down, not to mention his crew and he had played right into the hands of these people, whoever they were, just like a raw novice. It would be very hard to live with if, indeed, he was allowed to. He could deal with most things but not dishonour; it was completely alien to his nature.

The party was greeted by six, grinning, heavily armed guards who were the most villainous-looking crew you could imagine. They looked about as benevolent as the original Spanish Inquisitors.

“Welcome aboard,” said the largest of the group. “Our Captain will meet you on the bridge. Take off your space suits and line up against the bulkhead. Don't try any tricks or you will be immediately disabled.”

Nobody doubted his intentions.



## **CHAPTER 9. HARRY MORGAN.**

If the Crew of the *Black Swan* had been surprised to find a female member amongst their prisoners, they did not show it. All the *Atlas* Crew Members were treated firmly but courteously. There were several looks of apprehension when the true size and bulk of Arnie Sidebottom and Henry Hurst had been revealed. Arnie was very calm but Henry, who was in an absolutely foul temper, exuded an aura of utter malevolence towards his captors, even though he was keeping it under control.

The hard training had been good for Henry and his more than adequate proportions had increased to well defined muscularity. When he moved everything rippled and it was an awesome sight; Henry was a bad person to have as an enemy.

As they were taken forward, the enormous size of the inside of the *Black Swan* became apparent. It was very austere, but functional. Archie Murphy stared about him in amazement, obviously impressed at the way in which the seven ships had been married into one.

Eventually they arrived at the bridge and were impressed by the discipline and order which prevailed. After the bridge of the *Atlas*, which was only a quarter the size of this one, everything seemed to be strange and of large proportions. The onboard computers were enormous when compared to those of the *Atlas*, but, for all their size, they only had about one tenth of the capacity of the newer versions.

Michael's practiced eye quickly swept over the many controls and immediately realized that the myriads of levers and dials were duplicated systems from the motors of the extra vessels which formed part of the whole. By rights the *Black Swan* should have ten powerful rocket motors which would give bone-shattering acceleration if required to do so. How many of the motors were actually functional was another matter, but those that were could all be controlled from this place.

As they were herded into the centre of the room, a door opened on the far side and an amazing figure entered the room. He was tall and athletic-looking and sported long, black, curly hair. He also wore an eye patch over his left eye. He was dressed in a white, lace-trimmed shirt with fluffy arms and tight cuffs, maroon skin-tight trousers and slack-fitting, black, turned down thigh boots. For all the world he looked like a character study of a pirate from the Eighteenth Century. The hands were graceful but the remaining eye was blue and cold. There was also some slight scarring round the face and on the backs of his hands.

"Hell's teeth!" muttered Arnie. "It looks like Henry Morgan himself, Sir."

The newcomer spoke for the first time. "It's Harry Morgan, actually." He spoke coldly and without humour. He crossed the bridge and stood in front of them, hands on hips and feet apart. "I am the Captain of this ship and you are

my prisoners. What you say and do in the next few hours of your life will determine whether you live or die, so choose your words carefully.”

Nobody doubted him.

“Who is, or should I say was, the Captain of the *Atlas*?” asked Morgan.

“I am the Captain,” said Michael, “and I wish to point out that you have no authority to take over a Company vessel.”

“You appear to lack a little authority at this moment in time, Mr..... erm, what is your name?”

“Michael Stephens.”

“Are you the only pilot in this Crew?”

“Yes, “ lied Michael.

“Is this woman part of your Crew?”

“Temporarily,” lied Michael again. “We were taking her to Ceres to take up a secretarial post there and she has been helping out in the galley.”

“You will instruct me in the operation of the *Atlas*,” decided Morgan.

“No I wont!.... even if I wanted to I couldn’t, the motors have been shut down,” retorted Michael.

“Can you reactivate them?” asked Morgan quietly, as though he had suffered this conversation before.

“Only by contacting Company H.Q.”

“Then you are of no further use to me,” observed Morgan. He paced around for a few minutes and then spoke to a ferocious-looking man who appeared to be the First Officer.

“Send over a search party and a skeleton crew straight away.”

Morgan beckoned to another Officer who was of a better appearance than the others until he turned round. His good looks were marred by a wicked looking scar on the left hand side of his face and part of his left ear was missing. Again he wore the buccaneers uniform. It seemed that this crew had suffered a common, traumatic experience.

“Take the prisoners and secure them. Watch out for tricks and pick a room which is completely barren of wiring... I seem to remember that Captain Stephens has a knack of altering wiring.”

Michael was disturbed that Morgan knew him. He was not sure if he knew Morgan or not, but there was something familiar about him. The prisoners were taken to a large room without furniture and herded inside. There was one dim light which was recessed into the bulkhead and inaccessible. There was not even a porthole.

Two armed guards were placed outside the door which was one of the old fashioned screw-down bulkhead doors. There was no chance of opening it in a hurry; the room was cold and offered no hope. The prisoners just stood silently, waiting for and expecting

the worst. Michael tried to cheer them up and rally their flagging spirits but was unsuccessful. Soon he, too, lapsed into silence.

A little while later the door was opened and the Officer who had brought them from the bridge stepped in. "I apologize for the poor hospitality, but it will have to do for the time being."

"We have perfectly good quarters aboard the *Atlas*," replied Michael.

"Captain Stephens, you really must come to terms with the fact that you have lost the *Atlas*; do not torture yourself anymore. You will never set foot on her again..... accept it," he said gently. "I have brought you some blankets and mattresses. It isn't much but it will help keep you reasonably warm... there is also some coffee, please enjoy it."

The articles were brought into the room and the coffee was distributed; surprisingly it tasted good.

"What do you think will happen next, Captain?" asked Charlotte, who looked pale and frightened.

"I really don't know, but they have been fairly reasonably up to now," said a tight-lipped Michael.

"Any instructions, Captain?" asked Benjamin Rimmer.

"Yes, my advice is to not antagonize them. We must try to stay alive and bide our time. Please do not throw your lives away unnecessarily; that will not solve anything."

"If we are put together with the other prisoners, surely our chances of survival will go up with the increased numbers," observed Neville Johnson.

"Maybe so, maybe not. If they are all wired to explode, there will be a definite tendency to do as he asks," stated Michael flatly.

"I would like to kill them all," said Henry coldly. "They are no better than the pirates they are mimicking."

"You may still get your chance, Henry," grinned Sergeant Brody, "if the fates are kind!"

"There will be a queue for that privilege," growled Arnie, "with me at the front."

Soon the Crew were huddled together, wrapped in their blankets. They slept a little but Michael organized it so that there were always two Crew Members on watch at a time. He worried about Charlotte. On the face of it her future looked rather bleak as the only woman amongst a lot of hostile men. Eventually he, too, dozed off whilst racking his brains trying to remember who Harry Morgan was.

Presently the Officer returned to the room. "Our Captain is in good spirits , " he said. "your cargo is a very useful one . He is particularly pleased with the small craft, some kind of shuttle isn't it?... and almost new. The food is most gratefully received, as are the mining spares and equipment.

To celebrate the occasion he has invited you to dine with him. I have brought you some coveralls which you should wear instead of your Company uniforms..... uniforms make him nervous.... Please be ready in an hour."

"I don't particularly want to dine with him," retorted Michael.

"Well, that is your choice. However, I should warn you that you can do it the easy way or the hard way," he replied meaningfully. "Either way you will dine with him."

He left the room briskly. Reluctantly the Crew changed into the new garments. They soon realized that they were lined with a kind of thermal fur and were much warmer than their own. Michael glanced across at Charlotte and, to his abject horror, realized that her garment fitted like a glove and looked absolutely fabulous on her. It crossed his mind that Charlotte would look good even in a garbage-can liner, but it did nothing to ease his mind.

Amazingly, Henry and Arnie had coveralls which fitted them; they made a fearsome looking duo. As Michael looked around the Crew his eyes rested on Gary Mitchell. He was tight-lipped and he had a strange look in his eyes; Gary had not yet uttered a word since their capture. Michael gave an involuntary shudder and pitied the person that Gary got hold of first. Death would not come quickly to that poor individual, Gary was ruthless, merciless and, if that was not enough, he was fighting mad.

One hour later the door opened and the escort arrived to take them to Captain Morgan's quarters. The procession moved along quite slowly due to the weak gravity which was normal in these old ships. They presently arrived outside the cabin where they were to dine. It had been a long walk and Michael guessed that they were about to enter the nose-cone of one of the outside rockets

Archie Murphy turned to the Captain and said, "This is a much newer vessel, Sir. It has sliding bulk head doors."

"I think I would like to hear the full, unexpurgated history of this vessel, Archie, I bet it makes fascinating listening," replied Michael.

"I'd lay money that this is exactly what we are going to hear over dinner," added Ben Rimmer.

"You could be right at that," mused Michael. "Listen, all of you, I do not want any heroics over dinner. Try to act as normally as possible and enjoy the occasion. If we try anything violent we will lose out badly. "

"That is sound advice, Mr. Stephens," observed the Officer of the *Black Swan*. "Captain Morgan is a bad man to cross. On the other hand, he is an intelligent and benevolent man to those who accept him."

He then spoke into a grille on the wall. "Your dinner guests have arrived, Captain."

"Thank you Mr. Jagger, show them in," replied the grille.

With a soft rumble the door slid aside and as the Crew stepped into the room they were all equally astonished at the breath-taking view it offered. The whole forward cabin was totally glassed in: the deck floor was a cantilever structure of ample proportions and the feeling was one of standing in space itself. The Stars, the Asteroids and even the main hull of the vessel, in spite of its charring, were just like a beautiful painting.

There was a huge table, fully set for their meal. Ron Naylor looked around and cast an approving eye over the proceedings. Each place was perfectly set out with a beautiful display of solid Silver cutlery and table ornaments. The centre piece was an ornate, crystal fountain which was cascading in slow motion due to the lack of gravity. The water was beading like pearls and the colour changed constantly due to a randomly changing light source underneath.

"I hope the cuisine is worthy of the setting," remarked Ron Naylor, who liked to eat well whatever the circumstances.

Arnie Sidebottom mournfully surveyed the thirteen place setting and replied, rather unkindly, "Looks more like the Last Supper to me."

Charlotte smacked his arm playfully and told him to behave himself. Michael had seen her smile at that moment and it came as a great shock to him to realize just how much that little action had wrenched at his heart. Michael had never been in love before and it was taking a long time for the penny to drop. He knew she was different but was still overawed by her beauty, personality and success.

On the right hand side of the door, concealed from view as they entered, was a tastefully lit bar. Standing at the bar, resplendent in a gold and black, shiny satin outfit was Captain Morgan himself.

"Come in and take a drink," he called cheerfully.

They wandered over dutifully and picked up a crystal goblet topped up with a rather nice, white wine which had been poured out in advance. Captain Morgan waited until everybody had a drink then proposed a toast. "To your continued good health," he offered.

"And to yours, Captain," replied Michael.

The glasses were dutifully drained and then refilled by the villainous-looking barman who had an American accent when he spoke. This man, too, bore burn scars on his face. An oppressive silence descended on the gathering. Archie Murphy broke the ice.

"May I congratulate you on the construction of your vessel, Captain. I am extremely impressed with the way that the hulls have been married together. It must have been a difficult task."

Morgan looked hard at Murphy and searched for signs of sarcasm, found none, then replied, "Thank you Mr. Murphy, it was a marriage of both necessity and convenience at the time."

"Have you ever used your engines to full capacity, Captain?" asked David Boothman.

This time Morgan laughed, "If I was to do that it would kill us all..... we do not know exactly, but we estimate that if we fired them all simultaneously the ship would pull about forty 'Gs' and shake itself apart."

"Where did you steal the ships from?" asked Michael indelicately.

"Steal? ...Did you say steal?" demanded Morgan, whose smile had now completely vanished.

"Well, you have stolen mine, it is not an unreasonable assumption that you have stolen these vessels also," insisted Michael.

The smile returned slowly, "Your ship was taken from necessity, Mister Stephens. We needed your crew and cargo."

"For what reason ? Slavery has been illegal for Centuries."

"Slavery?" said Morgan sharply. "I never spoke of Slavery. My wish is to persuade you, not to persecute you. I can make you rich, rich beyond your wildest dreams..... all of you."

At this moment the trolley arrived with the meals on. It was very ornate and loaded with delicious food. Morgan spoke again.

"I would be grateful if you would hear me out over dinner. I do not wish to argue with you, I just wish to tell my story and state my case. Now...is that an unreasonable request?"

"I suppose not," said Michael grudgingly and the rest of the Crew mumbled their assent.

The party moved over to the table and found that their names were on their places. Captain Stephens and Miss Linaker were placed on the left and right hand sides of Morgan, who sat on the end of the table. It was noticeable that Henry Hurst and Arnie Sidebottom, the two big men, were seated at the other end of the table. Morgan was taking no chances.

The first course was a pleasant surprise, fresh fruit, a generous slice of honeydew melon with all the trimmings. Wine was poured and, as the meal progressed, there was a slackening of the tension in the room.

The main course was roast beef with real potatoes, Yorkshire pudding, sweet corn and fresh peas. It was delicious. On all the old deep-space ships it had been common practice to have hydroponics systems for growing plants and vegetables. It helped to maintain an oxygen balance as well as providing fresh vegetables.

Little was said during the meal. Michael tried to sum up the situation in his head. Morgan was obviously no stranger to space but he had appeared to accept the fact that the Company vessels only had one pilot, at least he had not challenged it. Morgan did not give the impression of being British and was most likely an American. The big ship was definitely American and so were the majority of the welded on vessels, although he had recognized the less sleek but more practical lines of a couple of Russian craft; a strange mixture indeed.

The sweet consisted of ice cream and mandarin oranges with a rather potent sauce which tasted of several liqueurs. Still the meal continued in a strained silence. Once or twice Michael caught Charlotte's eye and tried to give her what he hoped would pass for a reassuring glance. She did not respond but just sat there calmly looking beautiful.

Coffee, cheese and biscuits followed. Ron Naylor wandered if the Blue Stilton had been removed from the galley of the *Atlas*. It was a cheese he had put on board personally as it was his favourite; fortunately he was wise enough not to pose the question. The silence continued.

Eventually came the brandy and liqueurs. Morgan poured Charlotte a Grand Marnier and a large brandy for himself. Michael had a Drambuie and the rest of the Crew helped themselves to the brandy. Michael noticed that Gary Mitchell had a very large measure and hoped it would mellow him into controlling his temper. In his heart he knew it would not.

## **CHAPTER 10. HARRY'S STORY.**

Morgan spoke at last. "I trust you have all enjoyed your meal?"

Heads nodded around the room and Charlotte thanked him for his hospitality. Michael saw a light in Morgan's eyes which he did not like when Charlotte had finished speaking; it was the look of a man who had not seen a woman for a very long time. Michael was worried by it, but made no comment. As everybody relaxed in the afterglow of the meal, Harry Morgan began his story and his audience listened with rapt attention.

Eleven years previously Morgan was the owner and Captain of what was even then an elderly, but well preserved freighter called the *Cygnus*. He ran a freelance, commercial carrying business with a small crew. He could not compete with the secret C.A.M.I.D. powered vessels which left the Earth on a regular basis. It was simply too expensive to land his great ship and take-off fully laden from Earth. However, he had discovered that there were certain cargoes which the bigger companies were reluctant to handle. These included explosives, gasoline, propane gas, acids and other nasty substances; all of which were needed by the space colonies.

He had personally approached several of the larger Companies and offered to do the dangerous work for them. Without exception, they had all been delighted to subcontract to him.

The unfortunate thing about the old freighters was that they were relatively slow. Harry Morgan was able to increase his velocity by locking the *Cygnus* into Earth orbit and then using a much smaller vessel to service, load and unload the big freighter. In this way he was able to accept contracts from several different places for every trip. He was then able to use his full fuel load for the whole journey instead of wasting half of it on escaping the Earth's atmosphere. In spite of this, the journeys were still measured in months rather than in days.

The business prospered for several years and Harry started to accumulate a little wealth. He was an excellent engineer and kept his Ships well maintained. As the money became available he upgraded his electronics and strived to modernize his ship whenever the situation allowed it.

Six years ago as he had returned from a trip to a deep-space monitoring station named *Perseus*, which was situated diametrically opposite to Mars in the same orbit, he had been politely stopped and boarded by a Customs Unit. Harry was totally straight and above board so he had nothing to fear and made the Officers welcome.

He soon found out that it was a cover-up for a secret operation. On board the Customs vessel was an American Government Official who wished to talk business. Before the 'business' talks began, Harry had been obliged to sign a document of the Official Secrets variety which bound him not to discuss details of the meeting with anyone who was not a Government Official with written credentials to prove their involvement in the scheme.



The bones of the matter were that the Americans were setting up another top-security Penal Colony on Mars. It was being kept secret and its location undisclosed, since it was to house many of the Political Dissidents who were becoming more numerous in the U.S.A. and who were polluting the 'Morals' of the people in the street, as well as the other prisoners, with their socialist ideas of a fair deal for all the American people.

In its wisdom the Government had decided to isolate these people in as remote a place as possible; the Southern Plains of Mars were about as remote, desolate and lonely as Man could imagine.

Needless to say, the weaponry and other undesirable items needed to be taken in advance and in secret, since this particular facet of Government did not particularly wish the Military to know its strength. Neither did they want the area patrolled and, more to the point, they did not wish the Russians to know that they would be doing some exploratory prospecting in the area, using the prisoners as the prospecting team.

The Government offered to pay all the expenses and provide fuel and provisions. In addition they offered Morgan two million dollars clear profit to complete the Mission, fifty percent paid in advance. Understandably Harry Morgan graciously accepted the contract and, in his heart, considered himself to be a good patriot by doing so.

The *Cygnus* was loaded in the usual way. The American Authorities had stockpiled in many different places, so there was nothing odd about the comings and goings of the small feeder ship as it shuttled back and forth with its sometimes deadly cargo.

The amount of arms startled even Harry Morgan. It really looked as though the mere establishment of a penal colony was only a fraction of the truth. He was even more surprised when the shuttle arrived with two brand new Laser/Neutron Cannons.

These had been originally developed in the Twentieth Century for the *Star Wars* initiative which the Americans had used so successfully in its Orbital Defence System. One of these awesome weapons was now fixed to the hull of the *Black Swan* and Michael now remembered where he had seen one before. He also remembered where he had heard of Harry Morgan; he had been asked to keep a lookout for the *Cygnus* whilst he was on his routine patrols. It had been listed as 'Missing' and the Crew were officially presumed dead.

Morgan was a good enough business man to realise that it was no concern of his, so he asked no questions and consequently was told no more lies.

Eventually the loading was completed and the *Cygnus* was fully fuelled and provisioned. The ship was carrying its usual complement of six crewmen. Although the ship was big, it only needed this many men. Every crewman worked when there was a major handling manoeuvre, but once on course the ship was in free-fall and only one man was needed on watch.

It was a long haul to Mars from Earth and the two Planets could not have been in a worse conjunction. It had probably been planned this way so that

other vessels would be less interested in making the trip. Whatever the reason it was going to be a six month voyage. In addition he had been given an unusual trajectory, well away from the normal routes, again to reinforce the security of the Mission. Captain Morgan realised that he would be very much on his own.

The first two months passed without incident; the orbit of the Moon was quickly passed and then, after a perfect course correction, the pursuit of Mars began. Unlike the C.A.M.I.D. powered vessels the conventional rockets were unable to attempt Sun grazing manoeuvres. They had to content themselves with spiral trajectories always going away from the Sun. This increased the distance of the voyage immensely.

The problems started on the sixty-third day of the voyage. The duty man was startled to see a faint blip on his radar scope. He immediately called the Captain who was also mystified since there was no record whatsoever of anything on this particular trajectory; there should have been no ships and they were nowhere near any known Asteroid orbits.

A quick calculation confirmed that they were on a collision course. Captain Morgan decided that it would be easier to slow his vessel and let whatever it was pass in front of them. The Crew quickly pressurized the fuel tanks and prepared to fire the retro-rockets. By this time the scope showed several large Asteroid-type rocks and an accompanying cloud of debris and a small rock field.

Unbelievably there was a small cluster of space ships contained within the centre of it all. Morgan opened all the hailing channels on his radio and tried to get a response. He failed.

With a bone-shuddering roar the retro-rockets were fired and Morgan burnt them for a full two minutes and drastically reduced the velocity of his Ship; he also covered himself and his crew with abrasions and bruises from the restraining straps in the process.

It was an error. He should have tried to outrun the rock field and pick up his course again later. The debris was much more scattered than the scope showed and when the battering on the hull started it was as though a thousand men with hammers were running round the hull and going berserk trying to break in.

The damage reports soon started to come in. The hull was holed in dozens of places and the fuel tanks were not spared. The Crew quickly depressurized the fuel tanks and stemmed the flow; by quick action they managed to seal about half the cabins and the control room.

On the outside the *Cygnus* looked as though it had been sand blasted, any protrusions had been ripped off on the side where the cloud had hit them; this included fuel valves and all the radio and radar antennae. There was no way the vessel could make Mars in its devastated state. They had lost velocity and three engines. One engine still remained so Morgan decided to hand fly the

ship and match orbits with the cluster of large rocks and vessels which were approaching rapidly.

It was a difficult manoeuvre under the circumstances but Morgan was a superb pilot and knew his vessel. Thirty minutes later he was tucked inside the large rocks next to the other ships which looked deserted.

There was still no response from the other vessels so Morgan decided to investigate. He took two of his crew with him and traversed to the nearest ship. It was undamaged and contained two perfectly preserved corpses. Harry checked the gauges but the oxygen had all gone; without oxygen only death remained.

A similar story was repeated in the next four vessels and Harry Morgan admitted that he felt a strange feeling of helplessness and uneasiness. They decided to be thorough and complete their search and found six space suited figures in the final rocket. Unlike the others, these bodies were still neatly arranged in their seats. Expecting the worst, Harry went to the first one and very nearly did something very unhygienic inside his space suit when the supposed corpse slowly reached up and gripped his arm.

All six men were still alive but each had virtually no oxygen left. Harry and his men quickly coupled the survivors to their own tanks and took them back to the *Cygnus*. The men were very weak and half-starved but with a little care from Harry and his Crew plus some neat oxygen, soup and coffee, they soon started to pull round. Two were English, two were American and two were Russian.

Their story was simple they had struck it rich. The irony of it all was almost unbelievable. All the vessels had been wildcat prospectors rock-hopping amongst the known Asteroids. The Skippers had met in the 'Prospectors Bar' on Ceres, a place completely lacking in reputation, had got drunk together and started to bemoan their lot.

None of the Skippers had found any luck for at least six months; funds and morale were almost exhausted. One of the Skippers had suggested a joint venture to try a long range prospecting run based on the notion that six vessels properly provisioned could do the job of one large vessel. The general opinion was that they had nothing to lose.

The following day when the drunken euphoria had worn off, the Skippers sat down, pooled their resources and made their plans. Everybody, including the Crews, had put all their remaining funds into a common purse and then spent every last vestige of remaining money on provisions and kitting-out. A week later they formed a small convoy and blasted off in a determined attempt to reach the far side of the Asteroid belt.

They skirted along the edge of the belt in high spirits, however the problems soon began. They had completely miscalculated their fuel consumption. There were so many course corrections and collision avoidance manoeuvres that within three months there was practically no fuel left. There was no hope of getting back and they were way past the charted prospecting territories.

The Skippers held a meeting and decided to re-enter the belt at the next convenient point and stake their claim. It was decided that if they were successful they would try to raise help on the radio. If none came they would die; rich or poor, it would not matter any more.

It would be true to say that when they did finally re-enter the belt, all the Skippers were, in fact, lost. They found a large cluster of rocks and matched orbits with them. They had come to the end of their fuel and it was only a matter of time before all their other resources ran out as well.

Within hours of arriving they sent out their teams to study the rocks around them. It was the jackpot. There was uranium, platinum, gold, silver and crystal. One of the rocks was pure crystal and weighed at least twenty tons. It was an amazingly rich discovery and within hours every member of the expedition was rich beyond their wildest dreams; but it was to no avail.

However, human endeavour was such that they took on board as much ore and crystal as they could. Oxygen was still plentiful but fresh food and water were in short supply. The water was soon replenished by the fortuitous discovery of a large block of ice weighing about ten tons. It contained various chunks of rock, including gold nuggets up to about two pounds in weight, but as the water was melted down it was found to be sweet and suitable for consumption.

The Skippers met together to discuss their situation. Although there was little fresh food left, one of the Skippers had purchased several tons of surplus Military field rations. It was still untouched and, being canned, would last indefinitely. They decided to sit tight and just stay with their claim and wait for rescue. By living on meagre rations they estimated that they could survive for between nine to twelve months.

The next task was to make, an accurate map and fix the position of their claim. They had a lot of time on their hands and consequently made a very good job of it. A few weeks later another rock field came into view and to add to their consternation it was running obliquely to their own. There were a few collisions as the two fields passed through each other, but no damage was done and eventually the two fields diverged.

One of the Skippers was most puzzled by this event and went back to his computer to make some calculations. He did not like what he discovered. His results proved that their rich claim was in a highly elliptical orbit which took them close to the Sun and out as far as the orbit of Jupiter. Further calculations confirmed that the rock cluster would pass just beyond the orbit of Mercury and was travelling very quickly. It had to be, otherwise it would have been drawn into the Sun a long time ago. The lucky part was that they were on that portion of the orbit which was heading out towards the orbit of Jupiter.

The computers soon determined that a complete orbit was in the region of seven hundred and seventy two days. It would take about a year to get back to a similar point on the opposite leg of their orbit. Unless they were rescued, it

did not matter what happened to them, after that they would soon be dead anyway. So they resolutely drifted along with their claim, doing their best to keep themselves occupied.

Month followed month, they broadcasted on their tiny radios begging for help, but no help came. Eventually the situation became critical. In order to give their Crews the best chance, the Skippers and the First Officers made a suicide pact and packed all their Crews off to the sixth vessel, which was carrying the remainder of the oxygen supplies. As their oxygen ran out the Skippers and their First Officers perished with their ships.

Some Crewmen also died. They went out under the guise of doing some further prospecting and never came back. The last six were made of sterner stuff and decided to sit it out to the bitter end. Then along came Harry Morgan.

The chances of their paths actually crossing in this part of the Solar System were billions to one against. In reality not only had their paths crossed, they had actually come very close to colliding.

As the survivors regained their strength, Harry learned the truth about their predicament. The rock field and everything it contained was starting to slowly accelerate as the Sun's gravity acted on it. Soon the temperature would increase and they would all burn up unless precautions were taken .

All the survivors readily accepted Harry Morgan as their new Skipper. There was a genuine feeling of gratitude for their rescue and subsequent prolongation of life, even if it was only going to be temporary. Two of the survivors were excellent engineers but the others were basically prospectors with some training as crewmen.

In his usual efficient way Captain Morgan organized the hull repairs on the *Cygnus*. One by one, the various parts of the ship were re-pressurized as they were resealed. The only thing Harry could not do was to repair the three stricken motors. The valves which had been ripped off were irreplaceable and one engine was of little use to them apart from minor manoeuvres.

Harry did not like wasting anything. So the thought of leaving behind six perfectly serviceable space craft was as repulsive as dying with them. He sat down with the Engineers and asked for suggestions. One suggestion was to weld two ships together, another was to restyle the rocketry on the *Cygnus* with the engines from the other craft.

Having listened to all the suggestions, Harry decided that the sensible way was to weld all the smaller craft to the *Cygnus* to form one enormous vessel. It would be difficult but not impossible. He reasoned that the outer hulls would help to shade the *Cygnus* from the Sun when they passed close. Harry also knew the contents of his cargo; it contained a lot of welding gear and a lot of sheet metal.

He sat down with his computer and soon came up with a design. It was not pretty but it was extremely serviceable and with all the rockets coupled together would also be extremely powerful. At this point the procession

passed the orbit of the planet Earth. Unfortunately for them they were diametrically opposite their home planet and were enroute for the Sun.

Harry started work on the project as soon as possible. They carefully collected and arranged the other rockets around the *Cygnus* by using some of the many jet packs they had available. Harry then carefully marked the hulls to ensure perfect alignment, matching the marks to the computer predicted marks on the hull of the *Cygnus*. Once in position the welding commenced using struts and metal from his cargo as required.

In a surprisingly short time the seven ships became one. By this time they were up to the orbit of Venus. Needless to say it was beginning to get hot. At this point in time Harry had another brainwave. He reasoned that anything he could put between themselves and the Sun would increase their chances of survival. Consequently Harry and his men became Cosmic Bricklayers. They gathered up loose boulders and moved large rocks to the Sun side of the *Cygnus* and started to build a wall.

The job was awkward and it lacked the finesse of the Lakeland dry stone wallers, they also used huge boulders but it was effective. The temperature of the outer hulls started to drop as they came under its protective shade and radiation levels were drastically reduced. The crew worked as long as possible to make their wall as big as they could in the time available.

The orbital speed was now very quick and Harry had still not connected up the rockets and sorted out the fuel systems. There was no choice but to sit out the unpleasant swing round the Sun. Soon it was too hot to work outside. The Sun was enormous, filling the heavens, the heat was unbearable. The Crew did everything they could to keep cool.

The *Cygnus* survived the trauma better than they had hoped. Some wiring was charred but the slow rotation of the hull prevented any outbreak of fire and distributed the heat evenly. The men inside the Ship, however, suffered horribly. There were many unpleasant burns and scalds among the Crew but two weeks later the cabin temperature started to drop, the water went off the boil and it became possible to make ice cubes.

For three more weeks the men licked their wounds and gave their scalds, burns and blisters chance to heal. On the surface they were all relatively unharmed. Beneath the surface, however, there was a lot more damage. Harry did not realize it but the experience had left him and his Crew mentally scarred. The heat, the suffering and the situation had changed Harry's way of thinking. Instead of having a good business brain, Harry was now the proud possessor of a guiltless, criminal mind, blessed with a high degree of megalomania and thoughts of Empire building.

With this aim firmly in mind, Harry set about completing the space ship. The hull was charred and burned but otherwise unharmed. He still had quite a lot of fuel. His greatest fear had been that the fuel would ignite, but by carefully

jettisoning it to eliminate the pressure build-up he had kept it in a non-volatile state. He had lost a little but saved a lot.

The somewhat less than lawful antics of his long dead ancestor, Henry Morgan, preyed incessantly on his mind. So much so that, eventually, Harry decided that he was going to pick up where Henry had left off. He took one look at the old, charred *Cygnus* and in honour of the piratical connection re-christened it the *Black Swan*.

The voyage continued past the orbits of Venus, Earth and Mars and as they approached the main Asteroid belt again Harry completed the controls of his conglomerate space craft. A complicated system of pipes was run from the central fuel tanks to the auxiliary engines and a test firing was arranged.

Harry decided that he would fire the engines in diagonally matched pairs and give them a fifteen second burn. Soon everything was set. Engines one and four worked perfectly, as did numbers two and five. The problem came with engines three and six; both were Russian, Harry had deliberately matched them for that very reason. Within five seconds of firing it was obvious that the output on one was vastly superior to the other.

The Ship went into a sickening eccentric spin and it took a long time and all of Harry's skill to regain control and stabilize it.

The Engineers tackled the problem and soon discovered that one engine was much more fuel efficient than the other, which was much older. A reduction in fuel flow and an ingenious compensating valve fashioned by one of the Engineers was incorporated into the feed mechanism. Very gingerly a second firing was carried out and this time the results were not quite as drastic, the spin was less eccentric and was more easily controlled. After further adjustments a third firing was very timidly attempted. This time it was perfect, all the way through the power band to maximum.

The *Black Swan* was now the possessor of six new engines and one of its own originals. Given a little more time Harry was convinced that another of the originals could be made functional. At the present moment in time the *Black Swan* had sufficient power to operate as an interplanetary craft. All he was short of was fuel and a few other essential supplies and Harry had already decided that he was going to steal these items.

He knew he had a lot of weapons in his hold and in a flash of inspiration remembered the two large cannons. He made up his mind to have one fitted to the hull and he was quite correct in his assumption that it would add a lot of authority to his demands.

The Engineers enthusiastically tackled the problem. They adapted a television sight to the weapon and mounted it on a spare rotating antenna base. They added an elevating mechanism, a few simple controls and a remote firing button, then welded it to the hull, just above the bridge. When the power supply was connected the *Black Swan* became a war machine with a weapon capable of destroying or causing extensive damage to any ship, military or commercial.

