



The Return

It arrived and
then became
mankind's
salvation, but why
were we saved ?

By
Derek P. Blake

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Authors note:

The author is British and lives in Cornwall in the UK Therefore this book is written in UK English.

Chapter 1

The Discovery

It was one of those balmy late summer evenings, the long light nights of June and July were past and the sultry heat of August was upon the land. Blake Northfield, and his wife Jo, were lazing on the decking outside their summerhouse overlooking the English Channel. There was little or no light pollution in the far west of Cornwall, so the sky was bright with stars, even distant stars burned with a fire never seen in the cities. Blake laid back on the sun-lounger a Martini in hand, and stared up into the night sky, “See that smudge of light over there,” he said to Jo, his wife of over twenty years.

“Hmm, what smudge Blake, is it something on your glasses,” she asked in jest.

“Funny,” said Blake, “look over there in the north-east about twenty degrees from the horizon, see it?”

“Where,” asked Jo with some frustration, she turned on her lounger to face behind her and looked up, “yes, I see it, I guess you're going to tell me all about it now, instead of letting me enjoy my drink and my book.”

“Good guess, yes I am,” laughed Blake, “do you know how far away that smudge is?”

“No but I am sure you will tell me,” said Jo, “what is it anyway?”

“It's actually a galaxy, like our Milky Way, with billions of stars.”

“And that's why it's so fuzzy, because of all those stars?”

“Well partly, it's also a long way away, guess how far,” invited Blake.

“Billions of miles?”

“Not even close, it's 2.2 million light years.”

“Means nothing to me dear, use miles or at a stretch kilometres.”

“OK, hold on to your hat, it's 14,696,575,500,000,000 that's 14.6 quintillion miles away.”

“Never heard of quintillion, did you just make that up,” asked Jo.

“No I didn't, look I'll write it down for you,” Blake found a piece of paper and a pen from his shirt pocket and wrote the numbers out.

“Seriously! Look if it's that far away how come we get visitors, UFOs etcetera?”

“There's no such thing as aliens, they only exist in Star Trek and other fantasies, those who believe in aliens visiting Earth just come under conspiracy theorists,” said Blake a little too forcefully, “physics is the same in the Andromeda Galaxy as it is here, one plus two still makes three, no matter what planet you're on.”

Blake and Jo had been married for coming up to twenty-one years, and were as devoted to each other now as when they had met at university. They had two sons both now at college, one son, Donald had turned out to be a near genius at mathematics, but was determined to become a medical doctor, whilst the other, Paul, was setting his sights on being a physics teacher. Blake was

a naturalised British, American, who had come to Britain, originally to study at Oxford in his chosen field of advanced electronic systems. When he had met Jo, who was studying Classics and Ancient Languages, everything changed for him. Blake had had no intension of staying in England, and was there just to get the name of 'Oxford' on his degree and Ph.D. but fate had other plans for him, he met Jo and fell deeply in love with her. They had married and moved to Cheshire, where he had obtained a post at Joderal Bank, the radio astronomy centre of Manchester University, where he developed a more sophisticated and accurate tracking system for the main dish; whilst Jo went to work for Manchester University itself as a researcher and occasional lecturer. With the advent of the Moon exploration, Blake obtained a job with Goonhilly Downs Earth Station, in Cornwall, as chief electronics engineer. The move was more about quality of life rather than any grand job move, their salaries were considerably, less but living in Cornwall more than made up for that. They had both become disenchanted with life in the Manchester suburbs, and what was called 'The Cheshire Set', comprising mainly upper-class snobs. Jo's commute into the city had become a bind and seemed to take longer each day. Blake, although based at the site near the tiny village of Goostry just outside of Knutsford, he also was required to make the journey into Manchester at least once a week. Blake did not like being in the limelight and his occasional requirement to lecture advanced engineering students was not his ideal of heaven on Earth.

So one day whilst reading the Telegraph Newspaper, Blake noticed a recruiting advert for Goonhilly Downs Station, who required a chief engineer. Blake knew of Goonhilly, of course, it had obtained fame by being the first Earth-station to receive the signals from the first telecom satellite, 'Telstar'. In the late two-thousand and tens, the station had been awarded the contract to handle all the communications between Earth and the Moon, now that the Moon was being considered a commercial venture. It wasn't the job that attracted him, nor the salary, it was the fact that he would be based in Cornwall. He and Jo had visited the county initially on their honeymoon, money had been an issue then and a camping holiday fitted the budget. They had fallen in love with the county and had visited there many times since, many times dreaming of moving there to live. Blake was appointed for the job and, now having a good bank balance, they managed to buy a beautiful house overlooking the sea, about four or five miles from his work-place. They were settled, and happy and it seemed that nothing on Earth could disrupt their happiness.

Jo had found a part time job with Exeter University, based at the Penryn campus, on the outskirts of Falmouth, lecturing once a week and had become renown for her ancient language research, taking on private commissions from museums across the world. She had gained some notoriety for the translation of the 'Religious' stone that had been discovered in the early

twenty-twenties, close to Basra, in Iraq. She had also been acclaimed for her work on, what was thought to be a contemporary Gospel, dated from the time of the disciples. Their two sons loved the area too, but spent most of their time at university, the eldest, Donald, Edinburgh medical School, and Paul, following his father in engineering, at Keele University in Staffordshire, with a view to teaching. The two spent every recess in Cornwall and both had romantic interests there, two lovely local and intelligent young ladies of whom both Jo and Blake entirely approved. They spent many hours every summer surfing the Atlantic rollers or walking the high sea-cliffs and beaches. On this night in August they were both out together with the 'girls', Blake suspected one of the local hostleries.

“Can I get back to my book now, please,” pleaded Jo.

“Philistine, there is more to life than Greek literature, you know.” Blake settled back and continued viewing the sky. He was pleased with the way he had set his garden up, and not a little proud; he had brought in a specialist in wooden decking and had built an observatory connected to the deck. The observatory looked south-east toward the English Channel and gave him an unobstructed view of the sky from the north around to the south-west, the observatory contained his pride and joy, in the form of a twelve inch, computer guided reflector telescope. Being in the business, Blake had built the control system from scratch and was almost as advanced as the systems he had installed in Cheshire.

He intended that night to spend an hour or two looking through the telescope, he thought about taking some photographic images of the Andromeda galaxy, if the clear sky held. The big problem here, just outside of the village of Coverack, was that sea mist, or sea-smoke as it was known to some, it often rose quickly and obliterated the sky. Although living in this idealistic Cornish fishing village, where fishing was still a major part of its economy, there were still disadvantages. The village was flooded with tourists during the summer season, so the narrow lanes and roads were often blocked by drivers who were not used to the narrow roads and streets. The tourists came in their BMWs and Audi cars and drove down the middle of the roads, afraid to get their precious auto-mobiles scratched by the trees and bushes that edged the lanes, known as 'hedging'.

Blake sank further back and sipped his Martini again, he had never managed to shrug off the American habit of these drinks, even though hardly anyone in the UK drank them. He had never taken to the local drinks of Cider and Bitter-beer either, although on a hot day a larger did quench the thirst. He closed his eyes as he let the liquid circulate his mouth and taste-buds, as he opened his eyes again he registered a flash of light in his peripheral vision. Blake's head snapped around thirty or so degrees and caught sight of, what seemed like a meteor flaring through the atmosphere. "Jo, look there's one of your alien ships coming to visit us," he said in jest. Jo Looked up and laughed, "Well let's hope it's not

coming here, I'm not dressed for visitors.”

Blake grabbed a pair of binoculars from the patio table and quickly found the object, “Strange, meteors don't usually last this long before they burn up. It must be a big one, even an asteroid.”

“Is there a difference,” asked Jo.

“There certainly is,” replied Blake, still watching through his binoculars, “meteors are relatively small, but asteroids can be huge, anything from the size of a car to a city.”

“And what size is this one,” asked Jo.

“Hellish big,” came Blake's answer, “Looking at this it could be extinction sized, Oh hell Jo this could be the big one. . . Although we should have some warning by this time, it's too close.”

Blake continued to watch the object, and then jumped up and dashed into his observatory, “What's the matter dear,” asked Jo as he disappeared into the converted summerhouse.

“There's something strange going on here, I think it's slowed down,” came his voice from the observatory.

Blake switched on the power to his telescope as he entered the dark space of the wooden structure and a low red glow filled the cave. The telescope also came to life with whirs and clicks, finally ending in a bleep. He went directly to a control panel where he switched the telescope to manual control, as above him the two leaves of the roof opened. The object could be seen in the sky to the south-west, and now seemed like just another very

bright star, about twice the magnitude of Venus. Looking at the monitor that allowed him to align the scope he brought the instrument around until the object was in the cross-hairs on the screen, then he moved his attention to the eyepiece. He brought the telescope into focus, and suddenly sat back in his chair with shock, with so much force that the chair nearly toppled over. After a few seconds Blake's eye went back to the telescope, as her triggered the HD video camera, which took images from the telescope. He sat there for several minutes muttering, "I don't believe this," or, "incredible".

"What's incredible baby," asked Jo, from the doorway.

"Come here and look at this," invited Blake. Jo made her way to where her husband was sitting, and he switched the HD feed to the monitor.

"What am I looking at?"

"That babe is what that thing up there is,"

"It looks like a space ship," said Jo, the shock registering in her cracked voice, "is it the space station?"

"No it's not ISS-2, I've seen that hundreds of times, and it definitely came in from space just now."

Blake fumbled in his shorts pocket and brought out his cell-phone, he pressed a preprogrammed button and held it to his ear. "Ronnie, it's Blake, have you got anything out of the ordinary on your scopes? Well can you take a look, to the south-west? Yea, I'll hold."

"Whose that," asked Jo.

"Ronnie at work, he's on monitoring duty tonight, you

met him last family day that Goonhilly ran, he's the one. . . Oh hi Ronnie, you have nothing, but I'm looking at it right now, I'm sending you the video and the 'Alt-Dec' to you now, it's visible to the naked eye and through my scope, can you check it out please and ring me back.” The pair continued to watch the object on the telescope's monitor as it slowly changed orientation. It was clearly not a natural object in any sense, it was bright and lit by the Sun far now to the west, from their vantage point it seemed to consist of a large sphere, surrounded by four tube-like appendages. The four tubes were all connected by two rings, each about a third of the way along the tubes, there was no light that could be seen at this time, but of course they had little sense of scale either. Blake changed the magnification by replacing a shorter eyepiece, then refocused the telescope, the resolution was not as good but it did show slightly more detail. Although they could not resolve them, there seemed to be some markings in the tubes, which may have been letters. The space between the tubes and the sphere was filled with a lattice of some kind and more surface detail could be discerned if one screwed the eyes up or used peripheral vision, to reduce the blur.

The two stared in amazement and silence at the image on the screen, and they both jumped as the cell-phone rang. “Hi Ronnie, what have you got,” said Blake, who listened for some minutes as his colleague updated him, finally Blake said, “OK, ring Doctor Anderson and tell him what you have just told me, send him my video and

see what he wants to do.” pause, “Yes please let me know what he says, speak to you soon, bye.”

“What did he say,” asked Jo.

“In brief, he couldn't find anything there, even though he had a visual, no radio emissions or image bounce at all on passive. Then he had an idea, we have this new prototype dish that we haven't started to evaluate as yet, it's meant to work like a kind of range finder, anyway it sends out full spectrum signals, from ultraviolet to infrared. He powered it up and got a hit deep in the ultraviolet side of the spectrum, and here's the astonishing bit, it's around five-hundred thousand miles out. I shudder to think about just how big that thing really is. Being over twice the distance of the Moon away it must be about half the size of the Moon. Anyway, Ronnie's going to get hold of Anderson and give him the data, then it's down to him what he does.”

Doctor Ralph Anderson had been the director of Goonhilly Earth Station since the late two-thousand and tens and had seen the station come into prominence by obtaining the contract as the communications hub for the ESA and the private consortiums that wanted to mine the Moon. Goonhilly Downs was the first station to pick-up the signals from the very first telecommunications satellite, 'Telstar'. It had also been used as a part of the British early-warning network during the cold-war, and a tracking station for early missile tests. Anderson had been relaxing with friends after a small dinner-party when his cell-phone rang, seeing who was calling, he

immediately prepared himself for trouble “Excuse me, I have to take this, work,” he told his guests. “Hello, Anderson here,” he said and then listened in silence. “OK Ronnie, leave it with me and I'll contact the ESA, tell Blake to expect a call from them, as he seems to have all the data at this point, bye.” He stood still for almost a minute, prompting a question from his wife as to what was wrong, “Just work my love, a little problem. He said almost absent-mindedly. Turning to their guests he said, “I'm sorry, I am going to have to leave you for a little while, please just carry on and enjoy yourselves,” and he left the lounge bound for his office. Ralph dropped into his winged swivel-chair and sat thinking for several minutes before he took any action. His home office was fully equipped with everything an office should have including a secure line to the ESA duty officer. Finally he picked up the receiver from the black telephone and dialled zero-nine, one three, to activate the secure scrambler that the ESA had insisted upon.

After several clicks and bleeps the call was answered by Jules Mason who was the duty officer for the night at the headquarters building in Paris, he gave his personal code and asked for the Centre for Earth Observation in Frascati, Italy. After close to half a minute a voice announced “Observation Centre, who's calling?”

“This is Doctor Ralph Anderson at Goonhilly Downs in Cornwall, England,” he then gave his personal identity code.

“This is Mario Vinchensa speaking .How can I help you

doctor” the voice asked.

“One of my senior staff members, who happens to have a very sophisticated astronomy system at his home, has observed some sort of craft out beyond the Moon's orbit, but even so, it's visible to the naked eye. Our ranging equipment gives the range at around half a million miles, we have video of the object which, if you supply a number, we can send to you the video and all the data.”

“Are you sure this is a space-craft sir, I can see nothing on our local scopes, the range should cover at least that far out,” queried Mario.

“No, none of our dishes or LR Doppler Radar saw anything either, until one of my staff brought the Visible Light Ranging System on-line, with the coordinates our chief engineer gave us we were able to detect it,” answered the doctor.

“Are you available to hang on sir? I can bring the 'Galileo-ST' onto the coordinates,” offered Mario, “can you send the data to this number, 39-537-193877, it will come directly to me here.”

Doctor Anderson plugged the data stick into his computer and dialled the number Mario had given him, the computer showed a message that he was connected, he selected the file on the data-stick and hit the send button, seconds later the data-send had been completed. “I have it doctor,” Mario's voice informed him, “let me open the package,” he said. There followed several minutes of silence, before Mario voice again sounded, “Mama Mia! Is this video for real?”

“It would seem so, it was taken through a twelve . . . sorry a thirty-centimetre reflector with a HD CCD camera, by my chief engineer.”

“Okey-dokey, let me feed these coordinates into Galileo and see what we have,” the sound of keys being tapped could be heard in the background, “This may take a few minutes.”

“That's fine,” said Ralph, “Have the up-grades been installed yet?”

“Si, well most of them, we wait only for the new software, but the new lenses and receptors are onboard and working just fine. Here we go, eccellente!”

“What do you see Mario?”

“I see the ship like in your video, it's just hanging there, how did your man find it,” Mario asked.

“I am told he was sitting out and saw a flash, he thought it was a meteor or asteroid, but it didn't move, so he used his telescope, you have the rest in the package.”

“I will have to pass this up the line, we have a protocol for this eventuality,” explained Mario, “I have to contact my director and he will take over, and I am required to instruct you and your staff to stand down on this matter and to remind you of our non-disclosure agreement, so no media, sir. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Buona notte!”

As Doctor Anderson broke the connection to the ESA, Mario Vinchensa grabbed another telephone, a blue one this time, that was connected directly to NASA HQ at 300 East Street SW, Washington DC. It was four in the

afternoon in Washington, and a very hot day, in the office the day was thankfully coming to an end, when the emergency telephone rang. "Awe crap," muttered Doug Martins as he turned in his leather swivel chair and grabbed the receiver, noticing from the LCD screen that it was the ESA. "NASA Response," said Doug.

"Hi," a heavily accented Italian voice met him from the earpiece, "this is Mario Vinchensa at ESA Frascati, who am I speaking to?"

"This is Deputy Director Doug Martins at the response centre, what can we do for you Mr. Vinchensa?"

"We have a substantiated report of an alien space craft parked at a range of around five hundred thousand miles from Earth, and it's a-huge," explained Mario with more than a little excitement in his voice, "I am sending you a data package through now."

"I don't have time for wind up's Mr. Vinchensa, I warn you . . ." Doug stopped in mid-sentence as the data package popped up on his desk screen, "How big is this vehicle?"

"The stills and the initial videos were taken through a thirty centimetre reflector by an engineer at Goonhilly in Cornwall, England, Goonhilly used a ranging telescope under development there, and ranged it at the five-hundred thousand miles mark," explained Mario, "We used our new 'Galileo-ST' to get the higher resolution stills and confirmed the position and distance approximately to seven-hundred and eight thousand, one hundred and eleven Km, approximately twice the distance of the Moon. My rough calculations indicate

that the craft is about the size of Australia, and spherical.”

“Doug gulped and said, “What sort of civilisation builds a ship that size?”

“A very advanced one,” suggested Mario, “and it is bigger than that if you include the ring around it and other appendages, let us hope that they are not antagonistic towards us.”

“Has it shown any signs of activity in the past two hours,” asked Doug.

“Nothing,” said Mario, “I sent a universal signal asking for identity, but so far no answer, it just looks dead in space.”

“But someone or something must have navigated it here and moored it at that point,” said Doug, “OK Mr. Vinchensa, leave it with us, I'll get a priority order for the HST two (Hubble Space Telescope Two) to move onto those coordinates and see what we can get, so we will take over now, and thank you for your input.”

“Please, call me Mario, and may I point out that this was a European discovery, so I would ask that the ESA is kept in the loop on this at every stage,” stated Mario, pointedly, “We will of course be continuing to monitor the situation with our 'Galileo-ST'.”

“Well, OK, that's fine, we can share information, I will convey your request to my director,” Doug said in a rather starch-shirt kind of way, “We will speak again, Mr... Mario.”

Doug hung up the telephone and settled down to review

the full data package, in fact he reviewed it several times before he finally contacted his director. At ten minutes before five in the afternoon NASA's Director of the Shy-Watch program, a program that was set up to monitor asteroid activity, was also preparing to leave for the day. Director Atherton Bennet had been with NASA for almost thirty years and had worked his way up from his post as junior tracking engineer. When he had been appointed as director of this division, some three years ago, he had thought that it would be a sweet job with little to do than to track local asteroids, in reality it was anything but. There have been more near misses in the past three years than in the entire history of the planet it seemed, including two actual strikes, thankfully one in the Pacific Ocean and one in the central Sahara district, that had turned a hundred mile disk to glass. The disk of glass had changed the climate of the desert by reflecting a high proportion of sunlight back into space, it was now a cold austere area that experienced rain and even snow. The tsunami in the Pacific-rim caused more of a problem, with over two-hundred thousand souls killed around the coasts and islands. Earth was not a safe place to live these days, he thought, and he worried about his family, two sons and a daughter, all grown up with families of their own now. One son and a daughter had elected to stay close and lived down in Maryland, the other son had moved to California, also working for NASA at Ames Research Centre.

Atherton threw his jacket over his shoulder and loosened

his neck-tie, and started for the door when the phone rang. He looked at his watch, it was still five before five, he sighed and shrugged as he turned back to his mahogany desk, With another sigh he shrugged of his jacket and lifted the receiver and in a flat voice announced, "Director Bennet here."

"Sir, it's Doug, have you got a few minutes, we have a situation."

"OK I'll drop in on my way out."

"I wouldn't count on getting away sir, this may be the biggest event in history," said Doug.

"Great, be there in one minute," promised Atherton still hoping to get away for the weekend.