The results of the test firings meant that the *Black Swan* had left the sanctuary of the rich rock field and was now on course for the fringes of the known Asteroid territories. The men had readily accepted the ideas of piracy and Harry, with his meticulous eye for detail, soon made them some suitable uniforms and had them swear a blood oath of allegiance to him.

To celebrate the occasion in an appropriate manner the spirit store was broached and the men had a wild, drunken party lasting two days. They took another two days to recover and finally set about starting their new careers. They had a computer fix on the orbit of their original rock field and could return to it at will to mine its wealth. However Harry needed another main base in the belt itself. By a study of various rock formations he found one to suit his purpose and then went carefully on the prowl.

Their first capture for want of a better word, became the basis of their standard trap, only this time the distress signal was a genuine one. They homed in on the signal to discover the old prospector's vessel in absolutely perfect condition except for its crew. The problem was the crew. There had only ever been one man in it, a determined old veteran called Josiah Smith.

If the vessel was old then Josiah was ancient, since he was at least fifty years older than his ship, and that was far from being new. Harry's men boarded the small vessel and found Josiah in a lot of pain and very ill. They took him to the *Black Swan* and genuinely did their best to resuscitate him. It was to no avail; Josiah was too old and too far gone. He was grateful for his rescue and his passing was made easier by being in the company of fellow human beings. He bequeathed all his goods and his ship to the crew and died quietly in Harry's arms two days after they rescued him.

The old vessel contained a large supplies of food, fuel and oxygen which were gratefully received into the resources of the *Black Swan*. The old ship was rigged up to be carried by the bigger ship and became the basis of their piratical attacks after a few cosmetic and theatrical alterations.

Harry needed two things. Firstly he obviously needed essential supplies such as oxygen, fuel, food and water. Secondly he needed people to mine the vast riches of the rock field they had found. He did not really want slaves, he preferred volunteers, but he would use his prisoners for work if that was how they wanted it. Either way he could not release anybody to go and report on his activities. The mortality of privately owned vessels was still high, approaching twenty percent in some years, within the Asteroid territories, so a few more catastrophes would go unnoticed for quite awhile.

At first they terrorized only the outer fringes of the known Asteroid belt picking up a few small rockets and some stores. He gained some very willing volunteers, men who had not had any luck at all and also some prisoners, mostly British, who did not want to know and were outraged by his whole operation.

The *Black Swan* returned to the rock field and set up a colony using the captured vessels as quarters. The prisoners and volunteers alike were set to



work extending the solar rock barriers to make life a little more tolerable on their close visits to the Sun.

Eventually the food and fuel supply problem became acute. Harry used some of his bona-fide volunteer prospectors to run to Ceres and cash in some of their spoils and to buy supplies and food using their small craft. However the large amounts required by Harry's organization could not be purchased without arousing undesirable official interest. In addition time, physical size and distance were against him and he dared not show the *Black Swan* at an Official Base as yet.

Harry had little doubt that soon there would be security warships out looking for them. He wondered if they would be retracing his steps to find out what actually happened to the supplies intended for Mars. If it was a British C.A.M.I.D. powered vessel, he was convinced he would be able to lose it within the Asteroid belt. On the other hand, if he was accosted by an American or Russian patrol ship, then he would have to fight.

The Operation was getting bigger and soon the demands outflanked the supplies. Harry held a council of war with his men and they decided to go for the big time and trap some big freighters. It was easier than he could ever have imagined.

The *Hercules*, the *Titan* and the *Atlas* simply fell into his hands as they dutifully answered the weak distress call. His radio jamming equipment had prevented any warning messages being sent and the haul had been very rich. It was a perfect crime.

Even though he knew nothing concerning the operation of C.A.M.I.D. units Harry considered it only a matter of time before his computers cracked the codes to switch the units back on. He had people working round the clock totally involved in this problem. Once they were operational he was convinced that he had some pilots amongst the prisoners and again it was only a matter of time before he coerced one of the Officers into piloting the big vessels .

At this point Michael interrupted. "Why do you not coerce one of the Captains?" he asked.

"Sadly the Captains were extremely uncooperative," replied Morgan. "I soon realized that they were still controlling their crews, so I instigated the oldest strategy of command divide and rule."

"You keep the Captains in a separate place then?" inquired Michael.

"Not exactly," toyed Morgan. "I simply set them free."

"Do you mean that you murdered them?" asked Michael slowly.

Morgan's eyes blazed dangerously, "I may be many things but I am not a murderer."

Michael asked meaningfully, "Well, what you do to them?"

"In the old days, Captains who were uncooperative were made to walk the plank. Some survived in the sea, some died in it, but it was the sea that killed them, not the pirates. I do the same thing. I give them a supply of oxygen and a space suit, then throw them overboard. It is not I that kills them, if indeed they

do die. It is I who gives them a chance." Morgan's reply was very self righteous.

"You are just as guilty of their deaths as much as if you had personally slit their throats," snapped Michael.

"Nonsense," laughed Morgan. "The Lord giveth and the Lord taketh."

Michael fell silent, his thoughts racing. When his emotions returned to normal he realized that Morgan was still talking. "So you see, now that my little Empire is prospering, the King needs a Queen." He turned towards Charlotte and added, "What more could any man desire for a wife than a beautiful young woman like yourself, Miss Linaker?"

He thought about it for a moment and smiled seductively, "Yes, Charlotte, you are just the woman I need... you will be my wife from this moment forward."

Michael took one look at the startled, stricken look on Charlotte's face and completely lost control. He leapt to his feet and scattered the place settings; he was closely followed by Arnie, Henry and Gary Mitchell who were all ready to commit murder, mayhem and a whole lot more.

Michael went straight for Morgan's throat but he actually never made it. The bolt from the 'Stun' gun sent him flying. The barman had been well chosen, he was armed and an excellent shot. Michael felt the searing pain and was thrown backwards onto the floor completely paralyzed. Unconsciousness, mercifully, soon followed; the last thing he heard was Charlotte's scream.

Meanwhile the mayhem continued, Gary Mitchell was closest to Morgan and hurled himself at him. They both fell to the floor struggling, Arnie was heading to join them and Henry was leaping across the room towards the barman. The low gravity made it farcical, it was like slow motion in a bad dream. The next shot hit Arnie right on the temple and he fell instantaneously, completely out of it.

The next shot hit Henry right on the chest but he shrugged it off with a grimace. The next one hit him in the abdomen and visibly slowed him, but with arms outstretched he kept going. The final shot hit him between the eyes and felled him, still desperately trying to get to grips with the gunman.

Meanwhile Gary was making a mess of Morgan. He had bitten his ear, broken his nose, dislocated his elbow and three of his fingers. He was now sat astride him methodically beating his face as a prelude to smashing his ribs. The barman shouted for Gary to stop but Gary never heard him. The barman shifted the control lever to 'Kill' and fired. Gary was lifted like a rag doll and hurled across the room. He lay lifeless in the corner, but he still had a little cynical grin on his face.

At this point more crew members arrived to deal with the deteriorating situation. Dinner was over.

## **CHAPTER 11. A STRANGE THING.**

It started as a faint buzz and slowly built up to a heavy drone. With the drone came back the beginnings of sensation accompanied by brilliant flashes of light and then came the pain. Michael was in agony as he struggled back to consciousness. Every muscle in his body seemed to be in a cramp and as his awareness returned he realized rather hazily, that he was still alive.

He wanted to scream but was unable to do so; as his senses became sharper, so did the pain. When it felt as though his heart would burst the cramps started to let go. He was perspiring profusely and felt absolutely wretched. He guessed that he had been zapped with one of the electronic guns and his aching, bruised mind began to recall the events leading up to his demise.

Sadly he reflected that he had failed in his attempt to get Harry Morgan. As his nervous system returned to normal, he perceived that he was on the floor. With great trepidation he opened his eyes and, as they slowly started to focus, the first thing he saw was the corpse of Gary Mitchell.

He tried to sit up and look round but felt very weak. One of the problems which made this relatively simple task difficult was the fact that he was handcuffed. All of a sudden he was seized from behind and hauled roughly to his feet by two crewmen. They supported him until he could stand unaided.

He forced himself to look round and then focused on the three prostrate figures of Gary, Arnie and Henry lying on the floor. His heart sank at the loss of these three men but his spirits revived a little when Arnie and Henry started to stir. He tried to help Gary but was restrained by the crewmen.

"You cannot do anything for that man," said Morgan in a strange nasal voice. "He is dead... and what is more it is his own fault. He attacked me and did me serious physical harm. He was shot by my guard after failing to heed the warning."

Michael turned and saw Morgan sitting on a couch, watching him. The reason for the nasal voice was blatantly obvious from the large dressing on his broken nose. Morgan was covered with cuts and bruises and his arm was in a sling; he also appeared to be suffering from deep shock. It was obvious to Michael that Gary had done a good job on Morgan and there was little doubt in his mind that had the gravity been normal, Morgan would have been in a far worse condition, possibly even dead. He could find no sympathy in his heart, only sorrow for his friend.

As Michael looked round he saw that the rest of the crew were under guard and manacled, like himself. Charlotte was being kept apart from the rest and was seated. She, too, was in a state of deep shock.

As he looked round, Michael was not sure, but the group seemed incomplete. He looked again and his suspicion that someone was missing was confirmed. He did a quick mental check and discovered that it was Neville. Nobody seemed to be panicking, so Michael wondered if he had escaped in

the confusion and his absence had not yet been noticed, or, perhaps, if he had been locked away somewhere else. Either way he decided that he would not comment on the situation.

Instead he said, "How do you intend to dispose of the body?"

"We will eject him and disintegrate him with the cannon," replied Morgan. "If you have any prayers or things you wish to say, I will give you permission to do so now."

At Harry's command the crewmen removed his handcuffs.

Michael made it quick. He simply said, "Let us pray."

Everybody bowed their heads including Morgan and his crew.

"Dear Lord, we commit the soul of our friend and comrade, Gary Mitchell, into your care. Have mercy on his Soul and that of his murderer.... Amen."

There was no reaction from the crew. The First Officer of the *Black Swan* gently loaded Gary into the airlock and ejected him. Morgan limped over to the control desk and armed the cannon. The V.D.U. picked up Gary's body floating serenely away and for the first time Michael realized that the *Black Swan* was under way. The cross-hairs focused on the body and Morgan actuated the cannon. There was a blinding flash of light and Gary was gone.

Morgan then turned away from the desk and addressed Michael. "You have deeply offended me, Captain Stephens. I offered you the hand of friendship but you threw it back in my face. I am sure you must realize that I cannot allow you to remain on board, so, figuratively speaking, I am afraid you will have to walk the plank."

Michael did not respond, he just stood there defiantly.

Morgan continued, "I will allow you the choice of one, two or three air tanks. ...how do you choose?"

Michael, who was a great believer in the old adage, 'Where there is life, there is hope' responded immediately. "Three, please!"

This would give him about a week of life. A week to float aimlessly about and contemplate a slow, lingering death. On the other hand, he had a week to get himself rescued, although in his own mind he knew that this was not possible.

His own crew showed little reaction. They were cowed and deeply shocked. Charlotte was sitting there with tears streaming down her beautiful face, though her face showed no other emotion.

His space suit was brought, the food and water compartments were filled and he was helped into it. He could have fought but it would have been undignified and he would have lost anyway. So he put it on in a docile, obedient manner and the three tanks were fitted.

"Any last words?" asked Morgan.

"Only to my Crew. Please do not do anything foolish like I did. I will do my best to return but you must realize that my chances are, at best, marginal." He then turned to Morgan. "I am ready."

Morgan nodded, "Goodbye, Captain."

The airlock was opened and Michael stepped in with a lot more bravado than he actually felt. The inner door shut with a quiet hiss. The pressure in the airlock started to build up; instead of emptying the airlock they were pressurising it. Michael knew it would be an unpleasant experience because he would be shot out like a cork from a champagne bottle and would have no chance of clinging to the vessel.

Michael was able to see Charlotte through the glass panel. She had now broken down completely and was sobbing her heart out. It did absolutely nothing for Michael's composure.

As the pressure built up Michael braced himself for the shock. Then it came, the outer door snapped open and with a rush of escaping air Michael was ejected into the vast emptiness of space to await his fate. The trajectory, either by accident or design, took him neatly between the outer hulls of the *Black Swan*. He kept his eye on the cannon and wondered if Morgan intended to use it. In some ways he hoped he would, but the frailty of human endeavour ensures that life is desperately clung to, no matter how dire the circumstances.

Soon the *Black Swan* was a receding speck in the distance and Michael looked round to try and get his bearings; the silence was overpowering. Michael checked his gauges and, true to his word, Morgan had given him three full tanks; an additional bonus was a fully-charged jet pack. As his eyes accustomed themselves to the blackness of his surroundings, he started to pick up distant stars as little points of light. Some boulders and debris reflected light in the Asteroid belt, but by no means all of them. Michael slowly rotated himself, desperately searching for some kind of haven to head for. He found only emptiness.

He drifted aimlessly for twelve hours, breathing very lightly to conserve oxygen. He became very hungry and thirsty but tried to ignore it so that his meagre rations would last longer. At the end of twenty-four hours he allowed himself one food pellet and a sip of water. It tasted delicious.

He scanned his surroundings yet again, but there was still no visible, close reference point. Michael came to a decision and reasoned that he was on the Sun side of the Asteroids. Therefore, placing the diminutive-sized Sun firmly at his back, he gunned his jet-pack towards what he hoped was the Asteroid belt.

Twenty-four hours later the outlook was still barren and Michael began to suffer. He drifted in and out of sleep and he was gradually losing his body heat. He was plagued with attacks of cramps brought on by his enforced inactivity and still he drifted on. Shortly after this he began to think of God.

Michael, who had been brought up on the Moon, was a Roman Catholic and had been brought up with their traditions from birth. It was typical of the Roman Catholic faith that they had considered it important to set up a Mission on the Moon. They were the only religious sect who had tackled the problem and their pragmatism had brought results. They now had a flourishing Parish there and their Priests were sent to it on a regular basis. It was the ideal setting for Retreats and Meditations.

Michael said his prayers and prayed for assistance. strangely enough he felt neither fear nor panic; on the contrary, mentally he was very calm, but physically he felt wretched. He allowed himself to drift off to sleep as he floated totally alone in the vastness of space. It was the nightmare of every space traveller.

"Help me."

Michael woke with a start as the two words filtered through his befuddled brain. He grinned ruefully to himself as he realized that he must have been dreaming.

"Help me.... please help me."

The words were quietly spoken but Michael heard them not in his ears but somewhere in the back of his head. They were perceived very clearly but there was a hopelessness in their enunciation. Michael looked round but could not see anything.

"Help me, please."

This time the voice was stronger and insistent. Michael desperately searched the void around him but was unable to comprehend either the source or the method of communication.

All of a sudden there was a dull grey reflection of light on his right hand side, about ten miles away. He screwed up his eyes and was able to make out an extremely fragmented rock field; some big rocks but mostly small ones. He decided that this had to be the source and the method of communication had to be some kind of telepathy.

All tiredness dropped away from him as he gunned his jet-pack and turned towards the rock field. An hour later he was in amongst it and searching for a vessel in distress. His search became more and more desperate as the charge in his jet pack was slowly, but inexorably consumed.

"Please, help me."

This time the notion that he heard in his head was distinctly distressed, but it had enough strength in it to make him turn his head towards its source. Then he saw it. The vessel looked vaguely familiar to Michael. It was jet black, very smooth and was nose on to the rock field. The vessel was not cylindrical but more flattened, rather like a smooth black pebble, or a compressed pear drop. Its hull gave no indication as to its method of propulsion and there were no obvious portholes or hatches from the view he had.

Using his pack sparingly, Michael jettied across and approached the strange craft. It was further than he thought and, as he approached, the vessel seemed to grow in size, but its perfect proportions lessened the effect of its bulk.

Michael was in no position to approach cautiously, he had no weapon, little propulsion and no back-up. However he approached slowly to avoid overshooting too far in case he missed his target. He did not miss, but he received a surprise nevertheless. As he gently landed on its hull, he skidded straight across it. His magnetic boots had no effect at all, the hull was not even metal. It was constructed of a material he had never seen before. His headlong,

uncontrolled traverse across the smooth, black surface ended up in a rather undignified heap on the rocks which were gathered at the front of the vessel.

Michael checked his suit and was greatly relieved to find it was undamaged. Slowly he turned back towards the black vessel and was devastated by what he saw. As he viewed the smooth front of the craft his mind shot back through the years. No wonder the vessel was familiar, he had seen it twice before, it was the vessel which everybody had said did not exist. He knew then that they were wrong and just for a moment he pondered the fickleness of fate. The very vessel which had ruined his career now lay before him, seemingly disabled and impotent.

It also represented his only chance of a continued existence. His prayers had indeed been answered and in a wave of utter gratitude and unaccustomed devoutness he said a sincere and silent prayer to his Maker.

In the blackness of space it was still not obvious what had caused the demise of the ship, so Michael decided to risk using his limited energy source and switched on his lamp. Its feeble beam soon picked out the source of the trouble. The very thing which he had feared for years had actually happened to this vessel. There were some viewing panels in the front of the ship, fairly large ones about six feet by six feet. One of these panels had been struck by a rock and completely shattered.

Most vessels had self-actuating metal shutters which dropped automatically and resealed the cabin, thus preventing complete depressurisation and ultimate death. This craft was no exception and its shield had dropped but to no avail.

Fate had decreed that this vessel would be struck by a large splinter of rock instead of a round boulder. The rock was about fifteen feet long and two feet in diameter, tapering to a needle sharp point. The point had pierced the panel and the shutter had dropped on to the rock, firmly wedging it into place. The vessel was still in a state of decompression and open to the vagaries of space.

"The occupants must surely be dead, they wouldn't have had a chance," mused Michael to himself.

"Please.... hurry."

The voice galvanized Michael into action. He clawed his way along the protruding rock to discover that entry could be gained through an aperture of about two feet by three feet. Unfortunately it would be impossible to get through with his tanks on. Without a second thought he released his tanks, took a deep breath and pushed his pack through the hole. He followed as quickly as he could. With bursting lungs he desperately sought his pack, found it, reconnected it and released his pent up breath. He nearly suffocated.

In his haste he had completely forgotten to switch his tanks back on. With shaking fingers and bordering on panic he sought the offending valve, turned it on and gasped in the life giving air.

He shuddered as he pondered what the original occupants must have endured as the unimpeded depressurisation had inexorably run its course.

Once inside it was very dark and it was difficult to see anything, even with the assistance of his lamp. He found the needle-sharp end of the rock and was absolutely amazed to discover that the tip of the rock was a diamond some two feet long. The point glittered wickedly in the feeble light of his lamp.

He took a firm hold on the rock, braced himself on some kind of console and pushed. The rock moved from side to side but would not free itself. Michael moved himself to a new position and braced his feet against the underside of the shutter and pushed, but it remained firmly jammed.

The voice in his head returned. "Thank you for your efforts, but I fear it is too late, my air is now all gone and so is my time..... "

Michael shouted out with frustration and in a fit of anger pushed with all his might. It moved, only a little, but enough to free the rock. With his free hand he gently put pressure on the javelin-like rock. Ever so slowly it moved, so he put a little more pressure on it and pushed it harder. Suddenly it was free and floating gently back out, away from the shattered opening.

This left Michael in a very dangerous position. He had to free himself to allow the shutter to drop, otherwise he was likely to simply replace the rock with himself in the opening. He was sweating profusely and using his oxygen at an alarming rate.

Summoning all his strength he raised himself as high as he could and in an explosive movement he straightened his legs. The gamble worked, Michael shot into the cabin and the shutter slammed down into position.

It was apparent that everything on the ship had automatically shut down when the depressurisation had occurred. As the cabin resealed life slowly returned to the ship. Michael knew he was not free from danger, he did not know what the air pressure in the cabin was going to be or what kind of level the gravity was going to take. He did not even know whether the atmosphere would support human life.

Michael was convinced that the ship was not of an Earthly origin. The gravity returned and he gently bumped to the floor, it was stronger than the *Atlas* and, perhaps, ten percent stronger than the Earth's. In short it was quite acceptable.

Starting with the faintest glimmer the cabin lighting came into action. There were no lamps as such, the whole ceiling slowly became luminescent, a faint blue at first then gradually building up to a bright pearl. After his prolonged sojourn in space, it took Michael a few minutes to focus his eyes. When he finally managed it, what he saw almost broke his heart.

The argument was now over, the ship was definitely alien, there were two of them lying, dead, on the floor. They were vaguely human but completely different; he had no time to study them at this stage.

He felt his space suit start to wrinkle against him and realized that the cabin was repressurising. He could hear a faint hiss in the background as the new atmosphere flooded in. He watched his gauges and saw the pressure rise quickly to about fifteen percent above one Earth atmosphere.



Suddenly the green light in the middle of his gauge cluster clicked on. He breathed a sigh of relief. This was the signal that the atmosphere of the cabin had been sampled and found to be capable of supporting human life. He tore off his space suit and tried to gather his thoughts.

“Hang on a little longer,” he shouted. “I will try to find you.”

There were three hatch-like sealed openings at the back of the cabin. He carefully stepped over the two dead aliens and went to the first hatch. There was a switch on the bulkhead, Michael pressed it. The hatch opened smoothly and there was a slight inrush of air as the pressure equalized. Michael looked into a room full of equipment, possibly a computer room he thought to himself. There was no sign of life.

With a quick oath Michael leapt to the next one and opened it. To his dismay it opened on to a corridor with another ten hatches in it. He was almost weeping with frustration.

“Help me to find you,” he yelled down the corridor.

A weak vague notion of the third hatch on the left flashed into his mind; Michael rushed to it and opened it. The Alien was there sprawled across a kind of bunk and looked lifeless.

“No.. no.. don’t give in now,” whispered Michael fiercely.

He rolled the Alien over and shook him and applied pressure to his chest in an effort to make him breathe. There was no sign of life at all, the skin was a delicate pastel turquoise

and the eyes were shut, in fact the creature looked strangely peaceful.

Michael worked on the Alien for a full ten minutes but by the end of that time he was an exhausted, shattered shadow of his former self. The events of the past week caught up with him. The increased gravity sapped his strength, the exertions of sealing the ship and finally his vigorous work on the Alien overtook him. In complete despair he buried his head forlornly in his hands.

He remained in this state for several minutes until he finally pulled himself together and drew on his inner reserves. He stood up and took another look at the Alien. He was startled to see that there had been a change in its condition. The delicate pastel turquoise was slowly being replaced by an equally delicate pastel pink. Michael studied the body carefully and with a great surge of pure, unadulterated joy he realized that there was a slight movement from the chest, the creature was breathing, very shallowly, but successfully: the colour change was occurring as the re-oxygenating process took its due course.

He still felt a bit helpless, he did not know how to aid the creature which had come so close to death and begged his help. The Alien must have had a miserable existence since the depressurisation. His cabin had automatically sealed but, as the life-support systems had shut down, he had been trapped inside with only the air it contained and no sustenance.

Michael took a look round the cabin and his eyes settled on an oval, crystalline bowl which could only be some kind of sink. He crossed the room to it, pressed one of the buttons over it and water flowed into the basin. He

thought he would risk tasting it, just to make sure. It was odourless and looked like water, he tried it and was relieved to discover that it was pure and delicious. There were some towels hanging from a rail on the wall. He snatched two of them, soaked one in water and returned to the Alien's side. He bathed the face of the stricken creature and then, just like an old-fashioned trainer in a boxing ring, he flapped the other towel using it as a fan.

After a few minutes Michael noticed that the muscular function was returning. At first it was just a few involuntary jerks and twitches in the limbs. This progressed to the face and eventually consciousness returned to the creature, the death-like countenance dropping away like a veil.

Suddenly the eyelids flickered and the Alien opened its eyes. As it saw Michael its face twisted into a look of abject terror.

"Easy now easy," reassured Michael. "I know it must be a shock seeing me, but you asked for my help and I have done my best for you." Michael did not know if he was being understood or not, but hoped that the tone of his voice would help calm the creature. He continued to bathe its face and smiled down benevolently at it.

Slowly the fear passed away and the creature relaxed as it realized Michael was helping and not trying to harm it.

"Can you understand me?" asked Michael.

The creature looked at him and its facial expression mellowed. It did not speak but Michael felt the creature's reply inside his head. "Speech is not necessary, think your questions and direct them to me if you can, we do not communicate in the same way as you, we communicate mind to mind."

"What can I do to help you?" thought Michael.

"Are my companions dead?"

"Yes. ...I'm very sorry."

"You appear to have sealed the ship?"

"Yes, the shutter was jammed by a big rock, you were very unlucky."

At this point Michael experienced the feeling of the creature's sorrow and desolation.

"Were there only three of you on board, or should I try to look for other survivors?"

"No... there were only three of us.... thank you for your help. What do you intend to do now?"

Michael considered the question carefully before answering, then answered truthfully,

"I don't know... I have no vessel, I am very much at your mercy."

The Alien looked puzzled. "Why were you without a vessel in outer space, surely this is not normal?"

Michael grinned sheepishly. "You are quite correct, it is a very unusual situation. My vessel was seized unlawfully and I was cast adrift to die slowly.... you have saved my life just as much as I have saved yours."

"Then we must work together," said the Alien sagely, after an introspective pause.

"How long have you been trapped inside your cabin?"

"I do not know exactly, but it must be less than eight of our days otherwise I, too, would be dead..... I take it you are from the third planet?"

"Yes."

"Well, one of our days is approximately one and a half of yours."

"You must be famished," observed Michael who was still scarcely able to believe that this conversation was taking place without uttering a word. He was starting to get a grasp of how to do the communications. It was done conceptually rather than by means of language.

"I still feel too weak to eat," replied the Alien.

"Please let me find you something, I'm sure you desperately need it."

"You are right, but in a little while my strength will return sufficiently for me to get around the ship and check it out..... a drink would help a lot..... a cup is on the unit over there."

Michael dutifully filled it and returned to the bunk. He helped the Alien into an upright position and stacked pillows behind him to prop him up. The Alien took the cup and delicately sipped from it. "Thank you very much I'm beginning to feel better now.... do you have a name?"

"Yes, I am known as Michael," he replied, deciding not to complicate matters with his full name.

"Michael is a strange but elegant name," replied the Alien.

"I am known as Kandrás."

"That, too, is an unusual name. Tell me Kandrás, can you pilot this vessel, or was the pilot killed?"

"Like you, Michael, I am a Commander. I know everything about this vessel including how to pilot it. I will show you the controls and teach you also."

For the first time in a long time Michael felt a surge of hope pulse through him. Suddenly he felt very tired and he sat down on the bunk next to the Alien, it was very comfortable.

Again the thoughts of his companion pervaded his mind. "Michael, you are exhausted yourself... lie down with me for a while and refresh yourself. I am recovering very quickly now and there is nothing else you can do at this moment. We are safe now...so rest."

Michael gave in and wearily lay back. He was asleep in seconds and there they lay, the Earthman and the Alien, both completely trusting each other and at the beginning of a friendship which was based on one of the strongest bonds of all. They had both faced imminent death and had come through it together. Their gratitude and respect for each other was truly genuine.

## **CHAPTER 12. UNFAMILIAR SURROUNDINGS.**

Six hours later the sleep slipped smoothly away from Michael and instantly he was awake and alert. Kandrás had moved away from the bunk and was standing by the wash basin bathing his face. For the first time Michael took a close look at this alien life form; strangely there was no sense of repulsion, only a sense of kinship.

Kandrás was a biped and roughly humanoid in shape. The torso was thick set and muscular with a perfectly proportioned balance between the legs and body. The body was clothed in a short-sleeved, ornate, tight fitting garment without trousers; the exposed legs rippled with muscles but the great difference occurred at the feet. Instead of a single foot the ankle split into two with a foot on each portion. The feet were flattish and appeared to be webbed between each of the three long toes. The most startling difference came in the arm structure.

The upper arm was heavily muscled but at the elbow, again, there was a division. The creature had two forearms on each side and each forearm had an extra joint giving a great dexterity to each of the three-fingered hands.

The head was well proportioned and had widely set, slightly bulging eyes. The nose was diminutive but the mouth was perfect with white, evenly-spread teeth. There were no ears as such, but the facility existed in the form of two small holes to the side of the eyes. Behind these orifices there was a kind of deep red, delicate, lattice work of flesh attached to the side of the neck.

It reminded Michael of some of the fan coral he had seen on Earth. It came to him in a flash, they must be a kind of gill structure, the Alien was amphibious; the double webbed feet would be superb under water.

As Michael watched, he realized that the creature was not breathing through its mouth. He looked more closely and discovered that there were respiration points just above the angle of the neck. On the skull just above the eyes were two deeper red protrusions, they were like a smooth bulge and Michael guessed that these were the keys to the Alien's telepathy.

Between the bumps and the eyes were two cat's whisker type structures; they looked like antennae and, again, Michael wondered if they were transmitters or receivers. As Kandrás turned round he noticed that there was no facial hair at all, but the scalp bore a flaxen coloured hair of a comfortable length. Michael had always imagined that Alien forms were going to bear some kind of resemblance to the insect world.

He was relieved that this one, at least, did not; it was not even an arthropod. The skin was smooth and without blemish and was coloured on the red side of pink. Kandrás, decided Michael, was a beautiful, powerful creature with an intellect and a background far superior to his own, if the ship was anything to go by.

Kandrás detected Michael's scrutiny. "Do you like what you see?" he asked cautiously.

Michael grinned self consciously and replied, "Yes... I'm sorry I did not mean to offend, but as far as I know, I am the only man to have ever seen a life-form from anywhere except the planet Earth."

"You may very well be right."

"Are you amphibious?"

"Only in emergencies, my species is slowly losing this facility."

"Where are you from?" persisted Michael.

"It would be too difficult to explain at this moment because we have no notion of each other's overview of speed, time and distance. Let it suffice to say that we are not of this galaxy."

"Why are you here?"

Michael felt a wave of sadness overpower him, slowly it passed and Kandrass continued. "Our world is doomed, our Sun is expanding and is close to engulfing our planet. The process has started and is irreversible, it will eventually happen to your world, but not for a long time. We are searching for a new home. Your own planet is very inviting, but it is out of the question; we could not interfere with your civilization."

"Then why stay here?" asked Michael who was being inquisitive and not belligerent.

Kandrass was startled by the question, "Why do you ask?"

"I have seen this vessel twice before during the last few years, " ventured Michael.

Kandrass raised his antennae in mock horror. "You have seen us before? I thought we were undetectable."

"You are, on our instruments, but I saw you with my own eyes and so did my Crew."

"Aah... I remember an incident near to the sixth planet.... Was that you?"

"It was and that sighting completely changed my life. It is rather strange, but I am here on account of this vessel."

"This is very fascinating, please could you explain."

Michael quickly told his story and its consequences. He held nothing back and even included the suspicion that this very vessel may have had something to do with the disappearance of the *Hercules* and *Titan*.

There was a moment of silence at the end of his story, Kandrass stared solemnly and said, "Michael I assure you that we have not attacked any ships, nor would we, unless we were physically threatened ourselves."

"I know that now," replied Michael. "I, too, was tricked by them and lost my ship and my crew. They cast me adrift in space after I refused to join their gang, I even attacked their Captain but was disabled before I could get to him. One of my Crewmen backed me up and worked him over, but one of the guards killed him. It seems that my handling of the Mission has failed my Crew, my Ship and my Company."

"You are a man of great honour, Michael. Do not distress yourself we will recover everything using my vessel and we will do it together."

"Thank you, Kandras, your help is gratefully received... but you have still not told me why you remained in our Solar System."

Again came the flood of grief and despondency. "The answer is simple we had nowhere to go. Our signals have never been acknowledged and we have seen no others of our species since we left our home a long time ago. I fear that I am the last surviving member of my species now that my crew is gone. I am no danger... there will be no invasion. It is true that your planet with all its water would have made a wonderful home, but the resident population, no offence intended to you, would have been extremely sceptical about sharing their planet with an alien life form. I have also witnessed your willingness and capabilities to defend yourselves we would not have stood a chance. As it is now, I simply need some company to live out my days; I don't think they would begrudge me that... I have a lot of knowledge which could help your people." Kandras paused and reflected for a moment then said, "Are you well enough to eat, Michael? I'm starving. We will feed and then start on our repairs."