Thirty-eight seconds later the door to the main office opened and Bennet walked in, once again with his jacket over his shoulder and carrying his brief-case, Doug smiled at his optimism. "So what's the big panic Doug?"

"Let me show you rather than tell you," Atherton walked over and stood by the large monitor. "I think you'd better sit down Ath, before I show you this." The Director took a typist's chair and sat facing the screen. Doug tapped a button on his computer and the first image came up on the screen, one of the stills from Cornwall, followed with Blake's video and then the data that the ESA had added, with all of their estimates and measurements. Atherton's jaw had dropped and he continued to watch the blank screen. "I need a priority order to realign the Hubble."

"What? Oh yes, the Hubble, certainly," he swung around and logged into the nearest terminal, typed his

access code and made the order, directly to Hubble Control, another key directed the feed to a wall screen, almost twenty feet across. The feed from Hubble II came in live via a narrow band digital video signal, so the telescope could be aimed more accurately and zoom in on a particular spot in space. Three minutes later they spotted the new star in Earth's sky, the telescope stopped and started to zoom in on the star. Gradually the bright dot resolved into a vehicle until it filled the screen in amazing clarity. "And this is four thousand miles across?"

"So it seems," said Doug, "Mario says its the larger than Australia, incredible."

"Looks like my weekend just disappeared," complained Atherton, "right then first things first, I'll get onto space communication and lets see if we get any sort of signal from the object, voice, emissions, radiation, whatever. The Director swung back to the computer terminal and sent an order to 'Coms' marked 'Restricted Access' to commence a full signal sweep from the coordinates attached. The order was acknowledged. "It will take a while so you'd better get that coffee machine switched back on," said Atherton, "and I'd better phone my wife, again."

An hour and fifty minutes later the desk monitor lit up with a call from 'Coms' "Hello, is this Director Bennet," the woman on the screen asked."

"Yes this is Atherton Bennet, what do you have for me?"
"Nothing Sir, there is absolutely nothing at those

coordinates not even a star output, the register is just blank, Sir, sorry.”

“That's fine,” said the Director, “Good job Major, and thanks.”

“Looks like she's dead in space, as we said Ath',“ said Doug.

“Which makes me wonder how it got here and why it has now powered down.” Atherton turned back to the big wall screen, “That tubular ring around the sphere, doesn't that remind you of our design for a gravity-bubble drive some years back?”

“Yea, I remember, there a picture of the artists impression on the wall in the foyer.”

“It could be that this vehicle works on the same principle, but we could not solve the power issues to create the bubble,” Atherton continued, “to create a gravity bubble that size must take an incredible amount of energy. If we could bring it back and back-engineer it we may just get into interstellar space at last, there is huge potential here Doug.”

“You know that the ESA is going to claim this don't you,” said Doug, “Their guy I spoke to as much as warned me not to let NASA take over.”

“Well that depends who does all the work here Doug, and who manages to bring that baby into LEO to examine it, and I don't think the ESA are capable of that, yet.”

“Don't be so sure Sir, I have been reading about this space plane that British Aerospace have developed, runs

on some hydrogen drive and takes off like an aeroplane with turbo scram-jets.”

“Where did you get that from, I have'nt read about that anywhere,” said Atherton.

“I think I was chatting to someone from Space-X a few weeks ago, I think they may be working with BA.”

“Hmm', maybe we need to placate the ESA a little then, make this a cooperation project, I don't want the ESA getting out there first.”

Doug thought for a few seconds and said, “Come to think of it, Ath, how are we, the US, going to get there, all we have are the Orion capsules they are small and have never been past the Moon, in fact they have only been designed for the Moon, and there is nothing we can do to convert the ore carriers, they are fully automatic and don't have a cockpit.”

“I think we need to inform the the DG about this,” said Atherton, perhaps Space-X can help us out, after all the help NASA has given them, I think they owe us some.” The Director took his cell-phone from his inside pocket and tapped a button.

The call was answered almost immediately, “Atherton Bennet here sir, are you near a terminal, only we have a situation, [pause] yes Sir I will send the package to that IP immediately,” he tapped the I.P code into the terminal and sent it, leaving the DG on the line, then sat waiting for a response. Five minutes later the DG came back and Atherton reacted, “Hello Sir, yes, I see [pause] do you mean right now? OK, meet you at the East

Entrance, in thirty minutes, [pause] yes I agree Sir, we have to retrieve the vessel, the question is how? I'll see you in half an hour then."

"So," said Doug, "what did he say?"

"We have to take it to the President, he wants to meet me in thirty minutes at the White House, can you dump that data package on a data-stick for me?"

"Sure, I'll do it now."

"Will you hold the fort here until I get back Doug?"

"Sure, no problem."

The package was loaded onto a secure stick and sealed, Atherton placed in in his brief case and made his way out to the reception area, he asked the receptionist to have a pool car brought around, and past through the main doors. The car arrived within a few minutes and he climbed into the back ready for the eleven mile ride to the White House, during rush-hour, they would be lucky to do it in thirty minutes. The driver knew his stuff and activated the blue flashing lights at the front of the vehicle, these worked a charm and the traffic on Independence Avenue made way for them. They made it to Lafayette Avenue in just thirteen minutes and DG Wilson-Avery was waiting as promised at the East entrance, they shook hands and proceeded inside. Arriving outside of the Oval Office they were asked to wait for a few minutes, whilst the National Security Advisor was found and summoned.

"Have you met with the President previously," asked Wilson.

“Never, Sir.”

“There is no need to be nervous, but only speak when asked to speak,” advised Wilson, “he's quite laid back and will make you feel comfortable, call him boss or Mr President, you'll be fine,” he said as he patted Atherton on the shoulder.

The door to the Oval Office opened and the President, Oliver Bose, invited them in, he shook hands with the DG and said, “Who is this Jack?”

“This Sir is Deputy Director Douglas Martins, who runs our Sky-Watch Program.”

“Good to meet you at last Atherton, and welcome to the White House,” the president said as he shook Atherton's hand energetically, “come on in, please make yourselves comfortable.”

The two settled on a couch by the fireplace whilst the President sat in a winged chair facing them and next to someone who he introduced as Rowena Palk, who Atherton assumed was the NSA.

“So what is the situation that needs my involvement Jack,” asked the President.

“It seems that some Brit in a place called Corn-wall spotted an object in the sky some six hours ago, he has a very good telescope, amateur astronomer who is the tracking engineer at Goonhilly Earth Station, they have helped us on many occasions and are contracted to the ESA, for Moon Coms. This guy managed to get some stills and a video of the object and found it was a space craft parked some four-hundred and forty thousand miles from Earth.”

“You mean aliens,” asked the President.

“I guess so, Boss, but the thing is this craft is bigger than Australia;”

“Bigger than where, what the whole dam continent?”

So it seems Sir, may I play the data package we have assembled, Sir?”

“By all means, Jack,” president Bose said as he sat forward on his chair, and the NSA followed suit, Atherton plugged the data-stick into the screen behind them and played the package. At the finish the President sat back in the chair and both hands went to his cheeks, “I was just watching 'Independence Day' with my grands last week and I prayed this would not happen on my watch” he laughed a nervous laugh. “And there is no response to our hails?”

“No Sir, there are no emissions at all, it's as if there is nothing there, it seems dead in space, but it is holding position,” advised Atherton, “some, something is holding it there against Earth's and the Moon's gravity.”

“What do you advise we do about this, what's your opinion Douglas,” asked President Bose.

“We'd like to get it back to Low Earth Orbit, or at least investigate it, but we can't get to it, it's too far out and there is nothing we have that can get us there, Sir.”

“We wondered if we could enlist Space-X,” suggested Atherton.

The President sat back and looked at the ceiling for a few seconds, “I am loathed to just hand it over to them,

and that's what will happen, believe me. It may be better to engage them as consultants on a strict subcontract basis. Lets not cut the ESA out of this Atherton, it was their discovery after all, I want full cooperation in this, it affects the world not just the US. In fact I have heard that the ESA has a new bird on the test-bed, and the Brits have just ground tested a space-plane, there is a good chance that the ESA will pull ahead of the US in space transport, Branson and Virgin have been flying to sub-orbit with tourists for over a decade. We need to keep Europe sweet.”

“What about the media boss,” asked Atherton.

“Leave that to the Europeans, for the time being, they discovered this spaceship and they need to give this British guy the credit,” answered Oliver.

“Sir, if I may,” ventured Doug, “I checked, the guy is a US citizen, and a naturalised British citizen, married a English woman, a lecturer in Classics and Ancient Literature, his name is Blake Northfield, descendant from American Indian stock.”

“Sir, I do think we need to control any media release,” interrupted Rowena Palk, speaking for the first time, “as a matter of national security, the public's reaction could be a problem.”

“I don't think it will be long before someone else spots this new star in the sky, if it's a bright as you say it is,” said President Oliver, who spoke to the ESA?”

“Doug did Sir,” volunteered Atherton.

“Doug, can you get back to whoever you spoke to and develop a press release before some nut starts screaming

'invasion'," asked the President.

"Certainly Sir, it a guy called Mario Vinchensa, Italian, seems like a good man."

"One more thing," said Oliver, "how do you feel about a US-ESA consortium, a team and include this Blake Northfield guy, in fact if his wife is an expert in ancient languages, she may be useful too."

Atherton, who had been taking notes said, "How about this Boss, the two Brits, two representatives from ESA, Doug and myself to represent NASA, plus co-opting any others on a consultancy basis."

"That's sounds just fine, but be flexible to invite who you think may be useful, and tell the ESA that as well, but keep it balanced. OK people, I think we are done here, thank you for bringing this to me, and Atherton keep me informed at every stage, and I mean every stage, this is B I G, big."

Chapter 2

Decisions

Back in Europe Mario Vincenza, the Duty Officer in Tracking at the ESA had not been idle, after his call to NASA, his next call was to ESA HQ in Paris, where he left a message for the Director General, Henry van Wolf, with a copy of the data package. Mario would not be on duty when the DG received the priority message but he was sure that he would get a telephone call soon after nine in the morning. NASA had also sent him their shots from HST-II along with the US Presidents suggestions for the consortium. Ten minutes later his blue telephone rang, the direct line to NASA, it was Doug Martins.

“Hi Mario, this is Doug Martins at NASA, you received the latest package I sent a few minutes ago?”

“Si, I mean yes, thank you, are you calling about this media release, asked Mario.

“I sure am, are you authorised to get this together, the President is anxious to get a statement out before the nuts and the gutter-press get hold of it,” explained Doug.

“No, I am afraid not, but I will include this in my message to the DG, I will put it as Very High Priority, and he will deal with it first thing.”

“OK that will have to do, I will wait for his call, it looks like I am going to be doing an all-nighter again; by the way, do you have the telephone number for Blake Northfield, who discovered the ship,” Doug asked.

“Yes I just spoke to him an hour ago, seems he's been up all night watching the craft, said he can't sleep.”

“Good, so I won't be disturbing his sleep,” said Doug, “we'll speak again, have a good day Mario.”

In Cornwall it was coming close to dawn and Blake was continuing to watch his discovery, just in case something happened. He'd used both infrared and ultraviolet filters on his telescope without detecting any emissions on any spectrum sector except the visible. Blake yawned for the tenth time in an hour and was just deciding to go to bed when his telephone rang, he rather expected it was his friend Ronnie at work. “Hello,” he said in a very tired tone.

“Is this Blake Northfield,” an American voice asked.

Waking up slightly Blake answered, “Yes, this is he, who is this?”

“This is Douglas Martins at NASA, Sky-Watch Program, sir, I just wanted to make contact and thank you for the discovery of the UFO out there, you did a swell job buddy.”

“Well thanks, you lot got on to it quickly,” said Blake.

“Your people contacted the ESA and they contacted us, as per our agreement for Sky-Watch.”

“You're the guys that watch for asteroids, yes?”

“That's right, but our commission covers all near-earth objects, explained Doug, we have taken it to the President, that's how big this is, and he wants you and you wife to be a part of a management group on this, as a tracking engineer and you have plenty of experience in the area.”

“Well it depends on my employer Doug, but why my

wife Jo, she has no experience in the field,” asked Blake. “I believe you wife lectured in ancient languages, so she may be useful, if there are any aliens on board, or as it seems, it is abandoned for some reason, in which case we want to get it back to LEO. Then we need to form a team to back-engineer it if we can.”

“Yes she did, and she has kept up with everything since moving here.”

“Don't worry about your employer Blake, we will work something out on that score, the President wants to make sure you get full credit as the discoverer of the ship.” Anyhow, Blake, I just wanted to touch base to get you on board and reassure you that NASA are not going to walk in and take over. We propose that there will be six of us on the committee, you, your wife, two from the ESA and my Director and I, plus anyone we co-opt on. So we will be seeing you two soon, good night to you.”

“Well it's dawn here, but you have a good night, so-long,” said Blake as he hung up the phone, he walked into the house and shouted at the top of his voice, “Fancy a trip to the States, Baby?”

In Paris the streets were slick from the early morning shower, making the cobbles side streets slippery, but the main roads were already busy with incoming traffic bound for the city. In the leather back seat of one vehicle was Henry van Wolf, the Director General of Europe's Space Agency, the ESA. The official car was equipped with a secure internet connection, so Henry was able to access his e-mail during the fifteen minute

journey to his office in central Paris, from his allotted apartment in Saint Germain. The inbox opened immediately as Henry placed his index finger on the finger-print pad. He immediately spotted the double priority mail by the flashing red envelope icon, it was from the duty officer in Italy. He tapped the screen and opened the message, read what Mario had written and opened the data package, he watched it for a full two minutes before he exclaimed, “Ouch Hell!” in his Netherlander's accent. The car pulled up outside the HQ building on Avenue Mario-Nikis, and Henry jumped out before the vehicle had actually stopped, then almost ran in through the front doors.

Henry's office was on the third floor and he decided to take the stairs rather than wait for the lift, where several people formed a queue, taking two or three steps at a time. His personal assistant was already at his desk and he stood as the DG burst in through the door, “George, get a Douglas Martins at NASA Sky-Watch, Washington on the telephone for me please as soon as you can, please.”

“Yes Sir,” said George, but his boss was already in his office. George took just four minutes to find Doug.

Henry reached for his telephone before it had finished buzzing, “Am I speaking to Mister Douglas Martins,” asked Henry.

“You are, and who is this please,” asked Doug.

“This is Henry van Wolf at the ESA, I have just received your package about the UFO discovery, is this

for real, I mean is there a possibility that the image we see here is just space gas or something, you know, like the Martian face.”

“No sir, it's real enough, we have several conformations now, and we think it is unoccupied, no emissions of any kind, we have had Hubble staring at it for hours now using every tool we have and there is nothing, it just seems dead.”

“Could it be a Trojan Horse, a trap for us do you think,” Henry asked.

“I suppose so, but we won't know unless we can get out there,” Doug admitted, “which is one of our more immediate problems, the most immediate is getting a media release out before the crazy press gets hold of it, to be honest I am surprised that no one has picked it up by this time, it is not exactly insignificant in the sky.”

“Right, I see you need two nominees for the consortium panel, which I can do today, then just let me know when the first meeting will be. For now I will transfer you to our press office and our Chief Press Officer, he is British and a very good writer, I will send the data to him straight away so as he can review it while you talk.”

“Thank you Mister van-Wolf,” Doug offered, “one more thing before I leave you in peace, I don't suppose you have any vehicle that is capable of getting out there do you? We have heard rumours that you have something in development.”

“I have heard the rumours too, but sad to say our deep space personnel vehicle has not made it to prototype as yet,” said Henry, “I am sorry to disappoint you. Don't

believe all you hear Mr. Martins. This is very exciting, so please keep us involved; I am transferring you now.”

“Mister Martins I assume, I am Jeremy Winston, senior press officer for ESA, I believe we have a media release to get together.”

“So it seems,” said Doug, “our President feels that it is a European discovery so the media release should come from Europe, and he is most insistent that Blake Northfield, get the credit for the discovery, his number is in the data-pack.”

“No problem Mr. Martins . . .”

“Please call me Doug.”

“As I was saying. . . Doug, that is no problem, I will speak to Mr. Northfield later; would you like to leave it with me for a couple of hours and I'll submit something that we can kick around, old boy?”

“Sure, that would be great, we'd like to get it out in time for the US second editions and morning news shows.”

“So that gives us about a hour and a half to get it agreed; we can do that, under the circumstances,” said Jeremy, “This is so exciting Doug, I think I will be covering this story myself; I will speak to you in just over an hour, I have your direct number and I will send the piece through over the secure connection.”

“Speak later,” said Doug.

Forty minutes later the computer station did its usual 'ping-pong' sound and Doug, who was now half asleep in his chair, was startled by the noise. He he struggled to

regain wakefulness and then pressed the return key, a document popped onto the screen, Doug rubbed his eyes and read:

ALIEN SHIP PARKS IN ORBIT

At around 10pm last night, a American man, now a naturalised British citizen, made the discovery of a lifetime. At about 10pm yesterday, Blake Northfield a resident of Coverack, in Cornwall happened to discover a giant space vehicle arrive and stop at about twice the distance of the Moon from Earth. Mr. Northfield, who is employed as Chief Engineer at the nearby Goonhilly Downs Earth Station, told me this morning that he noticed a flash in the night sky. Blake, being a keen amateur astronomer took pictures and video which were sent to the ESA who passed the information on to NASA in the United States. Both the ESA and NASA have confirmed the presence of the craft.

Both the ESA and NASA say that there seems to be no imminent danger as the craft seems to be dead in space. No emissions of any kind have been detected from the craft. NASA and the ESA are planning to investigate the craft and have set up a panel to manage this, and possibly reach the craft. The panel will include Blake Northfield and his wife

Joanne, who is an ancient languages expert, two ESA representatives, yet to be assigned, and two NASA personnel. It is hoped that mankind will be able to interact with any aliens on board; as it seems likely that the craft is abandoned, to be able to learn its secrets and back engineer its systems.

Both NASA and the ESA have asked me to stress that there is no cause for alarm at this time as the craft seems to be devoid of energy of any kind. This however is an exciting discovery for mankind that proves that we are at least not alone in this universe. I am sure we will be hearing much more in the near future.

ESA Media Centre, Paris, France.

Almost as Doug read the last word his telephone buzzed, as he expected it was Jeremy Winston, at the ESA, “Will that do you Doug,” asked Jeremy.

“I think that's just about right Jeremy, nice and low key with just the facts,” answered Doug.

“I have contacts here with the European media, including the mid-morning news programs,” said Jeremy, “I'll get this out here and I will leave it to you Yanks to feed the story to your people, you have a bit more time over there.”

“Thanks Jeremy,” said Doug, as he returned the phone to its cradle.

It was late on Saturday morning when the Northfields were awoken from their delayed sleep, Blake rolled over and grabbed the receiver, “Hel-lo,” he said, still half asleep.

“Is this Blake Northfield,” asked a refined British voice.

“Yes it is, who is this please?”

“This is the BBC news-room sir, I wondered if we could have a chat,” said Malcolm Thatcher.

“What does the BBC want to talk to me about,” Blake asked in a rather annoyed manner.

“I’m the Deputy Editor, my name is Malcolm Thatcher.

“Should that mean something to me?”

“Probably not Sir, but it’s about your discovery, the UFO,” continued Thatcher.

“What! Said Blake, now almost shouting in his sleep-deprivation temper, “It only happened last night how the hell did you find out so quickly?”

“There was a press-release from the ESA and NASA a few hours ago, may I call you Blake, sir?”

“Yea, sure, whatever,” Blake said as he started getting out of his bed.

“Who’s on the phone Dear,” Jo asked sleepily.

Blake put his hand over the mouth-piece and whispered,

“It’s the BBC, about last night.”

“Arrrh!,” uttered Jo as she pulled the bed-covers over her head and crashed back onto the pillow.