"I'm yours to command," smiled Michael.

They left the cabin and proceeded back to the Command Area, Kandras took one look at the death and devastation and a black cloud of sorrow invaded Michael's mind and simply swamped him, causing him physical pain. He dropped to his knees and cried out. Kandras turned and saw what his emotional outburst had done to Michael. Immediately the pain disappeared leaving Michael gasping and weak at the knees.

"I'm sorry Michael it was just seeing all this carnage, I could not keep control it will not happen again."

Michael nodded and struggled to his feet. "I'm alright now, but I couldn't handle that amount of telepathic power... my poor, old brain feels bruised."

They walked to the two dead aliens who had changed colour with the return of the atmosphere. Already the bodies were in the first stages of decomposition and starting to smell. In spite of this, they looked at peace and strangely beautiful.

Kandras went back down the corridor to a store room and returned with two bulky body bags. Together they gently lifted the corpses into the bags and sealed them.

"Do you have a ritual for your dead?" asked Michael softly.

"Yes, we believe in a God. It goes back a long time but we pray to our God through his Son who was sent down to our Planet in our form to establish a system of worship and an administration."

"This story sounds familiar, what did you call this Son of God?"

"He chose the name Jesus."

Now it was Michael's turn to be emotional. "That is the same name which is used on Earth for the Son of God He must visit all civilizations in their own form, perhaps trying to unite them. It's.... It's....." Michael's voice tailed away as his mind wrestled with the enormity of his revelation.

"Do you believe in Jesus?" asked Kandras.

"Yes, I always did deep down, but there were nagging doubts from time to time... but not any more."

"Please will you pray for the souls of my Crew members with me?"

"Of course I will."

Both men said their silent prayers and then loaded the bodies into the airlock; Michael realized that the aliens were very heavy. They were also very big about seven feet six inches tall. Although they were both weakened, they managed the task, eventually. Kandrás ejected the bodies, crossed to the observation panel and gazed sorrowfully at the remains of his former companions.

"Watch with me a moment, Michael," requested Kandrás.

Michael came and stood by him and watched the pathetic bundles drifting aimlessly away. As he watched, both bags started to glow simultaneously, first pink, then deeper red. Soon the whole bags were a fiery red, then came the sparks. Slowly an aura of gases built up round the flames, then the flames really took hold and they danced and changed colour with wild intensity, getting bigger and more awesome by the second. Finally with a blinding flash of intense white light the display finished and there was nothing.

There was a respectable period of silence before Kandrás spoke. "One of the great creations of an advanced civilization... self-cremating body bags spectacular, don't you think?"

There was more than a hint of cynicism in his remark.

"It was like a miniature super-nova," replied Michael.

"You are very perceptive; Michael... that is just what it was intended to be. Now it is done, I think that I can eat. I am desperately hungry... could you eat something? I'm pretty sure the food synthesizer can come up with something palatable for you."

"It's going to be a long painful death if it can't," mused Michael. "Let's give it a try."

Ten minutes later they sat down to a strange, steaming, stew-like bowl of food and a vaguely pink, sparkling drink of some kind. Michael hesitated, crossed his fingers, stuck in the triangular eating utensil and, very gingerly, lifted some food to his mouth, held his breath and shovelled it in. To his amazement it was absolutely delicious.

They both ate in silence and drank their drinks, Michael could feel his cheeks going a little numb and a warm glow swept through him. At first he thought that he was reacting against the food, but a moment later he realized that it was not the food but the drink which was causing the trouble. He was getting tipsy..... he chuckled inwardly as the notion occurred to him that they weren't so different after all.

\* \* \* \* \*

Neville Johnson was cold and hungry; he was alone and a fugitive. He was trapped and getting desperate and had failed to formulate any kind of plan to

exploit his freedom. In the confusion which had surrounded the fight at dinner, Neville had simply slipped under the table and had crawled to a locker where he had managed to conceal himself. David Boothman had seen him go and winks had been exchanged. It was debatable whether he would be missed straight away and, in the event of a search, he did not want to be retaken.

When the room had finally been cleared, Neville had acted quickly. He had quickly slipped out of the dining room and stealthily worked his way into one of the outer hulls. Fortunately it was a big ship and the Crew was small so it was easy to avoid them. As he looked round he saw a porthole and peered through it. The *Atlas* was under tow and floating gently behind them at the end of a long latticework girder. They were moving relatively slowly and Neville wondered if there was a Crew aboard or if it was totally empty. The longer he waited the more he realized that he needed to get back on board the *Atlas* if he was to be of any use at all.

He accepted that his Captain was dead and it grieved him. Neville had liked Captain Stephens, he had respected him and that respect had been returned. He had also lost his new found friend, Gary. Neville was hell bent on revenge and he was determined to get satisfaction before he, too, was killed.

With an effort, he pulled himself together and considered his position. It was obvious that he needed a space suit, without one he could not hope to make the journey across to the *Atlas*. He would have to find one and quickly.

The hull that he was in did not appear to be used very much. In fact it looked very much as the original prospectors would have left it. He decided to search it to see what he could find. The smaller hull was firmly welded to the larger hull and entry was gained through a large tube which connected to the hold. At that moment Neville was hiding behind two large packing crates and had sat there for many hours without any disturbance at all.

Stealthily, he emerged from his hiding place and began a thorough search of the hull. It was very dark and he groped about until he found a door. It was some kind of sixth sense which persuaded him not to barge straight through it. It was a very old fashioned airlock which had been fitted to the ship.

It was optional whether the cargo hold was pressurised or not, depending on what was being carried. Consequently it did not have the safety precautions associated with the main airlock. To have opened it would have been disastrous, it would also have been the end of Neville.

Instead, he felt round the door and found a dimmer switch for the lighting. To his amazement it worked and a comforting, dull, yellow glow slithered into the hold. He kept the lighting down to a minimum to avoid detection and when he realized what he had nearly done he suddenly felt much warmer, in fact he broke out into a sweat.

He crossed the hold and located the door in the bulkhead. It was manually operated but was well oiled and in good repair; it swung open easily. Neville then entered what were the living quarters of the original crew. It was still in its original condition apart from some obviously additional thick cables at high



level. Neville guessed that these were for the remote controls of the engines to the bridge. He went into the first of the four small cabins, again using the dimmer switches. He looked into the large locker and found that there were some clothes. Gratefully he slipped into some warm clothing and then found another treasure; a pair of old space boots. They were a little on the big side, but he put them on any way.

With growing confidence Neville resealed the cabin and moved on to the next. At first glance it appeared to be empty, but a more thorough investigation yielded a pair of space gloves: not the answer to his problem but essential enough. They were a little perished in places but adequate for the short journey he intended to make.

The third cabin was larger and had probably been the Skipper's. The first locker was bare, the second contained some ordinary clothes. In the opposite corner of the cabin was a third locker. Neville quickly crossed to it, swung open the door and caught his breath; hung up inside were three well-preserved space suits.

Neville took one down and examined it carefully, particularly the seams. Everything seemed to be alright but there was something very unfamiliar about the suit. Suddenly the penny dropped, Neville laughed inwardly as he realized that the suit was a Russian made garment.

“Thank God for good old Russian thoroughness,” he said aloud.

Everything was there, even the helmet, but there was not a tank. Neville reasoned that they must have a store room where these things were kept and he continued his search. He ventured warily onto the bridge of the vessel, but felt very exposed in the glassed-in nose panel. A quick glance confirmed that it had more or less been stripped apart from the remote engine controls, so Neville quickly withdrew to avoid detection.

He returned to the hold to make a more thorough search. He eased up the lighting again and had a look round; no cylinders were in evidence. There were a series of lockers across the rear bulkhead which were the last remaining places to be searched. The first one contained a supply of hand tools and the second one was empty. Inside the third there was a puzzle: three different coloured cylinders with the contents scribed in Russian. It could have been Double-Dutch as far as Neville was concerned, it meant absolutely nothing to him.

Neville opened the valve on the first one and decided it was not air, or even oxygen. It was possibly acetylene, he remembered seeing a welding torch in the tool locker and dragged it out. He tried the union onto the tank, it fitted but would not fit the others, so he realized that he could not possibly use that cylinder.

He tested the other cylinders and they were both odourless. Picking up the cylinders he returned to the cabin where the space suits were. He tried the union on the first of the tanks but it would not fit; he tried the second and it fitted like a glove. Again Neville thanked the simple logic of the Russians.

Quickly, Neville went back to the hold taking the space suit and cylinders with him. He took time out to leave everything neat and tidy in an effort to cover his tracks.

He inspected the outer door inside the hold and realized that it was a single door. He also found a switch which would operate a warning light when the door opened. The pertinent question was whether this light would have been transferred to the main bridge console. Neville was of the opinion that any intelligent Captain would wire a telltale light on his airlocks; he remembered the mass of wiring from the bridge and decided to jam it.

He looked around for the means to do it. Back in the tool locker he had seen some thin metal strips and some insulation tape; he found them and crossed to the door. Neville bent the metal and wriggled it inside the door seal until it trapped the micro-switch. He then taped the metal firmly to the door surround, it would have to do, it only needed to hold a minute or so. After the hold had been sealed to prevent depressurisation of the whole ship, Neville slipped into the borrowed spacesuit.

The gauges showed that there was little air left in the tank, about an hour if he was careful. He sealed his helmet and took a few breaths; it was a bit fusty but breathable. He knew it was dangerous to go outside without lifelines but he did not have any choice. On a whim he went back to the tool locker and armed himself with a small hand-pick which was normally used for chipping off rock samples.

Very gently he opened the door a fraction and was relieved to see that the micro-switch had been retained by his do-it-yourself burglary kit. There was a slight hiss as the air gushed out of the slightly open door and when the movement stopped and the pressure was equalized, Neville checked his space suit, confirmed that it was working and opened the door fully. He gently floated through and quickly closed the door behind him.

The door was on the outer side of the hull and therefore he was undetectable from the bridge of the main rocket. His big problem was how to transfer from the outer rocket onto the towing gantry. Using handholds and whatever else he could find he worked his way down to the fins at the rear of the compact, Russian rocket. Frantically he clung on, there was no easy way to transfer. He had no lifeline or jet pack, so he would have to jump for it. If he missed he would suffer the fate of his Captain but, at least, it would be over quicker. Neville lined himself up with the gantry then smoothly pulled himself forward and let go.

There was a dull metallic clunk as his air bottle hit the fin. It was only a small collision but it altered his trajectory. Instead of heading straight for the gantry it seemed that he was going to miss it by a few feet. Slowly he floated across unable to do anything, he was only just out of reach and it was agonizing to miss by so little.

Suddenly he remembered his little hand pick. He unhooked it from his belt and fastened the short lanyard to his wrist. Keeping his cool he threw it at the

gantry and was lucky first time, it hooked on and he swung in a tight arc to land in an undignified heap on the latticed structure. He took a deep breath and thanked his lucky stars, then unhooked the little life-saving pick and scrambled inside the lattice work of the gantry. Slowly he worked his way up the middle until, at last, he was able to touch the *Atlas*.

He looked at his gauges and it was a shock to see that he had only fifteen minutes of air left. There were three airlocks on the *Atlas* and the nearest was on the side close to the bridge. Neville thought that this would be too obvious to an observer, so he decided to try for the one furthest away on the opposite side near the motor room. The third lock was right on top of the centre of the forward section and was in full view of any observer.

He worked his way along the grab rails which ran along the belly of the vessel and approached the lock. He glanced at his gauges and was perturbed to see that he had only two minutes of air left, no time for any kind of caution. There was no hesitation, Neville hit the button, opened the airlock and entered, quickly shutting it behind him.

At this moment his air ran out and the airlock was still going through its cycle. He gulped a large breath and held it as long as he could, which was not easy after his recent exertions. It seemed an eternity and his lungs were at bursting point when, at last, the red light turned to green and he fell out of the airlock and ripped his helmet off. He laid there for a few minutes enjoying the clean fresh air of his own vessel.

By the time he had recovered his composure Neville knew instinctively that the vessel was deserted. He still did a thorough, cautious search of the ship which only confirmed what he already knew. He was totally alone.

In the subdued emergency lighting which was ever present in the *Atlas* he headed for the galley, hoping against hope that it had not been stripped bare. It was soon apparent that all the fresh food had been taken but there was still a good supply of tinned and pre-packed food. He chose a can of stew, enough for four persons, gave it a few minutes in the microwave then slowly and meticulously ate the lot. He followed this with a full pint of coffee and a portion of rice pudding. At the end of this plentiful meal he felt a lot better and could feel his morale returning to normal.

By this time exhaustion was taking over and as he tried to formulate his next move he realized that he could not put two rational thoughts together. Sensibly he turned the audio airlock alarms up to full volume to warn him of unwanted guests then he went and laid down on his bunk. He was asleep in seconds.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Come on in, Fred," said Sir Richard, without any trace of emotion. Fred Ford entered the room and made no effort whatsoever to cover the fact that he was visibly distressed. He crossed to the low table in the centre of the room and sat down.

He nodded briefly to the other occupant, "Morning Clive."

"Morning Fred," replied Clive.

Sir Richard Crest crossed the room to his own desk and placed the office in its secure mode. He then joined the others and sat down.

"Gentlemen, I have called you here, as you have probably guessed, to discuss the *Atlas* mission. In particular we need to bring you up to date, Clive."

Clive raised an eyebrow, "I trust everything is going well, Sir Richard?"

There was an awkward silence which was finally broken by Sir Richard, "Tell him the story, Fred."

"There isn't much to tell really," observed Fred. "The voyage was fast and brilliantly executed. We received the normal twelve hour routine transmissions and a few others on the scrambled link, but we have had no communication for six days now..... nothing..... not a sausage."

"What did the last scrambled transmission say?" asked Clive Twist.

"It merely stated that they had entered the Asteroid belt at the agreed point and were starting their investigations. They promised to report every six hours or sooner if something special happened... but they never did."

Clive gave no reaction.

After a short pause Sir Richard continued, "We are very worried, Clive, and we need to plan our next course of action. Several things could have happened."

Again Clive gave no reaction.

Fred picked up the story again, "Maybe they have had a collision and are disabled, or perhaps the radio has broken down."

Clive gave a disapproving frown.

"....And maybe they have been captured, or even killed," added Sir Richard.

Finally Clive exploded, ".....And maybe they have turned into a pumpkin and two ugly sisters."

"Really Clive, this is no time for jokes which are in bad taste," retorted Sir Richard hotly. "We really must plan another mission."

"Perhaps we should inform the Military," added Fred. "We must do something."

"When Clive spoke again he had simmered down. "Sir Richard, I do not wish to appear callous, all the things you have said could be true. But I must ask you a question Why did you send Captain Stephens on this mission?"

"He was sent because everybody in this room thought he was the best man for the job," replied Sir Richard quietly.

"That is exactly correct," agreed Clive. "It is a good job you invited me here today, you are both too involved, you are beginning to let your emotions affect your judgement."

"How do you mean, Clive?" asked Fred.

"We all knew before he left that he was setting himself up as bait. Well it seems to me that this lack of communication means the plan is working and it's the best news you could have."

Fred studied his feet, Sir Richard gazed at the ceiling. "My God, you're a cold fish at times, Clive but, on reflection, you could be right. What is our next logical step then?"

"Do nothing for at least a month, continue to monitor the radio channels allow Michael to do his job and have a little faith."

Again there was an awkward silence. Again it was broken by Sir Richard, "Okay Fred, we will carry on as normal, use our most trusted employees on the monitoring post and try to forget what has happened until we all meet here one month today."

"Yes, Sir Richard," replied Fred dutifully.

"However, under the circumstances, we can break one of my rules. You know that I never take a drink before Midday don't you, Fred?"

"Yes, Sir Richard."

"Well I could do with a large gin and tonic and so could you, Fred, and I think it is only right...for the sake of our consciences... that Clive pours them, don't you Fred?"

"Yes. Sir Richard."

Chuckling to himself and ignoring the knot in his stomach, Clive crossed to the bar and poured not two, but three large gin and tonics.

## **CHAPTER 13. REPAIRS AND PROGRESS.**

When Michael had considered the possibility of alien life-forms, it had never crossed his mind that they would need to do something as mundane as washing up; but it was happening right in front of his eyes, Kandrás was standing at the sink in the galley and was meticulously cleaning up after their meal.

The task was soon completed and all the utensils were returned to their proper place. Michael felt good after the meal and was ready for anything. "Are you back to normal, Kandrás?" he inquired.

"As well as can be expected. ...it will be a little longer until I'm totally back to normal but I'm ready to start work if you are."

"I'm fine. ..let's go and look at the damage."

Kandrás lead the way back to the Command Area and looked critically round at the mess. With the bodies removed the task did not seem so forbidding.

"Is it possible to repair the viewing-panel?" asked Michael.

"Yes it is a fairly simple operation. The big worry is what the dust and debris may have done to the electronics and guidance systems."

"Shall we put our space suits on and do the panel?" suggested Michael enthusiastically.

"No... It won't be necessary."

"Surely you will have to decompress the cabin to fit a replacement, won't you?" insisted Michael.

"No we do not carry any spare panels at all. They are very simple to make due to the design of the vessel. We will clear up the debris first, so that it will not impair the repair."

While Michael busied himself putting the larger rocks and broken glass-type material into some bags, Kandrás went away and returned with a comprehensive tool kit. Sixteen screws secured the inner window panel which also had a rubber-like seal inserted in it. Kandrás soon removed the surround and with Michael's help removed the jagged remains of the smashed panel. Soon the actual surround was spotless.

The next step was to clean the inner side of the shield itself. This was done using a solution and some cloth. In the meantime Michael had been given a tube which slotted into a plumbed-in suction point contained on the bulkhead. Very carefully he went over the floor and the instrument panels picking up all the fine dust and small debris. He covered the whole area three times before Kandrás was satisfied. All the bags of dust were ejected through the airlock and the Command Area was looking as it should... clinically clean.

Kandrás left and returned with an odd-looking machine; it had several dials and a long flexible tube with several nozzles. It appeared to be electrical because Kandrás plugged it into the master control panel. He then selected a setting and switched on the machine. A purple light glowed and the machine

gave an insistent hum which fell away to a purr when the purple light eventually went off.

Two pairs of protective goggles were produced and Kandrás put his on. It was soon obvious to Michael that they had not been designed for him but he eventually arranged them so that he got some protection. Kandrás then sprayed a very light, fine liquid onto the back of the protective shield. Michael desperately wanted to know what was happening but he curbed his curiosity so as not to distract his colleague.

As if sensing the unasked question Kandrás turned round and said, "That is a coating of lubricant... an essential part of the process."

He then reset the machine and started to spray again. This time he worked slowly and methodically and sprayed a thick, clear, jelly-like substance from a thicker nozzle. This time he sprayed right into the reveals of the window surround and continued right across the back of the shield. The substance was like a liquid glass and after three applications it smoothed itself out and became the necessary thickness. Even as he watched Michael saw the surface tension of the substance take over and smooth itself out to a highly glossed finish. The surround with the rubber seal was replaced and screwed down.

Kandrás then cleared away the equipment and inspected his handiwork. "It's a good job... it looks like a perfect repair."

He crossed to the panel and pressed a button. Immediately the shields started to retract and Michael was very impressed to see that the new panel looked just like all the others. He was not impressed to see the closeness of the rocks, particularly the big diamond-tipped one which had done the original damage.

It must have had a similar effect on Kandrás because he immediately dropped the shields again but was obviously pleased and satisfied with his repair.

"We must manoeuvre ourselves away from this deadly place," observed Kandrás. "I am now going to check out the motors, I would be grateful if you would allow me to go through the routines on my own. I have a lot to do and I wish to remove us as soon as possible. When we have a little more room I will instruct you."

Kandrás gestured towards one of the cabin padded seats. "Please make yourself comfortable."

Michael went and sat down in the plush, padded seat. It was atrocious; nothing fitted, it was too big, the straps were all wrong, the ergonomics of the seat came in all the wrong places. As Michael wriggled and squirmed in an effort to make himself comfortable he heard a strange, happy, gurgling sound and when he looked up he realized that Kandrás was actually laughing at his predicament.

"I take it the chair does not fit," said Kandrás between gurgles. "Go and find yourself some cushions and pillows and see what you can do to improve your comfort."

Michael grinned back and purposefully strode off to one of the cabins to find the necessary articles. When he returned he found that there was some adjustment on the seat and between the pillows and the adjustments he eventually found a compromise and settled into his seat.

In the meantime, Kandras had been checking and cross-checking circuits on the main control panel. Now and then he made slight adjustments until he was, at last, satisfied. Eventually he pressed a button and the control panel slid back and another panel with levers and a V.D.U. installed on it slid smoothly into its place. He pressed another button and an auxiliary panel with another V.D.U. silently slid up from the console top. As he manipulated the controls a mass of signs and hieroglyphics appeared on the screen.

Michael correctly guessed that this was the on-board computer; it was very neat and probably very powerful. The big problem was that he could not understand any of the symbols displayed. Kandras then turned to the other screen and switched it on. Michael understood this one straight away. There in frightening three-dimensional realism was the view of the rock field outside the ship. The diamond-tipped, murderous rock was still there glinting maliciously.

At the touch of another button, four lights lit up on the control panel, a purple, a red, an orange and a green. Immediately a quiver ran through the fabric of the ship and a low buzz permeated the Command Area. The lights switched themselves off as the motors slowly warmed up and there was no feeling, or sound, as the orange light switched itself off to leave only the purple.

Kandras firmly strapped himself into the pilot's seat, made a slight adjustment for complete comfort and turned to Michael. "Are you firmly and comfortably strapped in, Michael?"

"Yes," said Michael, who was literally shaking with excitement. Kandras put his four hands on the four levers and gently manipulated them. His dexterity fascinated Michael who found it difficult to comprehend how one brain could move four limbs so completely independently.

They both watched the three dimensional screen. Before they moved an inch Kandras checked both sides, the rear and also above and below the vessel to form a complete picture of their hazardous situation. Ever so gently the vessel backed away from the diamond-tipped rock. In his heart Michael knew that the rock was of inestimable value but he could not bring himself to ask Kandras to take it on board after the grief it had caused him.

The rock gently slid to the right of the screen as the vessel slowly turned to the left. Kandras allowed the vessel to glide serenely away for a few minutes then turned to Michael and said, "There is a button on the end of the left arm of your seat. ... press it please."

Michael did as asked and a deep green, crystalline orb on the end of a powerful looking support arm swung out from under the seat and came to rest in a position two feet in front of his chest. As he looked across at Kandras he saw that a similar orb was in front of him also. Kandras touched a switch and



the orbs began to pulse with a soft green light, Michael immediately experienced a feeling of weightlessness.

"What are they, Kandras?" asked Michael.

"It is a device to prevent you being crushed by acceleration. Surely you have them in your vessels?"

"Our vessels don't accelerate quickly enough to need one, but the old rockets were uncomfortable though."

"I take it that your vessels are fairly slow... capable of sub-light speeds only?"

"Well of course many of our scientists are firmly convinced that it is impossible to exceed the speed of light," confirmed Michael.

"This vessel is capable of velocities up to about one hundred times the speed of visible light and this is quite slow by our standards," continued Kandras remorselessly.

"Visible light..... surely all light is visible?" challenged Michael.

"You, like us, are handicapped by the limitations of your senses. The fact is that even in the dark there is still a form of light which is on a higher harmonic frequency to visible light. It travels hundreds of times quicker and is totally undetectable by our senses. We discovered it by accident when we were looking for ways to improve our long-range radios."

"Does the same analogy apply to radio as well?"

"It does, but both things are very difficult to harness and use..... it is very advanced technology. Am I correct in saying that that nobody from your Planet has been beyond this Solar System?"

"We have not even managed the outer limits yet. I was the first to reach the sixth planet which we call Saturn... our scientists are not even sure how many planets there actually are.

We know of nine but suspect there are ten," said Michael who was feeling way out of his depth.

"There are actually twelve planets in this system..... I will give you the data on them to take back with you. It should create quite a stir. A lot of things will change as a result of our meeting... hopefully for the better."

Kandras then opened the protective shields which made the ship seem less claustrophobic. The three dimensional image was switched off and replaced with a two-dimensional long-range warning image. Finally he locked in the computer and turned to Michael. "Are you ready?"

"Yes, let's go," replied Michael who was now feeling a little more apprehensive.

Kandras firmly gripped the four levers and flicked a hinged cover on the top of the extreme right one to uncover a red button. As he pressed it a series of lights blinked brightly on the two control panels. There was a similar arrangement on the left hand control lever and again there was a reaction when he pressed the uncovered button. This time there was a faint tremble

through the hull which gradually built up to a powerful sounding, but quiet, low-pitched hum.

"Here we go," said Kandrás .

It was a strange sensation as the vessel gathered way. Michael had no previous sensations to compare it with but in his head he described it to himself as rather like falling down a tunnel. There was no sensation of G-force at all, in fact the tendency was to be pulled forward out of the seat. As he watched, the crystalline orb in front of him slowly changed colour, growing lighter and more intense all the time. Michael was apprehensive, exhilarated and curious all at the same time.

"Look ahead and prepare yourself for a wonderful sight," remarked Kandrás.

Obediently Michael peered ahead into the blackness and observed a faint glow in front of the vessel. Slowly it grew in intensity and took on a ghostlike appearance. Soon it had taken on a solid white aspect and there were dancing rainbow-like tinges round the edge as if from a lot of small prisms.

Kandrás exposed a button on the top of the inner right hand lever and pressed it. Immediately the hum of the engines went up two tones, then a strange thing happened. The solid, white wall ahead of them gradually split up into the seven colours of the rainbow as if from a huge prism, but they danced in a beautiful ballet of colour. The engine note continued to rise steadily.

Up ahead there was a blinding, violet flash and that colour disappeared in a shimmering cascade of droplets. As the engine note increased the same thing happened again and this time the indigo disappeared. Relentlessly the engine note rose and the remaining colours grew brighter; another flash and the blue disappeared. Next was lost green, then yellow and orange. Finally, there remained a fantastic red display which was a solid circle round the edge and a leaping, restless display in the middle.

Suddenly the engine note rose quickly and there was an incredible red flash and the display disintegrated in all directions. Then there was only the blackness of deep space.

The engine note now rose remorselessly until it was inaudible. By now the orb in front of him was glowing with a white, incandescent light, obviously running at maximum power. Michael looked through one of the side screens and was amazed to see that a few of the stars were visibly moving. ...very slowly, but enough to see.

"Are we at maximum speed?" gasped Michael.

"No. ..nothing like," laughed Kandrás, "We are doing about five times the speed of light... the motors are not even warm."

"What caused the light display?" asked Michael.

"Have an educated guess," replied Kandrás mysteriously.

"Well, I would have to say that it must be the.....er. 'Light Barrier' or something," ventured Michael.

“Very good.. but it is not just one barrier it is many. Some we do not perceive, like the X-Ray barrier, but they are all there, the final one is the hardest which is the seven staged barrier of light. The lower frequencies go first and the highest last; after that it is just plain progress. However, our scientists suspect that it may be impossible to exceed Harmonic Light speeds.”

Michael looked down at the orb and noticed that it was back to its deep crystalline green colour. “We do not need those now, we have finished accelerating,” remarked Kandrás. He pressed the appropriate button and the orbs quietly folded away into their storage positions.

“Where are we going?” asked Michael quietly.

“Nowhere in particular,” smiled Kandrás. “We 're just going to give ourselves room. a lot of it.”

“Are we leaving this Solar system?”

“Yes, we will clear the outermost planets very soon and then head for a point midway between your Sun and the next nearest star. It will take about two Earth days to reach a suitable co-ordinate. When you first begin to learn about piloting this kind of craft, believe me, you need plenty of room. In the meantime we need to swap basic technical information to give ourselves some common ground to measure time and distance.”

“That could be very awkward,” puzzled Michael.

“Not if you are prepared to be honest,” replied Kandrás knowingly. “Anyway I think we have done enough work for the time being!”

He reached over and flicked a prominent red switch on the panel and added, “The ship is now on automatic shall we eat? I feel quite famished.”

Michael did not need to think twice, he readily agreed, but as they both took off their harnesses and headed for the galley he was suddenly stricken with a very primeval urge that he had not encountered for quite a while. He needed the toilet and urgently.

He was so embarrassed he did not know how to formulate the question. Kandrás looked round puzzled, sensing Michael’s distress. “What is the matter. ..what do you need?”

“We humans have certain bodily functions which we need to perform to remain healthy... do you have the same problem?”

Kandrás now understood the problem. “You need the 'Waste Recycling unit'. please do not feel embarrassed or ashamed, all living creatures have the same problem. I apologize for being a poor host, but I have had a lot on my mind. I will take you to where you need to be... in fact you can bathe and wash yourself as well.”

Michael was taken to a beautifully appointed room and Kandrás pointed out the 'Waste Recycling Unit'. It was similar in shape to an Earthly one but was considerably bigger, it was also water sealed. Kandrás left and Michael did what he had to do. He felt a little foolish as he sat there with his legs dangling like those of a child but, in spite of that, he was grateful for its use.

When he had finished he pushed an obvious large button above the unit and a seal came across and the contents were whisked away. Seconds later the unit was ready for reuse and a pleasant but unfamiliar odour permeated from it. The sight of the showers and deep baths persuaded Michael that he would benefit greatly from an all-over wash. He stripped off and looked around. He was puzzled that the tanks were so deep; he expected them to be long, but not this deep. They were all clear sided, like a large fish tank. He was ashamed with himself for having hit the nail on the head in such a clumsy manner. The creatures like Kandras were amphibious and would probably enjoy total immersion every now and again.

Having considered all the options, he chose a shower. He stepped in and slid across a very thick door, which he thought was strange. There was one button and a dial. He reasoned that the dial was the water temperature so he set it about one third of its maximum so that he would not be scalded. He then pressed the button and water cascaded over him from every conceivable angle... upwards, downwards, sideways, even the door had jets in it. The water was a little cool for perfection, so he adjusted the dial again until it was exactly what he wanted.

He noticed a bottle in the corner and hoped it was soap of some kind. It was. As he poured it out and rubbed it on himself there were copious amounts of clean smelling suds; he washed his hair and soon felt two hundred percent better. Another press on the button made the water subside and, dripping wet, but very clean, Michael stepped out of the shower and dried himself on one of the immense fluffy towels which were on the walls.

He looked at the clothes which he had been wearing non-stop for a week and shuddered at the thought of getting back into them. Wrapping a towel around him he padded off to find Kandras and, hopefully, a solution to his problem. He was greeted by the happy gurgling noise which hinted that Kandras was amused.

"Very elegant," he chuckled. Michael once again blushed and explained his problem. Kandras nodded and went to his cabin. When he returned a few minutes later he was carrying a garment similar to the one he was wearing and a pair of briefs that would have fitted a three year old girl. He handed them to Michael who simply stared at them, completely perplexed.

Again there was a happy gurgling noise. "Don't worry, Michael, they fit me so they should fit you. In fact we only make these garments in one size because this material stretches to fit anybody."

Dubiously Michael mumbled his thanks and returned to the bathroom. To his amazement the trunks simply moulded and stretched to his contours. There was no elastication or anything, they simply stretched to a perfect fit and the natural built in resistance of the material ensured that it stayed put. The single piece coverall was exactly the same.

Michael inspected himself in the mirror and decided that the superbly tailored garment showed off his adequate physique to perfection. Michael was

not muscle-bound but he was fit and there was an attractive definition in his build. He liked what he saw, then, suddenly, the moment was ruined. He wondered if Charlotte would have appreciated the sight of him and was instantly depressed. Swathed in gloom he returned to the bridge to find Kandrás happily staring at the stars.

"Why so sad, Michael?"

"Oh. ..nothing really, I was just thinking about a friend."

"Only a female could cause so much despondency. There is no reason why you should not see her again. We will search thoroughly, there is nowhere to hide from this vessel in a place as small as a Solar System. Incidentally, if you look forward and to the left we are about to pass the twelfth and final Planet in your system."

Michael looked and saw a star-like blue blob which was growing rapidly, changing colours and looking slightly distorted. It grew and grew then was suddenly gone.

"It looked odd and distorted," remarked Michael.