“Right,” said Blake as he descended the stairs toward the kitchen and a cup of coffee, “what do you want to know?”

“We have much of the factual stuff Blake, but we'd like to get you into a studio for the evening news, give us the personal view, sort of speak,” explained Thatcher.

“Look Malcolm, I have been up all night and I really don't feel like going anywhere today, and my wife certainly doesn't.”

“Well what about tomorrow Blake, I have a slot on our political magazine between eleven and twelve-thirty,” asked Thatcher.

“No can do,” stated Blake, I am speaking at church in the morning and that's my priority”, stated Blake rigidly. There was a silence for a while and Malcolm said, “Well can you get up to Truro, to BBC Radio Cornwall tomorrow evening, I could extend the local news bulletin, I am sure the other regions will want to take it up, considering the subject.”

“I guess, that's about an hour away, so unless something else comes up, it's do-able,” decided Blake.

“Please don't bother driving, we will send a car, and I will come down to Cornwall to meet you. Can I ask you one favour Blake, I am sure you will be approached by other news broadcasters, would you be kind enough to wait until after the BBC broadcast tomorrow before you agree to appear for anyone else?”

“You mean you want the exclusive,” stated Blake, “Well one thing I can guarantee you, I am not going to be doing any more of these than I really need to do, so yes, you can rely on that.”

“Thank you Blake, I appreciate that, the car will be with you around four tomorrow. Thank you again.”

At that moment Jo had walked into the kitchen, “Who appreciates what,” she asked, as Blake had put the phone on speaker whilst he started the coffee.

“BBC man, Malcolm Thatcher, we're on TV tomorrow night,” explained Blake.

“Oh no, this isn't going to turn into a media circus is it, said Jo, it was a rhetorical question so Blake never answered. “Just give me the coffee,” Jo said as she hugged Blake around the waist.

That Saturday the Northfield's telephone never stopped ringing, and by three in the afternoon, Blake decided to pull the BT plug from the socket. The TV were full of the story, somehow they had acquired pictures of both Blake and Jo, and had managed to corner Ronnie for an interview. Every news channel were running the video that Blake had shot through his telescope, along with dozens of artist's impressions of the craft and even the aliens, who they imagined had built such a machine. Thankfully no one had realised just how large the craft was, Blake thought that this fact alone, which had obviously been omitted from the press-release, would have the potential to start a panic. At around eight in the evening Blake's cell-phone vibrated off the coffee table, he checked the caller and saw it was Douglas Martins at NASA, so he answered the call.

“Hi Doug, manage to get some 'Z's'?”

“I got about six hours in the end,” said Doug, “I guess the media's been harassing you?”

“They sure have, I had to pull the phone, but I agreed to

do the BBC tomorrow evening,”

“OK that's fine, try to keep it low-key,” advised Doug.

“That's a given, I'm certainly not into hype of any kind,”

“Glad to hear it Blake, about your visit back to the old country,” Doug lead into a new subject, “I have a tentative date for the first meeting of the panel, for Wednesday next week, how does that suit? You'd fly out on Tuesday, from New-quay to Heath Roe and then Washington direct, car to meet you at Dulles, you'll be staying at the Hyatt.”

“Wow,” said Blake, “you ain't hanging about any are you.”

“No, the president has asked for all haste, and when the boss asks, the boss gets.”

“Hold a second,” Blake said to Doug, and then to Jo, “We OK to go to the states, leaving Tuesday?”

“Why not, college doesn't start for another four weeks yet, be a nice break,

“Hi Doug, yes that will be fine.”

“Right, I'll get you booked in to the Grand Hyatt on an open booking, we have reserved suites there all the time, Oh and your air-tickets will be waiting at the desk at New-quay, your flight is at seven in the morning and nine-twenty from Heath-Row, I have a car picking you up at five, you are on VIP tickets,” said Doug, “I will try to drop in on Tuesday night to brief you both, it'll be good to meet you both.”

“Thanks Doug, see you Tuesday; and by the way, it's not New-quay, here you put the syllables together as one word, Newquay, like a pet name for a nuclear bomb

'nucie' OK.”

“OK I'll remember that, see you Tuesday.”

On Sunday night the car picked them up as promised and whisked them off to Truro, the capital city of Cornwall. Technically Cornwall could have been a separate country, as it was a Duchy, meaning it had a Duke or Duchess as its monarch, which was always the eldest son of the King or Queen of Britain. Cornwall also had its own language, which thrilled Jo, and she made it her current hobby to learn the ancient tongue, which was closely related to Welsh. The ancient kingdom was called Kernow and the Cornish people are fearlessly defensive about their nationality. Truro was not always the capital of Cornwall, the town of Launceston, (called Lanson locally) closer to the modern Devonshire border once fulfilled that role until 1835 when Bodmin replaced it in the 19th century. The BBC studios were situated overlooking the tidal river tributary of the Fal River which made Truro a port. The BBC had extended the news by fifteen minutes and the interview was going live to the whole of Britain and many European countries. The interviewer, some Irish guy that had a physics degree, was respectful but asked a lot of impossible questions about little green men and what did Blake think powered the craft; all of which Blake could not answer. He asked Jo how she felt about being married to the man who made first contact, but wasn't really interested in her reply. Then he asked Blake to talk him through the video and stills that had been

released, which he did, and the interview was over.

The interview was a chore, Blake thought, but Malcolm seemed pleased with the way it went. Monday was a blur of activity of packing and tying up loose ends, both family, friends and at Goonhilly Downs. As he had promised his leave had been organised, but it took several hours to do a hand-over to Blake's second in command. At four AM, on Tuesday morning, a BMW ten series pulled up outside their house; the driver dealt with all the luggage and suddenly they were on their way. When they arrived at Newquay, Cornwall International, they collected their tickets and were ushered out to the aircraft ahead of other passengers. Blake noticed several people pointing and telling others something about them as they crossed the terminal building, it was something he had never liked. Once on the aircraft no one bothered them, and an hour later they were on approach to 'the Heath'. A nice lady from American Airlines met them at the jet-way and escorted them to the first class lounge. At eight-thirty the same lady collected them, and, bypassing customs, they were again taken to the waiting aircraft and seated in the first-class cabin. The flight was a direct one, on the new super-sonic Boeing 790, flying at eight-hundred and seventy miles an hour the flight had been cut from just under eight hours to just over four hours. They seemingly had arrived in Washington at the same time as they had left Newquay. After landing a stewardess came and asked if they would wait until all other passengers

had alighted the aircraft, a few minutes later they saw a car, an extended limo with NASA decals, drive up to the aircraft. The air-stewardess returned and asked Blake and Jo follow her, instead of using the jet-way they were taken down the crew steps to where Doug was waiting with an out-stretched hand.

“Welcome to Washington DC, and welcome home Blake,” he said.

“It's always good to come back for a while, let me introduce my wife, Joanne,” said Blake.

“Good to meet you Joanne,” said Doug as he shook hands.

“Just 'Jo' is fine Doug,” she said.

“Come on, your luggage is in the trunk and we have squared immigration and customs, so lets get you to your hotel and you can settle in,” they followed Doug into the car and the driver set off for the VIP gate and within thirty minutes, despite the rush hour traffic, they were on the George Washington Memorial Parkway. Another ten minutes they were pulling up outside of the Grand Hyatt Hotel. The driver hopped out to open the doors and an army of bell-boys descended on the car, taking the luggage in through the glass doors, another, more senior bell-hop took them to their suite in the express elevator. Their suite was on the tenth floor and Jo, never having been to Washington before ran to the nearest window, where she could see the top of the Washington Monument.

Doug, who had accompanied them to the room, said, “I

hope this suit is to your liking.”

“It's wonderful,” answered Jo.

“Well then, I will see you around eight tonight, dinner down-stairs, OK?”

“Oh, right” said Blake, “we'll get settled in then, but I warn you, I may not be able to keep awake by eight o'clock tonight.”

“Just get some sleep this afternoon, and you'll be fine,” advised Doug, “I do it all the time; see you later then.” and Doug closed the door.

“I'm hungry,” said Blake, “let's go for another breakfast.”

Jo had insisted on taking a taxi-tour of Washington after breakfast, and satisfied that she had at least seen the White House, they returned to their hotel to follow Doug's advice, and get some rest. The twin beds were extra comfortable and they both fell into a deep sleep. It was six-thirty when their telephone rang softly and Blake awoke, it was Doug, “Thought I'd give you a heads-up, I'll meet you in the 'Cure Bar & Bistro' in ninety minutes.”

“OK, thanks Doug,” Blake said and roused Jo, “come on sleepy head, it's time to get ready for dinner.”

“Already,” Jo moaned as she sat up, “woo this bed is so comfy.”

They showered, had two cups of coffee and dressed and then took the elevator to ground floor, where they followed the signs for the Bistro. It was ten before eight and Doug was already there, waving from a private

booth at the far end of the Bistro.

“Come my new friends, join me and order whatever you wish, can I recommend the Rib-eye steak here, believe me, they are the best in Washington, the President gets these sent over occasionally, and all the vegetables they serve were still growing this morning.”

“Great, I'm starving, we seemed to have skipped lunch in favour of sleep,” Blake laughed.

Doug smiled, “Still an American at heart Blake, the car will collect you two at ten tomorrow, the meeting is scheduled for ten-thirty at HQ, the two reps from your ESA arrived this afternoon and went straight to their individual beds, not met them yet. Just to warn you, my Director, Atherton Bennet, who, with me are NASA reps by the way, says that the President will be joining us for a short time, during the afternoon.”

“What's he like,” asked Jo.

“He's an OK guy, puts you at ease, real casual,” said Doug. The remainder of the dinner was taken up with eating and Doug briefing them on the needs and format of the panel, which he thought, would be converted to a committee, quite soon and get official status. At just after ten, the dinner ended and after a last brandy the three parted, thankfully, again, to their beds.

At ten on Wednesday morning the NASA car again appeared in the drive-through and Jo and her husband slid into the back seat. On the way the driver pointed out both Ford's theatre and the Smithsonian Institute. Thirteen minutes later they parked outside the

Impressive Headquarters Building of NASA and were shown to the 'small' conference-room, which in fact was as large as one of Jo's classrooms, but better equipped. There were already six people in the room, including Doug, so introductions were quickly made, by Doug. There was, the two from the ESA, a senior aeronautics engineer called Conrad Delph and an administrator by the name of Gunther Claus. Doug introduced his Director as Atherton Bennet, who seemed a nice person and who Jo could see immediately has great intelligence in his eyes. The other two were introduced as Will Jefferies from Boeing Aerospace Division and a strange man that was introduced as Nathan Gutierrez, from Space-X, both of whom had been brought in on secondment as advisors, without any executive rights. Neither of the two seemed very keen to be there, and the ESA reps, Jo felt, were just a bit 'stand-offish'. Introductions done Atherton, called everyone to order and said, "Lady and Gentlemen, I think we will start with a short tour of our main monitoring facility downstairs, there you will be able to view the latest feed from our unknown craft, you have all had the data package, so there are no surprises; if you will all follow me."

Atherton lead them out of the conference-room and into the elevator, he swiped his I.D card and said "Sky Watch Monitoring", and the elevator descended. The doors opened on another corridor and they turned left through a set of security doors guarded by a Marine, sat at a small table, who checked Atherton's I.D saluted and

opened the doors. In the room there were maybe twenty or so people, each surrounded with monitor screens, with one cinema-sized screen on one entire wall as the focal point to the half-circle of stations. Atherton led the group around the back of the stations along a raised dais, “What you see here is the live feed from some forty optical and radio telescopes around the Earth, images are grabbed once an hour from each feed and automatically compared with the last image, adjusting for Earth rotation. If there appears to be an anomaly, it gets flagged and sent to one of these stations for investigation and conformation. Most times, it's just an aircraft off course or some other explainable object, if it cannot be explained it goes to the front row stations and gets further attention. Unfortunately, we missed our visitor on Friday, mainly because at the time we were in daylight here and on radio input, to which it seems invisible, but we would have picked it up as soon as we went visual. We cover a three hour section of sky at a time. “Can some one put the live Hubble image on the main screen please?” he called out.

A huge image of the craft appeared on the wall screen, and immediately Jo asked if she could go down for a closer look, “sure said Atherton, have you spotted something?”

“Let me look,” answered Jo. She jumped the two steps to the lower level and made her way to the front screen and stared at the craft. “It's strange, I seem to recognise the symbols but I can't quite make it out,” she called

back; “it'll come to me when I'm able to see the whole thing.”

“Has any one any questions, at this time,” asked Atherton. No one did, so he led the group back out and up to the conference-room. In their absence a coffee machine had arrived with pastries and cookies, which Blake attacked with some enthusiasm. Name tags had also been placed around the table and Blake noticed that Atherton's announced that he was 'Temporary Chair'.

Atherton stood after a while, and started the session, “Just to say welcome, formally, and to say that please if you need anything NASA's facilities are at you disposal. Our first and, at this point in time, our only discussion point, is what to do next.” No one spoke, but just sat looking at each other.

Blake cleared his throat and said, ”Well we have to do something people, personally, I want to get out there, we can't make any contact with it, maybe they use an unknown form of communication, I don't know, but speaking as an engineer, I want to see inside.”

“So, how the hell do we get out there,” said Atherton.

“We have a spare Mars module in our secure hanger,” suggested Will Jefferies from Boeing, “will that be of any use?”

“Capacity, navigation, control,” asked Atherton.

“Four man module,” Will answered, “set program navigation with limited manoeuvring and control, and it was designed to be refuelled from pre-landed tanks, for the return leg.”

“Won't do Will, but thanks for the offer,” said Atherton, “Mr. Gutierrez, we haven't met before, has Space-X got anything that we could use?”

“Before I answer that, I need to know what the specs are.”

“I would have thought that was obvious, we need to take six to eight people, plus the pilot and co, out to four-forty k-mile mark, do some pretty serious manoeuvring to find an access point and be able to get back with a hard landing, safely.”

“That's a mighty tall order Director, it's the manoeuvring around something that size, that's the killer, most of our vehicles are narrow targeted, without much adjustment, is there no way of modifying the Mars orbiter?”

“None at all,” stated Will, “not without re-engineering the whole darn module, which would take years, and I guess we don't have years.”

“You are correct Will, the President wants all haste on this project, and in presidential language, that means months,” said Atherton, “what about the ESA, is there anything you have to help, Conrad?”

“Just on ze drawing board, I am afraid, we are about four years off from testing,” said Conrad Delph, the ESA engineer.

“The President doesn't want us to involve Russia, but as far as we know they have little to help us,” the Director said, “so it looks as if we are between a rock and a hard-place.”

“This may be a stupid question,” said Blake, but what

about one of the old Space Shuttles, you still have them on display, virtually intact, don't you.”

The Boeing guy slowly shook his head, “They are just museum pieces Mr. Northfield.”

“Sure, I understand that,” said Blake, but the question is how long would it take to bring one back to flight standard?”

Atherton looked at Will, “Hey, you'd best get the United Space Alliance back together, we were just one of the consortium. Firstly it depends how much they have been modified for display, two, how much deterioration has taken place, like seals, gaskets etc. three NASA completely dismantled the launch facility, at pad forty-six was it? I don't remember, which, one our Space-X friend here now uses.”

Atherton went into thinking mode, “Most of the concrete work is still there, I guess it would not take above six months to re-build the launch gantry.”

“That would leave us out in the cold,” complained Nathan Gutierrez,

“I'm afraid this project is bigger than Space-X Nathan, and the facility still belongs to NASA.”

“Where are they,” asked Blake, “the Shuttles.”

Atherton answered the question, “Spread across the country Blake, but we still have Atlantis at the Kennedy Space Centre in Florida, she's the least modified of them all I'd guess, I discount the others, just for the problem of getting them back. One's out west, one is in New York, that's Enterprise she never went into space, and the other is right here in the National Mall in Washington.

But Atlantis is the best bet if we went down that road. Besides the others have been seriously modified, either to get them into buildings or to manage visitors.”

“I don't see we have any option,” commented Blake, “we need to get some estimates and options from you guys,” as he looked at Will.

“Will, what are you doing tomorrow,” asked Atherton.

“I guess I was travelling back, am I wrong?”

“If I can get someone from Lockheed Martin, to come and someone from the system's people, can we get down to Kennedy and do a quick inspection of Atlantis,” asked Atherton.

“Yea, I guess, let me touch base with the bosses over lunch and I'll clear it,” said Will from Boeing, “shall I try to get some of the guys who worked on the Shuttle down there as well?”

“That sure would be an advantage,” said Atherton, “we seem to be starting to move here people, fancy a couple of days in Florida Blake, Jo?”

Nathan Gutierrez was looking bored and decidedly uncomfortable as he sat twiddling a pen between his fingers, Doug must have noticed this and interjected, “Is there anything you and Space-X can contribute here Nathan?”

“Sounds like you guys have everything sewn up, and we have nothing that can help with getting you there, maybe, when you get out there and get in, we could help then, so if you don't mind, I think I'll make a get-away,” agreed Nathan, taking the hint from Doug.

Further, more detailed discussions continued for the next hour or so, until someone knocked on the door to say that lunch was ready in the executive dining room, “Wonderful,” exclaimed Blake. “You and your stomach,” said Jo.

The lunch was as good as anything one would have expected from a top restaurant and fully took them ninety minutes to finish, after which they made their way back to the conference-room. The afternoon was mainly taken up with discussions about possibilities, and contingencies as to various eventualities. But the main challenge was staying awake after such a big lunch. At just after three in the afternoon the door again opened and two men in dark suits, whose eyes took in everything in the room in one second flat, entered. The first man, being satisfied with what he saw, announced, “Lady and gentlemen the President of the United States.” and Oliver Bose stepped into the room. Everyone immediately stood but Bose waved then to sit and took a seat next to Blake and Jo. Atherton introduced the people from the ESA and Will Jefferies. The President interrupted and said, “I think we have met before Will, how are you.”

“Well Sir, it's good to meet you again,” he answered.

“And this must be the now famous Blake and Joanne Northfield, our intrepid discovers,” continued the President without a pause, “I hope you had a good trip over here at such short notice.”

“We did Sir, thank you, thanks to NASA,” said Blake, as

Jo leaned over to shake Bose's hand.

“I just wanted to make contact with you guys and to let you know that the United States is completely behind you, but we are not going to take over here,” stated Bose, “this is a European discovery and we will be looking to you Blake, as the discoverer to take some lead in what happens, and I have had a similar commitment from the ESA this morning. This, to my mind is the discovery of all time, and of course it doesn't hurt me that it happened during my administration,” the President laughed. “I have spoken to Congress and we have virtually an open budget on this, the ESA has not got that sort of money, but I am collecting commitments from the EU and your own UK. I have to impress, we cannot afford to mess this up people, we may never get another chance here, whether it's making first contact or getting hold of some new technology for the benefit of humanity.”

The President stayed about fifteen minutes, chatted to everyone as if they were personal friends and left in the same crisp way of his arrival. Atherton was immediately on the telephone making calls, whilst the others chatted generally. When he had finished the calls he returned to the table and announced, “That's all set, we have a ride to Kennedy in the morning from Andrews Air Force Base, Blake, and Jo, Doug will meet you at your hotel helipad on the roof at nine, that will take you to Andrews, and we should be in Kennedy for lunch, if you'd like to join us as well, Will, Conrad and Gunther,

the Northfields are at the Grand Hyatt, so be there before nine, does that suit you?"

"Sure, thanks," said Will, and the two ESA men merely nodded assent.

"I think that will do for our first session, so we will take a break here and I will see you all in the morning, as you Brits say, 'bright-eyed and bushy tailed'." Every one wished each other a good night and the group broke up' Doug approached Blake and Jo and asked them to follow him down to the car, on which he was getting a lift home, "I have to spend some time with the family," he laughed," during the slightly longer journey, due to traffic, Doug asked if they had visited Kennedy,

"Yea, once, we made a visit, with the kids, when we were visiting my folks some twelve years back, there was a thunder-storm and they wouldn't let us go inside the Shuttle, th kids were real disappointed."

"That's Florida for you," said Doug.

"Then we had to take shelter in the Space Camp car park because he couldn't see to drive in the rain, course Blake needed the loo, and they invited us all inside," explained Jo.

"What's a 'loo'," asked Doug.

"Sorry, the toilet," she answered.

"The 'jon' she means," corrected Blake.

"Right," nodded Dud, "you Brits have your own language, don't you."

"Well it was ours to start with, that's why it called English," countered Jo

"I guess so," said Doug, "I'll consider myself

reprimanded, mam.”

As they got out of the car, Doug leaned over and said, ”By the way, don't have too much breakfast tomorrow, the helicopter rides are usually a bit bumpy,” he shut the door as he waved,” Later!”

Thursday morning was hot and sticky in Washington as the Bell-hop opened the door to the helipad, it was ten before nine and only Doug had arrived, the Marine helicopter was sat waiting with its engines off reflecting the hazy sun, and there was the smell of turbine gas in the air. They stood in the open air and chatted whilst they waited, Will was next to arrive and greeted them with a friendly hello. At five after nine the ESA guys had still not arrived and Blake could see Doug getting anxious, he moved out of ear-shot and made a call, when he came back he told them that they were on the way, “Everyone under-estimates the Washington traffic.” At nine-fifteen the two burst through the helipad door panting for breath and Doug quickly ushered them into the aircraft. The co-pilot radioed through to warn Andrews that they were airborne and to clear their flight plan, the machine hovered for a minute then made off to the south east. The helicopter landed some fifty yards from a sleek jet and they and their light luggage were transferred to the jet, and within minutes of getting belted in, by a corporal, the jet made off for the runway, gained speed, rotated and they were in the air again, and flying south. Eighty minutes later they were landing at Canaveral Air Force Station, where yet another car was

waiting, which took them to a restaurant in Kennedy Visitor Centre. “They're closing the Atlantis exhibit at two, so we have free run for the next few days,” said Doug, “when are your guys getting here Will?”
“Some time this afternoon, there's a transport coming down, with something, they will be on that.”

Lunch finished, they braved the Florida heat to walk across to Atlantis, the last tourists were just leaving the Shuttle, and the 'Closed for Maintenance' signs were up at the entrance. Will, who had worked on the Shuttle himself, lost no time in examining the spacecraft, as the others wandered around just looking randomly. At just after three a voice called, “Will, are you in here?”

“In the cargo bay Josh,” Will called back. It seemed that the Boeing team had arrived. They had brought tools and equipment with them, and they got stripped off and dove into the bowels of the Shuttle.

“I think we can leave these guys to it for a while, they seem to know what they are doing,” Doug said to the rest of the group who were kicking their heels after the first two hours, “Why don't I take you on a special tour, that most people don't get to see?”

“That sounds good to me,” said Jo, a little too quickly.

The quiet man from the ESA, Gunther, was the first to decline, “I sink zat I vill just stay here, Danka,” he said, *Maybe it was his English that kept him quiet*, thought Doug.

“I will stay also,” said Conrad.

“So Jo and Blake, guided by Doug set off on the VIP

tour of Kennedy, grabbing a golf cart Doug soon took them through two security gates and into the heart of the NASA complex.

NASA had booked the whole group in to the 'Residence Inn' in Cocoa Beach close the visitor centre and they all met up in the restaurant that evening; except for the dower Gunther, the mood was good and optimistic. The drinks arrived at the table, cold beers now, to go with the heat, as Doug asked Will for his initial thoughts on the Atlantis Shuttle. "To be honest Doug, I can't believe how well Kennedy staff have maintained the craft, as far as I can see there are no new holes for cables," said Will, "and that's important for the integrity of the air-frame."

"What of the seals Will," asked Doug.

John came into the conversation at this point, "Again," said John, "all of the seals that I have inspected so far, and we have hundreds to go, have all been lubricated correctly by the maintenance teams, although there are a few that will need replacing, simply because of service wear, or ones that I would not trust to space. I think that our Rockwell plant still has at least one full set of spares at Palmdale in California. We will need to contact them to be sure, I'll do that tomorrow."

"Thanks John," said Will, "Norm' what about systems?"

Norman Lucas took out a note pad and opened it, "As far as I can see most of the systems are still there, or have been adapted for extra lighting and audio for visitors, and we may have a big problem reinstating those, but that can be done, given time."

“The visitor centre was given instructions to keep Atlantis as original as possible for future generations, student study, that sort of thing,” commented Doug.

“What about the engines,” asked Blake.

“Gone Blake,” said Will, “they were taken out when they were decommissioned and used for testing. This was the problem I was about to come to.”

“Can they be replaced?” asked Blake again.

“That is very possible, they were a standard engine in their day and we are still using them, it was the RS-25D and they are still used in the seventy metric ton Space Launch System (SLS). The SLS, expendable versions of the engine are used in a cluster of four to provide thrust for the launch vehicle’s core stage, so there is every chance we can get our engines. I was intending to ring Aerojet Rocketdyne, the makers, in the morning.”

“Do you think the RS-25D will be enough to get us out to half a million miles,” asked Conrad.

Norman said, “I was thinking about that, we four had a chat earlier, and if we are installing the latest RS-25's we may be able to upgrade.”

“What do you mean,” asked Doug.

“Well the SLS uses this cluster of four engines, we know the Shuttle wont take the four, but it could accommodate three of the 'E' version,” said Norman, it's smaller and more efficient on fuel, but three will use more of the liquid gold, we have to do the maths’.”

“We'll leave that to you engineers,” said Doug. The dinner finished and the group broke up, some to their

rooms and some to the bar. Doug, Blake and Will opted for the bar. “I spoke to Atherton before dinner,” said Doug, “he can't make it until tomorrow evening, but he wants me to put a proposition to you Blake.”

“What sort of proposition?”

“He wants you to consider coming on board, being the chair of this little group,” said Doug, the

President thinks you are the ideal guy, you have dual nationality, US and UK, you're an engineer and you have common-sense Blake, your the go-between, between NASA and the ESA, and the discoverer, for which you have gained a certain profile.”

“I'm not sure,” said Blake, “I have my job back in Cornwall, and I enjoy it, our life is back there now.”

“Look, talk it over with Jo and have a good think,” Doug continued, “You'd be employed by NASA, who pays well, and I have no doubt that it will make you financially independent for the rest of your life, we have some great benefit packages. Atherton and I can't be involved fully, we are Sky-Watch, but you will come under Atherton as Director. What do you think Will,” Doug asked.

“Sounds like a plan to me,” Will commented, “after all, this is that once a millennium event buddy.”

“I had best go now and talk to Jo, I can see this being a long conversation,” Blake said as he finished his bourbon on ice. His mind was spinning as he exited the elevator and walked to their room. The conversation was no where as long as he had expected, after Blake

had explained the offer, it took Jo just seconds to fling her arms around his neck and whisper in his ear.

“Say yes.”

Blake took his wife and gently pushed her away whilst keeping hold of her waist, he said, “One thing Jo, when this is over, we *are* going back to Cornwall, I don't want to live here for the rest of our lives.”

“OK,” said Jo.

Chapter 3

Out of Mothballs

Friday morning was overcast but the heat had not disappeared, Blake and Jo awoke at eight when their alarm call came through. They arrived in the dining room thirty minutes later to find a note from Doug, which read:

Blake/Jo

There seems little for you two to do today, we have already left for Kennedy and NASA offices for telephone calls etc. The engineers will be crawling all over Atlantis today, and you are not insured to do that, yet! I have placed a car at your disposal, the driver will be in the garage from 10pm, he will take you where ever you wish to go, shopping, sight seeing, (Disney's only ninety minutes away, and the

Florida Mall in Orlando is great), do what you want. Atherton will be here for dinner, so if you can be back here for eight, please. I hope you two have talked things through and made the right decision.

See you tonight, your friend,
Doug.

So the pair set off for a day relaxation whilst the remainder of the team worked in the steamy heat at Kennedy. Will and Doug went straight to the NASA offices overlooking the visitor centre, whilst the other three engineers made for Atlantis. Will spent almost four hours on the phones, and after the last call he found Doug was still working the phones. Will took a seat by the utility metal desk where Doug was on the phone, and waited reading his notes on a tablet device. Almost a hour and three calls later Doug replaced the receiver and looked up, "Lunch Will?" The two walked in silence to the employee's restaurant, they each selected their cold lunch and took seats, joining the engineers who were already finishing their lunch. "So, what news Will?"

"I have mostly good news actually, but I want to know

how you three are doing, answered Will.

John scooped the last of a portion of ice cream into his mouth and and looked up at Will, “I am still amazed at the condition of Atlantis, she's pristine, if we can get a standard turn-around kit, get the cabling sorted and the engines in, she'll fly, any thing we are missing we may be able to cannibalise the other three Shuttles.”

“That's great news, better than I expected,” said Doug, and Will nodded.

“We'll be getting back to the tin-can now, we have started making an up-grade list, parts, jobs, to do lists, etc.” said John. The three left their seats, saying that they would see everyone later.

Once they had left, and in-between eating, Will was first to open his tablet-device and started to tell Doug of the progress he'd made, “The big one first,” Will said, “Aerojet Rocketdyne have agreed to *give* us, yes that's a donation, give us three RS-25E engines, they are not new, but they have only been on test programs, they will 're-con' the engines for us and help to fit them, even with the modifications, if we need to.”

“That's wonderful Will, well done,” said Doug.

“There's more,” laughed Will, “I have located a company called 'Space Systems' in Britain who say they can supply, and at cost, all the engine control systems we need as soon as we need it, someone will be over next week and visit Rocketdyne to start the design work. I have also located two external fuel tanks at Ocean Salvage items, but I am assured that there is no damage.”

“That's lucky,” said Doug, I never thought about those

tanks, we've been so focused on the Shuttle itself, and of course we'll have no problem with the solid fuel strap-on boosters, NASA has a stock of those we are still using. Anything else?"

"Sure is, I phoned a contact at Rockwell division, they have a full turn-around kit, and possibly enough to get three together, however," Will pushed on, "in an abandoned hanger, one that's used for storing unwanted things, my friend remembered seeing more Shuttle cast-offs. He went off and checked and rang me back from the hanger, hidden in there is an experimental supplementary personnel cabin, and also some cryo-tanks."

"Sorry, you will have to explain."

"When the ISS started Rockwell wasn't sure about how many astronauts would need to be carried up to the station, I remember we started looking at how we could accommodate more people and we built an extra cabin that fitted in the forward section of the payload bay, bolts right into the bulkhead. We knew the extra weight would be an issue so we also designed extra fuel tanks, cryo-tanks to hold extra LO and hydrogen. It doesn't leave much room in the bay but they may be useful, I have put my name on both and Rockwell are going to dig them out."

"We are very grateful Will, you have worked a few miracles today," said Doug. "I can't claim so much success, but I have located all the original drawings and specifications for the launch facility, and I have engaged,

tentatively, a construction company to rebuild 46b. They say they can manage it in about three to four months. I also have the people on board who built and dismantled the gantry tower, believe it or not, they kept some of it for display, like the lift and mechanism. That last call was to NASA Operations, and I have to say that was the most difficult, but I got them to check with the President's office and that changed everything, we are officially a mission, these missions are named alphabetically, and we are 'Mission Reaper', I think it fits, don't you?"

The team came back together just before eight that evening and dinner was taken up with a full de-brief from everyone, even Jo told of her shopping trip to Orlando. Atherton had arrived during the afternoon and had a grin on his face, after being briefed by Doug, he was obviously pleased with the results of the two day's work. Between the main course and the sweet, Atherton asked Blake if he could have a word, and the two slipped into the bar. "Have you had a chance to think over my offer of leading the team Blake?"

"Yes," said Blake, "Jo and I talked about it last evening, Jo is more for it than I was, but I guess it's an opportunity that will never come again; to make first contact with another civilisation. So, yes I'd like to accept your offer."

"That's terrific Blake. You will have a great deal of autonomy, and you will report to Doug or myself, mainly Doug I imagine," Atherton told Blake, "I'm real glad that

you and Doug have hit it off, that make things easy, NASA has always been a family and values relationships.”

“Good to know,” said Blake, “we'll need to go back to the UK for a while soon to tie things up over there, the house, Jo's job, paying providers and all.”

“That's fine Blake, let me know when and I'll organise a Gulf-stream to take you there and back, any time, believe me it's more convenient than schedule airlines,” Atherton offered, “I believe there is a British Navy base real close to you.”

“Yes, it's Caldrose,” said Blake with some amazement, “they allow you to use that?”

“Sure, NASA can use any NATO base in the world,” Atherton informed him. “Next week, I will need to go over some stuff with you, sign some papers and talk about our budget, that Congress is approving for us tomorrow.”

“When Blake and Jo arrived at Atlantis the following day they found a team of contractors with jack-hammers ripping up the concrete around the undercarriage of the vehicle. Atlantis' wheels had been removed on decommission and anchors fitted to the struts, which were encased in concrete against the hurricanes and tropical storms, that Florida sometimes suffered. At eleven a big truck arrived, with an on-board winch, and unloaded the Shuttle's wheels. By lunch time Atlantis was free again from her manacles. The afternoon saw the Shuttle winched up, the anchor struts removed and

replaced by the newly arrived wheels. The work team fitted sheathed cables over the craft and fixed them to the ground, as a precaution. Sunday nothing happened, Blake and Jo found a small chapel in Cocoa Beech and had a nice time, they were again surprised that several people recognised Blake from the TV news. It seemed that coverage had been continuous for almost a week, but neither Blake nor Jo had seen any of the reports. Several of the congregation were keen to ask Blake how the discovery had affected his faith, but Blake told them all that it had not made any difference at all. The pastor asked if they would be back in Florida, and if so would he, at some future date, speak to the church, Blake agreed and he exchanged telephone numbers. The couple spent the afternoon on the beach relaxing and swimming in the Atlantic

Monday Blake and Jo arrived at the Atlantis site in mid morning and found a crowd barring the way, many of the tourists were upset about the exhibit being closed and were grumbling. The couple started the push their way through the crowd and thanks to the NASA Security Officers, who recognised the passes that Doug had provided, managed to get through the tourists and the temporary barrier. John was there and seemed to have taken charge, “Hi Jo, Blake, good weekend,” he asked. Atlantis was suspended about twenty foot from the ground by a series of slings and several people were holding cables to keep her steady.

“What's happening,” asked Blake.

“We're just waiting for the low-loader trailer to come across so we can load her up,” explained John, “Then we will prepare her over-night for the journey and first thing, hopefully before dawn, she starts her journey.”

“Where are you taking her,” asked Jo.

“Back to her birth place at Palmdale,” John explained, “and by road; we no longer have the seven-forty-seven, so it's congestion all the way to California. It's the only place we have the facilities.”

“We have to get across to the Air Force Base to fly back to Washington now, but we wanted to see where things were up to,” said Blake, “No doubt we will be seeing you again soon.”

“Awe yes, I forgot, you're the boss now, congratulations Blake,” offered John.

Once back in Washington the car took them directly to the Grand Hyatt Hotel again, where there was a message waiting for them to ring Atherton or Doug. At four in the afternoon Atherton was in a meeting so Blake rang Doug's number. “Hi Blake,” Doug answered, “thanks for ringing, Atherton wants to meet with us both in the morning, the car will be there for nine, we've also made arrangements for Jo to visit the Smithsonian tomorrow, and to have full access to the library and archive, the Director thought Jo may like to make a start researching that part symbol we can see on the alien craft.” Blake asked Jo, who indicated that she would appreciate that and stop her feeling like a spare part. “I'll confirm that with the Smithsonian then,” said Doug, “I'll see you

tomorrow then,” and Doug was gone. The following day the car arrived as promised and dropped Jo off at the museum, then continued to NASA headquarters, where a US Marine escorted Blake to Atherton's office. Atherton jumped to his feet as Blake walked in and welcomed him with a handshake.

“Firstly,” said Atherton, “we need you to sign these few forms, this is your contract to NASA, as you can see it is open-ended, but has a blank space for the termination. This is the most important one, just fill in your international bank details, so that we can pay you,” Blake signed that one as well, “then we have the Non-disclosure agreement, it covers anything deemed a secret other than that which is released to the public domain. NASA is a very open organisation, because we are owned by the American public, almost everything we do is open to scrutiny, so I doubt you will have any issues.” Atherton continued, “Next of kin forms, and lastly use of NASA resources, which limits any personal use of NASA resources.”

Having obtained signatures on all the forms, Atherton presented Blake with his staff badge and pass, “This will get you into every area of NASA other than those that are restricted at level three, either because of sensitive activities or for health and safety reasons.”

“Impressive,” said Blake.

“I am sorry to do this on your first day, but I am afraid we now have to go through the budget for Mission Reaper.” The remainder of the day was spent on the

spreadsheets that the Congressional money-men had sent across that very morning.

“What's the bottom line,” asked Blake, Atherton pointed to a figure at the foot of the very large data file, with his pen.”

Blake whistled, and said “Wow.”

Later that afternoon the car collected Blake from the garage station and pulled away, “Your wife is already back at your hotel Sir,” said the driver, “I dropped her off just after three.”

The next four days were consumed with endless introductions to both NASA people and others, visits to the Boeing, and Lockheed plants, Palmdale, where the Atlantis Shuttle would eventually arrive, and several other visits to potential suppliers. Blake and Jo spent the weekend as guests, with Doug and his wife, on a private Yacht on Chesapeake Bay, the yacht was that property of the NASA Director Nelson Hargrove. The captain had continually pointed out the places of interest along the coast and the crew saw to their every need, including a five star selection of food. It was an ideal weekend. Blake and Jo were due to fly back to Cornwall on Monday afternoon after a final meeting with Doug and Atherton at the headquarters building.

When the couple arrived at NASA on Monday they found the main entrance surrounded by a crowd of people, some waved banners and many were shouting slogans they they could not quite make out. Blake saw

that there were two separate groups here, some held banners appealing to the US Government to, “Nuke the Aliens” whilst other banners proclaimed, “Make Peace.” One of the mob saw Blake, and obviously recognised him, something that he shared with others, the result was that the car was attacked by protesters beating the car with their placards. The car managed to nudge its way through to the secure garage and the elevator took then up to the Sky-Watch main office, which Blake regarded as Doug's office. “You've seen the mob downstairs,” asked Doug.

“Yep. What's that all about?”

“It started over the weekend it seems,” said Doug, starting to explain, “one of our esteemed generals went on the weekend news and expressed a very personal opinion about what was going on. Do you guys never watch TV?”

“Very rarely,” said Jo, “we usually have the Times newspaper delivered at home, as well as the Helston Packet, a local newspaper, and we only watch TV when there is something specific we want to watch. We believe that TV stops communication between people.”

“Right,” said Doug with strange look, “General Croft McFarland, member of the Joint Chiefs and to be honest a real pain in the butt, he was a left-over from two previous administrations. The chief came close to sacking him last year over an issue in the Middle-east. Very much a warmonger that has a military solution to every problem, even domestic.”

“So what did this general say,” asked Blake.

“The gist was that any race that just parked a spacecraft in our space and just sat there watching us in full view was up to no good,” explained Doug, “and we should expect an attack at any time. He urged the people to tell the president that they wanted this craft destroyed immediately. The anchor-woman did her best to make the point that we had no missiles that were capable of reaching four-hundred thousand miles and that if the civilisation that could build something like this craft, would no doubt be capable of warding off any attack from us, which would be considered provocation.”

“Will he cause problems for us, do you think”, asked Blake.