"That is because you are above light speed and the waves are compressed. The eye cannot perceive accurately under these conditions, but the instruments can."

Kandrás flicked a few switches and the image on the screen changed and showed a planet which was crystalline in appearance. It was very beautiful and looked to be a mixture of diamonds, emeralds, rubies, sapphires and a myriad other glistening rocks.

"How big is it?" asked Michael.

"Oh... about the size of the second planet in the system... but it is much colder, in fact the ambient temperature is very close to the point where molecular movement stops and density is at its greatest."

"That is what we call Absolute Zero," offered Michael helpfully.

"Well it's a good name for it," agreed Kandrás. The crystalline appearance is caused by the frozen gases of what used to be an atmosphere. Everything is completely solid at that temperature. Another thing which you may not have considered is the temperature of space out here. You are a long way from any source of heat and consequently the temperature outside the vessel is very low and you need a very special suit to venture outside the vessel. Your primitive suit would freeze solid, including your gas bottles, almost instantaneously."

"That is a discomfoting thought," mused Michael as his mind wrestled with the inadequacies of his species' knowledge and equipment.

Kandrás changed tack suddenly, "Are you ready to eat?"

"Absolutely starving."

## **CHAPTER 14. LEARNING THE ROPES.**

Later, after an absolutely delicious meal consisting of he knew not what, the Earthman and the Alien faced each other across the table.

"Are you completely recovered now, Michael?" asked Kandra.

"Yes....completely. ...are you?"

"I think so. We need to sort out a few problems to help us communicate. I asked you if you were going to be completely honest earlier. If you have secret inner thoughts which you do not wish me to discover then the problem will take a long time to resolve. If, on the other hand, there is nothing you wish to hide and can honestly open up your mind to me, I can learn what I need to know in a relatively short time."

Michael gazed steadily back at his companion and searched his innermost soul. He had always been an honest and astute man and decided that he had done nothing of which he was ashamed and he certainly did not harbour any sinister thoughts concerning the Alien. All he felt was gratitude and a sincere feeling of pleasure that he had been able to help in what was obviously a severe crisis in both their lives.

"There is nothing which I need to hide from you. What would you like me to do?"

"It will be difficult but I want you to search your mind and go back to the very beginnings of your learning in mathematics and bring your whole mathematical knowledge to the forefront of your mind stage by stage."

Michael took a moment or two to put his mind in order then indicated to Kandra that he was ready to begin. Their minds came together as they both concentrated. First he offered simple arithmetic and concepts of shape, then he progressed onto the pure mathematics of basic algebra. He then progressed on to the pure aspects of geometry and trigonometry. He then regressed and thought about the practical applications of those last two disciplines. All the while he could feel his recall system being stimulated by Kandra's steady and gentle insistence.

Next he tackled Newtonian mathematics and their application through the notions of Calculus and the laws of planetary motion and navigation. At this point he decided to combine his knowledge of maths and physics and went through magnetism, light and the whole gambit until he finished with his somewhat scant knowledge of astro-physics. By this time he was feeling mentally drained and realized that his concentration had sunk him into an introspective state of fugue. With a sudden feeling of panic he struggled back to reality and focused on his companion who was still sitting there motionless.

"I'm sorry Kandra, but I will have to rest... this is a rather frightening experience."

"You have a strong and well structured mind, Michael, but there is a great difference between us in the anatomy of the brain. The oldest part of your brain controls your emotions and it is the later development in the outer layers that

controls your logical thinking. This means that in times of stress you will tend to think emotionally. We are exactly the opposite; we are logical beings who have acquired emotions, so, in times of stress, we revert to cold logic."

"Has my thought process been of any use at all?" enquired Michael.

"Oh yes.... I have conceptualised practically everything you have thought. That is another difference between us. ..our memory facility is much more reliable than yours. The peculiar part of it all is that your brain has more facility than ours, but it is unused. This will change as your species becomes more sophisticated. Are you ready to carry on?"

Michael then went back inside himself and thought about more mundane things and offered pictures of life on Earth and the Moon. For some reason his thoughts were frequently interrupted by visions of Charlotte; he could not control it and a feeling of helplessness came over him so he surfaced again.

"I'm sorry, I keep getting interrupted by thoughts of my lady friend, I am completely unable to keep my concentration."

Kandras stared back in a state of disbelief and awe. "Michael, that is not lack of concentration, those thoughts are being externally triggered. I am unable to pick up the source myself... but you can. Charlotte is calling for you and you can hear her. Do you realize that we are moving away from her at five times the speed of light and you can still communicate with her at this vast distance and speed? If you ever learn to develop this facility its power will be absolutely monumental. It's little wonder you could communicate with me so quickly. The strange thing is that you appear to be unaware of this fabulous gift. I may be able to help you develop it using some of our techniques but, believe me, we do not have telepathic power like yours. However we can control what we have got."

Michael detected an immediate change of attitude in Kandras . Instead of being a lower life form, he had been elevated to at least an equal in intellect, even though his technology was less advanced Kandras' admiration was genuine.

"We call it our 'Sixth Sense' or 'Extra Sensory Perception.' Some people display it more than others but we are unable to prove its existence. I did not realise that I had it... it's quite an exciting discovery."

"Well you have proved it to me, but it will be difficult to demonstrate and explain. It is deeply rooted in the emotional side of your brain and would appear to be randomly activated by stress, but I am sure you could learn to trigger it at will." replied Kandras. "You look very tired, Michael, why don't you go and rest?"

Kandras took him to a cabin and said, "You might as well call this your room now, have a nice rest."

Michael thanked him, laid down on the large bed and fell into a fitful sleep which was plagued by images of Charlotte and darkness.

\* \* \* \* \*

On board the *Black Swan* life was not too pleasant. All the Officers and men had steadfastly refused to co-operate with any of Harry's schemes and, instead, had promised to escape as soon as a chance manifested itself. Harry had gone through fits of foul temper. He had tried persuasion and dire threats but it had made no difference. His broken nose and consequent nasal voice only served to make him look and sound foolish. Unfortunately nobody dared to laugh; Harry and his crew were dangerous and had already proved that they meant business.

The result was that the men were enslaved and kept under constant armed guard. Both Arnie and Henry had been shot by the 'Stun' guns again for refusing to obey instructions. Although not fatal the 'Stun' guns were very painful and soon the Crew were morosely carrying out their allotted tasks. At first this consisted of cleaning parties. Harry was remarkably calm when he realised that Neville had escaped; his absence had been discovered by the cruel-looking First Officer when his work rota failed to tally. When the Crew of the *Atlas* were questioned it was soon obvious to Harry that nobody knew where he was. They admitted that they knew he had gone but they did not know where he was hiding, or even if he was still alive.

Harry had simply said that he must be on the ship somewhere and hunger would soon drive him out. He had made this profound declaration just as Neville was tucking in to a nice meal back aboard the *Atlas*.

Charlotte had not been asked to work, she had been secured in some pleasant quarters and Harry visited her daily in the mistaken belief that his boyish good looks, charm and repartee would soon win her over. Eventually Charlotte had left him in no doubt and had told him in a most unladylike way what to do with himself and to leave her alone.

Harry had been shocked to hear such language from a Lady and decided to punish her by locking her in an uncomfortable, darkened room with only bread and water to sustain her. She was already at a low ebb and soon began to sink into a deep despair. It was during this period of blackness that she had begged Michael to come to her, if only in spirit. Strangely she had the feeling that he had heard and felt comforted.

Meanwhile the *Black Swan* weaved undetected amongst the outer Asteroids towards her home base.

\* \* \* \* \*

A few hours later Michael and Kandras were facing each other across the table. Both had rested and felt refreshed and alert. The ship was streaking along into deep space at the same speed and Kandras was happy that everything was working perfectly.



"I want you to completely relax your mind and be receptive to the thoughts I will send you," said Kandrás. "I am going to feed you some technical information."

"I'm ready," replied Michael.

The first piece of information flooded in and Michael immediately tried to make sense of it; Kandrás stopped his train of thought.

"Please do not try to rationalise the information I am sending you, I just want you to accept it and soak it up. Try not to work with the information until I have given you all of it. It is a very difficult thing to do... just relax and receive."

They tried again and this time Michael remained completely inactive and again went down into a deep fugue, but his mind remained open. He struggled back to reality as Kandrás urged him out of it. To his amazement Michael looked at his chronometer and realized that he had been under for three hours.

This time it was Kandrás who was a little shaky. Again both men went for a rest and Michael realised that the increased gravity and change of atmosphere were quickly tiring him. He expected that this would pass after a period of acclimatisation.

When they next came together Michael sat down at the computer and was amazed to find that he understood the keyboard symbols. Their mathematics was completely different to anything on Earth. It was not exactly a duodecimal system but rather a parallel application of two base six systems. Michael soon found out that the keyboard was designed for four arms with three large fingers rather than for two relatively small hands with five digits on each. However he was soon able to prove that he understood the basic rationales of the system.

One of the results of the combined system was that it produced a lot of symbols and the keyboard was complicated with six shift keys, but it gave Michael no trouble. It was just as though he had always known it. The two men discussed the two systems at length. Kandrás agreed that the Earth system had its advantages but had one big draw back. His criticism was that it lacked choice and direction; his own mathematics were very linear and it only worked because there were many choices and many symbols to represent the choices.

In reality the Earth system was far more complicated and clever but most problems in the Alien system could be settled by a critical path through the symbols and the changes in direction had far reaching connotations which increased as the numbers got higher. The big advantage of the Alien system was that immense numbers could be handled easily without dozens of zeros.

Now that they could converse a little more meaningfully, Kandrás showed Michael round the complex Space craft. The method of propulsion was amazing. The main drive consisted of two very strong chambers connected by an even stronger main tube. In the first chamber was a source of high speed harmonic light. Its emissions were collected and concentrated, rather like a laser, and then directed down the tube. Inside the tube two things happened. Firstly, by an incredible process, the light photons were given weight by the addition of a heavy molecule so that they had substance. Having been slowed

down considerably by their increased density, the particles were fed into an accelerator and then fired against a thick thrust plate. As the particles expended their minute amounts of momentum against the plate there was no equal and opposite reaction and consequently this energy produced motion in the vessel.

The spent particles were collected and returned to the first chamber by a secondary tube; they were then recycled, each time getting heavier and heavier. With the subsequent increase in the weight and the volume of particles a corresponding acceleration was produced which increased in a geometric progression, quickly attaining the super-light velocities.

Changes of direction were easily produced by tilting the thrust plate using four massive hydraulic rams. It came as a surprise to Michael to hear Kandrás admit that he did not have a clue how the navigation and guidance systems worked. He was able to use them but knew nothing of the principles on which they operated. All he knew was that it was not electrically powered but was operated by a kind of synthetic light flux. They never went wrong and so he did not require this related knowledge.

Eight hours later Michael had learnt a lot of details about his new home and was feeling exhausted. Kandrás did a quick check of all the systems to make sure that everything was to his satisfaction. "Is it time to relax, Michael?" he asked.

"I'm tired but not sleepy," replied Michael.

"In that case we can we can relax in the recreation room."

The two companions went to a fairly large cabin which Michael had never seen before. It was tastefully decorated in restful pastel shades and had a sunken area with soft loungers in it. On the walls were pictures of alien landscapes showing formidable mountains and lots of water. There were others showing strange vegetation and lower life forms; some were impressions of seascapes which depicted ferocious-looking, serpent-like creatures of an immense size. There were screens both for educational and pleasure purposes and a music system which could produce sound on the same wavelength as the telepathic facility.

The music was quite eerie and was felt rather than heard; it reminded Michael of underwater scenes and was soothing and restful. There was a small galley area with an eating surface and some comfortable stools. As the men perched on the stools Kandrás produced two goblets of a pink drink and two ready-cooked burgers in a kind of bread, from the dispensers. Michael did not know what the meat was and he did not care it tasted delicious.

The pink drink was also very pleasant and the first one slipped down very easily... and so did the second... and also the third. Michael was starting to feel a bit giggly and very relaxed. Kandrás, on the other hand, was going more introspective and morose. Michael recognised that his companion was suffering from a kind of delayed shock due to grief and his recent trauma; in spite of the drink he knew he had to help. Michael had never been particularly

famous for his tact and once again he took a deep breath and firmly grasped the nettle.

"How did it happen?"

Kandras pulled himself together and replied, "How did what happen?"

"Come on now... you know what I mean. How did the accident happen...? You have never discussed it and I can see you are distressed and uncertain, please let's talk about it."

"Do you really want to know...? Does it make any difference? What is done is done," replied Kandras gloomily.

"That is rubbish. ...we must find out what happened and take steps to prevent a similar tragedy should the same circumstances arise," scolded Michael.

"You are correct, Michael, but I just know I am not going to like what I find.

"Why do you say that?"

"Because it is impossible for what happened to happen," insisted Kandras.

"Well it did happen and we should do some detective work to find out why. It must have been a defect in the monitoring system or something like that."

"Now you are being ridiculous," retorted Kandras. "Do you seriously think that I would be travelling at five times the speed of light in a vessel with defective systems? I have thoroughly checked out the systems and they are working perfectly everything always works perfectly on these vessels."

"Well it must be pilot error then," insisted Michael remorselessly. "It's a pity we cannot be sure and reconstruct what happened."

"I can see what happened very easily," said Kandras quietly.

"Well, why are we hesitating?" asked Michael incredulously.

"Because in my heart I already know the answer," said Kandras sadly. "To clear up any doubt and to help me come to terms with things, we will watch it. The screen on the wall there is the 'Automatic Daily Log.' It is a visual record of what goes on in the vessel."

Michael was impressed and watched with trepidation as Kandras switched on the large screen. He fiddled with some dials and switches, picked up a remote control and sat down with Michael to watch. A three dimensional image of Kandras sitting at the controls filled the screen. At the bottom of the screen was a read-out of data which included coordinates, velocity, direction and information on vessel status. Michael was able to understand enough to realise that the vessel was moving very slowly under manual control.

"This vessel is almost completely self sufficient due to the fact that there is a 'Matter Synthesizer' on board. It can make anything we need from oxygen to food by reducing matter to its basic particles and then reassembling them in the form of the substance we require. Energy is a little different. Every now and again we try to pick up a supply of a metal which naturally emits radiation; it can be found in considerable quantities amongst the ruins of the destroyed planet."

"We call the metal 'Uranium' and the remains of the planet are what we call the 'Asteroids,'" added Michael helpfully.

"Well, a small amount of 'Uranium' provides enough energy for a considerable length of time. We were here searching for some when the accident happened."

The picture changed and a second alien joined Kandrás. After a while Kandrás handed the watch over to the second alien. He checked his instruments and settled down to piloting the ship. The data readout was slowly but continually altering but suddenly a red light flashed in one corner. Kandrás explained that this was a signal that the sensors had picked up a source of radiation. The pilot dutifully made a course change and headed towards the source. He was then joined on the bridge by the third alien. Soon, some tiny pricks of light which could be seen through the image of the forward observation panels began to take shape. As they reduced speed it could be clearly seen that one of them reflected much more light than the others. Needless to say it was the diamond-tipped rock.

The vessel came to a halt close by and the two aliens studied the strange rock intently. One left the bridge and returned with two goblets of the delicious pink drink. They made a sign to each other, embraced and knocked back the complete contents of the goblets. The ship was put into reverse and the rock shrank in size. Then, with a determined gesture, the pilot selected forward drive and headed straight for the needle-like tip. Alarm lights shone and buzzers buzzed but the alien manually over-rode the lot.

When the rock hit it was so realistic that Michael threw up an arm to protect himself: Kandrás remained unmoved. The rock actually hit the pilot a glancing blow and sent him flying, then the screen dissolved into complete chaos. This was followed by blackness as the systems automatically shut down.

There was a shocked silence which was broken by Michael. "So it was suicide."

"Yes."

"But why? They had everything to live for... a superb ship and all the comforts it can supply. It does not make sense."

"It makes sense to me," brooded Kandrás.

"But why?" persisted Michael who could not accept suicide under any circumstances.

"It is all a matter of time, Michael. Our last orders were to remain in your Solar System and investigate it until we received further orders."

"Well I know you must have waited a long time because it is twelve years since I first saw this craft", observed Michael.

"We have waited much longer than that... we have been in your Solar System for one hundred and fifty-eight Earth years now."

"And you are still obeying your last order?"

"Yes."

Michael pondered this surprising piece of information and slowly came to terms with how the other aliens had felt. They had lost all hope and could only see their lives as wasted and pointless. They had no motivation.

"Why did you not contact us?" probed Michael.

"Our orders forbade it..... anyway we have seen some of your weapons and your willingness to use them... we feared for our lives."

"And now?"

"You are my trusted ally now and I am alone, circumstances have altered drastically. Do you think your people will accept me, Michael?"

"We may experience some apprehension but I think you will be made an honoured guest; particularly if you help me to fulfil my mission successfully."

Kandras turned back to the screen which was showing a dark but discernible scene. Michael could see himself struggling with the large rock. He saw the rock slowly disappear from the shattered screen and saw himself flung back inside as the screen dropped. The data under the screen was blank apart from a weak, flashing, green light which indicated that a life form existed on the vessel.

A stronger, steady light joined it as the scanners picked up Michael's vital signs. Even as he watched, the flashing, green light went dimmer and flashed more slowly. The picture then showed the systems coming back to life as the cabin repressurized and Michael tearing off his helmet to search for the one remaining occupant. Kandras watched fascinated as he witnessed Michael's frantic efforts to revive him, followed by his grief when he thought he had lost him and then his obvious joy and emotion as he had recovered.

"You worked very hard on my behalf, Michael... I had given myself up for lost. It was your powerful determination which pulled me back. I am very grateful."

"I hope after all this that you are not harbouring the same thoughts as your companions," scolded Michael.

"Me.. suicidal? Not likely. My recent brush with death has given me a renewed will to live which is very strong indeed."

"That makes two of us," agreed Michael. "Now that you have faced up to the facts, do you feel any better?"

"I feel more disappointed than anything else, but I'm glad for you. If they had not done what they did, you would have died a slow, torturous death. Oh, to Hell with it, it doesn't matter anymore... we are here and we are together... let's have another drink."

Kandras switched off the screen and produced another two drinks. Several drinks later the two companions fell into their respective rooms, a little the worse for wear but in a good frame of mind. They fell asleep almost immediately and the ship hurtled on through space without a care for the troubles of the beings it contained.

"A familiar smell invaded Michael's nostrils and he could not place what it was. He struggled back to consciousness aware of a slightly hung-over feeling.

Kandras was standing next to his bed with a tray in two of his hands, a drink in his third hand and some cutlery in the fourth.

Michael looked at the plate and was both surprised and delighted to see a huge helping of scrambled eggs. He sat up in bed and took the proffered tray. "If you can't make a living as a pilot on Earth, you will make a fortune as a waiter," laughed Michael mischievously. "Thanks for the meal."

Kandras gave his happy gurgle and said, "It's your turn next. I will show you how to use the machine and with practice you should be able to produce some of your own favourites."

Michael gratefully ate his breakfast, washed and made his way to the Command Area. Kandras was already there and was strapped in his seat; he asked Michael to do the same since they were going to decelerate and stop. This time the deep crystalline orb took up a position behind the seat. It began to pulse as Kandras manipulated the controls and the speed began to drop away at an unprecedented rate. It was a strange sensation. Instead of being rammed hard against the straps, the sensation was of being pulled gently back into the seat.

Soon streaks of red light started to form in front of the vessel and the other colours joined in as their critical velocities were encountered. Suddenly the separate colours imploded to form the white coloured cloud which slowly faded into nothing as the speed dropped to sub-light and a few minutes later the sensors indicated that they were motionless.

"Alright," said Kandras. "It is your turn now. There is nothing within one and a half light years of us now so you have plenty of room." He pressed a button and a duplicate set of levers swung smoothly into view from the console. Kandras painstakingly outlined the function of each control and the actual piloting of the vessel was quite simple when compared with the problems of a C.A.M.I.D. powered craft. The big problem for Michael was having only two arms; the ergonomics of the vessel were not designed around humans. It was like having an old-fashioned aeroplane with two joysticks which were both essential to its control.

They pondered the problem for awhile and Michael came to the conclusion that it would be impossible for him to pilot the vessel with the controls as they were. He pointed out that he had always used his feet, in addition to his arms, when it came to piloting his craft and would need to adapt the controls to include this facility.

At first Kandras was very dubious about this idea, but, when Michael made a drawing of what he intended, he relented.

"Do you have a workshop?" asked Michael.

"Yes, but I am afraid that I am not very pragmatic in that area... my engineer was one of those killed. We tend not to overlap our skills more than we have to."

Kandras lead the way towards the stern of the vessel where the compact, well equipped workshop was situated.

"I need some strong metal rods," requested Michael. "Do you have any in store?"

Kandras smiled back patiently and reminded Michael that it was not necessary to carry stores when you had a 'Matter Synthesizer.' Instead he showed Michael some samples of what was easily available and already programmed into the machine.

He chose a hollow, alloy rod which had a substantial tensile and compression strength and programmed the machine for ten rods, each six feet long. They were ready in five minutes.

Next he synthesized a supply of a light, but strong, metal sheet and was relieved to find a supply of rivets and a combined laser cutter and drill ready for immediate use. He quickly cut his rods and assembled two pedals whose operation worked on a pantographic principle. They then returned to the control panel where Michael devised a quick-release system for fitting them to the floor, the console and finally to the levers. The operation was smooth and successful. The job had taken Michael two hours and Kandras impressed.

"Your problem solving capabilities are very good. It would have taken me ages to design and build that, but now comes the big test. .. let's see if it works?"

"The low speed handling was a compressed jet arrangement very similar to the *Atlas*. Michael mastered the handling within minutes. Kandras was amazed at the delicacy and co-ordination of the synchronisation between the hands and feet of the Earthman.

"You are a born pilot, Michael. Are you considered an expert amongst your own people?"

"Probably a little above average," lied Michael, who suddenly wondered where his golden comets were at this particular moment in time.

They went through the procedures for setting off and heaving-to, but keeping below light speed. Again Michael quickly grasped the feel of the vessel and was soon completely competent in its operation. Kandras then threw him a few problems such as spins and pitch-poling effects, which Michael soon learned to correct. He had a little trouble with the pitch-poling effect where the vessel tumbles end over end; it was something which he had never experienced before, but once mastered it gave him no trouble.

Next, they tackled the procedures for exceeding the speed of light which were more complicated. However, Michael was a good student and did everything as instructed without question. After a few light barrier procedures Kandras allowed Michael to push the vessel quite hard and for a few minutes they touched seventy-five times the speed of light. Out in the blackness of space it still felt quite motionless, Michael even felt a little disappointed.

Kandras went on to explain that you could not and must not use these velocities within solar systems where there was space debris, but in intergalactic space there was no debris at all, so you could go as fast as you liked.

There followed two days of intensive training which Michael enjoyed immensely until finally Kandras took him by the shoulders and pronounced him to be a first-rate pilot.

"We will now lay a course back to your Solar system and begin our search," said Kandras. "Have no fear we will find them."

Michael did it himself and locked the controls to automatic, then the two companions went and had a well earned rest.



## **CHAPTER 15. THE PIRATE'S LAIR.**

Neville was a little puzzled by his decision to go and tidy the Captain's cabin in the *Atlas*. He was suddenly worried that one of the criminals had taken the solid gold comets which had been awarded to Captain Stephens. There was certainly some evidence of a search but nothing was broken and the uniforms were still hung up in the wardrobes.

Sure enough on the ceremonial uniform were the two golden comets which sparkled even in the subdued lighting. Neville reverently unfastened them and concealed them in an inner pocket of his trousers.

"One of his relations will probably treasure those," he thought to himself.

As he looked through a porthole it became obvious that they were moving nearer to some rock clusters. "It looks as though it is time to go into hiding," he thought to himself.

He had already decided that he was going to bide his time and hide out in one of the containers. His first thought had been to commandeer the container which housed the Captain's Moon Shuttle but had decided that this would be too obvious. He had even considered making a break in the Shuttle and trying to reach a base of some kind to bring help, but he was a novice pilot and the cannon on the *Black Swan* had left an indelible impression on his memory. That ruse could be tried as a desperation measure if the situation deteriorated.

However, in the meantime, he had to be more practical. Neville went to the quarters of Henry Hirst to see what he could find. The accommodation was set out with military precision and everything was neatly stowed and labelled. Neville was looking for a cargo manifest and he knew that the crew of the *Black Swan* had taken the copy belonging to the First Officer. He reasoned that since Henry had been in charge of putting the cargo together, he would have complete records somewhere.

It was stupid to feel guilty but Neville felt like a thief in the night as he rifled through Henry's files, but he soon had what he required a general layout and a detailed list of the items in each container. He studied the documents carefully and started a process of elimination.

There were twenty-four containers but numbers one to six were taken up by the extra power packs and the Moon Shuttle with its accompanying spares. Numbers twenty-one to twenty-four were too near the rear for comfort, so they were out. It was evident that some containers carried only one kind of goods such as food or mining spares which were being shipped wholesale for the main suppliers on Ceres. This took care of numbers seven to ten, which contained food in vast quantities and seventeen to twenty, which contained all manner of mining equipment and the unique hand tools required by this specialized work. Container eleven was exclusively air cylinders and number twelve, totally rocket spares.

Containers thirteen to sixteen were a different matter. These were specific orders by four of the more successful prospecting companies who could afford

to ship their own wholesale containers stocked with the items they required. These, quite understandably were filled with a plethora of assorted articles.

Most of container thirteen was taken up by a large rock crusher, its associated spares and gas tanks. These machines were equipped with internal combustion engines which used a sealed carburettor and a pre-mixed gas which allowed them to operate in their hostile, space environment. The engines were built with lubrication free bearings, large tolerances and huge cooling fins which were necessary for the radiation based cooling systems.

Number fourteen contained one of the ugliest space vehicles ever produced. It was still in kit form but, when assembled, was best described as a space dumper truck. They had a mechanical grab on the front and due to their odd configuration were affectionately known as 'Lobsters' by the prospectors.

Number fifteen was a definite possibility. It had an inventory like a general store with food, clothing, bedding, air bottles, water bottles, beer and small amounts of mining tools, spare space suits, magazines, books and music tapes. However number sixteen, the last choice, was just perfect.

Again it had a wide ranging inventory, but the main article in the container was a portable site cabin complete with airlock. This would allow him the luxury of eating and breathing normally. In addition some comfort could be gained from the chemical heater, which was a flameless and fumeless source of heat.

Neville studied the manifest very carefully and was disappointed to find that there were no weapons of any sort in any of the containers. He already knew that the official arms chest had been transferred to the *Black Swan*, thus leaving him defenceless. Then an idea came to him which gave him one last forlorn hope.

He made his way to the quarters which had belonged to Gary Mitchell. Gary had often talked with affection about his own weapons collection and, knowing that Gary had been a man of action, Neville had a strong suspicion that Gary would have had an illegal weapon concealed somewhere.

Neville looked everywhere he could think of, in bags, drawers, clothing and even under his bunk, but found nothing. He then started a systematic search of the cabin, taking out drawers, and checking to see if a weapon was concealed under it or taped to the drawer recess but the effort was fruitless. The next things to be searched were the tops and backs of lockers; the wardrobe was then emptied of clothing and all the boots and shoes examined. Again the search yielded nothing.

He sat down on the bunk feeling a little bit cheated. His eyes fell on the rather large collection of books that Gary had taken with him whenever he was on a mission: to his amazement he found himself looking at a large, beautiful volume entitled 'A Pictorial Guide to Trees and Flowers.'

Although he had not known Gary very long he had never, ever seen or heard him mention anything as mundane as flowers and trees, except, perhaps, how to blow them up and the title was completely at odds with the

other technical books on explosives and their applications. The book looked to be well thumbed and regularly used so Neville took it down to inspect it.

It was the oldest trick in the world; so simple and yet so effective. The pages had been carefully carved away to conceal the contours of the weapon. Neville was overjoyed with his discovery and with the weapon itself. It was one which had originally been designed for use by the British Secret Service and was the only duel-system weapon made. The body of the weapon contained only non-metallic substances and was virtually undetectable by normal scanning methods. It was capable of firing a large calibre, low velocity bullet which exploded on impact and had a clip which contained ten of these projectiles. Again the ammunition was non-metallic.

In addition to the projectiles there was the standard, electronic 'Stun Gun' facility which was directed from a tube immediately below the main barrel. Neville was relieved to find that Gary had brought three power packs and six clips of ammunition; with this useful weapon he could hit back and hit hard. He replaced the book, fitted a power pack to the weapon and returned to his own quarters. He looked again at the contents of container number sixteen and calculated that there was enough oxygen, food and water to keep him alive for at least twelve months. All he had to do was broach the packing and gain access.

He tidied up after himself to destroy any evidence of his recent occupation. He then went and changed into a spare space suit and hid the one he had come aboard in. This time he decided that he was taking no chances and found a pack of three air tanks which would keep him alive for a week. He also found a lifeline, carefully fastened his weapon on a strong lanyard, fitted a new jet pack, picked up a strong kitchen knife and his hand pick and made his way to the rear airlock. Just as he was ready to fasten his helmet he realised that he would need a source of light. Quickly he returned to the store room and picked up a powerful hand lamp and some chemical emergency lights to illuminate the cabin.

Soon he was outside the *Atlas* and making his way along the containers towards number sixteen. He was careful to keep himself hidden as much as possible from the *Black Swan* and soon arrived outside his destination.

He had a choice of entries. He could use the main power-assisted door of the container or he could use the small, man-sized access panel on the top. As he was pondering his decision he was quite alarmed as some large rocks rushed past. It helped to remind him that they were probably getting very close to the end of the journey.

He decided that he would risk using the smaller opening. Climbing up the side of the container he lay as flat as he could, thanking his lucky stars that it was very dark. The panel had a screw down, submarine-type fitting and with a few spins of the wheel he was able to open it. There was a thick layer of polystyrene foam underneath it, but Neville was ready for that.

He drew his weapon and set the electronic charge on low and fired a good blast through the opening. This effectively melted the polystyrene and the protective bag. A few more blasts cleared enough of a path to allow him entry. He quickly slipped inside and sealed the hatch after himself. He switched on his high powered torch and to his disappointment he could not see the cabin which was to be his refuge. What he could see were the sharp edges of a pile of rocket spares and already his space suit was snagged on one.

He carefully unhooked it and was relieved to see that the suit had not been punctured. It was likely that the cabin had been loaded into the container as the first item. Gritting his teeth he started to pick his way through the spares and slowly made his way towards the rear of the container. Several times he had to blast away the polystyrene to make progress.

Soon he was sliding across many boxes of the spring-loaded cans which had now become commonplace. The spring-loaded bottoms made it easier to eject the food into the plates and pans in low, or no gravity situations.

The next obstacles were stacked ranks of oxygen bottles and sundry crates of tools and utensils and, finally, there it was; a small but invaluable refuge. Quickly he cleared away all the obstructions to free the airlock and the external tank connections. He had to be careful where he placed the cargo which he moved, for his own protection.

Very soon the *Black Swan* would decelerate and all the loose cargo would shoot across the container until it either hit the side or some other item. He did not want the cabin to be damaged for obvious reasons and, unfortunately, he would receive no warning when the retro-rockets would be fired.

As he shifted the big crates he was glad that in this environment they possessed only mass and not weight. He packed and wedged them as tightly as possible. Next he connected three full tanks to the air inlet valves on the site cabin and turned them on. Having done that he searched around and found a case of food, manhandled it to the airlock and stacked the cans inside the outer door. He did the same thing with some water containers and other essential supplies such as blankets, heating packs and lighting packs. Finally he went into the airlock himself, sealed the outer door, opened the inner one and soon both Neville and the supplies were safely installed inside the little cabin.

The cabins were fitted with a full complement of utensils and a special chemical stove with its matching magnetic-bottomed pans which stayed safely in place. Neville did not possess much in the way of 'Cordon Bleu' skills but after a struggle he managed to make himself a hot drink of chocolate and warmed a can of stew which he ate with relish. To complete his day he made up a bed, set the heater going, took off the remainder of his space suit and settled down to get as much rest as possible.