“Maybe, he seems to be gathering a following, but we'll cross that bridge when it becomes a problem,” advised Doug, “so let's get on with tying things up before you leave for little ole England.”

The meeting over, the Northfield's car slowly nudged its way through an even bigger crowd than before, the 'Peace' faction seemed to have left, leaving the area to the anti-alien people. Once through the mob of protesters the car sped out of Washington toward Andrews Air Force Base, and their awaiting Jetstream VII. After some delay over air traffic control, the jet took off just after four in the afternoon, Jo found that there was a bedroom cabin between the main cabin and the flight-deck and after dinner they decided to turn in, as an attempt to defeat the jet-lag that was so much worse travelling east than it was the other way. At just

after six in the morning British summer time there was a discrete knock on the cabin door, Jo awoke first and tried to shout, “Yes,” she managed to say.

“We will be landing at Caldrose air-base in about fifteen minutes Ma'am, I need you and Mr. Northfield to be seated and strapped in for the landing,” said the co-pilot, “there's no hurry to disembark after we land.”

“OK, thank you,” answered Jo as Blake was struggling to come to full consciousness. The two dressed in the robes from the locker, and took up seats in the main cabin where they were buckled in. Blake looked out of the window as the plane skipped over the last of the Atlantic Ocean and then into the English channel, then, as it swung north he spotted their house on the cliff-top below. By that time the Jetstream was on final approach to Caldrose Naval Air Station and seconds later they heard the undercarriage descend, followed seconds later by the wheels touching the runway with a bump. An hour later, after breakfast on the plane, a local taxi picked them up from the bottom of the plane's steps and drove the fifteen minute rout to their house.

On Friday of that week Blake received word that Atlantis had arrived in Palmdale and that work had started on the modifications and upgrades, he was to get a daily report of the Shuttle's progress. After the U.S. Cornwall was a haven of tranquillity for those three weeks, whilst all the loose ends were tied up. A local company was engaged to secure, pack and seal the house; at Goonhilly Downs, Blake spent three days training and briefing his

replacement, he was pleased to find that his old assistant had obtained the post, so the handover was brief. Jo also spent several days at Truro College, with her department staff and making some fine tuning to the syllabus for the following year. In addition to the tasks that they needed to achieve, they also received several invitations to speak at various locations some local but some in other parts of the country. Half way through the first week they received a message from Caldrose that their aircraft had been recalled to the U.S. Bake spoke at their local church, St. Peters on the Sunday morning and at the sister church of St. Keverne in the evening. St. Keverne village was a sister village to Coverack, and was set back about a mile from the coast. One further TV appearance from Truro, finished Blake's media carrier, or so he claimed. During the third week the Jetstream returned to pick them up, and on the Saturday morning the jet took off again heading west to Washington.

At Andrews Air Force Base, a car was waiting, with a fuel bowser, Doug jumped out of the car and came aboard the aircraft, "You two stay where you are, you're flying on to Palmdale, I want you to get immersed in the Shuttle referb," Doug announced. "Get to know your team and learn as much as you can about Atlantis." They enjoyed a drink together whilst the Bowser refuelled the Jetstream, and Doug left them seconds before the jet took off again, this time heading for California. An hour before they landed at Palmdale, the captain appeared, "Just to let you know Sir, we have

some trouble at the Boeing plant with demonstrators, I am told that nothing is going in by road, there are so many people demonstrating.” As the aircraft flew into the Plant it was early evening and they saw the thousands of people amassed around the main gate, which from above looked rather like an ants nest. Palmdale, or Air Force Plant 42, is a classified facility of the US Government set in the south-western Mojave, in the Antelope Valley, approximately sixty miles from Los Angeles. The Jetstream taxied directly into a hangar before it stopped, the boarding steps were lowered and their friend John Armstrong climbed on board, “Hi Guys.”

After dressing in more suitable clothes for the desert climate, the two emerged from the bedroom and greeted John. “Things are well under way and going well,” said John, “come and look.” the three went down the steps, and there right beside their jet was Atlantis, the paint finish had been taken back to a base coat so she was grey. The heat dissipating tiles had been removed and technicians swarmed all over the Shuttle carrying out their duties. The window glass had been removed, and the engine bays and payload doors were open and empty, making Atlantis look like some giant insect.

“Are we on schedule,” Blake asked.

“We are a bit ahead if anything,” said John, “but we have a long way to go, getting the new engines designed and fitted will be the biggest and longest job. We have a team of designers standing by for when we get the mount

details or the engines themselves.”

“By my reckoning we have five months left John, by the President's executive order and the budget limitations, said Blake, “will we make it?”

“I estimate, if we have the engines here in the next month, Atlantis will be ready in about four months, maybe earlier.” advised John.

Blake and Jo spent the following three months shuttling back and forth between Palmdale and their hotel in Los Angeles, the time was broken by days sampling the L.A. lifestyle, several visits to the beach, and shopping trips for Jo to the many malls and shopping areas, including Rodeo Drive. Nights out to both the theatre and as a special treat, Atherton had sent them tickets for a film premier, where they were treated like film-stars, as the couple's fame had spread. Blake also visited the Griffith Park Observatory, whilst Jo was in one of her shopping trips, and he was treated to a tour by the observatory's director herself. Three weeks after their arrival the three engines had arrived and the designers at Palmdale started on the design of the modifications for Atlantis. It was a surprise when they found that Space Launch System had configured the RS-25E engines in a yoke, which make the designer's job much easier. All that was needed was to design the mounts for the yoke. A company by the name of Aero-Cables Inc, completely replaced the wiring loom, Blake thought this was best as he had experience with how cables deteriorate over time and cause problems. The personnel module and cyro-

tanks in the payload bay were installed and an engine test was completed at the end of the third month. Just three months and one week after their arrival at Palmdale, John Armstrong greeted them at the helicopter with smiles and said, “She’s finished, all we have to do now is run final diagnostics.”

“What about a pressure test,” asked Blake.

“The fuel-system’s been done and the extra accommodation module’s been tested,” answered John, and all systems are green.”

“What I’m talking about is a full-body pressure test, we seal Atlantis up and pump her cabin pressure up to four bar, leave her a couple of days and see if there is the tiniest leak,” suggested Blake, “give her thirty-six hours, maybe.”

“Each cabin has been tested, Blake” said John, “but you’re the boss, we can get onto that straight away.” Atlantis was duly sealed and a test compressor connected to the ATP and four bar, or atmospheres of air pumped into her. The test started at mid-day and before Blake and Jo went back to their hotel at fifteen after five, they checked the pressure. In just over five hours the pressure had dropped zero-point one-four five bar. There was obviously a serious leak, the remote smoke marker, a smoky, was triggered and smoke, almost immediately, started to issue from the seal between the main fuselage and the personnel module in the pay-load bay. “What on Earth made you ask for that test Blake,” asked John.

“I don’t really know, it was a thought that came to me

last night,” explained Blake, “I really can't explain it.”

“Well thank God you did,” said John.

“Yes indeed,” said Blake, “you are sure right about that.”

By the following day the seal had been replaced and another test started, and thirty-six hours later another test showed that the Atlantis was free of leaks. The problem now was about transporting the Shuttle back to Florida. It took two days to prepare Atlantis and get it onto the same trailer that had brought her to Palmdale. The three were there to see the Shuttle slowly leave the plant via a little used gate to the plant, whilst the police tried to clear the main gate of protesters, as a diversion. Only a hand-full of protesters made it to the back gate as Atlantis pulled onto a perimeter road, made it to the highway, and then started its journey to the Cape. With a sigh of relief they turned and started to walk to the waiting helicopter, as John gave Jo a farewell hug, there was a distant thud of an explosion. The three twisted around in time to see a plume of smoke rising from the direction of the highway, just where Atlantis should be. Blake shouted to them to get into the aircraft, and told the pilot, “Get us over there as quickly as you can. The pilot started his engines and it seemed to take for ever to get the engines up to temperature and speed, at last it rose into the air and could see hundreds of Boeing workers running toward the security gate.

Their hearts were in their mouths as the chopper approached the Shuttle, they hovered over Atlantis and

were relieved to see that it was the traction unit that had caught most of the blast. They landed to the side of the highway just as a cavalcade of police-cars appeared in the distance, streaming up the carriageway toward the Shuttle, with their sirens wailing. Blake was first out of the helicopter, scrabbling up onto the tarmac he ran to the cab, which was a mangled wreck, sadly the driver and his assistant were both dead. As Blake climbed down from the wrecked cab he caught sight of a figure dashing around the back of the low-loader trailer, something told him that the figure meant harm and without thinking, he dashed after the person. When he rounded the trailer, there was no sign of anyone, he stopped to think and leaned against the trailer; then he heard a low noise under the tarp that covered the Shuttle. Blake tried looking under the covering but could see nothing, he moved to where the trailer was lower to the ground and climbed under the tarpaulin. He moved to where the wings joined the body and stopped, in the gloom he spotted a small red light flash under the cockpit. Moving as quickly as he could in the maze of ropes and straps, he made for where he had seen the red light flash, there dressed entirely in black was the figure, trying to attach something to the side of the fuselage. Guessing it was another bomb, Blake charged, just as the saboteur made their get-away. He noticed the flashing numbers as he passed the bomb and chased after the bomber. Two policemen arrived as Blake jumped down from the trailer, and with guns pointed at him, he was told to 'freeze', Blake showed his NASA I.D. and told

them that there was a bomb on the Shuttle, then pointed at the receding bomber in black, "That's the bomber," he shouted. The police holstered their guns and and both ran off after the distant running form.

It was obvious that the police had chosen the least dangerous action and had decided to chase the perpetrator rather than deal with the bomb. Blake had a moment of indecision, before he dove back under the tarpaulin and made for the bomb. When he arrived at the side of Atlantis there were just forty-three seconds left on the detonator, he grabbed the package and pulled it, it was stuck fast to the skin of the Shuttle. Blake looked around and saw a strap-winding handle on the deck of the trailer, he grabbed it and found that there were no thin edges that he could use to prise the bomb from the skin. There was only one chance left, Blake swung the winder like an axe and hit the package with all the strength he could muster, fortunately the bomb parted from the Shuttle and fell to the deck. A quick look told Blake that there were only twenty-one seconds left before he and the Shuttle would be blown to bits. The bomb in hand Blake made it to the side of the trailer, jumped down to the highway and threw the bomb with every last bit of strength of his shaking body. Blake dove under and behind one of the trailer's large wheels just as the bomb exploded in mid-air, he collapsed where he was as the adrenalin ceased it's production. He had not seen the police car pulling-up behind the unit, but seconds later he saw two uniformed legs the other side of

the wheel and a voice asking, “You OK buddy?”

Blake climbed out from under the trailer with the assistance of the cop, “Yes I guess so, just a bit shaky,” Blake answered.

“You sure had a close call there,” another cop said, “I guess we're not needed now, we're the bomb unit, by the way.”

Blake laughed, “Just a few minutes too late.”

There was nothing more he could do for the drivers so Blake turned his attention to the Shuttle, although there were several tears in the tarpaulin that covered Atlantis, looking underneath, he saw there were just scrapes in the nose paint work and tiles where he had ripped the bomb from the craft. The tiles could easily be replaced at Kennedy and the paint touched up. The priority now was to find another traction unit, and get Atlantis moving again. One of the police officers helped him back to the idling helicopter, because Blake's legs were more like jelly than flesh and bone. Jo saw them coming and jumped down from the aircraft to meet them, “Are you all-right?”

“Yes, I'm fine,” said Blake, attempting a smile.”

“Your husband's a real hero, Missus Northfield,” said the cop.

“Why,” asked Jo a little hesitantly, “what have you been doing?”

“Not much,” said Blake.

“Not much,” repeated the officer, “This man, tacked the bomber and then managed to get the bomb out just

seconds before it went off, he threw it and it actually exploded in the air.”

“Blake, you darn fool, you could have been killed.”

“But I wasn't was I,” Blake responded as he slumped into the chopper's seat. He turned to the most senior of the four policemen, “We need to get hold of another tractor, so the Shuttle's gonna be stuck here for a while, can you get some security for it?”

“Sure Sir, I'll get on the radio to get some more officers out here, and we'll stay with the trailer until the arrive.”

It took two days before Atlantis moved again, the police had sealed the area as a crime scene, even though the new unit was ready to continue the following day. The media circus arrived within hours and that alone assured that no further attempts would be made to disable the craft. The Shuttle continued eventually, with both a police and NASA Security escort, police cleared the roads and no one was allowed to go close to the Shuttle. Sixteen days later Atlantis arrived back at Kennedy.

Since their last visit a make-shift assembly building had been constructed and the launch gantry was almost complete. The shuttle was taken directly to the assembly building, where the damaged tiles were replaced and a touch of paint brought to machine back to showroom condition. Over the next few weeks Atlantis would be mated to one of the two fuel tanks and the booster rockets attached, the whole assembly would then be rotated from horizontal to the vertical, and placed on one

of the crawlers. Launch day was set at April fourth, and the process of choosing the full team and crew started in earnest. Atherton called a meeting with the full committee, to discuss who would be invited to join the exploration team. Conrad Delph the ESA, senior aeronautics engineer was there but Gunther Claus was missing, as he had expressed his doubts to the ESA about the mission, who had withdrawn him from the team.

“Seems we have a bit of a hero in our midst,” said Atherton, “in case you hadn't heard, Blake here saved Atlantis from certain destruction.” Every one of those stood and gave Blake a round of applause, except for Jo, who was not amused.

“I am afraid you have the wrong guy,” responded Blake, “what I did was under some kind of automatic response, it was a stupid risk.”

“Still we sure appreciate your actions Blake,” said Atherton, “as I see Jo is not amused, I propose we get on with business then.”

Atherton Bennet, director of Sky-Watch, suggested that both Jo and Blake should be on the Shuttle team, Blake as mission commander (for which he was given a temporary US Air Force rank of Major), the pilot (Captain) and co-pilot, would be designated by NASA. This meant that they needed three other mission specialists to complete the team.

“Can I suggest John Armstrong from Boeing,” Blake said, “if we need a flight engineer, there are few that I

would trust when it comes to knowledge of the Shuttle.”

“Good, I think you're right, no one else has been more involved in this mission more than John,” agreed Doug.

“Which, if he agrees,” said Atherton, “leaves us with two more crew for the initial mission team.” The meeting continued through the morning and afternoon with no two people being 'ideal' for the mission. During lunch Blake had called John with the request, John had jumped at the opportunity, “I have worked on space programs for twenty years and I always wanted to go with them, I never thought I get the chance, so yes Blake, count me in,” said John.

“We will be in touch to let you know when the training starts,” said Blake. The discussion continued after lunch, with everyone searching their memories for people who would want to go into space and had the right skills.

“We seem to be at an impasse here,” said Atherton, “there must be two specialists that have the right credentials and, would want to join the mission.”

Blake suddenly had a thoughtful look on his face, “There is this one guy, we were at university together, way back, we hit it off because we were both into astronomy, but he was a far better engineer that I ever was, came out with a one-one degree and went on to get a doctorate, he was always saying that he'd give anything to get into space. I remember we had a discussion about UFOs and aliens, he said that if one landed anywhere he was, they would have to fight him to stop him getting on board. I haven't spoken to him in ten years, but it wouldn't take much to

contact him.”

“What's his name Blake,” asked Doug, pen poised.

“He's Doctor Charles Childs, born in Yeovil, in the county of Somerset in England.”

“Of course, Charlie,” said Jo, “I'd forgotten about him, he's a total genius.”

“Can you try to get in touch, whilst I do a quick check on him,” said Doug.

“Sure,” said Blake, and took out his cell-phone once more, searched the contacts list and found his friend's number, the phone rang three times and at the other end and a voice said, “Childs, who is this calling?”

“Charlie, it's Blake, Blake Northfield.”

“Blake! I thought you'd had a fallout with me, what can I do for you, you must want something.”

“Charlie, I guess you know about our alien craft that's parked out past the Moon,” Blake started to explain.

“Of course, and I know about the job you landed too, why didn't you call me earlier, are you about to offer me a flight on that spaceship of yours?”

Blake laughed, “I can't get anything over on you still, can I Charlie, as a matter of fact yes I was.”

“Listen old son, I was always one step ahead of you.” said Charlie, “Give me some time to think it over.”

“How long do you need,” asked Blake.

“About twelve seconds,” the Doctor laughed, “I accept,” “Slow down Charlie, they are still running your name,” said Blake.

“Bloody cheek,” said Charlie.

Blake had been keeping his eye on Doug and just then

Doug gave him a thumbs-up, “OK my friend, you are on the shuttle, I'll phone you later to give you the details of when the training starts, but you will need to get out here in the next few days, if that's OK.”

“Come to the US, well only if I have to old chap,” Charlie laughed, “I shall await your call, it will be good to get together again.”

“That means we just need one more with relevant skills,” said Atherton, “I don't suppose you have an old friend hidden somewhere Jo, or you Conrad.”

“Charlie started me thinking of someone, actually she once when out with Charlie,” said Jo, “Laura, oh what was her name? Do you remember her Blake?”

“Laura Pierce, she works at the British Museum library as a researcher,” said Blake.

Jo looked aghast, “How did you know that?”

“Last year, I needed some information on ancient astronomical methods and instruments for one of my talks,” explained Blake, they put me through to the library and the person who answered the phone said her name, and I recognised it, we had a chat.”

“Really, you never told me,” said Jo with more than a hint of cold shoulder.

“Doug already had her name in the terminal, and whistled as the background information came up, “This Laura Pierce is known to us and has done some work for the US government, she already has clearance as a researcher, she lived here for just over a year six years back.”

“Why don't you ring her Jo,” suggested Blake, I have the British Museum's number here,” Blake passed his cell-phone to Jo, and she hit the dial button.

“Can I speak to Laura Pierce, in the library please,” said Jo into the phone, a few seconds later she responded to the voice on the other end of the line, “Hello, Laura, this is Jo Northfield, remember me?”

“No, should I,” came the questioning voice, now on the speaker.

“Sorry Laura, I used to be Jo Wiggins, we were at university together, and friends.”

“Awe, yes of course, you married Blake,” said Laura, isn't Blake involved in this UFO thing?”

“Yes we both are, that's why I'm calling, we are putting a mission team together to ride out to the UFO and investigate it, I thought you might like to join us, I can think of no better researcher than you Laura,” said Jo.

There was a few moments of silence before Laura spoke again,”Jo, honestly, I'd love to, it's the opportunity of a lifetime, but I have this job here at the BM, and I love the job.”

“I think we may be able to fix it for you Laura, that your job is still there afterwards,” Jo said looking at Atherton, who nodded his assent.

“When do you go,” asked Laura.

“April fourth, but that's restricted information,” Jo said “and there's two weeks intensive training before we go.” Atherton had immediately picked up his cell-phone and had already reached the curator of the British Museum.

“That soon,” said Laura, plainly playing for thinking

time, “can you hold for a few minutes, I need to speak to Garry, we're engaged.”

“OK Laura,” Jo said and they waited.

Atherton said, ”All fixed, if she wants to come on board, the Director's sorry but the Curator of the museum sees it as a media triumph for the museum, but he seems to think a lot of her, she'll even get a promotion when she get back.”

“Hello, Jo, you still there?”

“Yes Laura, it's been fixed with your boss' and a promotion when you get back.”

“OK, I'm in, but can I just ask, is there extra pay, see we're saving for a deposit on a house before we get wed.”

“Laura, this is Director of Sky-Watch, Atherton Bennet at NASA headquarters, if you tell me what you salary is, we will pay you ten times that for the time you are with us, which will be about a year, if it's less we will pay for the full year, would that be satisfactory?”

“Blimey, I'm sort-a glad I said yes, Garry said to go for it as if I didn't, I'd regret it,” said Laura.

“Laura this is Blake, we'll be in touch with the arrangements in the next twenty-four hours, we'll see you soon.” and everyone chimed in a “Goodbye.”

The following day Blake had the responsibility of making the arrangements for the team to start training, he rang each member with the details which he sent to each as a data-package, complete with airline tickets to Dulles Airport, where a private jet would take them to

Johnson Space Centre in Houston, Texas for the training. The training would be a crash course and include; medical tests, physical training, EVA training in the buoyancy tank, emergency procedures, automatic return and re-entry training, and whatever else there was time for or considered a requirement. Charlie and Laura were allotted adjoining seats in the first-class cabin of the AA jetliner, so that they could get to know each other again. There was a cold atmosphere between them, which was followed by a discussion as to who dumped who, and by the half way stage they were friends again. The flight went quickly for the two, who never stopped talking, both catching up on what the other had been doing. At Dulles Airport, Washington, the Jetstream private jet was waiting and an airline official drove the two to the plane, with their luggage. Blake and Jo were waiting on the jet and he and Charlie embraced as the old friend they were. On the flight to Houston Blake briefed the two on everything they needed to know.

The team of Major Blake Northwood, Jo Northwood, Conrad Delph, John Armstrong, Laura Pierce and Charlie Childs, together with the Shuttle pilots, Captain Josh Flynn and co-pilot Angelo Maeo, started their training at seven o'clock on the Monday morning. There were the inevitable moans and groans about having to get up at five in the morning for a one hour run before breakfast. The full American breakfast placated the complaints somewhat, and by eight they were in a classroom for the first day of training. Charlie took the

whole course in his stride, whilst both Jo and Blake struggled with the more physical aspects. Laura teamed up with Jo for much of the time and renewed their friendship. Conrad was the one who had problems with the buoyancy tank, we all just jumped in, except for Conrad, so the instructor, sort of, just gave him a shove and in he went. We all heard the screams and gasps through our radio sets and the instructor realised what he had done, dove in and dragged Conrad out of the tank. The instructor, Ronnie, had dealt with this before and later that week had him get into the suit and sit in a chair by the tank, he gave Conrad a laced drink and just ignored him. Within a half hour Conrad was snoring and sleeping peacefully, Ronnie hooked the winch up to the chair and lowered it into the tank and left it on the bottom of the tank. An hour later Conrad started to wake up, slowly, and gradually realised where he was, with the short lasting drug Conrad kept calm, and his phobia was cured enough to continue with the course. After the instructor enabled him to overcome his fears, in the end he passed the test with flying colours. John also struggled with the physical training, and all six of the team fell into bed each night totally exhausted. Their rooms were comfortable but no one used their room long enough to appreciate them. The two weeks passed both quickly and slowly, and the instructors gave each a certificate for passing the course, this was not official of course, but a nice thought. On the third Monday a US Air Force Jet arrived to take them to Kennedy Space Centre, and they knew the the time was here when they

would start the journey to something that no man's hand had conceived.

Chapter 4

Journey into Space “Atlantis Rises”

At long last the team arrived in the Cape, it was April first and they would be in isolation until the fourth, when Atlantis would once again take to space, having unexpectedly being brought out of retirement. For the following three days they would live together in close quarters, undergoing medical examinations and various tests. Outside of the Astronaut Facility the world's media was busy setting up their satellite dishes and building their extreme-telephoto lenses that would track the Atlantis to the edge of space. The media had covered their arrival at the Cape and had vied for interviews, which were arranged over video-link with the whole team present. As well as the many media interviews, much of the time was taken up playing board games or reading manuals related to the Shuttle. Inevitably the day of the launch arrived, the crew were awakened at six in the morning, showered, and ate breakfast, nothing too heavy, underwent final medical examinations and then started the two hour process of getting into their environment suits. At eleven o'clock they exited the Astronaut Facility and boarded the bus that would take the eight people to launch pad 46b. The bus pulled up at

the elevator doors and the eight alighted. Blake looked up at the towering Shuttle with its external tank, it was like looking up at a New York skyscraper, a height equivalent to the length of two football fields, and he thought, an intimidating sight. *'What have I let myself in for'*, Blake thought.

The elevator doors slid open revealing the aluminium cage inside, it was a tight squeeze with eight crew members in space-suits and four technicians inside the cage, but they managed it. Then with a jerk the cage started to rise up the tower, Jo turned to Blake and her gloved hand sought his, he gave her hand a squeeze, but had no idea if she felt it, but she smiled. Blake found himself shaking and again wondering what in hell he was doing risking his, his wife's and the lives of the others on a quest that may end in disaster. Why, Atlantis had not even been tested in actual space, he was almost at the point of backing out when the elevator stopped at the hatch. The doors opened again and the technicians ushered them out. One by one, they were helped through the main hatch, the Captain and co-pilot went first and climbed into the front seats, as Commander, Blake's seat was behind and between the two forward seats, and Jo moved in to Blake's right behind the co-pilot. The other four were helped to the seats in the Mid-deck, and the technicians started to strap them all in, and lock in all the cables that connected the suits to the computers, and then checked their helmets. They now had an hour in which to reconsider the decisions

they all had made, and let their confidence slowly drain away. The only one who seemed oblivious to the worries of the others was Charlie, who insisted on telling a stream of bad jokes. Laura was as quiet as the others, and they just listened as Captain Josh Flynn and co-pilot Angelo Maeo went through the many checks. At 'T' minus twenty minutes Charlie called through the intercom to the Captain, "Hey Josh, just a thought, have you checked the tyre-pressures?"

The response was immediate, "Charlie shut up and switch your intercom to mid-deck only, I have enough to do without your silly comments, thanks."

The digital clock above their heads continued to count down, and the stream of information flowed between the pilots and launch control. At 'T' minus nine a voice announced, "Start automatic ground launch sequencer," at T-seven and a half minutes the access arm was retracted. Charlie shouted, "point of no return people," "Charlie try and be quiet," returned Blake.

At T-two minutes the instruction came for the crew to close and lock visors, just over an minute later power was transferred to the Shuttle's internal power, T-thirty-one seconds came the announcement that the automatic launch sequence had started and at minus six seconds the main engines started, and a thundering vibration flooded both decks. Five ... four. . . three ... two ... one "Solid rocket booster ignition and lift-off!"

The following few minutes were terrifying for the whole crew, even the pilots later admitted to feeling the same

way, having practised in the one operational simulator, but training had cut in and they held it together. Even Charlie was silent and Laura saw him turn a strange green colour behind his visor. The launch tower disappeared from view and by the time the shuttle is clear of the pad, it's already at a hundred miles an hour and accelerating straight up. After around thirty seconds the shuttle rotates, with the tank on top as it corrects into a parabola and the crew could again see the Earth below receding fast. After just forty-five seconds they were travelling faster than the speed of sound, Mk 1, and the vibrations continued to shake the crew. After two minutes there was a heavy bump, and the shuttle shuddered as the solid fuel rockets, spent of fuel, were explosively left the external tank. The shuttle was now on liquid fuel only and the three engines were pushing Atlantis faster and faster toward space. The eight felt themselves becoming heavier and heavier in their seats and it became harder to breathe, this lasted for around six and a half minutes, then at eight and a half minutes from lift-off the engines suddenly stopped with a bang as the external tank is jettisoned; the crew now experienced weightlessness for the first time.

The voice of the Captain came over the intercom, "Ladies and gentlemen you may now undo your seatbelts, with care, and just get used to being weightless." The first thing the six did was to float to one of the windows for a view of the Earth, this generated six gasps as the Atlantic and then Africa revolved below them. The Captain continues, "we will remain in Low Earth

Orbit for the next eight orbits, about twelve hours whilst we carry out all the checks, and increase our speed to twenty-five thousand miles per hour. The final orbit will then sling-shot us out toward the target, which we will reach in approximately eighteen hours.”

“So how-come it takes them three days to get to the Moon,” asked Jo.

“Basically Jo,” answered Charlie, “the Moon keeps moving and we have to get into the Moon’s orbit and then either catch up with it or let the Moon catch up with us.”

“We do that to save fuel and that means using both the Earth’s and the Moon’s gravity,” explained Josh, “but with the extra fuel and the more efficient engines, we can go straight to target.”

“Oh,” said Jo, feeling a little stupid.

The two pilots spent most of the following twelve hours doing systems checks and talking to Houston about some technical aspect or the other and programming the on-board computers for the flight to the target. Their passengers spent most of the time transfixed at one observation port or the other, most taking pictures with their personal cameras. On nearly every orbit Blake stared out at the distant point of light that was their destination, wondering what they would find. It was now a little over six months since he had discovered the craft, and he was surprised that he had not thought about it more over that time. His time, however had been so consumed with the getting there, there had been little time to consider the objective itself.

On their eighth orbit the US President came on the video feed from the Oval Office to wish them a safe journey, which they all knew would be taken up by the media. This was followed by video links with the British Prime Minister, the President of the EU and the Director General of the ESA. The US President, Oliver Bose, made much of the US contribution to the mission and the facilities that had been provided. Prime Minister Goodwin also made much of the fact that most of the exploration team were British and how the mission relied hugely on British expertise. The EU President and the DG of the ESA were lower key affairs, and the messages were restricted to good wishes. On the surface the media kept up a continual commentary, and the US and UK had cleared TV channels of programming to devote the air-time to the mission. As they neared the end of the eighth orbit Captain Flynn asked everyone to strap themselves in again for the final sling-shot part orbit.

After a few bumps and jerks, as the manoeuvring jets adjusted their course for the sling-shot window the main engines cut in for six seconds, and again the crew were thrust back into their chairs, like having God's hand pressing down on them. The manoeuvre was successful and the Shuttle assumed a new elliptical orbit that took them almost twenty-two thousand miles out from Earth and then back again to LEO and off again into an orbit from which they would break free at the right moment.

Those who had window seats saw the Earth recede to a full sphere and then rush back to fill the port; no one saw it recede again, because Earth was now behind them. After two more nudges from manoeuvring jets, a final four second burn of the three main engines, they were on their way on their eighteen hour journey into the unknown. Telescopic cameras had been fitted to the nose of the Shuttle, which gave them a forward view that could be both zoomed and panned. The monitors were therefore a focus of attention during the flight. Captain Flynn cut off the feed after four hours, in order to enforce rest period, they had all been running on adrenalin for the past sixteen hours, so a rest period was needed. The Shuttle was on auto-pilot and no human interference was needed, "If anything happens or the computers detect a problem either they or Houston would wake them," said Captain Flynn, "I've set an alarm to wake us when we are two hours out, now please get some rest."

No one had much sleep, except Charlie whose snores were instrumental in keeping the others *mostly* awake. As promised, at two hours out the alarm woke everyone, just as they'd just finally fallen asleep, it seemed the only one to get some sleep was Charlie. Each, dressed in NASA a jumpsuit then they climbed out of their sleeping cocoons. The forward windscreen was the destination of most of the group, followed by gasps of astonishment, with just under fifty-thousand miles to go, it already looked as if they were about to crash into the craft. This

was the first time anyone had ever seen the object without the aid of electronic devices or telescopes, and it looked different. No one could make out what colour it was, and each had a different opinion as to the colour, some said silver another said it was gold, the Captain thought it was green, whereas Blake thought it was pale blue. To the unaided eye there also seemed to be a slight glow, or aurora, around the object, which was a worry to Captain Flynn as an unknown issue. The Captain decided to send out a probe, when they were close to the craft, which would detect any harmful radiation, an addition that Lockheed Martin had been asked to provide. The cameras were switched back on and the search for a access hatch began using the monitors, but the monitors gave them no sense of what they were looking at, and after the first hour they gave up. By this time the craft was so large that it filled the forward windows. “We programmed a search pattern into the navigation computer just in case we could not detect a hatch,” said Flynn, “we will take a position a hundred meters above the surface and do a visual inspection.”

Forty-five minutes later the manoeuvring jets turned the Shuttle around and after everyone strapped themselves back into their seats, the main engines fired again for ten seconds, bringing Atlantis to a full stop just ten miles from the object. Jo gazed out of the port at the huge markings on the side of the main sphere and took pictures, the markings looked vaguely familiar to her and she accessed the research computer that had been loaded

with every book published on written language from both the British Museum and the Smithsonian, some twenty-thousand volumes. The Shuttle turned once more so that it was facing toward the unidentified craft, and one of the three engines on low thrust then slowly pushed them to kissing distance from the surface. Captain Flynn then engaged the search pattern in the navigation computer and the Shuttle slipped away towards the side of the craft unseen from Earth. Radar, infrared and ultraviolet sensors surveyed the surface over twenty-eight million square miles of it, looking for any anomalies in the surface, hot spot areas that may be different and indicate an entrance. Any anomaly would be recorded and location logged against a projected grid. Atlantis moved relatively slowly at just over a hundred miles an hour but looking through the ports it was hard to tell that they were moving at all. With little to do, except for Jo and Laura who were busy researching the markings on the outer skin of the craft, they decided that now was the time to eat.

Jo had uploaded the image to the main computer and sent it back to Earth, but neither had come up with anything, so far. Jo stared at the image for the fiftieth time in an hour, “You know Laura, I have seen this somewhere, or something very like it, and I just can’t remember where.”

“I can’t say that it rings any bells with me,” said Laura, so I’m just starting from scratch.”

“If you had to guess, Laura,” asked Jo, “at first glance, what language would you say it was related to?”

“I’d guess at some sort of ancient Arabic language.”

“Yes that was first thought, but there’s nothing like it,” said Jo, “the alphabet is all wrong.

“What about hieroglyphs, the fact that it’s all one,” suggested Laura, “not with separate letters would suggest that, do you think?”

“It’s possible, let’s do a search on ancient Egyptian Hieroglyphs,” said Jo. She fed the image on the screen into the research computer and set it to search for similarities. The computer voice said *‘working’* and a message on the screen told them the search would take fifty-five minutes. Blake brought the some food, but Jo continued looking through the books in her tablet. “What about ‘Coptic’, “Hieroglyphs weren’t used generally, just for formal and ceremonial use.”

“Possible but Coptic came after the Cushitic branch of the Afroasiatic,” said Laura, “so, maybe we should start with those.”

“Before we do,” interrupted Jo, “have a look at this, it’s Demotic, some say that it was Demotic that evolved into Hebrew.”

“There are some similarities here, see the ‘y’ the ‘e’ and the ‘h’ all look similar to the form we have here,” continued Jo.

“Let’s go to ancient Hebrew then, but surely it can’t be as simple as that,” added Laura.

Jo brought ancient Hebrew up on the screen and spent some time going through the letters and dictionary. “Hebrew is read right to left so let’s see what that first letter might be,” said Jo, that little mark in the Demotic as well it’s the alternate for the ‘w’, in Hebrew it’s called an ‘iota’, what could that next letter be?”

“Possibly the Demotic ‘m’,” suggested Laura, “look, neither Demonic nor Hebrew are connected by that bar underneath, I say we disregard that part.”

“OK,” said Jo “let’s take it out on screen and see if the computer has any luck.” Laura went to work scrubbing the lower bar with a graphic program. Jo re-inputted the modified graphic and set the computer looking for similarities again, against ancient Hebrew, about fifteen minutes later the computer beeped and the screen flashed with a possible match.

“Look at this,” called Laura, “it’s real close to our target,” she tapped the information button and a screen full of text scrolled down the screen.

“Woe, that’s close,” exclaimed Jo, reading the information, “see here it says that there were variations, sometimes a short form was used.”

“That’s interesting,” said Laura, “it seems that it means ‘Return’ or ‘to turn back’.” The two continued for the next hour, just to confirm that what they had found; all the indications were that they had found the meaning of the markings on the craft’s hull. This was a surprise as they were expecting to have to start a lingual analysis of an unknown language, both felt a relief over this; however they both knew that it begged more questions

that it answered. What was an alien space-craft doing with a word in an ancient Earth language painted on it? Had it originally come from Earth or were humans seeded from these aliens?

The two researchers suddenly realised that they had been at it for over five hours as they went to the main cabin to break the news to the others. “Do you want to know what the space ship is called,” asked Jo when they had gathered everyone together?

“You actually know what that symbol means,” asked Blake.

“Yes, we’re about ninety percent certain; go on Laura,” Jo prompted, “tell them.”

“She’s call either ‘The Return’ or alternatively ‘The to Turn Back’, which doesn’t have the same ring to it, I think,” announced Laura.

“I think we’ll stick to ‘The Return’,” said Blake, everyone agreed.

Jo brought everyone up the speed with how they had discovered the meaning and the language. The eight spent some time discussing the implications of how an Earth language had turned up on an alien ship. The discussion continued until the navigation alarm went off, with its crisp, ‘ping, ping, ping’ sounds. Captain Flynn went to the monitor that had been linked to the scanners and navigation computer and an image of what could be a sealed hatch appeared on the screen. No sooner had they had seen the first image than another alarm sounded and an identical feature in a different location flashed on

the monitor, then another and another. In all there were seven of these features spread over about fifteen miles of surface area. Flynn jumped into the captain's seat and started punching in instructions. The Shuttle slowed and stopped, turned slightly and slowly moved backwards and towards the surface, a few meters from the feature Atlantis turned to face the 'could-be' hatch and slowly nudged toward it for a closer look. When the nose cone, that contained the shuttle's sensor array, was just inches from the feature the huge plate that the sensor had identified started to move inward, keeping just about six inches from the nose. Silently Atlantis pushed forward as the plate then started to lift, revealing a cathedral-like empty space before it.

As all eight of the crew gawped at the sight with their jaws almost touching their chests, and Flynn stopped the Shuttle's forward movement at about a hundred yards in. They were roused from their trance by the outside light starting to dim, they realised that the hatch door was closing behind them. Blake turned to the Captain, "Josh, turn us around or we're going to be trapped here." "I think it may be triggered by some proximity sensors or the other, but we need to test it, as you say." He turned the Shuttle and approached the door, at a few inches from the plating the door started to open again, but this time down and outward, forming a platform. Captain Flynn turned Atlantis again and taxied it to the far wall where there seemed to be several doorways.

Blake looked at his watch, and said, “Can I suggest that we make a start getting suited up, ready to do some tentative exploring, Angelo, can you radio Houston, update them and tell them that, Atlantis had landed?”

Chapter 5

Exploration

It was a frustration to everyone that it took so long to get into their EVA suits, at long last the six that made up the investigation team were ready and each checked the others suits. There was room for two in the air-lock and Blake with Jo accepted the honour of going out first, once in the lock Blake pressed the dual function button that both extended the retractable steps that had been installed as a modification, and started the vacuum pump that took the air out of the lock. The steps purred as they descended outside, and as the pump evacuated the air the sound faded. The light above the hatch changed from green to red and Blake operated the lever to open the hatch, but the hatch didn't move, he tried again but the hatch-cover would not budge. Pressing the intercom he explained the problem. "Josh, the hatch-cover is jammed."

"Hold on, I'll check it," there was a few seconds of silence before the Captain returned, "The hatch shows no problem here, so . . . just a minute, I don't believe that."

"What's up," asked Blake.

"The sensor panel shows air outside, must be a malfunction."

"Maybe not," said Blake, "I'll re-pressurise the air-lock and try the hatch again, we've got our EVAs on so we'll be OK." Blake hit the button again and the air returned, he tried the hatch again and it swung open.

Blake cranked the steps back down by hand and they descended onto the floor of the hangar. They both removed their helmets and put them back into the hatch, just as Charlie, Laura and the rest climbed down. Charlie looked around and said “Good Lord, there’s gravity.”

“Charlie,” said Blake, “you have magnetic boots.”