\* \* \* \* \*

There was a sullenness aboard the *Black Swan* which annoyed Harry Morgan. He had a mental picture of himself as the leader of a band of swashbuckling, dedicated pirates who were all keen and loyal to him; at this moment in time nothing could be further from the truth. He was totally fed up with his injuries which gave him a lot of pain and the prisoners were troublesome. Some of the new prisoners had worked quite well, others had not.

In the interests of safety, Archie Murphy and Alfred Brown had done a thorough structural survey of the *Black Swan* and had found many faults; some were very serious and were the results of metal fatigue which only a trained eye could notice. Harry had gratefully accepted their recommendations and had actually worked with them to make the ship safe and sound to the best of their abilities.

Both Murphy and Brown had made it clear to Harry that their co-operation was in no way a gesture of goodwill. They had worked merely to increase the life-expectancy of everyone aboard, including Harry's own, an observation which had not gone unnoticed.

Archie, in fact, had a sneaking admiration for Harry's engineering and the concept of the vessel which he had created, but the complexity of the control systems with so many remotely controlled rockets required a specialism which was a little more refined than Harry's more practical ability.

Archie was very tempted to kill Harry in spite of his admiration; he could have done it easily, many times. If Captain Stephens had still been on board he would already have done so. It could have been made to look accidental and, indeed, it could very well have been a genuine accident. Several times it had been necessary to deal with high-voltage D.C. cables and Harry had become so familiar with this type of work that he had become contemptuous of the danger. Several times it had been the restraining hand of Archie which had prevented Harry from picking up and cutting the wrong cable.

But Harry's death would have served no purpose. Harry knew where the other vessels were and Archie believed that this was where they were headed for. To kill him would have meant aborting the main reason for their mission.

Much of the time the crew were kept separated so they could not plan, but Archie knew that all the ex-professional military men, and probably the Company men as well, realised that the mission was not over just because the Captain had been killed. As far as he was concerned the First Officer, Ben Rimmer, was now in command. His sole task now was to carry on and complete the work which they had started.

There was a lot of cooking to do and the most eminently qualified man for the job was Ron Naylor. Harry had asked Ron, quite pleasantly, if he would be the Ship's Chef for a while. He had discussed the matter with Mister Rimmer

and they had decided to humour Harry in all reasonable requests. It would be better for Ron to cook for them than to become weakened by starvation. In the style of the good old days, Mister Rimmer now had the official duty of 'Taster' of all Harry's food, just in case Ron had any ideas of feeding him something nasty.

Harry was not really a murderer, he had genuinely regretted the death of Gary Mitchell and he had only cast the three Captains adrift out of sheer necessity. However, in the case of Henry Hurst and Arnie Sidebottom he was very tempted. Inwardly he was terrified of what would happen should either of these men get their immensely strong arms on him. So Harry was trying to break them by working their resentment out of them. Henry was currently employed cleaning the very large floor of the Control Room with a bucket of water and a toothbrush.

Arnie was in the hold and was stacking and restacking heavy metal ingots into neat piles for the umpteenth time. As soon as he had finished he was given a new location and the task was repeated yet again. There was no argument, no dissension and no menacing comments. Both men simply did as they were told without question.

Harry thought he was winning slowly, but he was wrong. Both Arnie and Henry had simply switched off mentally and were biding their time. The exercise was keeping them fit and mean; they were both prepared to fight to the death when the signal came.

Sergeant Brody was in solitary confinement. He had been locked away on his own for refusing to maintain the weaponry on the *Black Swan*. Although the crew had used the weapons, they did not know the correct procedure for stripping and cleaning, an operation fraught with danger to those who were ignorant of the processes of electronic weapons. They were puzzled by the Company weapons, particularly the pistols with their extra functions. No amount of threats or coercion would persuade Sergeant Brody to teach them anything or help them in any way.

"Learn by your own trial and error, but you'll only make one mistake." had been his suggestion to Harry. Harry had not taken him up on his challenge.

Benjamin Rimmer and David Boothman were also in solitary confinement and undergoing a poor attempt at brainwashing. Captain Stephens had not convinced Harry that he had been the only pilot on the *Atlas* and Harry was leaning on these two Officers to try and get them to teach him the secrets of C.A.M.I.D. operation. Flashing lights and loud noises were a poor attempt to break their resistance, but Harry had a lot of time.

Meanwhile, in her solitude, Charlotte was still resisting Harry's advances. He had relented a little and was now trying to win her over by kindness. She spurned it all and remained aloof and unattainable, which did absolutely nothing for Harry's peace of mind.

Mister Rimmer had considered their position very carefully. The horror of losing his friend and colleague had depressed him immensely at first; now he

was feeling angry and vengeful. Fortunately years of military service had given him the strength not to act emotionally. The situation was quite clear in his mind, he would allow Harry to lead them to the others and locate the missing vessels before he acted. Ben was able to hold some hope for the future because he believed Neville Johnson to be alive and well and biding his time.

Harry Morgan had not forgotten about Neville. There had been a half-hearted search and they had found the airlock which had been tampered with. The previous day a team had gone across to the *Atlas* and continued the search but had failed to find any evidence that Neville had been there. Harry, therefore, had presumed that he had met the same fate as his Captain; Ben thought differently, he knew that Neville was intelligent and cunning.

Ben knew that it was up to him to give the order to fight and he knew instinctively that the others would back him up and fight to the death if necessary, it was just a matter of recognising the correct moment in time. So, like a coiled up spring, everybody waited, wanting and wishing for the confrontation they knew would eventually happen.

Later the same day all the prisoners were taken to their quarters and strapped to their bunks. Everybody now knew that arrival time was rapidly approaching and that this was a prelude to a deceleration procedure. With all the prisoners safely secured, the Officers and the Crew of the *Black Swan* assembled on the bridge with their Captain. The ship was well into the rock field and was on its final approach to their H.Q.

Harry was a unique navigator, he seemed to know and recognize the empty fabric of space. He had scarcely looked at his instruments but he was in exactly the correct position.

"Prepare retro-rockets two, four and six for a ten second burn," commanded Harry in his recently acquired nasal tones.

"Retros primed and ready, Skipper," replied the First Officer.

"I will count back from fifteen... fire on ten and cut- off on zero."

"Understood, Skipper," replied the First Officer in a bored, matter-of-fact tone.

Harry made the count, the retros fired and the *Black Swan* slowed perceptively. Meanwhile in container number sixteen Neville Johnson sat in a crumpled heap, festooned in all the loose debris of his little site cabin; some of the things he was saying were most unbecoming of an Officer and a Gentleman. The language did not improve when the main rockets were fired for a slight correction and Neville landed on the opposite wall along with the accompanying trash. He finally ran out of words and tried to cling on as best he could.

Back on the bridge the view out of the front was deteriorating. More and bigger rocks were visible and floating past at an uncomfortable speed. Harry guided the *Black Swan* with his one good eye alternating between the view ahead and the predictions of the monitor in front of him.

He reduced speed again and became more vigilant. Suddenly there was a huge rock dead ahead. It was a strange crystalline shape and due to its dark colour was hardly visible it rapidly increased in size as they approached closer. Harry sheered off to starboard when he was about a mile away, much to Neville's continued discomfort. The *Black Swan* suddenly appeared to be travelling down a kind of natural tunnel; at this point Harry switched on the floodlights and the rocks were illuminated.

The view was dazzling, light was reflected off the many different coloured quartzite rocks and crystals which made the corridor resemble a huge kaleidoscope. Suddenly it finished and the *Black Swan* floated serenely into a huge void surrounded by smaller Asteroids. In truth it was not completely natural, but one of Harry's creations. He had seen the area on his instruments and had recognised its potential. A team armed with powerful jet packs had been sent in to move those rocks which were in the way and soon the hideout had been created. It was a superb natural sanctuary.

Floating in the centre of the void was a single, huge torus-shaped formation which was more like a small planetoid than a rock, being about a mile in circumference. Anchored to it were the mooring cables of the *Hercules* and the *Titan*. Both ships had been stripped of six of their containers which were now mounted on the planetoid. Each container had been fitted out with a crude but efficient airlock. Their cargo had been stacked and anchored to the planetoid and the containers were being used as essential living quarters and store rooms. Although the quarters on the *Hercules* and *Titan* were more comfortable, Harry was taking no chances; nobody was allowed on board.

With great skill Harry gently brought the *Black Swan* to its moorings and the *Atlas* was boarded and uncoupled. It, too, was soon tethered next to the *Titan*, having been delicately moved there by externally fitted jet-packs. The three vessels themselves were worth in the region of three hundred million pounds, plus the value of the cargo which was probably about another sixty million pounds. There was no doubt about it, Harry was the greatest robber of all time if the value of his booty was anything to go by.

The prisoners were not released, they were still strapped to their bunks and it became apparent to all that this was to be a fleeting visit. Ben Rimmer was able to see the other company vessels through a port hole and experienced a strange feeling of calm. The ships were there, they now only needed to be retaken; he knew that their time would come.

Several of the containers carried by the *Titan* were actually tankers containing rocket fuel. One of these specialised tankers was being used to refuel the *Black Swan*. It was a long job and it was not to Harry's credit that as he waited he was haunted by a recurring vision of Charlotte lying there strapped to her bunk. He shook off the temptation by convincing himself that there was time enough for his fantasies when he had finished the job in hand.

The Crew of the *Atlas* were left on board and the prisoners from the *Hercules* were transferred to the base. Harry had decided that the Crew of the



*Atlas* were much more of a threat than the others at this moment in time, so he was going to use them to work the original field in the eccentric orbit. It was his considered opinion that a dose of prolonged suffering would eventually force them to concede to his point of view.

As the refuelling progressed more supplies were loaded onto the *Black Swan* in readiness for a long journey. The Moon Shuttle which had been Captain Stephens pride and joy was gently brought out of its container and took the place of the old prospecting vessel. Morgan was looking forward to indulging himself with that little, sleek vessel. Harry waited patiently for his engineers to give him the all clear. Two hours later the job was done and the *Black Swan* slipped her mooring cable.

Carefully she retraced her steps from the hideout with Harry manually piloting the ship without reference to any instruments. Once clear of the belt he locked in the computer and fed it the rendezvous co-ordinates of the original rock field which was presently swinging back from its Jovian approach.

At precisely the correct moment four rocket motors fired and the gargantuan vessel rapidly picked up speed. Five minutes later two more rockets fired to assist the acceleration sequence and with a jaunty twitch of her tail the *Black Swan* shot off into the void to make her rendezvous.

Harry stepped down from the bridge and said, "Release the prisoners and feed them, then put them all to work. Miss Linaker can start by scrubbing the galley "

A few hours later, back at the hideout, Neville listened for signs of life. He listened intently for thirty minutes and heard nothing. He donned his space suit and decided to play

a gamble. He knew he was now somewhere in the hideout and fully intended to briefly break radio silence.

He left the comparative safety of his site cabin and picked his way through the cargo which had shifted a little as the deceleration had taken place. Eventually he found his way back to the manhole where he had gained entry. As he slowly lifted the lid he felt for the comforting feel of his weapon and then switched off his lamp.

Very cautiously he looked around and was astonished to see that the three missing vessels were all moored together. This unexpected sight gave him a renewed determination and like a predator he made his way back to the rear airlock. He made his entry and once inside knew instinctively that the vessel was unoccupied. Carefully he made his way to the bridge where he proceeded to the radio booth. He was relieved to discover that the radio had not been disassembled and put out of commission.

Neville switched it on and allowed it a few minutes to warm up. There was an official Company code for emergency use; one letter in Morse code carried either information or an instruction.

He racked his brains trying to think how best to transmit his message. Neville was intelligent enough to realise that any message was going to cause

considerable consternation when it arrived, he suspected that they had been given up for dead a long time ago.

Having selected the scrambled channel and maximum power, he firmly gripped the Morse key and tapped out the following Morse message F...3S...C...N...R...X. Neville quickly shut down the radio set and waited anxiously for a response from the small settlement. He waited for a full quarter of an hour and there was no sign of activity; Neville was happy that the signal had got away undetected.

He quickly returned to his hideout and celebrated by opening a couple of cans of beer and a one hundredweight sack of potato crisps.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir Richard and Fred Ford were having their daily meeting. "Do you have the projected Cargo Manifests for next month, Fred?" asked Sir Richard.

"Yes Sir," replied Fred without much enthusiasm. He reached into his case and pulled them out. "I have received two letters of complaint this morning from the *Amalgamated Asteroid Trading Company*. I'm afraid we have been a little lax in the handling of our day to day affairs. We should have duplicated the lost shipments immediately, the Company is crying out for their supplies."

"What shall we do, Fred?" asked Sir Richard without his usual sense of urgency.

"May I suggest that we ignore the letters for a week and then alert the Authorities and own up to what has really happened? I can get an interim shipment off in two days time," replied Fred.

"I really wanted to wait until after our next meeting with Clive before making an official announcement," said Sir Richard who was wracked with indecision.

At that moment the video-com lit up with the lovely face of Sir Richard's personal secretary. "I'm sorry to disturb you, Sir Richard, but the Head of Security has just requested a personal interview to discuss a matter of great importance."

"Oh dear!" growled Sir Richard. "I wonder what the devil has gone wrong now?" To his secretary he said, "Show him in straight away please, Louisa... I will release the room from secure mode immediately."

One minute later the Head of Security stepped over the threshold and crisply instructed Sir Richard to return the room to its secure mode.

"Good morning Number One. What can we do for you this fine day?" asked Sir Richard apprehensively.

Number One did not look like a Head of Security. He was a slight, wiry man with advanced baldness and horn-rimmed glasses. Looks are often deceiving and never more so than in the case of Number One. His mind was as sharp as a scalpel and his eyes like those of an eagle; when coupled with his impressive

photographic memory, devious modes of thought and total ruthlessness of operation, Number One was a force to be reckoned with.

He considered angles which never even crossed Sir Richard's mind and was the perfect man for the position he held. He made no apologies for his interruption, he merely sat down at the table with the others and took charge. With his usual incisiveness he came straight to the point.

"At ten thirty-two this morning we received a message from the *Atlas*."

"You're joking," replied Fred incredulously.

Two very disdainful eyes bored through Fred. "I do not make jokes, Mister Ford," said Number One disdainfully. "Such mundane matters are reserved for those individuals without responsibility."

Sir Richard smiled inwardly, the lack of humour displayed by his Head of Security was, ironically, a great source of amusement to him. "Please tell us more about the message, Number One."

"Well it came in about fifteen minutes ago on the scrambled channel in Morse. It read.. F...3S...C...N...R...X. The computer analysed the signal and recognised the characteristics of Mister Johnson, so the message is genuine."

Fred looked puzzled. "Did the computer think that Mister Johnson had been drinking? It seems a very odd message to send."

Fred received another withering glare from Number One. "It is an agreed Company code which is used only in emergencies."

Needless to say Fred was already aware of this.

Sir Richard hastily interceded, "Please explain what it means, Number One."

"The 'F' is a very important signal and when used is always at the beginning of the transmission. It means that the sender wishes you to make a fix on the signal source. When received the computer overrides any command and activates the direction-finding antennae to locate the signal. '3S'... means that there are three ships in sight. It is our considered opinion that this refers to Company ships, otherwise he would have used a different code denoting hostility. 'C'... well this is serious. It simply means that they have casualties."

There was a moment of silence. "Any clue as to how many?" asked a shocked Sir Richard.

"No... no clue at all. However the next letter 'N'... means 'No Action.' They do not wish us to make any move at this stage. 'R'.. means that they will re-contact H.Q. as soon as possible and the final letter.. 'X'.. is an instruction not to acknowledge the signal."

Sir Richard looked thoughtful as he digested the curt message. "It says a lot and a little all at the same time. I am very upset to hear about the casualties, I wonder how bad it is?"

"Logically, I suspect the casualties are light, otherwise they would have requested back up," answered Number One.

Fred saw a chance to get his own back on Number One. "Haven't you forgotten something Number One?"

Number One looked puzzled, "I don't think so."

"Hell's teeth, man, the location.... did you get a fix on the signal?"

Number one flushed slightly but answered quite calmly. "We did not manage to pinpoint the source exactly but we have a position to within about three hundred miles. On-board instrumentation should be able to pick up the search from there."

"Excellent," said Sir Richard. "Thank you, Number One, pass on my appreciation to your staff for their vigilance. It could have been very easy to miss such a short signal after so long. However, we now know that the listening post must still be manned twenty-four hours a day."

Number One stood up, nodded curtly, crossed to Sir Richard's desk, released the room and left without saying another word.

Fred re-secured the room. "That man gives me the creeps, he makes me nervous whenever he comes near me."

"That, my good friend, is the reason that he has the job," teased Sir Richard, then more seriously, "We had better get Clive up here."

He spoke to his secretary on the video-com and asked her to arrange it as soon as possible.

"Drink, Fred?"

"It's only eleven o'clock, Sir Richard."

"It won't have to matter, I'm having a large gin and tonic. ...Are you joining me ? "

"Well....go on then....," smiled Fred. "We'll probably both be raving alcoholics before this damned mess is cleared up."

## **CHAPTER 16. THE SEARCH AND A BONUS.**

Michael watched with fascination as the Alien ship dropped to a sub-light speed; the glittering light show was reversed, but just as impressive. Kandrás was now at the controls and had left it as late as he dared before reducing speed. They were already past the orbit of Jupiter and fast approaching the Asteroid belt.

The speed soon dropped away and the vessel gently nosed its way through the shattered remains of the long-dead planet. They finally took station on a group of large rocks, not too far away from where Kandrás had been compromised by his crew.

"What now?" asked Kandrás .

"Is it possible to identify any vessels on your scope?" replied Michael, hopefully.

"No... there are far too many rocks."

"Do you have any conventional radio facilities apart from your deep space, harmonic sets?"

Kandrás thought for a moment and his eyes lit up as the memory came back to him. "Yes, we have... I have not used it for a very long time but we are equipped with a standard radio which was used for ship to ship communications when we were in the company of other vessels. "

He crossed to a locker on the wall, opened it and there was a beautiful, multi-band radio, a little dusty, but it looked to be in perfect working order.

Michael noticed a microphone. "I thought you communicated by telepathy?"

"We do whenever possible, but we can communicate by sound as well, though we only do it when we are forced into it, as in radio messages."

Michael switched on the set and it issued forth some crackly white-noise then it settled down. Michael looked for the tuning dial and found nothing. "How do you alter the wavelength?" he asked.

"You don't need to, it will pick up any frequency and automatically transmit on the same wavelength as the incoming message. You can isolate your signal by 'Squelching, down the other signals using those two levers, but leave them at zero until you hear something."

The earphones were not for human ears, and there was no way they could be made to fit, so Kandrás, with his usual amused gurgle, patched the sound into an external speaker arrangement.

Then they were soon under way again and commenced an audio and visual search through the desolation of the inner Asteroids. After awhile Kandrás said, "Do you think it is worth using a life-forms scanner or do you anticipate finding only abandoned vessels?"

"That is a good question. ..will it detect life-forms through metal?"

"Yes, that was its prime function when it was designed."

"In that case we may be able to pick up signs of life when we are unable to detect a ship due to metallic rock formations... it's a good idea, we'll try it."

Kandras switched on the scanner and the voyage continued fruitlessly. They flitted from rock field to rock field and investigated several small planetoids, but without success. They both realised the enormity of the task they had undertaken. The Asteroids encompassed a gigantic volume of space and it would, in reality, take decades to search it thoroughly. The instruments were the only real chance they had.

Twenty-four hours of close surveillance was unrewarded. Since this particular task required both their services, they matched orbits with their surroundings, had a meal and a few hours sleep to rest their eyes and refresh themselves.

About eight hours later Kandras lifted his head and looked at Michael. "I've picked something up," he said incredulously. "It is very faint but it is definitely a life-form."

Michael's pulse quickened. "Do you think it is human?" he asked.

"It's too weak to tell do you wish to investigate?"

"Yes, of course... you have control now," said Michael as he switched the piloting facilities to Kandras' station.

The Alien ship picked up a little speed and did a very jaunty turn to starboard and shot off on a new course.

"Michael.. you had better put on your space suit. This particular life-form would probably have a fit if I went to investigate."

Michael agreed and quickly rounded up his gear and put it on. Kandras told him where he could find a jet-gun and, apart from his helmet, was soon ready for action. Kandras now slackened speed and gently approached a group of boulders with a big flat chunk of rock at its centre. Michael was amazed to observe some garbage bags floating gently round the area.

There were a few pieces of machinery fastened to various rocks and Michael recognised the decaying remains of what had once been a thriving claim, now long abandoned.

The ship was brought to a halt. "The signal is emanating from over there, on the large rock, behind that big cylinder," Kandras informed him.

Michael looked to where Kandras had indicated and recognised an old bulk-oxygen cylinder, the type that had been used to supply several cabins at once and to fill empty tanks.

Kandras went to the rear airlock and explained its operation to Michael; they were quite different to the Earthly designed ones. In appearance it looked like a large tube which was partially cut away. It revolved on its base and had a glass-like substance as a door. The design was such that when it revolved you simply stepped out of the vessel, or vice-versa if you were entering, whilst the inner section remained sealed. It was a brilliantly simple device.

Michael stepped in, actuated the mechanism then pushed off into space. It was a psychologically difficult exercise for him after his recent experience of being cast adrift, but he gritted his teeth and jetted off towards the large cylinder. As he drifted over the top he saw a space-suited figure slumped

against the tank support; it was totally inert. There was an emergency tube plugged straight into the oxygen tank with a make-shift connection. It slowly dawned on Michael that the space suit was very similar to his own, in fact it was exactly like his own it was a Company space suit.

Michael gently touched down alongside the prostrate man who appeared to be in a comatose state. He carefully turned him over and laid him on his back and by the dim light of his lamp he was able to read the name tag sewn on the front. It read 'Gorrie.'

"Gorrie... that name is familiar," said Michael to himself.

Then the memory returned. "Good God.... it's Captain Gorrie of the *Titan* how the devil have you managed to stay alive?"

Michael connected Captain Gorrie's oxygen pipe to his own supply, fastened them both together with his emergency line, then jetted off back to the Alien vessel. In a matter of minutes they were back inside and Michael and Kandrass began work on the inert, but living, body of his Company colleague.

Captain Gorrie had miraculously found himself an oxygen supply which could have kept him alive for a further eighteen months. The biggest problems were dehydration, starvation and hypothermia. The Captain had been a big man to start with and Michael guessed that he must have found little pieces of ice from time to time which helped to sustain him, otherwise he would have died a long time ago.

Kandrass was appalled at the emaciated state of the Captain's body. "How can he be still alive and in such a poor state?" he asked.

"It's a mixture of a little courage, some determination and a whole lot of anger, if he feels anything like I do. Unfortunately those admirable qualities will not keep him alive for much longer. Do you think that machine of yours can rustle up something suitable for him to ingest?"

"Yes. ..what we need is a high protein, high vitamin broth. .. I'll see to it straight away."

He returned a few minutes later with a flask full of a luke-warm, cloudy liquid. "This should do the trick." he said hopefully.

Captain Gorrie's tongue was badly swollen, so much so that it was impossible for the fluid to be swallowed. Kandrass looked at the problem and then went to fetch a first-aid kit. With the contents of it they managed to get a small tube down his throat and with a syringe-like pump some liquid was trickled down the tube. The result was a violent attack of stomach cramps.

Kandrass went to another locker and took out a complicated piece of equipment which resembled a gun. He took a phial from the first-aid kit and loaded it into the gun; it was a needle-less hypodermic device. He placed it against Captain Gorrie's abdomen and fired two quick shots; the cramps disappeared instantly and the Captain visibly relaxed all over.

After they had fed him some more water and fluid the tongue shrank a little and after a while they were able to remove the tube as the Captain became capable of swallowing on his own.

"Do you think we could bathe him...? His body temperature still feels quite low," asked Michael.

"Yes, that will be easy enough, but before you do, I would like to give him another shot... with your permission. It is a chemical which speeds up the body metabolism and consequently the body repairs itself quicker. It works on all known life- forms on our planet. It is completely harmless."

Michael agreed, the shot was given and they gently carried the limp body through to the bathroom. The big tanks in the bathroom were side-opening and Michael carried Captain Gorrie into one, set the temperature and ran a deep, warm bath. They stayed there for about fifteen minutes; Michael thoroughly washed and shampooed him then massaged his limbs to restore his circulation as well as he could. They were both very clean when they finally emerged from the bath, Captain Gorrie was still unconscious, but his breathing had improved and he did not look as pale .

He was taken to a spare cabin and strapped to a bunk so that there would be no accidents during any of their many avoidance manoeuvres. Michael and Kandrás returned to the Command Area, very carefully extricated the ship from the abandoned claim and resumed their search. Eight hours and many thousands of miles later, the scanners remained steadfastly blank.

In uninterrupted conditions the scanner had a range of about one thousand miles, but in the Asteroids the prevailing conditions frequently reduced their effectiveness to about half that distance. In spite of this, Michael was impressed by its efficiency, the scanner had picked up the feeble life-form of Captain Gorrie from three hundred miles away.

Michael's eyes were beginning to ache and his concentration was starting to wane; Kandrás did not seem to be affected in the same way, his powers of concentration were far superior.

"Is there anybody there?" shouted an aggravated North Country voice.

Michael's tiredness dropped away as he realised that Captain Gorrie had regained consciousness. He turned to Kandrás and said, "No offence, but I think I had better go to him. He will probably have a seizure if he sees you first."

Kandrás gurgled happily as the thought amused him. "He is probably ready for something to eat now... I think it's about time we took a break as well. I'll match orbits then prepare us some food."

Michael hurried down the corridor to Captain Gorrie's room and was confronted by a very much stronger, irate patient.

"Where the Hell am I...? Who are you...? Are you a bloody pirate as well?"

In spite of his concern Michael could not help grinning.

"Easy now. ..relax. ..you are amongst friends here."

"That isn't very likely, is it?" snapped Captain Gorrie.

"Why have you got me strapped down like this?"

"It's for your own protection; we are moving through the Asteroids and we did not want you damaging yourself any further by falling on the floor."



"Well, if you are a friend, you can release me right away."

"Captain Gorrie, I can understand your feelings and your aggressive attitude, but I assure you we are both on the same side... I, too, work for Sir Richard and I am a Senior Captain with the Company. Like you, I was tricked, captured and cast adrift, so, if you would please calm down, there are some things you need to know."

Captain Gorrie gave Michael a hard look and then his facial expression softened. "I'm sorry, I suppose I'm not in a position to argue... after my recent experiences I find it difficult to trust anybody... this is a strange ship, where did you get it?"

"Are you going to behave yourself and listen if I remove these straps?" asked Michael, "because if you don't, you are going to get a shock that you may not recover from."

"Alright. ..you have my word, " said Captain Gorrie, begrudgingly.

Michael undid the straps and helped the tough Northerner into a sitting position and propped him up with pillows and cushions. "I am Captain Stephens of the freighter *Atlas*. I was sent here by Sir Richard to specifically investigate the disappearances of the *Hercules* and your own ship the *Titan*. My plan was to set ourselves up as bait... and it worked."

"Are you the Captain Stephens who did the exploratory surveys of Saturn?"

"The very same."

The attitude of Captain Gorrie completely changed. "I recognise you now. I was very impressed by your achievements. How long have you worked for the Company?"

"Less than a month."

"Well I am proud to have you with us..... was it you that found me?"

"Yes... but I had assistance. What I am going to tell you is difficult to believe, but I want to prepare you before you find out by accident."

"My god! It must be serious."

"I'll come straight to the point, Captain..."

"Call me Andy."

"Okay, Andy... this is not an Earth vessel. It is an Alien ship and the Alien is on board. He is a very pleasant chap and humanoid.... we saved each others lives."

Michael narrated his story and explained about the telepathic communication. Captain Gorrie was excited, but a little apprehensive, all at the same time; he listened intently, as though frightened of missing a word.

"Are you ready to meet Kandras now?" asked Michael.

"The sooner the better.... Hell.. this is exciting."

Michael left the room and returned with Kandras. Introductions were made and as Kandras communicated with Captain Gorrie, Michael was surprised that he could only pick up half of the conversation; he could not pick up any of the communications from Captain Gorrie. Kandras explained that this situation would improve as Captain Gorrie's telepathic facility strengthened.

Captain Gorrie's immediate and unreserved acceptance of Kandras was very encouraging and Kandras patiently answered all his questions. Eventually Michael won Andy's attention.

"I'm sorry to interrupt, but we need to feed you, you have very nearly starved to death. Do you think you could manage something to eat? I think it will have to be fluid for the time being."

Captain Gorrie considered the question. "I am so excited I seem to have forgotten about my own troubles. Actually, if I'm being honest, it is so long since I have eaten the thought never crossed my mind, but I will be a good patient and try."

"Good... I need you fit and well as soon as possible. I suspect you will wish to take command of the *Titan* when we find it?"

The Captains face lit up with a fierce determination and he grabbed Michael's hand. "Are you serious...? Are we going after them?"

"We certainly are."

He then latched on to one of Kandras' many hands. "Thank You..... thank you very much there is nothing I want more."

It upset Michael to see the tears of gratitude on the other Captain's face and Kandras was deeply moved by his fierce determination.

Captain Gorrie's strength suddenly ran out and he sank back into his pillow, exhausted. A little later he was tucking into a specially prepared high-protein broth and drank as much fluid as his shrunken stomach would allow. After this he went back to sleep and instead of strapping him to the bunk, Michael arranged pillows to prevent him from rolling out.

When he was asleep Kandras gave him another shot of the metabolism accelerator.

"This will help him to digest the food a lot quicker and rapidly speed up his recovery."

Soon the ship was underway again and searching in earnest. Michael had one great fear, they could be travelling in the wrong direction, away from the Pirate's base. He had fixed in his mind a limiting co-ordinate at which point he would retrace his steps and search in the other direction.

There were several sources detected by the life-form scanner but a closer inspection had shown them to be bona-fide mining operations or private claims. As these became more frequent Michael became more and more convinced that he was travelling in the wrong direction. He voiced his fears to Kandras who was also of the same opinion.

Once the decision was taken Kandras was able to retrace their steps very quickly and they soon reached the vicinity where the ship had commenced the hunt. This time the search went in the opposite direction. There were no traces at all for a full six hours and Michael was feeling a little depressed, even though the lack of contact encouraged him to believe he was searching in the correct direction.

Michael had completely forgotten that the radio was on. He had previously squelched it down to cut out the radio chatter of the prospectors and it had not made a sound since they had reversed the direction of the search. He was startled when it suddenly came out with a fifteen second burst of absolute gibberish.

Michael looked at Kandrás who was also wearing a puzzled expression. "I don't know what that was. ..do you?"

"No... not a clue, although I have heard similar signals before," replied the Alien.

"I know what it was," said a voice from the doorway.

They both spun round and were surprised to see Captain Gorrie standing there. He looked a lot better but was a little unsteady on his feet.

"Go on then. ..what is it?" begged Michael.

"It's Morse code being transmitted on the scrambled channel I'd recognise it anywhere it's actually used only in emergencies," said Captain Gorrie emphatically.

Michael knew it should mean something to him, he had forgotten something which was very important; he wracked his brain trying to equate the significance of the signal. Then, like a veil being lifted, he recalled his ignominious exit from the *Black Swan*.

"It's Neville. ..it must be. ..he is still alive and he's just got a message away," said Michael excitedly. He thought for a moment and turned to Kandrás. "Can your computers get any kind of fix on where that signal emanated from?"

Kandrás grinned. "Do you want it correct to six or eight places of your decimals?"

Michael was almost dancing with excitement. "Do you mean you can pinpoint it?"

"To within a kilometre or two," laughed Kandrás.

"Well let's do it before it is too late," hooted Michael, who was fearful that the opportunity would be lost.

Kandrás went to the computer and expertly manipulated the keyboard. A few seconds later he looked up. "The co-ordinates are locked in. It will take about four hours to reach the destination... even I cannot rush about in these rock fields."

Michael had now simmered down and explained the reason for his outburst to his two companions. They were both of the same opinion that, under the circumstances, Michael's interpretation could be correct. The next four hours were going to seem interminable.

Michael looked Kandrás straight in the eyes and decided to tackle a tricky problem. "We're now approaching a critical point in the proceedings. Now would be a good time to tell us what armament, if any, you have available."

Kandrás gazed steadily back at him. "The taking of life is both abhorrent and expressly forbidden to my species. Our way is to disable, not to kill."