“Oh yea,” said Charlie and looked around for something to check his theory, he didn’t have afar to look as Blake and Jo’s helmets were floating inside the hatch. They decided to leave the air-lock open but keep their suits on for the initial exploration. About twenty meters away were a number of hatches, or doorways, in the back wall, over each was a display that constantly changed, the characters looked the same as the one on the hull. Jo said that if it was an early form of Hebrew the characters may be numbers, however each display showed different characters. Captain Flynn came through the air-lock followed by the other members of the team; Angelo was to stay in Atlantis, as emergency coordinator. Flynn thought that they should first examine the hanger bay, so they set off to see what they could find. The lighting came from flat panels in the roof that adequately lit the area but did not dazzle when you looked directly at them. The floor was obviously metal, steel of some magnetic alloy, on the floor were engraved marks, lines and symbols, feint but definite, the Captain thought they resembled those at an airport. Jo suggested that they might resemble the lines and symbols on the Nazca Plateau, the ancient petroglyphs in the Nazca Desert, in

southern Peru. High on one curved wall there were indications that windows may exist, although because of the lighting one could not be sure as they were dark and difficult to judge. Along one section of the right-hand side there were sections that that looked like movable panels and along the adjacent wall were what looked like power sockets of some kind.

An hour later they had inspected almost the entire bay and most were keen to see what was behind the hatches in the far wall. They held an impromptu meeting to discuss how they should proceed. After some discussion and disagreement it was decided that they should investigate only one of the hatches at a time, so that the group stayed together in case of problems. As the mission leader Bake elected himself the first to enter and would return to report initial impressions. The group crossed to a central doorway and gathered around, Blake saw that there were no handles or hatch locks, but centrally mounted was a plate that looked different to the hatch material. He stretched out a hand to touch the plate and the hatch was immediately illuminated from the surround, he touched the plate and a message appeared on the hatch cover, in the same characters as the ones they had discovered already, “Any idea what that says Jo,” he asked.

Jo looked and took out her tablet, flicked through a few screens and scanned the writing, “According to this it says something about hand prints or palm impressions.”

“Maybe it’s like some of the hand-locks we have at home,” said Blake, “where you have to place your whole hand on the scanner to get in, and one step on from fingerprints.” Blake placed his hand on the plate, there was a slight hiss and the hatch sank inwards and upwards, he looked around at the group, and Jo gave his arm a squeeze before her husband stepped into the hatch. The inside of the hatch was roomy, would have accommodated some ten or twelve people, and in the right wall was a blue button, like that on an elevator on Earth. Blake pressed the blue button and held his breath, the outer door closed and there was movement, but he wasn’t sure in which direction after about ninety seconds the movement stopped and the other door opened. What greeted Blake took the breath from his lungs, turned it into a hurricane, and then tried to stuff it back into his mouth. His jaw, once more hung down for the second time.

What he saw his brain would not accept, he was in a town of some sort, the outside of the hatch door was ornate and on it was mounted an identical plate to the one on the hatch in the hangar bay. Around him were buildings, some that looked like multi-story apartment blocks, but they looked as if they were made of pure crystal and the light reflected from their walls. ‘*Light*’, thought Blake, who then looked up; above him seemed to be a single light source that resembled our Sun, both in apparent size and light intensity, but around it was some form of structure. Blake was stood on what

seemed like a stone path and on each side was green manicured grass, he bent over to feel it and it actually felt like soft, lush meadow-grass. He picked a couple of blades as samples, but they immediately shrivelled in his hand and as he watched several new blades grew back where he had plucked the samples. As he let go of the, now brown, grass they fell to the ground, and he realised that here there really was gravity, he switched off his magnetic boots and nothing happened, he didn't start to float, he just stayed where he was. Blake was so fascinated he forgot the other members of the group left waiting somewhere beyond the hatch. He started to approach the nearest building, the walls were smooth as frosted glass but not cold to the touch, there were no visible joints anywhere, the building was empty and seemed unused. *'Where were these aliens'*, thought Blake, the place seems deserted, he selected a path or narrow roadway that came directly back to the hatch and set off at a run. He wanted to see how large the village, or town, or city was, he estimated that he had run for about half a mile when he came to the end of the buildings and before him spread out as far as he could see was agricultural land with another town in the distance. It was only then that Blake realised the true extent of this world within a spacecraft.

Here there were ploughed fields and fields with some unknown crop growing; here there were trees and bushes some with brightly coloured flowers. The verges of the roadway also grew coloured flowers of orange, blue and

yellow blooms. The only thing missing was a blue sky, because behind the light source it was just a very light grey, but then he noticed that between the ground and the light there were clouds, very Earth-like clouds. Although these clouds occasionally covered the light the temperature did not alter, Blake guessed at a comfortable twenty-five degrees. In the far distance he could see a very tall crystal spire that towered higher than any of the other buildings in this town or the one in the distance. It was then that Blake remembered the others who were waiting in the hangar, and he turned and trotted back to the hatch, he looked at his watch and realised he had been gone over a half hour. He reached the hatch and placed his hand on the plate, to his relief the door opened and he stepped inside, pressed the blue button and the elevator started to move again. As the hangar door opened he was greeted by Jo's "Oh thank God," who then scolded him with, "where the heck have you been, do you know how long we have been stood here?" "Sorry," said Blake, "I just got carried away." "What did I say," said Jo to the others, and turning back to Blake, "come on then, what in there?" "I am not going to attempt to tell you, you just need to see it for yourselves," answered Blake. "Come on it's quite safe, as far as I know, see for yourselves." All nine people entered the elevator, and Blake once more pressed the blue button, and the room again started to move.

The ornate door opened and they all piled out, and one at a time they all froze where they stood, mouths open gazing at the spectacle before them. Maybe minutes passed before the first person spoke, which one might know, was Charlie, "No wonder you were so long fellah, I don't think that I would have come back yet."

"This is incredible," said Jo. Everyone concurred with mumbled agreements. "How much have you explored Blake," she asked.

"Only here, that building there and down that road," answered Blake, "the town stretched in that direction for about a half mile and then it's agricultural land and another village, way off."

"This is going to take some exploring," stated Captain Flynn.

"That is, how do you say, an under statement," said Conrad.

"Has anyone noticed the light source," asked Blake. Immediately the group's heads tilted up and he heard another gasp.

"How is this possible," asked Charlie with a rhetorical question, "from here that looks like a fusion reaction going on up there, inside a structure, people, we may have discovered our first Dyson Sphere."

"Our what," asked Jo.

"I'll explain later," said Charlie.

They set off in different directions as the Captain shouted, "Meet back here in one hour, and keep in touch, switch on you suit to suit radios; Angelo, please monitor all transmissions and record."

“Aye skipper, monitor and record” sounded the voice of Angelo over each radio receiver.

Jo and Blake, holding hands went off to the left of the elevator and around every corner were wonders in building, made from the same material, some were in different colours and some shone like rainbows. They saw one building that emitted a pale blue hew, then they opened the door and went in; it was a two story building and the ground floor was furnished with couches and modernistic chairs, a pop-up table that folded up from the floor. There was no carpet but the floor felt soft to the tread, there was a ventilation system that blew softly with fresh air that smelt fresher than anything they had ever encountered. The upstairs was also furnished, a bed and more chairs; Jo tried the bed and found that it was just about the most comfortable bed she had ever laid on. “All we need now,” said Blake, is a family of alien bears to discover us here.” Jo laughed and jumped off the bed. “Where are these aliens anyway, there’s no sign of habitation, everything looks brand-new.” Jo said. “I know,” said Blake, “that’s the question, why this enormous ship with no one to populate it, there’s no bodies, as there would have been if they’d been taken ill and died.” “What if that's what happened,” suggested Jo, “but all the bodies have been cleaned up by some system of the ship?” “I guess that's a possibility, but there is absolutely nothing of them left behind, you'd expect a garment or a

cup, or something. There is no sign that anyone has ever been here, except for the ready ploughed fields outside the town.”

“What! Ploughed fields,” exclaimed Jo.

“Yea, half a mile down the road opposite the elevator,” answered Blake, “we need to find the command centre, if there is anywhere on this tub that will be manned, sorry aliened, it will be the command centre, this thing didn’t get here on its own.”

“Or did it,” mused Jo, more to herself than her husband.

Laura and Charlie, who seemed to be forming a relationship over the past weeks, teamed up together, and Captain Flynn, Conrad and John formed another team and set off down the road toward the fields where Blake had previously explored. Within fifteen minutes, walking at the Captain’s brisk pace, they arrived at the edge of the town, and stopped to look around. “Looks a good way to the next village,” observed Flynn, “I don’t think we can make it and back in an hour.”

“Not even at you pace,” commented Conrad.

“What’s in these sheds here,” asked John, veering off to the right, he found no door, but to one side there was another hand-plate, like the ones on the hatch. Placing his hand on the plate the whole front of the small building seemed to scroll upward, Wow, that’s clever,” he said, which attracted the other two.

“What haft you found,” asked Conrad.

“Looks like it’s a garage, with some sort of vehicle in it,” said the Captain.

John was already in the driving seat trying to find how to switch the vehicle on, as there were no windows in the building it was difficult to see, so he switched on his suit's work beam. There was just a sort of joy-stick on the dash, tentatively he pushed the stubby stick fully forward, at once the vehicle jumped forward at an alarming speed, but seemed to stop on its own before it hit the Captain and Conrad. "Cute, auto stop at obstacles," declared John, "very safety minded these aliens."

"Does it have a charge meter," asked Flynn.

"Negative, just this joystick, no brakes or anything," answered John, "shall we chance taking it for a spin?"

"Why not," said Flynn, "as long as we don't go too far we can always walk back, come on out John."

As John edged the buggy forward, fully out of its garage, he instinctively looked behind him, just in time to see another identical looking vehicle rise from the floor, "Hey, did you see that," he called.

"Ja," said Conrad, "we seem to have solved ze transport problem."

"Did you hear that everyone," the Captain said into his microphone, "plenty of buggies here to travel around in, we will bring this one back to the hatch, later."

There was a jumbled chorus of "Roger that," mixed with a, "OK," from Charlie and a, "Great" from one of the females.

"Everyone, can we stick to radio protocols as per training please," scolded Flynn.

The two jumped in the buggy with John, there were seats for six people, and John turned right toward the next town. The buggy was surprisingly fast and in seven minutes they entered the little town. On their way they passed fields, some ready ploughed and others had crops growing, John thought one field held a crop of what he thought looked like sweet-corn, and another had a perfect crop of corn, ready for harvesting. "I don't get this," said John, "it's just like a duplicate Earth, how long have those crops been growing there?"

"Who knows," said Flynn, "we'll get to that when we find the aliens or the command centre."

The town was similar to the first but in some way different. There were more of the garage-type buildings at the boundary and the buildings were simpler and mostly single storied. In the fields were more of the garages, and larger ones that looked like barns. They decided to push further on toward a crystal spire that over shadowed the land. They drove through the village, and passed through more fields of crops and ploughed fields. It took them another fifteen minutes to reach a point on the crest of a low hill where they had a good view of the structure, and the beauty took their breath away. The crystal spire was at least the height of the tallest building on Earth, and shone with a ethereal gleam of very pale blue light. Before it laid a silvery lake surrounded with manicured lawns, flowering bushes and trees, with meandering paths, the one thing missing was people. "That may be the command centre," said

the captain, “but it’s time to return to meet up with the others now, we will return tomorrow.”

Charlie and Laura set off to find the centre of the town, they walked past hundreds of buildings that all looked like houses or dwellings. After about a ten minute walk they came to a broad square, in the centre was a fountain and the square was liberally scattered with seats, “Why does this alien craft remind me so much of Earth,” asked Charlie.

“I was thinking the same,” replied Laura, “shouldn’t we test that water?”

“Good idea,” and they walked to the fountain, Charlie rummaged in his satchel and brought out a small pad of papers one of which he dipped into the liquid.

“Yes, it’s water all right, and perfectly safe to drink,” declared Charlie, “I’ll take a sample.”

They walked to the perimeter path to look at the buildings facing the square, they were all single story and were open fronted like market stalls, some small and some quite large ones. “Shops,” declared Laura, “shame they’re not stocked,”

“Hmm, but that poses a question of why are they here at all,” asked Charlie, “It’s just like they are up for rent.”

“The aliens want to let them out to someone,” said Laura, “do you think this is some sort of baited trap?”

“That, my dear was exactly what I have started to think about, it’s just too good and perfect to be true, and you know what they say, if it seems too good to be true, it probably is.”

“Who ever built this certainly studied Earth closely,” said Laura, “everything seems to be made for humans and for Earth-dwelling humans.”

“Time we were getting back to the hatch Laura, time’s nearly up.”

The three groups met up at the hatch and Charlie started examining the buggy, he retrieved another instrument from his satchel and touched the bodywork with a probe. After examining it he thought for a second and said, “It seems that this whole body is some form of battery, and if I am not mistaken, it draws its charge from that fusion reactor up there that acts as the Sun.”

“We will need to get one of these back to Earth to be back-engineered,” said the Captain.

“If we can find a way of getting it out,” said Blake, “it sure won’t fit through there,” he said indicating the hatch to the elevator.”

“Is it just me, or has the light level dropped over the last twenty minutes,” said Flynn.

“Yes it has,” said Charlie, “look there’s a shutter covering up their mini-star.”

Back in the shuttle the girls busied themselves preparing the NASA provisions, and John produced eight heads of sweet-corn that they had picked on the return journey, “Nothing like fresh corn,” he said, “just microwave it for a couple of minutes, and get that spread out, not like butter but it will do.”

“Well there’s some amazing tech out there that could benefit Earth no end,” said Blake.

“That’s if we can get it out,” commented Charlie, and he shared his fears about it being a trap.

“To what purpose,” asked Blake.

“Maybe to populate another genetically failing planet,” suggested Conrad, “like these ‘Greys’ that people report abducting people.”

“You’re not a conspiracy theorist are you, Conrad,” said the Captain, with a smirk on his face.

“Nicht, I am just making the suggestion, this ship may be from ze future.”

“Why would they go to all this trouble if they could just fly around grabbing people,” asked Jo.

“That’s true,” said John, “what it must have taken to design and build this ship, it’s more than just an abduction trap.”

“I sent all the video from your explorations, back to Houston and so we have Director Atherton Bennet on video link in sixteen minutes,” warned Angelo.

“OK, thanks for that number one,” said the Captain.

“We are not on the Starship Enterprise, Sir,” laughed Angelo.

“Tell me about this sphere thing Charlie,” asked Jo.

“Ah yes the Dyson Sphere, it has been theorised for several decades that an advanced civilisation could possibly build, with the right technology, a sort of cage around its star, and obtain almost limitless energy, which it transmits the energy to the planets in an energy stream. We thought that we’d found one back in the early two-thousands but it was found not to be so, I don’t

remember the details.”

“Pretty cool,” responded Jo.

“Not exactly 'cool' Jo,” laughed Charlie, “that thing up there is almost the temperature of the Sun, if it wasn't constricted like that it would burn us and everything here to a crisp. Here we just see the mini-star through that slot, and It revolved to shut off the light during the simulated night, I guess. The energy from that must be incredible, which is what must power the whole ship. Inside the shuttering there must be millions of energy receptors that take the energy to where it's needed.”

A few minutes later the radio sprang to life, “*Houston to 'Mission Reaper', come in.*” Angelo left the table and pushed off toward the communications station.

“Receiving you Houston control,” answered Angelo, “go ahead.”

About ten seconds passed and the radio announced, “*I am patching you through to Washington Reaper, stand by.*”

Seconds later Atherton appeared on the video screen, with Doug behind him, “*Congratulations on achieving target people,*” said Atherton, “*I've watched you video-send, what are your feelings so far,*” he asked.

The team each enthusiastically expressed their impressions of the initial exploration, Charlie extolled in raptures about the energy system, the fusion mini-star and the remote charging buggies, the water supply and his fears about it being a trap. Jo updated them on the written language situation and how they may be able to translate much of the signage, and that the ship was called “The Return’. This was done with several

interruptions from Laura. The Captain and John told about their feelings that the large spire was 'possibly' the control centre, to which Doug replied, *“Don’t forget the size of that ship, it would be a happy circumstance if you found the CC so easily, we have done some calculations here the area you are exploring is at least thirteen and a half million square miles in surface area, that’s from the telemetry you obtained on approach.”*

“Wow, that a lot of squares,” exclaimed Flynn, *“Earth’s land surface area is about fifty-seven and a half million square miles, if I remember right.”*

“Near enough,” said Doug, *I know what you’re thinking, but Earth has huge areas that are not settled, like the deserts, Polar Regions, etc.”*

“Could we get the whole population on Earth in here,” asked Blake.

“No, but we calculate that it could take a good portion,” answered Doug, *“looking at your video, there are large areas of agricultural land, so if what we have seen is average then it could support about two-billion people.”*

“Out of eight point eight billion,” said Flynn.

“As I said I know what you are thinking,” said Doug, *“that it could be used as a life-boat if the worst ever happens, but it will not hold the whole population, so we discounted that.”*

Everyone gave their first impressions of the first day’s exploration, and Atherton finally asked, *“Can I suggest Jo that before you go much further, you do enough work on the vocabulary of this ancient Hebrew, so that if and when you find the CC you can at least identify any labels, or instructions. I don’t suppose there is much chance of being able to speak the*

language?”

“None at all,” Jo answered, “letter sounds change over time and the verbal construction and intonations change. We can’t even speak early English with any accuracy, and in this case that could be dangerous.”

“Point taken,” said Atherton, *“I will get off now and let you people get some rest. Well done team, good job.”* And the link switched off

“I’ll take the first shift from eleven to three Angelo,” said Flynn, “you get some sleep and I’ll give you a call at three to take over.”

“Aye Captain, three AM,”

Jo and Laura went to work on constructing a dictionary, after three hours their eyes were closing and they decided to get some sleep and zipped themselves into their sleeping cocoons. “These are definitely not as comfy as those beds in the town-house,” stated Jo, “I think we will sleep in the town tomorrow night.”

“Good idea,” shouted Blake.

Soon all seven were asleep and gentle snores rose from several of the cocoons. At seven the following day Angelo set off the alarm to wake them all, his sense of humour came through as the alarm was a recording of ‘Reveille’. Everyone struggled out of the cocoons and pulled on their NASA jump-suits, then ate their bacon and egg nutrition bars. Jo and Laura put in two more hours on the dictionary and just after ten Atlantis time, they exited the Shuttle and made their way to the row of hatches. This time, whilst Jo and Laura set to work

translating the signs above each hatch, the others made a closer examination of the hatches. John was the one to make a discovery, around the frame of each hatch were seven buttons that were almost invisible, set into the metal frame. Blake and Flynn gave the go-ahead to press one and John obliged.

At his first touch the lettering above the hatch changed, and with each subsequent touch, changed again, seven times. They tried the next hatch and the same thing happened, but with a different set of names or words, according to Jo.

“I think you need to start translating these Jo,” said Blake, “they may be destination signs, and I’d sort-a like to know where I’m going.”

The first hatch, the one they had used the previous day, took over an hour to translate all forty-nine signs. “We have forty-nine destinations on each hatch,” said John, “so from this hangar we can get to what, three-hundred, forty-three destinations, now the whole thing may just be duplicated in each hangar, but I am willing to bet that each hangar leads to a whole new set of destinations. If that is the case then there are some two-thousand four-hundred and one points of entry to this ship. You have a lot of work to do ladies.”

“But we are looking for the control centre, the ‘bridge’ if you’d rather think of it that way, said Captain Josh Flynn.

The two women were left in the hangar with a magnetic

table and chairs from Atlantis whilst the other five returned to yesterday's entry point. When the hatch opened they found that the buggy was no longer waiting for them, as Josh Flynn wanted to investigate the crystal spire building, they walked out to the edge of town to collect another buggy. John again opened the 'garage' climbed onto the buggy and drove it out the other four climbed aboard and twenty minutes later they stopped outside the front of the huge building that soared like an icicle toward the foe-sun. Here again there was no obvious entrance, but an archway gave them a clue, and a few minutes investigation resulted in finding one of the almost invisible buttons. Blake was the one to touch the glass-like button and a doorway appeared like a curtain being drawn to each side. They walked into the building, to find an enormous space that seemed even larger than the outside, the spire was entirely hollow and soared to great heights that it seemed disappear into infinity above them. Pale blue-green light streamed in from all sides giving them the impression that they were under water. The floor consisted of semi-circular rows of seats all looking toward a central slightly raised dais, where the light seemed to be more intense, but without any extra light source.