"Does that mean you have a kind of 'Stun Gun' which will disable people temporarily?" asked Michael hopefully.

"Good Lord, no! Our device disables machinery and electronics... permanently."

Now it was Michael's turn to show astonishment. "That in itself is a fascinating concept... but how do you deal with the people?"

"I have already brought you to your knees... accidentally, of course, but I could do it any time I liked."

"You mean by the power of your mind?"

"Precisely.... on our planet, people who have authority go through specialised training to enable them to do this... larger crowds are dealt with using a harmless anaesthetic gas which sends them to sleep."

Michael pondered the problem a moment. "How does your Destructive ray work?"

"From what I gleaned from your astro-physics knowledge, you would call it a modified Gamma ray. It passes harmlessly through life-forms but turns metals into a mushy plastic. The damage is permanent and irreversible... I do not think you would wish to use it against your own ships."

Michael laughed, in agreement then spoke seriously. "You do realise, that my species does not have the same high ideals as yourself when it comes to killing. Our natural instincts are for self preservation. Make no mistake about it, Harry Morgan's men will shoot to kill. If you can get myself and Captain Gorrie close enough we will tackle them on our own."

Kandras gave Michael an incredulous look. "Do you seriously think that I would leave you to face them alone? I only said I wouldn't kill..... I did not say that I wouldn't fight."

"But you could be killed by these villains and I would not like that to happen," insisted Michael.

"They will not kill me and they will not kill you or Captain Gorrie... I cannot vouch for anyone else, but you two will not come to any harm and neither will I."

"How can you guarantee that?" asked a mystified Captain Gorrie.

"I can guarantee it because we will all be wearing a 'Personal Protection Device,' which makes you invulnerable."

After a stunned silence Michael said, "I asked the wrong question, didn't I...? I should have asked you what defence systems you carried."

"That is one of the great differences in our philosophy; you think of attack we think of defence."

"We believe that attack is sometimes the best form of defence and sometimes we sacrifice a few to save many," argued Michael. "Anyway we will have plenty of time to argue the point after we have released and rescued our people."

All three of them staggered as the ship swung violently to avoid a rock cluster.

"We had better concentrate on the ship for the time being," remarked Kandrás. "Will you take over the controls while I go and find the 'Protection Devices.'"

Michael strapped himself into his seat and took over the modified controls. Captain Gorrie was really impressed. "Do you know how to pilot this thing?" he asked doubtfully.

"Yes, Kandrás has taught me everything I need to know."

"Is it quick?"

Michael smiled knowingly. "I have done about seventy-five times the speed of light in it" he said truthfully. "I consider that to be quick, but Kandrás doesn't. I have learnt so much from him. ..do you realise that I have been halfway to Alpha Centauri in less than two days."

"That is incredible," gasped the Captain.

"The whole damned situation is incredible," said Michael grimly. "All three of us are alive as the result of three miracles... I just hope our good luck extends to the others."

"Amen to that!"

The two men lapsed into silence as Michael concentrated on the progress of the ship. Five minutes later Kandrás returned carrying three small packs and some webbing. The 'Protection Devices' consisted of two plain black boxes which were strongly secured to a kind of thick fabric webbing which fitted like a parachute harness.

Kandrás explained their operation. "The device puts you at the centre of a protective bubble some twelve feet in diameter. The focus automatically adjusts so that there are three protective layers in the shield. The outer shield is a modified Gamma-ray, similar to the one in the defence system. The second shield is a combination of a harmonic-light laser and a specially developed synthetic ray which disintegrates the plastic material which emerges through the outer shield.

The final shield serves two functions. Firstly, it protects the wearer from the harmful radiation effects of the other two layers and, secondly, it acts as a semi-permeable membrane, so to speak, for it allows material to pass through the shield from the inside, but absolutely nothing from the outside. It is necessary to wear breathing apparatus if you are to wear the devices for any length of time."

Michael and Andrew experimented with the devices and became thoroughly acquainted with them. They threw things at each other and were amazed to see them stop short in mid-air and bounce off. The only visible effect was a slight, green halo.

After a while Kandrás left the bridge and returned two minutes later carrying the diminutive garments that had puzzled Michael so much. "Perhaps you would care to wear these, Andy," gurgled Kandrás merrily.

Michael and Andy joined in the laughter as they realised that the only garment Andy had been wearing was a towel. This had long since dropped to

the floor and during the experimenting modesty had been forgotten; he was stark naked.

Soon, in spite of all the same doubts that Michael had experienced, he was clothed in the same garb as the others and was looking a lot better.

Kandras spoke again. "We are passing through a relatively clear area; now would be a good time to eat and have a short rest."

This they did and one hour later, feeling fit and refreshed the three companions returned to the Command Area.

## CHAPTER 17. RECOVERY.

"Michael, you are the military man; I think it would be a good idea if you took command of the recovery operation. Andy and myself will be your soldiers. This will avoid confusion."

"Alright," said Michael. "Are you happy with that, Andy?"

"Of course I am," he replied bluntly. "I never thought I would get a chance to hit back."

A short while later they entered the unusually dense, large rock field which had protected Harry from discovery. The normal scanners showed only a conglomeration of rocks, it was impossible to distinguish ships from Asteroids. However a strong and positive reading was shown by the 'life-forms' scanner as they approached the co-ordinates of the radio signal.

Michael decided that the best approach would be from the worst possible direction. He asked Kandrass to bring them in from the left hand side through a field of large boulders and planetoids. As they approached even closer, the different locations of the life-forms became more obvious.

Suddenly Kandrass said, "There they are." He halted the ship and matched orbits amongst a group of boulders and to the observer was quite undetectable. It was beyond Michael's wildest dream; all three of the missing vessels were moored together. His enthusiasm waned a little when he realised the *Black Swan* was missing.

"Now there's a sight for sore eyes." said Captain Gorrie. "What do we do now Michael?"

"We need to locate Neville." He turned to Kandrass. "How accurate is the scanner?"

"At this range I can pinpoint a strong life-form to within about two of your metres."

"Can you scan the vessel nearest to us... that is the *Atlas* ...I suspect Neville is hidden in it somewhere."

Kandrass nodded and adjusted the controls. "Is it a good feeling to see your ship again?"

"It certainly is, but it would be a lot better if the *Black Swan* was here as well."

"There is a definite life-form emanation in the *Atlas*," said Kandrass.

"Is it at the front or at the rear?"

"Well... it is neither, Michael. It is right in the middle of the ship." He blew up the view of the *Atlas* on the screen and a bright red light flashed to show the location of the life-form.

"Container sixteen ?" queried Michael.

"How can he exist in a container?" asked a mystified Captain Gorrie.

Michael thought long and hard about his cargo manifest and mentally checked off the list in his memory.

"It's the site cabin the crafty, old fox.... he found the site cabin," laughed Michael.

"Is it Neville Johnson?" asked Captain Gorrie.

"Yes. ..do you know him?"

"Very well, he is an extremely clever and resourceful man. He has made several trips with me as my communications officer," replied Captain Gorrie.

"He surprised us, I can tell you, he has a very mean streak under that smooth exterior... I wouldn't like to cross him," said Michael. "Kandras, please can you pinpoint the other groups. We will treat them all as hostile at this moment until I can prove differently."

The other groups were soon identified and plotted. It appeared that on their scheduled day this was sleeping time because there was little or no movement.

"There must be somebody on watch," said Michael, "but I suspect they will be watching monitors for the approach of other vessels. There is a good chance that we can make it to the *Atlas* undetected. I can see no sense in prolonging matters . We will occupy the *Atlas* and get Neville to send off a message for help. Let's get our gear on then and get it over with."

Soon the three man rescue team was fully kitted out, two men exactly the same and one in a suit which was very different and made the others look primitive. Kandras had managed to refill the tanks of the two earthly suits, but only after Michael had fashioned an adaptor. All were equipped with a jet gun to propel them and were able to communicate with each other either by radio or by telepathy.

"Do you have another protection device which we could give to Neville?" asked Michael.

"I'm sorry but there was only one issue per crew member I haven't any spares," replied Kandras. "However, if you switch off momentarily and keep close contact, he can still be protected within the umbrella of your own set."

"That's useful to know," said Captain Gorrie.

"Before we leave the ship, Andy, I would like us to maintain radio silence for as long as possible. Can we relay any messages we might have through you, Kandras?" asked Michael.

"Yes.... of course."

They exited the ship with Michael leading the way. He took them through the rocks to a point immediately above the *Atlas*.

"We will approach one at a time," said Michael telepathically.

"I will go first, Kandras second and Andy last."

Michael expertly jetted down and kept to the side furthest away from the little Community on the rock to avoid detection. Seconds later he was joined by Kandras and then by Andy.

"Kandras, could you possibly communicate with Neville and try to give him some notion that we are here. I don't want to simply barge in, he may have booby trapped the entrance," requested Michael.



“Inside his little site cabin Neville was sleeping, but it was a worried, fretful type of sleep; he was expecting to be discovered, so he slept shallowly. He woke up with a start as somebody called his name. A quick look round the cabin confirmed that he had not been invaded and inwardly he thought that his nerves must be getting to him.

Then it came again.

“Neville... I am a friend... I have Captain Stephens and Captain Gorrie with me... we need your help to retake the ships.”

Neville broke out into a cold sweat, he had never seen a ghost before and he had certainly never heard one. He had heard stories about spirits being trapped in space after men had died, but he had never believed them. Now he was not so sure.

“Neville... relax and listen.... I am communicating telepathically with you... I am not an Earthman. Captain Stephens saved my life... he is here with me now... he says that he wishes you to communicate with Sir Richard at Company Headquarters. ..”

“Good God!” exclaimed Neville. “Either I am going mad or Captain Stephens has befriended an Alien.”

The voice in his head continued relentlessly. “We know you are in container sixteen and we are waiting at the hatch for you... Captain Stephens requests that you do not use your radio. ..please, come quickly.”

Neville gathered his racing thoughts and decided to act on the request. “I’m coming out,” he yelled, not knowing if he would be heard or not. He donned his helmet and checked his gauges, he had plenty of air. Soon he was out of the cabin and making his way to the hatch. Very gingerly he lifted it up, gripped his weapon and peered through. He was elated and overjoyed to see his Captain alive and well. He was even more astonished to see Captain Gorrie... they greeted each other like long lost friends, which, indeed, they were.

It was the greatest moment in Neville’s life when he was introduced to Kandras; he just could not believe it was happening to him. Michael congratulated Neville on his courage and clear thinking in the situation he had escaped from, but then he chivvied everybody along and soon they were in the receiving room of the *Atlas*.

Neville and Michael went straight to the radio room and warmed up the set. Andy and Kandras went to the observation turrets to keep watch.

\* \* \* \* \*

Sir Richard was relaxing in his office with a cup of coffee when the video-com lit up and crackled into life. It was Fred Ford and he was excited.

“Good morning, Sir Richard, I’m sorry to disturb you, but we have just received a signal from the *Atlas*... A10, which means 'stand by for a full transmission in ten minutes. It would be a good idea if you could come down here, Sir. We may need some instant decisions.”

Sir Richard showed not even a trace of emotion as he answered curtly, "I'm on my way." Inwardly his pulse and his thoughts were racing; was it good news or bad...? He would soon know.

Five minutes later Sir Richard, Fred Ford, the Head of Security and the Radio Operator were assembled in the Special Operations Room and there was an air of expectancy as they waited for the signal. Right on cue the radio crackled and the call sign of the *Atlas* came through. The messages were automatically unscrambled and displayed on a large V.D.U.

The first message came through. "This is Captain Stephens of the *Atlas*, please confirm reception. "

The Radio Operator did so.

The message continued. "Thank you.... our position is sector Q of the inner Asteroids, co-ordinates 976-352-9097. This signal may be interrupted at any time but I will try to give you an update on our status. In the meantime, please will you make available to me the engine-lock numbers of the *Atlas*, the *Hercules* and the *Titan*.

The radio operator quietly said, "Voice recognition is affirmative, Sir Richard."

"Good!" was the reply.

The message continued. "The Company vessels have all been victims of piratical attacks by a vessel called the *Black Swan*, formerly known as the *Cygnus*, and its crew lead by a man named Harry Morgan. I am transmitting secretly from the *Atlas* which has been captured and is being held at the Base for which I have given you the co-ordinates. The *Hercules* and the *Titan* are also here... All the Captains including myself shut down their C.A.M.I.D. units, so the ships are virtually useless... However we intend to fly them to Ceres as soon as we are in a position to do so... I have Captain Gorrie and Neville Johnson with me Mr Johnson escaped after we had been captured and Captain Gorrie survived by finding an abandoned claim after he had been cast adrift... we must assume Captain Collins to be dead and Gary Mitchell was killed by one of Morgan's guards...I am unable to report on the whereabouts or condition of any other crew members at this moment.."

"The computer confirms that this is the work of Neville Johnson, Sir," whispered the Radio Operator.

"Good!" said Sir Richard.

After a short pause the message continued again. "We have made contact with an Alien life-form... he is called Kandra..."

"Ask for confirmation of the last message," snapped a thunderstruck Sir Richard.

"The Radio Operator tapped-out the request.

"Confirmation... we have... repeat have... made contact with an Alien being who is currently assisting us in our quest... He is the pilot of the U.F.O. I saw and is deserving of our highest praise; we made contact after I had been cast adrift by Morgan. We were both in a tricky predicament, so we helped each

other... his two companions were killed.... please send help immediately to the position I have given you... I will leave you to decide whether to send Company men or the Military, either will suffice... that is the end of this transmission... Please transmit the 'Engine-lock codes'... over and out..."

Number One, the Head of Security, had already retrieved the codes from the computer and he handed them to the Radio Operator who transmitted them. The *Atlas* responded with its call sign to acknowledge receipt, then the V.D.U. went blank. Sir Richard suddenly galvanised himself into action.

"I want everybody in my office... is Clive Twist in the building?"

"I have seen him," said Number One.

"Fred... tell him to drop whatever he is doing and ask him to attend a meeting in my office immediately, please." With that he turned on his heel and walked out, closely followed by Fred Ford.

Before Number One left he had a quiet word with the Radio Operator and reminded him of some of the very nasty things that could and would happen to him if he breathed a word of what he had just heard to anybody.

The Radio Operator just grinned and said, "I won't let Sir Richard down, Number One... you can sleep easy in your bed on my account."

Five minutes later everybody, including Clive Twist, was in Sir Richards office and the room was secure.

"Firstly, I will bring you up to date, Clive, " said Sir Richard. "We have just received a signal from Captain Stephens."

"That is wonderful news... what did he have to say?"

"Nothing much... he's just found the three ships and befriended an Alien. He's been the victim of a piratical attack and survived being cast adrift in space... nothing out of the ordinary really," quipped Sir Richard.

"Sounds like a fairly average day, " retorted Clive. "Now what did he really say?"

"It's hard to believe but I have just told you the truth," insisted Sir Richard.

"I thought for a moment that you had said he had made contact with an Alien," smiled Clive.

". ..and Captain Stephens confirmed it."

Clive sat down with a bump. "Is he in command of the situation?"

"We do not know for sure, but his message sounded confident enough. He has requested some immediate back-up; we must quickly decide who we are going to send... the military or our own people," replied Sir Richard grimly.

"The military are probably a lot closer than we are," observed Fred.

"The Alien becomes a problem if we involve the military," said Clive. "We have already seen their reaction to previous sightings... they may not take us seriously or they could just shoot the poor chap and say it was a hoax."

Sir Richard nodded in agreement. "It is a pity we do not have a small force in the vicinity."

"We have."

Everybody turned towards Number One.

"How is that possible, Number One?" asked a puzzled Sir Richard.

"I anticipated that we would receive a request such as this and even if we didn't. we would need an armed guard ship to escort future vessels through this zone. I dispatched a vessel with full external armament and a contingent of twenty security guards fourteen days ago. The vessel is in the vicinity and hove-to awaiting further instructions."

"Why was I not told of this?" demanded sir Richard.

"Because I do not need to tell you, Sir Richard. Security is my problem... Company policy is yours," replied Number One without any sign of remorse or apology.

Sir Richard coughed gently. "Well... I'm glad you did. Are we all agreed that we commit the Company contingent to Captain Stephen's request?"

The agreement was unanimous.

"Which ship is it, Number One?" asked Fred Ford.

"I sent *Hornet* and Captain Andrew David."

"I thought *Hornet* was in for repairs and servicing," retorted Sir Richard.

"I lied!" replied Number One with one of his very rare, cold smiles. "Incidentally, the co-ordinates given by Captain Stephens check out with the fix we obtained from the previous signal. I passed these on to Captain David and he moved position so that he was available in that sector."

"You did well, Number One... go and brief them and get them there quam celerime."

"Quam what-a-may?" asked a puzzled Number One, who was not a Latin scholar.

"As quickly as possible," smiled Sir Richard .

"Well why didn't you say so?" scowled Number One. He released the room and left.

"Do we need to go back into secure mode, Sir Richard?" asked Fred.

"I don't think so. ..could anybody use a coffee?"

Louisa arrived a few minutes later with a fresh pot and efficiently poured out a cup for everybody. The room was then resecured and in its privacy the topic of discussion was the Alien. They were all very moved and excited about it. The general agreement was that the Company should throw a protective cloak around the Being and protect him from the Authorities.

As they left, Clive turned to Sir Richard. "The Alien himself is a fascinating discovery... but I'd give a years wages to see his ship... that must be really something. I wonder if it is quick as ours?"

Sir Richard raised an eyebrow. "I suspect it is a damned sight quicker if he is not from our Solar System... and it is most unlikely that he is."

The three men then went their separate ways with their minds in a whirl as a result of this new update.

\* \* \* \* \*

"We've been rumbled, " shouted Captain Gorrie. "There are two men leaving Block Three."

"Are they coming over here?" asked Michael.

"No... they are heading for a covered stack of supplies."

Michael rushed to the observation turret, picking up the night binoculars on his way. He focussed on the two men and felt a sinking feeling in his stomach as he saw what was underneath the cover that they were now removing. "It's another of those bloody cannons," cried Michael despairingly.

"How long before they can make it operational?" asked Captain Gorrie.

"About three minutes, I suppose. We had better clear the ship immediately."

As he took a last look at the two guards, the strangely-suited figure of Kandra swam into view. He had already sized up the situation and was heading for the guards, as fast as he could... as yet unnoticed.

By the time they had all cleared the airlock, Kandra was almost upon them and the two guards were arming the weapon. All of a sudden one of the guards saw him coming; he must have realised immediately that the strange vision was not an Earthly one and drew a hand gun. He fired three quick shots at point blank range which hit the shield thrown up by the protection device Kandra was wearing. There was a vivid, violet flash a few feet in front of Kandra as the shield did its work.

Much to the consternation of the guard, his weapons had no effect whatsoever. By now the other guard was alert to the situation and he drew his weapon and frantically blasted away to no avail. Like an avenging angel, Kandra gently touched down about five yards from them with his hands and arms outstretched in a menacing attitude; he made no attempt to stop them.

Eventually the power packs on the weapons ran out and both guards threw the weapons at the spectre in front of them; they were vaporised by the shield. In a state of near hysteria the second guard dived for the cannon and frantically swung it round towards Kandra. This worried Michael; a blast from a hand gun was one thing, but a blast from a weapon which could easily vaporise a twenty ton rock was an entirely different kettle of fish. In desperation he generated all his telepathic power and screamed the warning to him.

Suddenly the guard threw his hands to his helmet and his knees buckled as he slowly crumpled to the ground; he went stiff then gently floated off the rock, completely unconscious.

The remaining guard was just standing there, absolutely terrified. Kandra gave him his full attention and soon he, too, was disabled and out of it. Neville was impressed with this display of invulnerability and remarked on it seeing as radio silence was now no longer a problem.

Michael explained that it was all on account of the devices that they were wearing. He looked down at it and was horrified to discover that he had forgotten to switch it on in his hurry to vacate the *Atlas*. Captain Gorrie was also defenceless. Michael pulled Neville to him, told him to stay as close as

possible and as he switched on the device Neville, too, came under its protection.

Kandras took a piece of cord from the cannon covers, caught the two unconscious men and tethered them to the cannon. Next he removed the priming circuit from the cannon and crushed it with his large, double boot, thus rendering it useless.

By now more space-suited figures were emerging from the container. When they saw Kandras a hail of fire was directed against him. Neville decided to take a hand, he raised his weapon and fired one round of the explosive shells which narrowly missed one of the pirates and exploded against the rock in a cascade of sparks. He immediately felt a mind wrenching grip inside his head and the admonishing voice of Kandras who said, "Do not try to harm them. ...it is unnecessary ."

"O.K... O.K...," gasped Neville and put the gun away as Kandras released his mental grip.

Kandras communicated with Michael, "You had better let me handle this lot... we do not need weapons... which is just as well since we only have the one.... just stay within the cloak of the protection device and you will be safe. I will disable them."

The hail of fire slowed down as one by one the guards succumbed to Kandras. Soon there were nine inert bodies gently bobbing around the rock.

"Can you herd the guards together, Andy, ferry them to the *Atlas* and secure them?" asked Captain Stephens.

"It will be a pleasure," replied Andy gruffly.

"How long will these men remain immobile, Kandras?" asked Michael.

"They will remain inert until I free the 'motor' sections of their brains. I have paralysed this part of their nervous systems It is painful but harmless," replied Kandras.

"We had better check their quarters to see if there are any hostiles left inside," said Michael.

Michael, Neville and Kandras split up and approached from different directions, but there was no movement or hostility; it looked to be deserted. They met again at the airlock. Michael stepped inside having first deactivated his protection device. The interior of the container was brightly lit by some crudely rigged neon tubes. In the corner was a deep-space radio and it was still switched on. Neville and Kandras entered as the airlock re-cycled and Neville immediately went over to check the radio.

"It has been used recently... possibly to warn the *Black Swan* of the situation here," said Neville. "The output stage is still hot."

Michael and Kandras wandered to the other side of the container and half-heartedly poked amongst the makeshift bunks to confirm that there were no more of Morgan's men here.

Suddenly from behind a packing crate to the left of the airlock a figure rose silently and a powerful, electronic rifle was quickly levelled at the back of

Kandras. Neville spun round and saw the danger; it was the barman who had been on duty at the ill-fated party.

His wicked eyes gleamed as he realised that they were at his mercy. "I don't know what you are or where you are from but you're dead now," he shouted triumphantly. His rifle came into his shoulder and there was a flash and a loud bang almost simultaneously. As Michael and Kandras spun round they saw a gruesome sight. The barman had lost his left arm and most of his chest; he was lying dead on the floor. His rifle shot had destroyed one of the neon tubes and splinters of it were still spinning round the interior.

Neville was standing by the radio with the gun in his hand. He had aimed and fired as an involuntary reaction and one of the low-velocity shells had hit the barman on the left side of his chest. As the projectile had exploded it had destroyed the gunman, he probably never knew what happened.

Kandras was shocked and silent, but Michael quickly pulled himself together. "Thanks for that, Neville... we had even forgotten to reactivate our devices."

Kandras, too, came to his senses. "I am very glad that I did not paralyse the 'motor' functions in your brain, Neville. I find it hard to believe that men such as this can arrive at the decision to kill so easily.... yours is a violent society."

"Only a small portion of it, Kandras," said Michael reassuringly.

"I think it is poetic justice," said Neville gently.

"What is?" asked a perplexed Michael.

"It is most fitting that the man who killed Gary Mitchell should, in turn, be killed by Gary's personal weapon," insisted Neville.

"I suppose it is... but it is a tragedy that anybody had to die at all," replied Michael. He crossed to where the weapon of the dead man had landed and picked it up; it was set on 'kill.'

"This man had no intention of taking any prisoners," remarked Michael. "You had no choice, Neville, it was all of us, or him so don't be distressed about it."

"Thank you for your concern, Captain, but I am neither sorry, nor distressed..... the man was a menace," replied Neville coldly.

"We had better do a last thorough search then open the airlock and depressurise the container. It will not be needed any more," instructed Michael.

Neville went over to the radio. "Would you like me to send a message to the *Black Swan*, Captain?"

Michael pondered a moment. "No.. I think we will leave him guessing... but make a mental note of the wavelength on the radio... we may need it later."

When they had completed their work and covered the corpse with a blanket, Michael jammed the inner door of the airlock, switched off the oxygen supply and slowly opened the outer door to release the pressure. As they exited, both doors were left open.

Kandras had already specified which containers emanated life-forms; there were three more. Michael knew that there would be hostile guards along with the captives. The problem was how to make a safe entrance. Fortunately

sound does not travel in space so they would not have heard the raging, pitched battle outside. Unfortunately, there was no way of sneaking through an airlock and the protection device had to be switched off to go through such a confined space.

Michael wracked his brain for a solution to gain entry. His eyes came to rest on a stack of chemical barrels which were outside one of the unoccupied containers. These barrels were made out of a heavy-gauge metal and had even heavier lids with two carrying handles. It was a crude idea and very risky, but it was a risk he would have to take; one of those lids would make a shield and give him a chance to survive the first blast from one of the electronic rifles.

He jetted across and removed a lid from one of the barrels, then headed back towards the next occupied container.

"It's too risky, Michael," insisted a worried Kandrás.

"I know, but it has to be done."

Gritting his teeth, Michael shifted the lever on the electronic rifle to 'stun,' took a firm grip on his makeshift shield and opened the outer door of the airlock. As the airlock went through its cycle it was annoying that there was no way to see inside. He did not know if the container would be illuminated or in total darkness; to give him some advantage he switched on his headlamp.

The airlock completed its cycle and Michael released the door then pushed with all his might and leapt through. The lack of gravity made it a slow-motion ballet, but it was equally difficult for the guard. The interior was dimly lit by one neon tube, but as he leapt through the opening Michael was quick enough to see a startled guard bring up his weapon and loose off a shot.

Michael parried it with the shield but it was ripped from his grasp by the force of the electronic bolt; he, too, was knocked back against the wall of the container. But it was too late for the guard. Michael jabbed the button on his protection device' and instantly he became invulnerable as the pale green aura enveloped him. The guard shot at him again and was joined by a second guard who had leapt from his bunk. There was complete panic inside the container, there were ten other inhabitants who were all chained to their bunks.

Michael simply stood there as a hail of electronic death was absorbed by his safety device, then carefully and deliberately he raised his rifle and shot the first guard just below the neck. He floated away completely stunned and out of it. The second guard threw down his weapon and raised his hands. It made no difference. ...Michael stunned him anyway. Both guards would be unconscious for at least two hours .

Michael communicated with Kandrás. "I'm alright... things are under control here. I shot two guards but there are ten hostages as well, so it would be better if you remained outside for the time being... they have had enough shocks for the time being. Perhaps you could give Andy some help?"

"He does seem to be struggling... the bodies keep floating away. Shall I send Neville in?" came back the reply.

"Yes please. .. it is safe in here now."



Michael suddenly realised that the ten hostages were gazing fearfully at him. He removed his helmet and switched off his protection device.

"My name is Captain Stephens, in command of the freighter *Atlas*. I have been sent by Sir Richard to help you. Are there any more Company men here?"

The captives gave a feeble cheer and six men raised their free hands. One of them spoke. "My name is Frank Jennings, Captain. I was First Officer on board the *Titan*. You have no idea how glad we are to see you. I'm afraid Captain Gorrie was killed by that lunatic Morgan."

Michael smiled mysteriously. There was no mistaking that this was Fred Ford's son; it was all there in the hard eyes, and facial expressions. "Who are these other chaps then?"

A big man on the end bunk gave the reply. "We are, or should I say, were, a legitimate, British prospecting company, Captain... We were tricked by Morgan and our ship, the *Starling* was seized... my name is Trevor Dixon and I was the Skipper."

"Where is your ship now?"

"All the small captured vessels have been taken to the other claim, wherever that may be," replied Dixon.

"Your Crew has also been taken there from what I can gather, Captain." added Frank Jennings.

Michael's face showed his disappointment. "I thought I would find them here but it seems I will have to search elsewhere. Where are the keys to the manacles?"

"The guard has them round his neck."

Michael crossed the room to the guard and was not too upset to discover that the blast from the electronic rifle had burnt an imprint of the keys onto his skin. It must have been a direct hit.

At that moment Neville Johnson came through the airlock and removed his helmet.

"Hello Frank... you seem to be a bit tied up," he quipped.

Michael gave Neville the keys and told him to release the men.

"Can I ask you a question, Captain?" asked Trevor Dixon.

"Why was the guard unable to shoot you?"

"Like Captain Gorrie, I, too, was cast adrift. To cut a long story short I crossed paths with an Alien and this is one of his devices. He is a first-rate guy and you all owe your freedom to him... so be grateful and not frightened when you meet him Oh!... I forgot to tell you... Captain Gorrie is alive and well, we managed to rescue him... he is a tough old bird is that one."

The *Titan* crew members were overjoyed and Michael was embarrassed by the amount of thanks which was showered on him.

"Do you feel competent to take over the *Hercules*, Mister Jennings?" asked Michael formally.

"Yes Sir... but I think Mister Calvert would be very upset."

"Who is Mister Calvert?"

"The original First Officer from the *Hercules*. He is next door with the rest of the Crew."

Michael recalled their brief but poignant encounter aboard the *Atlas* at the beginning of their captivity. "In that case I will put you in charge of the *Atlas* instead."

"But what about you, Sir?"

"I'm going after my Crew... I have a score to settle with Morgan." Michael then addressed the whole ensemble. "Get your spacesuits on as quickly as you can and help Captain Gorrie and the Alien, Kandras, to take the pirates back to the *Atlas* please. Help will be arriving soon."

Michael picked up his metal shield, which now sported a dent and a scorch mark and replaced his helmet. He indicated that he was going to free the Crew of the *Hercules* and asked Neville to follow him as soon as possible.

He exited and made his way to the next container. This time it was easier. Michael gained entry unchallenged to find both guards asleep. One was Jagger, the Officer from the *Black Swan*.

Michael shot them both in their sleep. "They will have a rude awakening," he said to himself.

Michael shook the manacled Crew into consciousness. "Where is Mister Calvert, please?"

"Over here," said a voice from the far end of the bunks. "It can't be Captain Stephens you're dead."

"I assure you that I am still very much alive, Mister Calvert.

Do you feel competent to take over command of the *Hercules* with whatever Crew we can put together?"

"Yes Sir.... just get these damned cuffs off me."

Michael briefed the men on the situation and told them about Kandras. Neville joined him and set the ten men free.

It transpired that one of the Crew of the *Hercules* had been killed for attacking a guard and another had been killed in an accident; he had been crushed between two large boulders. That left seven of the Crew. The other three were some bona-fide American prospectors who had been fooled by Harry. They had decided that they wanted nothing to do with Morgan or his promise of great riches and had been enslaved along with the others.

The *Titan* had not lost any Crew, but three dissident Crew members had been taken along with the Crew of the *Atlas* to do a stint in the original rock field.

Michael was informed that the rest of the pirates were off-duty in the next container. This was going to be a more difficult job. "How many do you estimate there are?"

"About ten at a guess," replied Calvert.

"Thank you... get into your spacesuits as soon as possible and assemble in the *Atlas* with the others."

As Michael left the container a beautifully designed small warship swooped into the hide-out, literally bristling with armament. Michael switched on his 'protection device' as a precaution; there was a Company Crest on the side but he was taking no chances until he was sure. He switched on his suit radio. "Warship, Warship... please identify yourself."

The reply was immediate. "This is Captain Andrew David of the Security Patrol vessel *Hornet* on a special mission to assist Captain Stephens... who are you, please... over?"

"This is Captain Stephens speaking... well done! You got here quicker than I expected... may I come aboard and brief you?"

"Certainly, Captain... Number One says we are to take our orders from you."

"Who is Number One?"

"The Head of Security."

"I should have known. ..prepare to receive me please."

Five minutes later Michael stepped into the *Hornet* and was greeted by a familiar face. "762, how are you? What are you doing here?"

"I volunteered, Sir... we all did. Number One guessed that help would be required eventually. We have been biding our time for four days now. Please allow me to take you through to the Captain."

Captain David greeted him warmly. "It's good to see you alive, Sir."

"It's good to be alive, Captain." Michael then explained that there were ten hostiles in the fourth container; he explained that he would try the same ruse as before but would like a little back-up.

In the company of five armed security men, Michael left the ship and returned to the fourth container. He was astonished to find that the airlock had been bolted from the inside to prevent surprise attacks. He radioed the *Hornet* and spoke to the Captain. "Do you have a radio transducer that I could attach to the container and speak to them?"

"Affirmative Captain. I will have it sent over immediately."

Ten minutes later the transducer was attached to the outside of the container and Michael had his radio patched into it via the *Hornet*. The security men were all in position with weapons set on 'stun,' watching the airlock.

"This is Captain Stephens of the *Atlas* Your game is now over... you are surrounded and the ships are back under my command. There is also a fully armed warship in attendance. If you surrender now, you will not be harmed... you will be taken for a fair trial at the Martian Crown Court. You have sixty seconds to make up your mind. "

Thirty seconds later the inner door of the airlock was seen to open and everybody focused their attention on it. It was a clever ruse to distract them; as they watched the airlock, the manhole on top of the container flew open and the men

streamed out of it firing their weapons. The first shot hit 762 on his leg and severed it below the knee.

Michael was incensed. He came right out into the open and was deluged in a hail of fire, but it had no effect. His protection device simply shrugged it off. The security men returned fire and two minutes later the pirates were all unconscious. The ships were now truly recovered and resistance was at an end.

## **CHAPTER 18. THE BIG CLEAN UP.**

762 was barely conscious and bleeding profusely, his spacesuit was depressurised and he was close to death. Michael ripped the strap off his rifle and applied a tourniquet round the stump. The bleeding slowed down and the suit repressurized. Kandrás, who had seen the incident, was already out of the *Atlas* and heading towards them.

"We must take him to my ship immediately, I think I can help him."

They quickly jetted him back to the Alien vessel, leaving the Security men to tidy up the mess. Michael spoke to Captain Gorrie over the radio. "Andy... please inspect the containers and see what can be salvaged. Use the men to reassemble as much of the *Hercules* and *Titan* as possible and recover any usable merchandise."

He then spoke to Captain Andrew David. "When Captain Gorrie has finished his work, destroy everything that is left.... don't leave anything."

"Message received and understood, Sir."

By the time they reached Kandrás' ship, parties of men were already setting about their work. Once inside the ship, Kandrás and Michael carried 762 to a remote room at the rear of the ship; it was a sickbay and operating theatre.

762 was laid gently on the operating table and Kandrás sprayed a fluid on the stump to stop the bleeding temporarily, then he produced another hypodermic gun and gave 762 a shot which put him out. The severed limb was still inside the torn leg of the spacesuit. Kandrás put on some rubber gloves and asked Michael to do the same. It was a little difficult fitting five digits into a three digit glove, but he managed it. They both removed their spacesuits and put on a cloth coverall and at Kandrás' request stood inside a cubicle. The cubicle was a sterilisation process and thirty seconds later they were pronounced clinically clean.

Above the operating table was a very strange machine which was controlled by a powerful computer. Kandrás switched on some strong but non-glaring light and with Michael's help removed and cut away 762's spacesuit. The gruesome, severed limb was carefully taken out of the spacesuit boot and placed into a highly polished channel inside a receptacle which looked very much like a micro-wave oven. Kandrás took a blood sample and placed it in another orifice in the same receptacle. Finally a complicated, electronic head was slotted into the channel and placed against the severed end of the limb.

The overhead machine was brought down and 762 was clamped securely to the table and another channel was inserted under the stump and, again, a corresponding electronic head was attached to the severed end of the remaining stump. Kandrás manipulated the computer and inserted the necessary data. "It's ready now... this is an amazing machine. It is an extension of the matter synthesizer... it should effect a complete and perfect repair."

He pressed a large red button and the machine gave a deep-throated hum which died away as it reached its working temperature. He then pressed a

purple button and the process started. Slowly the severed leg was absorbed by the machine and reassembled on 762's remaining stump. Thirty minutes later the whole operation had been completed and 762 had a brand new synthesized leg which was exact in every detail to the original.

Kandras removed the machine and placed a kind of light over the leg. "This will help to harden the bone... 762 should be up and about in fifteen minutes."

Michael could only mumble his thanks and gratitude, he was absolutely dumbfounded by what he had witnessed. Fifteen minutes later Kandras examined the job, nodded his satisfaction and released the straps.

Five minutes later 762 opened his eyes, fearfully waiting for the pain which never came. He recognised his Captain. "Looks as though my dancing career is over, Captain."

"Not necessarily. ...take a look."

762 could not believe his eyes. He wriggled his toes and bent his leg, pinched himself and moved his ankle; everything was perfect.

"How did you manage to do that, Captain or have I had a bad dream...? I thought my leg had been shot off."

Michael smiled back reassuringly. "You are the first Earthman to receive alien surgery, 762. I only helped..... your thanks should go to my friend Kandras who performed the operation... I have never seen anything like it."

Hardly trusting himself, 762 sat up and put his feet on the floor. Gingerly he tried his weight on his new leg; it worked as well as ever. If 762 had been afraid of Kandras he certainly did not show it. He shook Kandras inner-right hand very solemnly and thanked him quietly and sincerely.

"You're welcome, young man. I couldn't bear to leave you in that predicament," smiled Kandras.

As they cleared up the sickbay Michael asked if Kandras would be prepared to give chase to Morgan's ship and help to recover his Crew. Kandras readily agreed and pointed out that he had already promised all his help. Michael said he realised that, but wanted to give him the chance to change his mind now that he had first hand knowledge of the enemy. Kandras replied that he would honour his word... besides he had nothing else to do.

"May I take another couple of men with us, please?" asked Michael.

"Remembering that we may have to pick up your own Crew... how many are there?"

"Ten at the last count."

"We could manage yourself and two others."

"Thank you very much." Michael addressed his security man. "Do you wish to stay with us, 762?"

"It is my duty, Sir, I am still your official bodyguard... although Kandras seems to do a much better job than I ever could."

"Do you feel up to it?"

"I feel great, Sir."

"Good man... you stay here and I will find Neville and contact Company H.Q. You will need a new spacesuit too, 762..... I think we had better deduct the cost of the next one out of your pay... you appear to be unnecessarily rough on them," quipped Michael, as he looked at the tattered and blood-stained remains of 762's original suit. "More material for the waste re-cycling unit , Kandra's?"

"Every little helps," he replied with a smile.

Michael replaced his own spacesuit and jetted back to the *Atlas*. Everything was running with professional smoothness; Captain Gorrie had organised everything as requested. The *Hercules* had been completely reassembled but the *Titan* was six containers short: their conversion into living quarters had rendered them useless for cargo. Captain Andrew David had used them for target practice and had blasted them into oblivion with the impressive armament of the *Hornet*.

Captain Gorrie and the two 'Acting' Captains had sat down and formed three crews from the available men. The British and American captives had also been signed on to give them a manageable complement to make the journey to Ceres. Number One had sent the *Hornet* prepared for trouble and had included a hundred pairs of manacles to accommodate any prisoners that might be taken. Once the twenty-three captives had been firmly secured in the connecting corridor of the *Atlas*, Kandra's came across and released the paralysis in the heads of the prisoners. Those who had been stunned were now fully recovered and were painfully nursing their headaches.

The barman who had been killed by Neville had received a brief liturgy and had been summarily vaporised by the crew of the *Hornet*.

Eight Security men were transferred from the *Hornet* to stand guard on the prisoners. As a result of the increased personnel, the food cargo of the *Atlas* had been broached and extra supplies had been brought on board and stacked.

In the meantime, Michael had made a full visual report to Company H.Q. using the normal, scrambled Tele-com channel. Sir Richard, Clive Twist, Fred Ford and Number One had all gathered to receive the broadcast. The look of relief on Fred Ford's face when his Son had spoken to him had made it all worthwhile; little had actually been said, but the look of gratitude had been enough.

Michael had given a blow by blow account from the time of their capture to the existing state of affairs and readiness of the three vessels. He had made a point of thanking Number One for his foresight and had praised the work done by his men. In conclusion he informed Sir Richard that the shipments could now continue to their original destinations but pointed out that some of the cargo was missing and would have to be replaced.

Sir Richard had smiled and said, "Good Lord, Captain, that is the least of our worries." Michael then gave details of the known deaths and the missing Crewmen. When he had mentioned the missing Senior Executive Officer he

had given a withering look of disapproval that had made even Sir Richard wince.

"What is your proposed course of action now, Captain?" asked Sir Richard.

"The *Hornet* will escort our convoy to Ceres, but Kandras, Neville, 762 and myself are going to continue the search for our missing men and the Senior Executive Officer..," said Michael meaningfully.

This time Sir Richard was completely unruffled. "I did not force Miss Linaker to go, Captain Stephens. She exercised her right as Senior Personnel Officer to go with your Crew. Believe me, if I could have stopped her I would have done... After all, she is my niece, you know..., I more than anybody wish to see her safe and well."

Michael did not know. In fact the possibility of such a relationship had never even crossed his mind... and it came as a shock. "I'm sorry, Sir Richard... I was unaware of the true situation... it must have been an appalling decision to keep silent."

"It was... and it was only my faith in you that persuaded me not to intervene."

"Thank you for that, Sir, I will try not to betray your trust... I will complete the mission one way or another as soon as possible. Kandras does not have a Company radio, so please be prepared to receive an unidentified vessel when we return. Neville may be able to rig something up for us, but do not count on it. Our vessels are about as advanced as the Wright Brothers biplane compared to his."

The broadcast had come to a climax when Michael had introduced Kandras to Sir Richard. He had never been a man to miss an opportunity and Sir Richard had calmly thanked Kandras for his help and had promptly offered him a job as Chief Technical Advisor to the Company.

Kandras communicated with Michael and Michael reported his reply. "Kandras expresses his thanks for the offer, but he thinks we ought to get to know each other a little better before he gives his answer."

"I understand," said Sir Richard. "I will not keep you any longer... you must have many jobs to do. I wish you luck with the search for our Men... and Lady... and by the way..."

"Yes Sir?"

"Please be careful. "

"Thank you. ..over and out."

The screen went blank. Sir Richard turned to Clive. "The man is a miracle. He has succeeded beyond my wildest dreams already... I hope his luck extends to recovering the Crew."

Clive looked meaningfully at Sir Richard. "Between you and me, Sir, I get the feeling that Michael has the best motivation a man can have to find them."

"Oh! ...what's that Clive?"

"He's in love... I think you may be losing a niece and gaining a nephew."



"Really!... I suppose that would explain his reaction. Well, it's about time... Charlotte has never shown the slightest interest in men and I would be proud if she chose Captain Stephens to be her husband."

A thought suddenly occurred to Sir Richard and he took a piece of paper from his desk and wrote some instructions on it.

"Fred, please will you arrange to have this request carried out?"

Fred read the message and raised his eyebrows. "That is very thoughtful of you, Sir... I'll see to it straight away."

\* \* \* \* \*

Back on board the *Atlas* Michael was carrying out his last task. He went to the engine room of each Freighter and reactivated the power-locks with the codes he had obtained from Company H.Q. The Skippers of all three vessels went through a thorough system of checks and one by one pronounced their vessels as space worthy.

It only remained for Michael to give the order to leave. He shook hands with Captain Gorrie and emphasised that he, as the Senior Captain in the convoy, was in charge. They parted company with the firm assurance that they would get together as soon as possible when the whole miserable affair was over and done with.

Kandras had already returned to his vessel and Michael was pleased and gratified that he had taken some electronic rifles with him. He did not object to their use provided they remained in the 'stun' mode. His second brush with death had tempered his idealism with a little commonsense.

Neville hurried to the bridge of the *Titan* with a bulky parcel in his hands.

"What is it?" asked Michael.

"A portable radio, Sir... I thought it might come in handy... with Kandras permission of course."

"We can always try, " agreed Michael.

Finally Michael went to the video-com and addressed the other Captains. "Prepare to get under way in fifteen minutes time..... Mister Jennings. .."

"Yes Sir?"

"Be careful with my spaceship."

"I will, Sir." he grinned .

"Bon voyage. ..over and out."

Michael and Neville quickly jetted across to the Alien vessel. They were greeted by 762 at the airlock. Neville could not believe his eyes. "I wondered why you did not report his injury... it's just as though it never happened."

As they made their way forward to the bridge Neville's astonishment increased as the style and the different design structure of the vessel made its impact on him.

"You've seen nothing yet," grinned Michael.

As they arrived on the bridge the last of the mooring cables had been slipped and led by the superb patrol ship *Hornet* the three vessels gently edged into an 'in line astern' formation; then, with searchlights blazing, they disappeared down the quasi-tunnel in a shimmering procession. Michael felt a big weight lift from his shoulders as they were left alone; now he was left with a single purpose... he was going after Morgan.

A dark and oppressive mood came over him and he stared emptily out at the destruction which had once been Morgan's base. Again thoughts of Charlotte pervaded his mind.

"Hang on a little longer," he said out loud.

"I beg your pardon, Sir?" asked Neville.

Michael broke his mood and came back to reality with a bump. "Nothing, Neville, I was just thinking out loud."

Kandras, who was enjoying having some company, peered round the door. "Dinner is served, Gentlemen we will eat and then get down to the business in hand."

## **CHAPTER 19. A CRISIS FOR HARRY.**

Charlotte had worked very hard. She had thoroughly cleaned and disinfected the galley and had then been instructed to clean the bathrooms. Fearful of what would happen if she refused, Charlotte had done as instructed without a whimper or a protest.

At long last she had been allowed to return to her quarters feeling dirty, dishevelled and totally unfeminine. For a few minutes she luxuriated in a hot shower, shampooed her hair and as the water washed away the dirt, she began to feel more human. She was relieved that a clean pair of coveralls had been left out for her. When she had dried herself she pulled them on, laid down on her bunk, stretched like a cat and was asleep in minutes.

Her awakening was less tranquil. She was roughly shaken back to consciousness by Morgan. "Get up... you have things to do today."

"What things?" groaned Charlotte as she struggled to come to her senses.

"You can clean my quarters for a start."

Charlotte was instantly awake and gave Morgan an apprehensive look. "Your quarters?"

"Yes... my quarters. We will have some breakfast and I will take you there. ..hurry up."

Reluctantly she dragged herself out of bed. "If you were a gentleman you would knock before entering a lady's room."

"I am not a gentleman and you are no longer a lady. You are mine now. I offered you marriage and you rejected me... you obviously prefer it the other way, so that is how it will be... you will learn to do as you are told or life will become very unpleasant."

Harry was back to normal apart from some twinges in his ribs and he looked very theatrical in his all black outfit; gone were the nasal tones and his arm was out of the sling. However there was nothing theatrical about the short, leather whip that he was toying with in his hands. It was not an accident that there were nine strands to it; again Morgan had remembered his piratical connection.

Charlotte, fearing the worst, had a quick wash and cleaned her teeth, then followed Morgan out of the cabin to the bridge where breakfast had been laid out for them. Morgan swaggered onto the bridge, obviously enjoying his new, assumed role as a dominant master.

"What would you like?" he asked.

"Nothing, thank you," she replied curtly.

"Sit and eat," said Morgan threateningly.

Charlotte sat and ate. As breakfast was consumed Charlotte became very introspective and arrived at a few decisions. Firstly, she hated Morgan and no amount of whipping would make her succumb. Secondly, she would rather be dead than be his slave. So she decided there and then that she would kill either herself or Morgan, depending on which opportunity offered itself first.

Harry finished his breakfast and looked lecherously at Charlotte. "We have wasted enough time... we will go to my quarters now."

"I will not go to your quarters," she said in a small voice.

"Yes you will," threatened Morgan.

"No. ..I will never succumb to you. .." insisted Charlotte.

Harry back-handed her and she fell to the floor, face down, sobbing. The whip was raised above his head. "I'll show you who your Master is now," screamed Morgan, his eyes bright with anticipation.

"Captain." shouted the radio operator. "Come quickly, Base Two is under attack!"

"What?" shrieked Morgan, who had suddenly lost interest in whipping Charlotte. He swung the whip down with all his might but the action was reduced to farce; in spite of his strength. The low gravity saved Charlotte from any real harm and the leather thongs floated gently down on to her back. Harry threw the whip down in disgust and hurried to the Radio Operator.

Seizing the chance to escape, Charlotte picked herself up and fled back to her quarters, where she stretched out on her bed sobbing her heart out. Meanwhile Morgan was listening to the message from Base Two.

"... there are three in the attacking party... two men and what appears to be a huge robot... they have already put the cannon out of action and have made a transmission in some form of code to Earth we are in the process of sending out an attacking force to engage them."

Harry grabbed the microphone. "Can you identify them?"

"Negative, Skipper, but they look like Company suits... apart from the robot. I can't even see a ship."

"Let me know when you have something to report...."

"Yes, Skipper... I had better lend a hand now... over and out"

"Damned fools!" raged Morgan. "They have allowed themselves to be surprised. ..What is our E.T.A. at Base One?"

"Fourteen hours, Skipper," replied the First Officer.

"Good! We will drop off the work party and then return to Base Two and see what has happened."

Harry turned to the Radio Operator. "Let me know immediately when they report back."

"As soon as I hear from them, Skipper."

Harry went to the pilot's chair in the centre of the bridge and sat down. "Get these pots cleared away," he shouted. Then he lapsed into silence. The silence turned to moroseness as time passed without any word; then the moroseness turned into a form of anger. As this emotion passed, Morgan became very worried. He had tried to call his Base on a closed channel several times, but there had been no response.

"We have Base One on the scope, Skipper," reported the First Officer.

Harry pulled himself together with an effort. "Prepare retros two, three, five and six for a twenty second burn... and secure the prisoners."

Ten minutes later Harry treated the *Black Swan* to some unusually rough treatment as his haste overcame his natural caution. Harry fired the four retros instead of the usual three and delayed the manoeuvre until the last moment. Ten minutes later he had safely matched orbits with the large cluster of rocks, which formed this rich claim. The five diminutive rockets which had been disabled and placed there as living quarters were clearly visible in the lee of the protective wall.

"Assemble and kit out the prisoners as quickly as possible," ordered Morgan.

"What about the Woman, Skipper?" asked the First Officer.

"She stays aboard.....leave her strapped to the bunk."

\* \* \* \* \*

"How are you doing, Neville?" asked Michael.

"About another ten minutes, Sir."

Neville and 762 had been working to make the radio functional. It was difficult because the hull of the Alien ship was non-metallic. To overcome the problem, Neville had designed a full-wave aerial from rods and wire which was accurate to a millimetre in length. The finished article was coiled all round the Command Area which was now a scene of orderly confusion.

Kandras was genuinely in awe of the way Neville had tackled the problem and was sitting at the controls, fascinated by what he saw. To overcome any power supply problems, Neville had brought several external battery packs with him and these had now been fitted and tested. In order that the on-board computer could be used to obtain a 'fix' on the *Black Swan*, should it answer their call, Neville had patched the radio into the existing Alien set.

The Alien vessel was cruising slowly on the Sun side of the Asteroid belt. In truth, neither Michael nor Kandras had any idea where to search for Morgan, so Michael had decided to trick Morgan into answering a radio call so that they could quickly track him down.

Neville ran some checks on the make-shift radio and then declared it operational.

"Good!..... Well done Neville," said Michael. He then turned to Kandras. "Would you have any objection to us giving this vessel a name?"

"None at all, if it suits your purpose."

"I think, under the circumstances we will give her a seafaring name," smiled Michael. "I think we should call her the *Revenge*..... That should get him thinking."

Everybody was in agreement. Michael picked up the Microphone. "Is the computer ready, Kandras?"

"Yes, Michael..... we will get an accurate fix if you can get him to talk to you."

Neville selected the waveband he had discovered in the radio booth where they had all come so close to death.

"O.K. Skipper... go ahead when you are ready."

\* \* \* \* \*

One by one the prisoners were brought down to the cargo bay of the *Black Swan*. The last one to arrive was Ben Rimmer. As they waited for their spacesuits, they quietly conferred amongst themselves.

"We're all ready to fight, Ben," confirmed Archie Murphy under his breath.

"Arnie and Henry are really spoiling for a show-down," added Sergeant Brody.

"Well, I think it is now or never," breathed Ben. "When I give the signal try and get the weapons off them and put them out. ..O.K. ..are you with me?"

"Yes, Sir!" chorused Archie and Frank.

"Pass the message on then."

"Aye, aye, Sir..."

Soon both the guards and the prisoners were clad in their spacesuits. Apart from Morgan himself, every crew member had been assigned to settle the prisoners in. Harry had previously briefed the prisoners about what he expected of them. He had promised to return to check them as they reached Earth orbit and if they had collected enough gems, meaning a hold full, he would take them off and abandon the claim while it went round the Sun. On the other hand, if they failed to satisfy his needs, then they would have to weather the treacherous passage round the Sun themselves: it would probably mean certain death in the small craft that were available.

However, in his own mind, Harry thought that he was being fair; he was leaving them plenty of food, water and oxygen supplies. In fact their first priority was to unload this substantial amount of cargo. With undue haste and unaccustomed sloppiness, the supplies were thrown out of the *Black Swan* and some started to drift away. All the prisoners were catching, ferrying and stowing the packages into the holds of the small rockets. One large crate was drifting towards the nose of the *Black Swan*.

Sergeant Brody signalled the guard that he was going after it and he nodded assent; he also made a sign to Ben Rimmer who casually alerted Arnie and Henry as he drifted past. Suddenly Ben's hands came to his throat and he began to convulse and grab at his oxygen pipe. To all intents and purposes he had run out of air. Two of the guards rushed towards him to try and help, their eyes blind to the real danger which consisted of Arnie and Henry seemingly trying to help as well.

Ben cleverly drifted behind a large boulder and had a miraculous recovery as Arnie and Henry attacked the two guards from behind. Arnie went for the weapon and simply tore it from the surprised guard's fingers. As the guard swung round, Arnie shot him... he had no way of knowing that the weapon was set on 'kill' but it was. The force of the blast burned a hole in the guard's suit killing him instantly.

Henry seized his man from behind and grabbed the weapon at both ends and pulled it against his man on the neck-line. He then placed his foot in the middle of the man's back and pulled with all his might. The guard's neck snapped like a rotten carrot.

Meanwhile, as the diversion was happening, Sergeant Frank Brody had unerringly gone for the big cannon and had triumphantly pulled out the primary firing circuit and smashed it on the cannon's base mounting. It was now so much ornamental junk.

As the action outside dissolved into mayhem, inside the *Black Swan* Harry, blissfully ignorant of the trouble, was startled to receive a signal.

"...Calling *Black Swan*. ...Calling *Black Swan*.....Please acknowledge."

Harry frantically grabbed the microphone and replied. "This is *Black Swan* . ..Is that Base Two. .? Give me a status report... I repeat... give me a status report."

"Negative, Harry this is not Base Two... Base Two no longer exists... end of status report," said the radio sarcastically.

"Who are you. ..? Are you the Military?" "Negative again, Harry, this is Captain Michael Robert Stephens. ..late of the *Atlas* but now in the *Revenge*. Do you remember me Harry?"

"It can't be. ..he is dead. ..what is your real name?"

"I'm coming to haunt you, Harry, and I'm feeling very angry. You weren't nice to me, Harry, so I'm coming to find you."

"You'll never find me... I'm not scared of you anyway."

"You should be... I have a secret weapon, Harry, you'll like it."

"I've heard all about you and your big robot... whoever you are... I'll blow you away if you try to interfere with me," and with that he turned off his set.

He looked out just in time to see Sergeant Brody disable the cannon. "What the hell. .?" said a badly shaken Morgan and he rushed to the porthole to witness a running battle which his men were obviously losing. The professionals and their hard training were making short work of Harry's motley crew, though they fought bravely enough.

Harry suddenly felt very vulnerable; his world was collapsing around him. He sealed the ship using remote controls and gently edged it away from the rock field, leaving his men to fight it out. Harry was a true believer in the old adage that there was 'no honour amongst thieves.' Once clear, he locked in the coordinates for Mars, strapped himself in and accelerated the old ship as fast as he dared.

In the privacy of her cabin, Charlotte was also feeling very vulnerable as she laid there strapped to her bunk. The straps themselves were saving her from serious injury, but it was most uncomfortable and she had plenty of bruises and chaffing marks to show for the experience. She hoped that he would forget she was there and, at this moment in time, she had no inkling that things were not going to Harry's liking. On the bridge the only thought on Harry's mind was to put as much distance as possible between himself and his pursuers.

\* \* \* \* \*

"Did you get a fix?" asked Michael excitedly.

"Of course," smiled Kandras .

"Well let's go then," he enthused.

"This particular source is in a highly elliptical orbit, according to the computer fixes, and is also travelling very quickly... it does sound as though this is the one."

"Can we be there quickly?"

"A matter of minutes, if we try hard... Mister Johnson and 762... please come with me to the crew room. You will have to stay there until we arrive."

Kandras took them through and sat them in two chairs similar to the ones on the bridge; he explained about the green orbs and their function. Both nodded their understanding of the situation and Kandras returned to the controls.

He studied his instruments very carefully and ascertained that his proposed route was clear and then the newly named ship *Revenge* gathered way. It streaked up to about three times the speed of light and after what was only a matter of minutes, the orbs transferred to the rear and the deceleration started.

"I have them on the scope," said Kandras. "There is not a large ship with them though."

"He must have flown the coop," said Michael, annoyed at being frustrated yet again.

"Can you do along range sweep and see if you can pick him up?"

Kandras twiddled some knobs and tuned his set. "Yes... there is a large ship on a course which suggests it has left here recently... it looks as though it is heading for the fourth Planet. I'll get a computer fix on his course and then we can pick him up later."

Neville and 762 now joined them on the bridge. "Neville, I want you to stay with the radio... 762, put on your suit and the other protection device. We don't want you losing that new leg again, do we?"

762 grinned and was ready in minutes. As Kandras gently manipulated the *Revenge* towards the other ships, they were able to see that a battle was in progress.

"Ben has taken the initiative," shouted Michael excitedly.



"It looks as though they are pinned down by those guards in that cluster of rocks over there," replied 762.

Michael could see that there were several inert bodies floating about. This battle was for real and no quarter was being given nor asked for. None of the combatants even noticed as the sleek, black ship matched orbits close to the other vessels. Michael, Kandrás and 762 left the ship together, then split up. Kandrás and 762 switched on their devices and enveloped in their light green aura headed towards the guards' stronghold.

As soon as they were seen, a hail of murderous fire was directed at them. One by one they succumbed to the mental control wielded by Kandrás; 762 collected the weapons and then secured the unconscious guards.

Michael had a similar experience as he approached the terrible trio of Ben Rimmer, Arnie Sidebottom and Henry Hurst, but their reaction was different. After a few shots had failed to penetrate the screen, their professionalism came to the surface. They put their weapons aside to save ammunition and Arnie and Henry, seeing that the approaching figure was unarmed, prepared to tackle him physically. Michael did not fancy that idea at all, so he stopped short and tried to communicate. Morgan had taken the radios out of their suits so voice contact was impossible.

Michael tried some soothing gestures, but they were too fighting mad to take any notice. Suddenly they went for their guns and started blasting again until the lack of effect caused them to stop. This time they were more apprehensive as the forbidding four-armed figure of Kandrás arrived on the scene.

One by one he immobilised them and then the battle was over. For safety's sake, Kandrás picked up all the stragglers and immobilised them as well.

Michael picked the largest of the rockets, it was the one owned by the American prospecting team, and gathered the dead, the wounded and the immobilised into its hold.

Michael spoke to Neville on the radio. "Neville, can you try to raise the *Hornet* and tell them to get a repair and salvage crew out here and inform them that we have some prisoners."

"Yes, Sir... I will need the coordinates of this rock field and its projected speed and trajectory.

Michael furnished him with the necessary information then went about the task of sorting and identifying the inert bodies.

As the helmets were removed, he was relieved to see that his Crew were, for the most part, safe and well. This feeling of elation faded when he realised that Charlotte was not there and, to his annoyance, felt angry as he began to be plagued by visions and feelings of Charlotte's suffering back on board the *Black Swan*. He did not know if these feelings were real or imagined, but he did know that there was now a deep-rooted hatred of Morgan within him that would not rest until they met face to face.

With Kandras' help he began to restore the Crew. "Ben... Ben... wake up now."

Slowly and painfully Ben opened his eyes and saw Michael. In his confused state he started to ramble. "Captain? I must be dead ...I m sorry I failed you..."

"You're not dead Ben and neither am I... pull yourself together... you have done well. I want you to meet my friend Kandras... you have seen him before, Ben... in that strange . craft."

Ben woke up with a jerk when he saw Kandras but soon regained control of himself.

"Is Charlotte still on board the *Black Swan*, Ben?"

"Yes, Sir, just her and Morgan."

Michael went tight-lipped at this piece of unwelcome news, but carried on with the job in hand. Soon, most of his Crew were restored to consciousness but were still a little groggy. Kandras had stared in amazement as the handsome, dark features of Henry Hurst had been revealed. On his own planet there were no such distinctions in skin colour.

The final bill for the showdown was quite severe. One of the crewmen from the *Titan* had been killed outright, Ron Naylor had been badly stunned and Sergeant Brody had suffered a broken arm as a rock fragment had sheered off. David Boothman had collected a very deep cut in his leg as a piece of crystal had shattered, and he was also suffering the effects of partial depressurisation.

Alfred Brown was already working on these injuries and those of the guards.... who had fared less well. Four out of the eight guards had been killed. One had died of suffocation in a struggle with Archie Murphy, just after he had killed the crewman from the *Titan* Two others had been shot and the fourth had been killed by Henry, who had broken his neck.

Three had been paralysed by Kandras and the remaining guard was unconscious, having been shot by Ben with his own gun. This guard had also suffered a broken wrist in the struggle for the weapon.

The worst part for Michael had been when Arnie Sidebottom had come to. He was still fighting mad and had woken up punching. In his confused state he had not recognised his Captain, so, in an effort to cut through his hysteria, Michael had resorted to the familiar background of Military training.

"Stand to attention when you address a Superior Officer." he shouted.

Arnie had reacted and pulled himself to his feet. As the realisation of where he was and who he was talking to had sunk in, he had burst into tears and embraced his Captain in the only show of emotion that Michael had ever seen him have.

It did not last long. Arnie soon pulled himself together and said, "Gawd, Sir, you look just like an Egyptian puff in that frock."

When Michael had shown him who the tunic actually belonged to, he had gone a little pale and added, "Quite smart, really."

Everybody, including Kandras, had laughed at his discomfort and it had helped to ease the tension they were all suffering from. Michael was relieved

that his people had accepted Kandras at face value and had shown no hostility towards him. He, in turn, had gone out of his way to make them feel welcome.

Michael pulled his First Officer to one side. "Ben... I'm putting you in charge here. I've sent for a patrol ship and a salvage crew to come to your assistance. I will take Arnie with me and leave Henry with you, I'm sure he will enjoy guarding your prisoners. By the way, I have Neville with us in Kandras' ship, so I will keep him and leave you my security guard 762. He is an intelligent and useful chap."

"Thank you, Sir!"

"Just try and organise things so that you can be ready to move as soon as possible. We must get after Morgan and Miss Linaker immediately before she comes to any more harm. Call the Crew together now, Ben, and I will speak to them."

Two minutes later the Crew were all assembled. Michael thanked them for their fortitude and explained what was happening next and what he expected from them. He also explained that the three vessels had been recaptured and their colleagues freed. This information was greeted with a chorus of cheers.

As he prepared to leave, he had a private word with Ben. "I know you were not treated too well by these criminals, Ben, but I want you to make sure that they do not receive any more harsh treatment than is absolutely necessary. It is for the Authorities to punish them, not us."

"Aye aye, Sir. You have my word."

As they exited, Michael turned to his Crew. "I'll see you all back on Earth when this mess is cleared up and we will have a celebration. With any luck Sir Richard will be footing the bill. ...au revoir."

The three companions jetted across to the Alien ship and prepared to give chase.

## **CHAPTER 20. HARRY'S LAST FLING.**

As the *Revenge* got under way, Kandras scanned the likely area for signs of the *Black Swan*. He found nothing.

"He seems to have disappeared, Michael."

"That is impossible," fumed Michael. "My guess is that he has either changed course or accelerated again."

"How fast can an old vessel like that travel?" asked Kandras.

"Nobody really knows," said Michael. "Your speed on the rocket-propelled ships is always a compromise with the available fuel. The problem is that you need as much fuel to stop you as you do to accelerate, so you never give the vessel its head... but you might if you were on a one-way trip. Now there is a thought. Any reply on the radio, Neville?"

"No, Sir... but this radio is a less than ideal set up for long range communication."

Michael knew that he had to make a decision about their next course of action. "Do we have the coordinates of their last known position?"

"Yes, it is in the computer," replied Kandras.

"Good ...we will go to that position and search along his projected course. The distance is too short to go above light speed, but can you proceed as quickly as possible, please, Kandras."

"Yes, Michael, we will be there in about thirty minutes."

"Thank you. I will go and check on Arnie."

Arnie had been so exhausted when he arrived on board that he had virtually passed out. They had helped him to a bunk, fed him a high protein meal and he was now recuperating. Michael looked in on his old friend and was relieved to see that the process of sleep was erasing the lines of stress from his face. There was no need to wake him now and Michael gently stacked pillows round him to prevent accidents caused by sudden course changes. It made a change for him to fuss over his Coxswain; he was surprised to discover that it gave him a good feeling.

Thirty minutes later, Kandras announced that they were passing Morgan's last known position and were proceeding along the last known projected course, but there was still no sign of the *Black Swan*.

Kandras increased velocity and, suddenly, there it was on the scope at extreme range. They were overhauling it at an alarming rate and Kandras eased down the speed to a more acceptable level.

Soon the *Black Swan* was in view and it was headed straight for Mars, travelling faster than Michael would have thought possible. Neville tried continuously to raise Morgan on the radio, but there was no response. His set was probably switched off.

Soon the *Revenge* was on station just below and to the rear of the *Black Swan* and remained, apparently, undetected.

"How many life-forms can you detect on board, Kandras?" asked Michael.

Kandras peered down into the scope. "There are two. One in an outer pod and another moving towards the rear of the main body."

"At least they are not both together," said Michael in a relieved voice.

As they watched the scanner, one of the life-forms was shuttling backwards and forwards between the bridge and the hold, it was almost certainly Harry. Mars began to loom a lot larger as they hurtled on and the first seeds of doubt were sewn in Michael's mind.

"I bet he has used all his fuel to gain as much velocity as possible. The *Black Swan* is going to burn up in the Martian atmosphere how long has she left?"

Kandras did a quick calculation. "About thirty-five of your minutes."

"Morgan must have a plan, but it will do him no good. I am going across. If you can keep me informed where he is I will go to an airlock at the opposite end."

"Please hurry, Michael. ..there isn't much time left."

"Do you need any help, Captain?" asked Neville.

"No thanks. ..Morgan is mine. I want to deal with him personally," replied Michael cruelly. "Stay with the radio, Neville, I will keep you informed."

Five minutes later he left the airlock and Mars was looking much bigger, taking on a definite shape and its distinctive colouring becoming more and more obvious. Neville reported that Morgan was still on the bridge, so he went to the rear airlock and soon gained entry.

He switched on his 'protection device' and headed for the bridge. Again Michael had underestimated Morgan. Harry had known the instant the *Revenge* had joined him. His remote controlled cameras had picked it up. He had loaded the gems and other valuables into the Moon Shuttle and was ready to blast off at a moment's notice. Morgan had already made a last forlorn plea to Charlotte to go with him or stay aboard and die. She had chosen to stay aboard.

As Michael headed for the bridge he heard the cargo-bay doors open and the little moon shuttle shot off like a thoroughbred with a throaty roar. A feeling of dejection assailed Michael's mind. He knew that Morgan would have to go to Mars, but it would be easy to hide once there. There were many disreputable people in the Martian Colonies and one more would not really matter.

Then a thought crossed his mind, which cheered him up a little and he smiled to himself; Morgan was not as clever as he thought. With a feeling of elation he took off his helmet and went in search of Charlotte.

He found the cabin and opened the door. Charlotte was still there lying spread-eagled and face down on the bunk, with thick straps making sure she stayed there.

"The answer is still no, Morgan," she hissed at him.

"Do I take it you are not receiving visitors today?" asked Michael sarcastically. Her head spun round and the beautiful, tear-stained face looked as though she had seen a ghost... and she was still not sure.

"Michael ...is it really you. ..? I thought you were dead."

Her last vestiges of reserve disappeared and she dissolved into helpless fits of sobs. Michael gently undid the straps and released her. She embraced him and covered him with kisses, repeating his name over and over. As they clung together, Michael could feel a lump building up in his throat and knew that he, too, would lose control if he did not act quickly.

He prised them apart. "Charlotte we are still in grave danger, we must try and get this vessel under control... go and find yourself a spacesuit."

Drying her eyes, she pulled herself together and hurried off. Michael went to the bridge and selected three retro-rockets and attempted to fire them. Nothing happened. He checked the fuel gauges and was not surprised to see that the tanks were completely empty. Harry had totally committed himself and sacrificed the *Black Swan* in his escape attempt. By now, Mars was looming larger than ever. He abandoned the bridge and went off to find Charlotte who was sifting through a pile of slashed and torn spacesuits.

"He has ruined them all, Michael... there is not a serviceable one left."

"Never mind... You can use mine to get across to my friend's ship. Arnie is there... he will look after you." He checked his watch, there was ten minutes to go before impact. He tore off his spacesuit and quickly put Charlotte into it. He gave her a last kiss and told her to go quickly to the black spaceship. He bundled her into the airlock and returned to the bridge .

"Neville, can you hear me?" he said through the radio.

"Loud and clear, Captain."

"I'm just calling to say goodbye... Miss Linaker is coming across now... pick her up and make her feel welcome... there is no fuel left and no serviceable spacesuits... so it looks like I have run out of time... say goodbye to Kandras for me... and tell Charlotte that I love her and have no regrets...over and out."

He switched off the set before Neville could answer. He did not mind giving his life so that Charlotte could live, but he did resent the fact that Morgan had out-thought him all the way through.

Six minutes to go. He ran back to the spacesuits to see if there was anything he could possibly salvage in the time remaining, but Morgan had destroyed them all. "Nothing to do but sit and wait," he said out loud. "At least it will be a quick death."

Five minutes to go. Michael looked up, puzzled, as the airlock recycled.

"Hurry up, Captain. ..we can still do it." shouted Arnie, throwing in a spacesuit.

"You big dope," scolded Michael. "There is no point in us both dying." He tore feverishly at the suit and it was soon on, after a fashion. Three minutes to go, Mars filled the view ahead.

Michael and Arnie were both in the airlock; they deliberately opened the outer door before the inner door was completely shut. The air pressure blew them out unceremoniously and completely out of control, but it was a quick exit. It took only a few seconds to control their spinning and Michael was

amazed that Kandrás was flying the *Revenge* as close as was physically possible.

Two minutes to go. The airlock was in sight but it could only take one man at a time. Without any hesitation Arnie physically pushed Michael into it. Fortunately the rotating action of the airlock was very quick and even as Neville hauled Michael out, the first vestiges of atmosphere were occasionally plucking at Arnie's suit.

One minute to go. Arnie was pulled out of the airlock by Neville who immediately banged a warning button to inform Kandrás that they were inside.

"Lie down and grab hold of a stanchion," shouted Neville.

As a man they hit the deck. Then the *Revenge* started an upward turn, gently at first but it increased alarmingly as Kandrás avoided the destructive atmosphere of Mars.

Through the airlock viewing panels they could see the awful destruction as the *Black Swan* burnt herself up in the atmosphere and vaporised in a cloud of flames and gas. As the 'G' forces died away the three men hauled themselves painfully to their feet.

"That was an awful risk you took, Arnie," said Michael gratefully.

"All part of being a Coxswain, Sir. I couldn't let you go a second time without a try," grinned a very relieved Arnie.

At this point Charlotte came rushing back and threw her arms round Michael who returned her kiss boldly and passionately.

The two other men suddenly remembered something else they had to do on the bridge and left the two lovers to their emotions. Five minutes later Michael and Charlotte walked onto the bridge hand in hand. Michael looked very happy and Charlotte was flushed but smiling.

"Everything alright, Miss?" asked Arnie.

"No it isn't..... he shouted at me for all the trouble and worry that I've caused him... isn't he a beast?" she said lovingly, as she clung to his arm.

"Can't say that I blame him, Miss," said Arnie who thoroughly approved of this new relationship in his Captain's life.

"You men are all beasts, " she replied as she let go of Michael and slipped her arms round Arnie's neck.

"Thanks for rescuing him... I don't think I could have stood losing him twice."  
"

"Me neither, Miss," said Arnie who was blushing like a beetroot.

Michael thanked Kandrás for the magnificent way he had piloted the *Revenge* and for the enormous risk he had taken.

Kandrás was overjoyed that things had turned out alright and gently accelerated the *Revenge* away from the planet, finally bringing her to rest in a very distant Martian orbit, well away from prying eyes and detectors.

Kandrás quickly made them a meal and a drink, which was gratefully received by everybody. It had been a hectic twenty-four hours and the companions retired for a well earned rest.

Charlotte and Kandrás were up and about before the others. Charlotte explained to Kandrás that she desperately needed a wash, a shower and a change of clothes. He smiled and showed her the bathroom, he then laid out a superbly designed, emerald green and gold tunic with a pair of matching wedge-shaped, thonged shoes which, again, stretched to fit any foot perfectly.

Kandrás had not seen any kind of female for about two hundred years and even though Charlotte was not of his species, he knew that they all displayed the same kind of traits and naturally tried to look their best. On a whim he remembered that there were some programmes in the 'matter synthesizer' for various ornaments and he quietly went and produced some for her and laid them on the bed with the tunic.

Charlotte really enjoyed the shower but was most upset to see the bruising and chafing on her wrists and ankles. She explained what had happened and Kandrás, who was fascinated by her delicate skin colour, took her to the sick-bay and gave her a shot of the metabolism accelerator and asked her to lie down under the lamp above the operating table.

To her amazement the ugly wheals, cuts and bruises started to disappear before her eyes. Five minutes later they were gone. She was so excited she gave Kandrás a big hug and went back to finish her dressing. At that moment he realised just how much he had missed having a female around.

Kandrás was soon at work in the galley and produced a delicious scrambled egg breakfast. By this time the other men were up and about. The four males sat down to breakfast and were chatting happily but as Charlotte made her entrance the chattering ceased and the men stood up to greet her. They were all spellbound by the vision of loveliness which walked into the galley.

The emerald green and gold tunic was like a mini-dress and along with the matching, thonged, wedged sandals, it showed her legs off to perfection. Charlotte had shampooed and brushed her long, black hair to a perfect sheen and it was adorned with a golden tiara with large gemstones in it; they were more like a green diamond rather than a true emerald. There was also a matching necklace and thick gold bracelets with similar stones in them.

She was not wearing a vestige of make-up and, in truth, did not need it. Michael was open-mouthed and speechless. Pulling himself together he rushed round the table to help her sit down.

"Good morning, Charlotte... you look too beautiful for words," he said hesitantly.

"Well it's nice to see that you are behaving a little more like a gentleman today and not shouting at me," she teased and kissed him gently on the cheek.

As they came to the end of breakfast, the conversation naturally returned to the events of the previous day.

"It's a pity Morgan escaped," said Neville. "It would have been rewarding to go home with a *fait accomplis*, if you know what I mean."



“Morgan has not escaped us, yet,” said Michael mysteriously. Kandrás’ antennae went up and Michael had the full attention of everybody. “Excuse me a moment.”

He left the galley and went to his spacesuit and pulled an item from one of its pockets. He returned to the galley and continued. “I still have this!” he said, holding up a small electronic device.

“Is that the anti-theft tracking device?” asked Neville incredulously.

“It is!” said Michael triumphantly. “It has a range of approximately one thousand miles. I reckon that if we locate my moon shuttle, Harry will be in the nearest bar. Can you take us down to the surface, Kandrás? Does this vessel have landing facilities?”

“It has been a long time since this vessel touched solid ground, but it is not a problem, my camouflage and anti-detection devices should guarantee a clandestine arrival,” replied Kandrás, who by now desperately wanted Morgan to receive the justice he deserved.

“Good!” said Michael. “We have three spacesuits... So Charlotte can stay here with Kandrás... it would probably cause a riot if he went with us.”

Kandrás just smiled but Charlotte opened her mouth to protest; but she shut it again as she realised the truth of the situation.

“Neville, please can you rig up this tracking device somewhere so that we can use it from the ship... Arnie, you come with me and we will refill the tanks and check the suits.”

“What about weapons, Captain?” asked Arnie.

“No point in having them with us really. It would attract attention and they would be confiscated at the door of any club. On the other hand we could leave an armed man outside... it would give us a better chance of a getting away. Have you still got Gary’s pistol, Neville?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Unload the shells and just use it as a 'stun' gun. You will be able to conceal it until it is required. Remember we have no jurisdiction here, all we can do is take him by force and kidnap him.”

“How long before you wish to leave?” asked Kandrás .

“About an hour, if that is possible,” replied Michael.

“Good! I will check out my atmospheric procedures and landing gear, seeing that they have not been used for two hundred years.”

Michael gave a big grin. “Sounds like a good idea to me.”

\* \* \* \* \*

The Southern Polar ice cap was in darkness as the *Revenge* slipped undetected into the rarefied, carbon dioxide rich atmosphere of Mars. Kandrás had all the 'stealth' devices working so that the ship would not show up on any radar type instruments.

Most of the larger populated areas of Mars lay on the Equator, in an effort to harness the feeble heat of the Sun.

Their plan was to search these areas first. The first settlement offered no signal; neither did the second, third or fourth. As they approached the fifth, a township called New-Selby, on account of its mining industry, a faint bleep issued forth from the tracking device. By a process of trial and error, Kandrás manoeuvred the *Revenge* until it was directly above the signal source some eighty thousand feet up. A remote control camera picked up a large recreation centre with its own launching pad; a quick count showed twenty-two different rockets in attendance.

The light was fading rapidly as the *Revenge* gently dropped down to the desert-like surface. Kandrás put her down like a feather in a crescent-shaped depression about four hundred metres from the launching pad. The mysterious propulsion unit was silent and left no clouds of dust to give away their position.

Charlotte had laundered Michael's thermal coveralls which he had received on board the *Black Swan* and he was now wearing them under his spacesuit. Charlotte had also done another job on the spacesuits. She had covered them all with simulated patches and tape, which served a two-fold purpose. Firstly it made the suits look more like those of poverty-stricken prospectors and secondly it covered all the Company Insignia so that nobody would be able to trace them.

The party of three men left the *Revenge* and crawled to the top of the depression which concealed the ship and ascertained some marks which they would need to follow to find their way back when they left the club. Then they circled away to the right until they came to a surface-vehicle park. Having entered the parking area unobserved, they stood up and walked nonchalantly towards the launching pad.

Their search did not take long. Michael soon spotted the sleek outlines of his favourite toy. He was not pleased to see the black charring on the nose and the melted blobs where the lights had once been. It was apparent that the little shuttle had made a very fast re-entry; it had probably been unable to slow down sufficiently from the break-neck speed which the *Black Swan* had induced.

"Can I help you guys?" asked an American voice inside their headphones. They turned to see the launch-pad guard.

"Possibly," said Michael. "I believe this little bird is for sale. Do you know where the owner is?"

"From the way that guy was flashing his money around, I suspect that he will be going in for something a lot bigger. You'll find him in the bar... he seems to be in a generous mood tonight... he might even give it to you. He has apparently struck it rich," replied the American, a little enviously.

"Wouldn't you know it." said Michael. "Some guys get all the luck. ..thanks Mister."

The three companions made their way towards the bar which a neon-light sign proudly proclaimed as the *Oasis Club*.

"I can't see too many palm trees," observed Arnie, innocently.

"It must be the dry season," quipped Neville.

Michael cut across their jocular mood. "Neville... take cover over there behind that column. Disable anybody who follows us out of that airlock. Arnie... let's go... we must find him quickly."

"I'm right with you, Captain."

In their disguised, tattered spacesuits they passed through the quick-action airlock.

These worked like two discs fastened together. As one was open the other was automatically shut. Each disc had three exit holes cut into it and were instrumental in vastly quickening up airlock activation. They had been originally designed as a fire escape door from Public Buildings on the Moon Bases and even now the Authorities insisted on this design in Clubs and other Public Buildings before a 'fire certificate' could be awarded.

"Good evening, Gentlemen," said a rather large doorman who was in charge of the entrance. "The cover charge is ten dollars each."

Michael felt foolish he had never given a thought about money. He automatically put his hand to his breast pocket and was relieved to feel a bulge. The money was still there from his visit to Earth.

"Do you accept English money?" asked Michael.

"Yes, Sir, you can change it over there, where the cashier is."

Michael went across and changed some of his money into dollars. They paid the cover charge and went into the bar. Helmets were always carried in these places; life-support systems were not infallible and sometimes there were power cuts which put them out of action.

There was no immediate sign of Harry and the bar looked inviting. "Fancy a drink while we're waiting?" asked Michael.

"Thank you, Cap... I'd better call you Michael... I'll have a pint of that draught beer, please."

Michael ordered the drinks from a very Earthly looking barmaid who gave them both a long, smouldering, searching look and as she moistened her lips, she left no doubt that further advances would be most welcome. Since none came, she sullenly served up the drinks. The smile soon returned to her face when Michael gave her a large tip and asked her where the man who had struck it rich was celebrating.

"He's in the small bar over there and is making himself very popular... just my luck to be serving on this bar tonight," she moaned.

Michael offered his consolations and moved away from the bar. "There is no point in delaying things, Arnie. We will finish our drinks and recce the room."

As they walked past, they saw Morgan surrounded by about twenty drunken hangers-on and they were having a good time. Even at a glance it was

possible to see that Morgan was sober. He was going through the process of winning friends... he was going to need them.

"Fancy a scrap, Arnie?"

"I'm just in the mood...let's take him."

They strode purposefully towards the smaller room, went inside and closed the sliding door. Harry looked up and just for a moment there was a flicker of fear in his eyes.

"Good evening, Harry... we have come to take you home... are you going to come quietly or will it have to be the hard way?"

"These men are maniacs," screamed Harry. "They want to kill me... there's ten thousand dollars for every man, if you can save me from them."

There were some whoops of delight and the crowd turned on Michael and Arnie. Arnie hit the first man on the chin and he shot backwards into the crowd, bowling some others over. Michael felled one with a right cross and with a savage karate kick he sent another sprawling backwards across the floor. Keeping their backs to the closed door the Captain and his Coxswain battled on. The bar brawlers were no match for the fit, trained professionals.

Arnie picked up another assailant and threw him at the bar, clearing the glasses off, just like a scene from an old cowboy movie. By now Harry was searching for a weapon and unfortunately he found one. There was a fire-axe behind the bar; he leaped over, smashed the glass and helped himself. Arnie was now going onto the offensive instead of just defending himself, he had two men cornered. He hit one with a right cross and spun round and delivered a vicious back kick right on the nose of the other man; there was blood everywhere. Morgan screamed with hatred and rushed at Arnie brandishing the axe.

Arnie was concentrating on two other men and could not see him coming. Michael saw the danger and hurled himself at Morgan, ducked under the axe and they both landed in a heap on the floor. Morgan was shouting obscenities and struggling like a man possessed. Michael grabbed the axe handle and forced it down onto his windpipe and pressed. Morgan shut up rapidly, his cries strangled in his throat. Meanwhile Arnie was disposing of the revellers, dropping the last one with a vicious chop to the side of the head.

"Thanks, Captain, I never saw him coming."

"Think nothing of it, that makes us even again. Do you have those manacles handy?"

They slipped them on Harry who was now going blue in the face. The room looked like a battlefield with unconscious bodies littering the floor. There came the sound of some frightened sobbing from behind the bars. Arnie reached over and dragged an extremely frightened barmaid to her feet.

"Sorry about the ruckus, Ma'am, but this man is a criminal. My colleague and I work for the British Secret Service, so do not worry," lied Arnie convincingly.

Michael threw the rest of his money onto the bar, a considerable amount. "That should pay for the damage and buy these lads a drink when they come round... give them our apologies. ..we will be leaving now."

The girl nodded dumbly. They picked Harry up and dragged him forcibly to the door. As he opened his mouth to scream, Arnie callously jabbed his thumb into his jaw, just under his left ear and put him out.

Arnie supported Morgan as Michael collected their three helmets then they removed the manacles and opened the door. They had Harry supported between them and headed for the door. The doorman came over to see what the problem was.

"Too much celebrating, he's passed out," laughed Arnie.

"We're taking him to his ship. We will stay with him while he sleeps it off."

"Well it looks like he will have one big hangover in the morning... serves him right," said the doorman unsympathetically.

They passed through into the lobby, fitted their helmets and went through the first phase of the airlock. As they cleared the second phase of the airlock there was a commotion in the lobby and two security men rushed up to the doorman who gave a startled expression and pointed to the exit. They had obviously discovered the carnage in the small bar.

Michael watched as one of the security men spoke into his radio. "We'd better hurry up, Arnie. ..We've been rumbled."

"Arnie picked up Harry, threw him over his shoulder and started back towards the *Revenge* as quickly as the low gravity would allow him.

"Look out, Arnie. ..here comes Security. "Three men came round the building with electronic rifles; two knelt down and took aim, there was no attempt at a challenge. A dark shadow moved round from the columns of the club and then there were two brilliant white flashes; the two security men fell stunned as Neville callously cut them down. The other guard hit the deck and kept his head down, but it was too late, Neville shot him between the shoulder blades and put him out.

Neville caught them up and they scrambled across the launching pad in a direct line for the *Revenge*. Alarm bells were ringing and lights were flashing back at the *Oasis Club*, but it was too late. They reached the ship and Kandrass was there to help them up. Just as Kandrass was closing the large cargo doors, there was a vivid flash and Kandrass fell. It was the launch pad guard; he had followed them, undetected and managed to get a shot away. He was a very angry man and had watched his own colleagues cut down by Neville. The bolt which had hit Kandrass had ricocheted off the door surround but the weapon had been set on 'kill.'

Michael was horrified but kept his head. He dragged the inert Alien out of the cargo bay, sealed it all and removed Kandrass' helmet; the others removed theirs as well. "Work on him while I get this bird into the air."

Back on the bridge, Michael switched the controls to his own position and wound up the motors. He had never taken off from the surface before but

somehow he knew the procedures. Very gently the *Revenge* lifted away from the rust coloured sand of the Martian desert and smoothly accelerated upwards. At about two hundred thousand feet Michael selected the normal drive and delicately accelerated away. He had just left the atmosphere when two American patrol fighters swooped across his bows, both bristling with armament. He had forgotten to switch on the 'stealth' devices and was now the subject of their full attention.

Cursing to himself, he switched them on as the fighters came back in perfect formation. Michael accelerated as much as he dared knowing the others were not strapped in. He reasoned that if the 'stealth' devices were now working, a couple of course changes should throw them off the scent. He actually made three. It was enough. Two very puzzled American pilots returned to their base unable to explain the loss of their quarry. After another ten minutes of steady acceleration, Michael shut down the engines and put the *Revenge* on automatic, heading roughly towards Earth.

He rushed back towards the corridor which led to the cargo bay. Harry was handcuffed to a stanchion but Charlotte and the two men were still working furiously on Kandra.

"Is he still alive?" asked Michael anxiously.

"Just about," replied Arnie. "He has a pulse but he does not seem to be breathing."

Michael could see that Kandra's skin colour was turning to a delicate pastel turquoise; from experience he knew that Kandra was not re-oxygenating. Acting on an impulse Michael instructed them to take Kandra to the bathroom and said that he would meet them there in a moment.

Michael rushed to the sick-bay and grabbed the gun which held the metabolism accelerator and hurried back to join the others in the bathroom. He helped to divest Kandra of his spacesuit and gave him two shots in the abdomen.

"Put him in that large tank," instructed Michael.

They put him into the tank with difficulty, Michael stripped down to his briefs and jumped in with him. He filled the tank to a depth of four feet and totally submerged Kandra.

"You'll drown him," screamed Charlotte.

"No... he's amphibious... if his lungs are not working, perhaps his gills are." Michael massaged Kandra's limbs and chest as well as he could and was rewarded by a reversal of the oxygenation process. The regular pink skin colour began to return and a few minutes later Kandra opened his eyes and was more than a little surprised to find himself floating in a tank.

He struggled back to consciousness with difficulty and began to emanate dark waves of pain which affected them all. Slowly these passed and Kandra regained control.

"What happened?" he asked painfully.

"You were shot by one of the guards," replied Michael. "Luckily it was a ricochet and had lost some of its energy, otherwise you would be very dead. You stopped breathing so I put you into the tank and gave you a couple of shots to help your normal functions to return."

"Thank you again, Michael. ..where are we now?"

"We're heading for Earth... do you feel well enough to get out?"

"I think so."

Michael released the water and Kandrás shakily climbed out. He took a long look at Morgan and with all the telepathic power he could muster directed at him said, "You have caused a lot of trouble, Harry Morgan, people have died because of your evil notions."

Harry squealed with pain as the turmoil in his head took its effect, then he passed out. After an hour or two on his bunk, Kandrás was back to normal. They made a course correction and put on a quick burst of speed and soon the *Revenge* was on final approach with its 'stealth' devices still engaged.

"Can you put me on the Company Wavelength if possible, Neville?" asked Michael.

"It's set up already, Sir, we should be in range now."

Michael took the microphone and called Base.

"This is Captain Michael Robert Stephens calling the Crest Interplanetary Trading Company. ..come in please."

"Good morning, Captain Stephens. ..what can we do for you?" requested H.Q.

"Thank you, Control... please ask Sir Richard to stand by to receive guests."

"Roger, Captain, we have been expecting your call. Sir Richard has left instructions for you to use his private launch pad. It will be indicated by a green laser beam... what is your E.T.A. ...we do not have you on our scope?"

"Thank you, Control... E.T.A. in eight minutes... over and out."

The *Revenge* landed with pinpoint accuracy and Michael turned to Charlotte. "Well... we made it back... but there were times....."

He left the sentence unfinished.

## **CHAPTER 21. EPILOGUE.**

Shuttles had been arriving all day at Company H.Q. some from not too distant and others from as far away as the Moon, Mars and the Asteroids. Sir Richard had organised a re-union dinner for all those whose lives had been touched by what was now referred to as the 'Morgan Affair.'

It was three months to the day since the *Revenge* had touched down on Earth and the vessel was still locked and under armed guard for the time being. Michael was sitting next to Charlotte and had many memories of the Mission. As Sir Richard smoothly delivered his after-dinner speech some of them flashed through his head.

Michael looked at his Crew, they seemed to be fit and healthy. Arnie looked quite miserable and uncomfortable in his suit, but cheered up as he caught Michael's eye. Captain Gorrie was sitting with his Crew and looked as stolid as ever. As a mark of respect, the places of the Men killed in the 'Morgan Affair' had been set and draped with a piece of black velvet. Before dinner commenced, two minutes of silence had been observed in their honour.

The Guest of Honour was Kandrás. He had been received with something like reverence by all the Authorities which he had seen. The British Government had passed an Act of Parliament to give him British citizenship and Sir Richard had again offered him the post of Chief Technical Advisor to the Company. This time Kandrás had accepted and to everybody's amazement had accepted in perfect English. He had learned the language over the weeks and was intelligent enough to realise that he would have to communicate with the Earth people at their own level.

He was going to be a very busy person and had promised to host a series of seminars which would re-align the thinking of the Company's top boffins.

He had fallen in love with the planet Earth and had spent a holiday on Grand Cayman, Sir Richard's favourite hideaway. This particular spot in the British West Indies with its beautiful, clear waters had been the ideal place for an amphibious being like Kandrás and he had been overawed by the richness and beauty of the marine species which abounded amongst the coral. After two hundred years aboard his ship it was an unbelievable experience to swim freely in a large expanse of water.

Sir Richard had made sure that he was well looked after by sending Henry Hurst as his companion, his local knowledge had been a great help.

One of Kandrás' biggest luxuries was the fresh food. He had lived on synthesized food for hundreds of years and his first fillet steak had tasted so unbelievably good to him that he had requested a plate of small samples of other earthly dinners. He had loved them all, particularly the fish dishes and had found real pleasure in being a gourmet.

Neville Johnson was sitting with a beautiful young lady named Anna. On the breast of his evening dress suit was pinned a recently awarded medal for 'Meritorious Service above and beyond the call of Duty.' Michael's lasting



memory of Neville came when they were on final approach with Michael flying the *Revenge*. Neville had returned his Crest Comets to him and said, "We have every confidence in you, Sir, but just in case they don't recognise you, you had better wear these. These they will recognise."

Michael had highly commended Neville's part in the Mission when he had submitted his report. Neville's courage, resourcefulness and determination had been instrumental to the success of the Mission and he was pleased that it had been suitably rewarded.

One of the better things to come out of the incident was the arrangement Fred Ford had been instructed to negotiate. Following the transmission by Captain Stephens after the recapture of the three vessels, Sir Richard had instructed Fred to invite Admiral Williams to Company Headquarters to discuss an appointment.

It had not been easy to find him. The dishonoured Admiral and his wife had moved to a remote farm house in Wales without a telephone or other communication device. Fred and Lord Lamont had gone to visit the Admiral to try to convince him that it would be in his best interest to talk with Sir Richard.

It had not been easy, but eventually his lovely wife, Valerie, had persuaded him that he could not hide away for ever and so the meeting had taken place. Sir Richard had created a new executive post in the Company and called it the 'Chief Military Liaison Officer.' It was this post that had been offered to the Admiral. He could not believe his luck and had gratefully accepted the post. His only question had been, "Why me?"

Having put him on the payroll and updated his security clearance, Sir Richard showed him the video-tapes of Michael's transmission. The Admiral was immediately excited and astounded.

"Captain Stephens was the most reliable and trustworthy Officer I ever met. When he said he had seen something, then I knew it must be there."

The significance of his appointment had dawned on him when Sir Richard had looked him straight in the face and said, "I hope you get a lot of personal satisfaction when you inform the Military of what we have discovered here." Without doubt, a classic case of 'rubbing their noses in it.'

Michael was now a fabulously rich man in his own right. He had asked if a Company freighter could pick up his Moon Shuttle from Mars. Fred Ford had sent the *Atlas*, now under the command of Captain Benjamin Rimmer. It had been brought back, still locked up and when Michael had opened it, the hold had been crammed with bags of uncut gems and other valuable nuggets. Under space law the contents of a space ship had been deemed to belong to the owners, following a test case involving the Skipper of an American prospecting team and the owners of their vessel. Even after tax his personal fortune was in excess of one hundred million pounds.

Things were not too good for Harry. He had been placed in a mental institution when a judge had ruled him unfit to plead. He was suffering from Melancholia and 'Delusions of Grandeur' which was made all the worse by his

schizophrenia. Harry was quite mad and Michael had made some money available to help ease the way and provide the few luxuries which he was allowed by the Institution. In a way, Michael felt rather sorry for Harry Morgan, he had been the victim of a lot of circumstances.

The remainder of his Crew had been tried and convicted on charges of piracy in the first ever trial of its nature. They had been sentenced to ten years in the Martian Penal Colony.

As Michael's mind wandered, he recalled the hard times and then looked at Charlotte's hand and admired the intricate twin-stone, diamond setting of her engagement ring: there was a thick gold wedding ring underneath it. Both the rings had been made from materials brought back in his Moon Shuttle. Their eyes met and he squeezed her hand... Charlotte had made the perfect Mrs. Stephens and that was something he did have to thank Harry Morgan for.

Michael's thoughts pondered what the future might hold. Having married the niece of Sir Richard Crest, Michael was in a very strong position, both financially and status wise. Once again he was a Captain without a ship but, with a new wife to enjoy life with, it did not hurt as much. He knew that soon this feeling of contentedness would pass and that the craving would once again return, but that was in the future. The thing that preyed most on his mind was what Sir Richard would instruct him to do within the Company.

He hoped that it would not be entirely desk-bound. He was startled out of his reverie as Sir Richard tapped him on the shoulder.

"Michael, I have been thinking. When the honeymoon is over I would appreciate it if you would give some thought to drawing on your experiences as a pioneer space explorer. With Kandra's help I intend to organise a deep-space exploration mission and I would like you to be in Command I'm sure Charlotte will be able to find a good reason to go along with you..... what do you think of such a suggestion?"

Michael was unable to control the smile on his face as he turned to Sir Richard. "I thought you were never going to ask....."