"I wonder what this could be," asked Captain Josh, looks like a church to me."

"Or a seat of government, or a community meeting place," suggested Blake," or a theatre, it could be used for anything, every community needs a focal point where it can come together."

“At a quick count, I think there could be enough seats here to accommodate the population of a few towns like the two we’ve seen, maybe it’s a cathedral of sorts,” commented John.

“Good point,” said Charlie, “but I’m not into religion, so I’d prefer we didn’t start calling this the ‘Cathedral’.”

“OK from now on this is the ‘Meeting House’,” said Blake.

They examined the walls of the building without finding any other doors or anti-chambers. They had spent about two hours admiring and examining the Meeting House, when they heard Jo’s voice from the entrance, all five turned to see both Laura and Jo waving to them.

“How did you get here so quickly,” shouted Blake.

“You don’t need to shout Blake, the acoustics in here are great I can hear every word you five are saying,” said Jo, “we found one of the signs on the door you went through that translated ‘Tabernacle’ and we thought that may be where you were going, so we thought we’d test the theory.”

“And it worked, well done,” said Blake, who looked at the others, “don’t worry, ‘Tabernacle’ means meeting tent in Hebrew, not a church, later it just meant ‘a tent’ or a shelter”.

“Where’s the terminus here, Jo,” asked John.

“There are three, just behind the building,” said Jo, “they look a bit like those Hobbit houses in the old Lord of the Rings. What a great place though and wow, the sound in here.”

in Modern Hebrew “אגם דגים” “We also found a sign that said Hebrew,” announced Laura.

“Which means,” asked Captain Josh.

“Well we hope it means ‘Fish Lake’,” continued Laura.

“OK shall we take a look, folks,” suggested Blake. They all agreed and trooped out to the terminus behind the building. Laura found the right sign and they entered. When the hatch opened at the other end they were faced with another stunning sight; spread out before them was a huge lake, the far shore was only just visible in the haze. The shore below them was lined with a sandy beach from which protruded a little pier or landing stage, along which were several small boats tied up. At the rear edge of the beach, where the sand met the grass, were several racks with fishing nets draped over them, as if waiting for the fishermen to take out for the day’s catch. Along the grass bank were picnic tables backed with more flowering shrubs and tall trees, the air was perfumed lightly with salt and the aroma of the flowers. It was an idyllic location, ideal for a lazy Sunday afternoon’s relaxation.

“I wonder,” said Charlie, “fresh or salt water?” Although they no longer wore their EVA suits Charlie continued to carry the satchel, into which he dived and pulled out his pad of test papers, and marched down the beach to the water’s edge. A quick dip into the water confirmed it, “It’s salt water, but only just, I would guess that both fresh and seawater fish could tolerate it, obviously been engineered that way, as I doubt there would be salt in

any run-off here.”

“I doubt there is any run-off at all,” added John, “we have clouds up there but I have seen no sign of rain.” John joined Charlie down at the water’s edge and tasted the water after dipping his finger, then made his way around the little jetty and jumped into one of the boats. “Look here,” he called back, “same joystick arrangement as in the buggies.” John untied one of the boats and pushed the stick gently forward and to the right; the boat slowly responded and when he was further out pushed the control fully forward. The little two seat boat with an open well in the back, shot forward like a speed boat. They noticed that there were no propeller or jet effects at the rear.

“I thought so,” said Charlie, “it must operate on some form of induction power, from underneath the water, same way the buggies get their power, same construction material as well.”

“As nice as this place is,” said Blake, “let’s move on,” and then shouted to John and Charlie to return to the group. John obviously didn’t hear, or didn’t want to, and continued his jaunt on the lake. Josh switched on his person to person radio and spoke into the microphone that was clipped to his neck, “John can you get back, we’re moving on.” John obviously heard, he turned the boat so suddenly that it capsized and threw John into the water. The group gasped with worry, there was no sign of John for almost a minute, but then there was a palpable sigh of relief as John stood, the water just

coming to his arm-pits. The boat righted automatically, and John managed to get back in. As he, more slowly this time, came back to the landing-stage, he shouted, "There are fish in here, thousands of them; fresh fish for supper tonight folks, Yahoo!" When the boat arrived they found John, unseen, had put eight fish into the boat.

"What else have you found," asked Blake.

"Not sure," said Jo, "we just finished this scanner application, well Laura did, we can use these tablets to take a scan of the elevator signs and it will hopefully translate it. The lake was the first one we'd tried."

"Which worked fine," commented Laura.

"Yes it did," said Jo.

"Well let's go press some buttons," said Charlie, "as long as we know how to get back,"

"Yes," said Laura, "we have the hangar logged in here," she indicated the tablets they held in hands.

The group made their way to the elevator hatch once more and started pressing the buttons around the frame.

"This one says 'Store'," said Laura, "want a look?"

"Why not," said Blake, who placed his hand on the plate and the door opened, once inside the blue button was pressed and the elevator car moved. It took several minutes before the car stopped and the door opened, not into the open this time but into a warehouse, the size of which no one had ever even imagined. It was cool, just a few degrees above freezing, but totally empty. They stepped out to find maybe hundreds of elevator hatches along the walls. "Not much to see here," stated Blake,

let's try another location.”

For the remainder of the day they hopped from one wonder to another, as they elevator-hopped. As the light started to fade, and after visiting almost a half of the forty-nine locations signed, they found the destination board for hangar seven and returned to Atlantis once more. There was another conference with Houston and Doug in Washington, which was followed by a delicious microwaved fish supper. Laura and Jo huddled together sorting through the location signs they had scanned, and after an hour they declared that, “There is nothing in these translations that even suggests a control centre.”

“Maybe there isn't one,” said John, “maybe it totally automatic and Charlie's right.”

“That still makes no sense,” said Blake.

“I agree,” added Josh and Angelo in unison.

“I was thinking about that,” said Josh, “If there are different destinations available from each hangar, maybe we have to move Atlantis to another hangar bay and try there, at the least it will prove if we are right about all the different access points.”

“Do we have enough fuel to hangar-hop,” asked Blake.

“Yea, plenty,” answered Josh, “we found the access hatches quite quickly and we have plenty of reserves.”

“OK. Tomorrow we move on,” said Josh, “I just have a hunch that hangar four, the middle hangar, may be the one.”

“Why,” asked Blake, “why not hangar one.”

“That would be my next guess, but I just have this strong

feeling that its number four.”

That following morning after breakfast Atlantis fired up its rocket motors and slid easily out of hangar seven, made a seven mile flight and docked in the middle hangar. This one was considerably smaller than number seven, which would have possibly held some ten shuttles. Hangar seven could easily have accommodated more than a hundred of Atlantis. Josh piloted the Shuttle to the single hatch at the back of the hangar. “This looks promising,” he said, “smaller hangar and just one elevator.” The Shuttle powered down and the main hatch opened, “OK ladies you’d better get to work your magic again.” Laura and Jo exited the Shuttle and went to the hatch.

“There are still seven buttons here,” called Jo back to the others, who had started to follow them.

Laura scanned the sign with her tablet and a few seconds later the translation came up on the screen, she read it and said, “Power tent, or room.”

“Engine room,” said Josh excitedly.

Next sign up came 'Fuel', then 'Replication' “I think that may be maintenance,” said Josh.

The next button brought up what he had been waiting for, the translation came up with 'Creation & Manipulation', “has to be command centre,” Josh said, the last three were 'Auxiliary', 'Supply' and 'Personnel Tabernacles',

“That will be crew quarters, no doubt,” said Jo.

Inevitably, again they pressed the middle button to select 'Creation & Manipulation' and piled into the elevator car. This journey took somewhat longer than any they had so far taken and took a full ten minutes; they all sensed that they were travelling at great speed also. Finally the hatch opened on darkness, all seven switched on their torches, which revealed some of the immensely complicated instrumentation. "Lights!" shouted Josh.

"If it is voice controlled it won't answer to English," said Laura.

"So what is ancient Hebrew for 'lights'," asked Josh.

"We have no idea," said Jo.

"I think you will find that the word is 'ôr'," shouted Blake, and immediately the lights brightly illuminated the control room.

"How did you know that," asked Charlie.

"Surprising what you can pick up from reading the Bible," retorted Blake.

"Woo, where in tar-nation do we start with this lot," asked Josh to no one in particular, whilst he stroked his hand over his skull, "I thought the Shuttle was complicated when I first got in the simulator, but it has nothing on this, you have your work cut out ladies."

"Do we have anything to physically write on," asked Jo, "to write translations on, there are hundreds of labels here."

"Angelo here," came a voice over the radios, "we have the plastic film we use in case the audio goes down and we only have video-link."

"OK, Angelo," answered Josh, "I'll come back for it."

“Roger that Sir, Angelo out.”

“Be back in thirty,” said Josh as he entered the elevator again.

“These look like observation ports, but they are covered by plating,” said John, looking along one wall of the bridge.

“Could be,” answered Charlie, “think that button there, opens them?”

“Maybe, but it looks like we have no power,” answered John, “Jo, what were the other options on the elevator buttons?”

Jo grabbed her tablet and flicked through a couple of screens, “Power tent, or room', 'Fuel', 'Replication', 'Auxiliary', 'Supply' and 'Personnel Tabernacles” she read.

“I'm willing to bet that Auxiliary, means ' Auxiliary Power', some kind of generator or tap on that mini-Sun out there,” said Charlie.

“Shall we have a look Blake,” asked John, “you're the boss.”

“Yes, go,” said Blake, “but don't touch anything you're not sure of.”

“Look for something like this, [עזר],” said Jo showing him here tablet screen, “it'll likely have a line joining the bottom of the characters.”

“See you later,” said John as they entered the elevator whilst Jo brought up the destination.

The elevator journey was much shorter than the one to

the bridge, and in just a few seconds the hatch opened, and they were met again by darkness, John called ““ôr”” and again the light flooded the modest room, “What's that,” asked John.

Charlie inspected the roughly spherical unit that stood in the middle of the floor, it was about two meters in diameter with few controls, it had a plate like the ones by the elevators and a smaller square button beside it, “Amazing,” said Charlie in a reverend tone, “I think what we have here my friend is the holy chalice of physics, it seems to be a 'Cold Fusion Generator' humans have been trying to develop this for seventy years and more.”

“Yes, I know,” said John, “we just have to back-engineer this.”

Charlie placed his hand on the plate and nothing happened; he touched the small square at the same time and there was a low hum, which quickly grew until they needed to shout, it then fell again to the original low hum and the lights flickered; it was working.

On the bridge everything came alive, “They seem to have succeeded,” said Conrad.

“Indeed,” said Blake in a rather Spock-like voice, as he smiled, but the joke seemed to be lost on Conrad. Blake looked at Jo. Who was just smiling, and shrugged her shoulders. “Have you made any progress, Jo?”

“Some,” said Jo, “but I'm having a hard job understanding what they mean. See, this one translates as 'wind', what would that be?”

“Jo,” called Laura, “I think this is the window control, it translates as 'view'.”

“Try it,” said Blake. Laura followed orders and placed her hand on the two inch dome on one of the panels. Slowly the plates that covered the observation ports lifted and revealed the most amazing sight; ahead was a panorama of bright stars and around to their left, just in sight was Earth and the Moon, looking the same size from this distance. The four all leaned on the panels and craned their necks to gaze at the wonderful sight. Still so few humans had actually seen this view of Earth, even though the space age had started over eighty years before. Space Tourism had taken a few super-rich people into space and the ultra-rich had even spent time on Sky-view, the space hotel that opened in the late twenties. So to Jo, Blake and Conrad this view really meant a lot. They were still gazing out to the stars when John and Charlie arrived back on the bridge.

“Got them open then,” said Charlie.

“Yep, thanks to you two,” said Blake, “well done.”

A moment later Josh, with a thirty centimetre roll of film, arrived, “Ah, someone's been busy, got the power on.”

“Charlie and John did it,” said Blake, “the power unit is in the Auxiliary bay.”

“Thought it might be,” answered Josh, “and the forward ports are open as well, good work, what a view hey?”

The remainder of the day was taken up with translating the many labels around the bridge, even the engine start sequence was uncovered and various other systems,

some for the wondrous spherical world inside, but mostly to drive and control the ship. It was one thing discovering and translating the controls, however, it was quite another to find out what they actually did, and that would be the next challenge.

The reason Captain Josh Flynn was chosen for the mission, was simple, he was acknowledged as NASA's foremost expert on present and future propulsion systems, the man behind the developing Alcubierre, gravity-bubble system, commonly known, though inaccurately, as the 'Warp Drive'. It took two more days to translate all of the labels on the bridge and after that Josh was left alone on the bridge to figure the systems. In the meanwhile the others continued to explore, after finding that one of the options from the hangar four elevator took them to any of the other hangars they chose, and from there to any point in this microcosm of this synthetic world. On the fifth night Josh, the Captain, arrived back at Atlantis, he looked exhausted.

“Josh,” said Jo, “why don't you take tomorrow off, you look terrible.”

“There is little time to spare, we gave ourselves a month and Atlantis was provisioned in accordingly, we have little over a week left here.”

“Surely that can be extended Josh,” said Blake, “we've plenty of water from the ship and I'm sure no one would mind fish supplements, they're delicious, and we can extend our stay by at least a week.”

“I guess so,” answered Josh, “I was going to move up to

the crew quarters to save coming back here, but if we can extend I may be able to figure the controls out.”

“So, how's progress, Captain,” asked Charlie.

“I've made some steps forward, the ship seems to have three propulsion systems, none of them chemical,” explained Josh. One seems to be some sort of manoeuvring system, and then we have an induction system which uses some kind of variable impulse to accelerate the ship.”

“What velocity does that achieve, do you think,” asked John, ever the aerospace engineer.

“According to the labels that Jo and Laura have produced, we have graduations in percent of 'ôr', light.”

“What!” exclaimed Charlie, “near light speed travel, how is that possible?”

“Well the way it just appeared on our screens,” said Blake, “I should think it's entirely possible.”

“Now don't get excited,” said the Captain, “that's two of the systems, which leaves the question, what is the third system for?”

“Oh my goodness,” said John, “you think it may be FTL?”

“What's 'FTL' please,” asked Jo and Laura almost in concert.

That was followed by another chorus, this time of six male voices, “Faster Than Light travel.”

“Hey, I'm nowhere close to figuring this out yet, so let's not jump ahead, it's just a possibility,” explained Josh, “first priority is to get this ship in a closer orbit to Earth,

so we can get more help on board.”

“We’re taking her closer to Earth,” queried Blake, “I wasn’t told about that.”

“Those were my orders from NASA Exec, I thought you knew.”

“What orbit,” asked Blake.

“HEO,” Josh answered.

“Twenty-six thousand miles?”

“A bit higher than that,” said Josh, “we have to clear the communications satellites, somewhere close to thirty-five.”

“That’s still very close, we don’t even know why it’s here yet,” interrupted Charlie, “this could still be a Trojan-horse you know.”

“To be honest Josh,” stated John, “I agree, with the potential energy in this ship, if it blows up it could take a good part of our planet with it.”

“I would agree John,” conceded the Captain, “but I’m Air Force, and NASA and orders are orders, as you must know John.”

“All of this is very interesting,” interrupted Jo, “now what about joining us at the lake tomorrow, for some R&R, as you Americans say.”

“OK, I guess I could use a break, and think through some stuff.” conceded Josh.

“Good, well catch some more fish and have a cruise with the boats, just laze around for a few hours, take a book on your pad,”

“OK, OK you’ve sold it to me, Jo,”

That evening the usual contact was made with Houston, who had obviously been listening in, and thought that a day off was a great idea. They were also some excitement evident, which was possibly from the mention of FTL travel, but no one actually mentioned it. *“One bit of news you may be interested in, they got the guy that bombed Atlantis, and he talked; they've arrested General Croft McFarland of the Joint Chiefs, last week he slugged the President, so got fired and now the bomber's implicated him in the bombing. Ain't life great?”* said the controller.

Josh explained the plans for extending their stay in 'The Return' and asked for confirmation, authorisation came before the transmission finished.

The morning came with a festive air as the entire crew busied themselves over breakfast and persuading Josh to allow Angelo to join them. Angelo had only seen a small percent of the ship, other than through the video feed. Finally the Captain agreed, as long as they could maintain the radio or video link, which Angelo quickly set-up and produced a portable unit from stowage. All eight members trooped to the hatch at ten (ship's time) and dialled up the lake, they left their suits, with the magnetic boots, behind at the hatch and wandered down to the beach, chose a picnic table and settled down. After an hour John stood up, “I going to pick some of that sweet-corn for lunch along with the fish, I'll cook it all in the Shuttle and bring it down in the insulator box.” An hour later John returned from the hatch, he walked down to the jetty and grabbed a fishing-net, jumped in

one of the boats and pushed out about a hundred meters, where he threw the net into the water. Just seconds later he hauled in a net of struggling fish. He spent a few minutes selecting the best and emptied the remainder back into the lake. Satisfied, he made his way back to the hatch, waving as he went. One and a half hours later John appeared with one of the gleaming silver-padded stowage boxes from Atlantis. "Lunch, is served, you lazy lot," he called as he approached. The lunch was delicious and everyone, totally satisfied, lay back in the grass a dozed in the gentle warmth of the mini-sun. After a couple of hours snooze it was Jo who came awake first, and shouted to the others to wake up; she looked around to check everyone was there and saw Charlie and Laura behind her. Charlie was stretched out on the grass and Laura had her head on his chest and her left arm around his waist. Laura awoke before Charlie and realising her position, removed herself embarrassingly, and stood up pulling her 'T'-shirt down. As Laura passed by Jo commented, "Getting a bit cosy with Charlie aren't we."

"I don't know how that happened," said Laura, "he's not my type, too much of a loose cannon."

The afternoon's activity was to take to the boats, which doubled as an exploratory trip, a flotilla of four boats made their way up along the near coast. There were more villages and larger towns along here, spread out at various intervals but all separate, and in various styles, many looked very Romanesque, some were European or American, in the distance they even glimpsed what

looked like an African village, but no one was sure.

After three fascinating hours they decided to turn back and as they neared their picnic spot the light levels started to lower. Jo suggested that they waited until after dark to see what it was like and they all agreed. The effect was yet another wonder of the ship, as darkness fell the light grey clouds started to glow with a blue hue, and through them tiny dots of light appeared, as if the roof had been removed from the ship. The translucent blue clouds made the lights twinkle with a myriad of pale colours that danced across the sky, and everyone fell into a totally relaxed state of mind. They were all silent as they made their way back to the Atlantis and climbed into their low-gravity sleeping cocoons.

The following morning the crew felt refreshed and ready for more exploring, and in Josh's case, more figuring out of the systems. They ate breakfast, together and Josh left them for the bridge. Blake, who had been making some schedules called everyone into a meeting, "Right," he said, "in my opinion what we need is to formally map this ship," Charlie started to speak but Blake held up his hand to stop him, "I know we have the video record, Charlie, but I have been speaking to Angelo, he tells me that we have a laser-mapping unit on-board that can be pulled for portable use. He reckons that we need to choose six points around the sphere, or somewhere near the equator of the sphere and he can link in the video to each point, where we have video. It seems the video is

grid-linked, is that right Angelo?” Angelo nodded to confirm this. “I spoke to Atherton a couple of days ago and he agrees this is crucial, so that's our mission for the next week folks.”

“I have much experience in laser mapping with the ESA, Blake,” interjected Conrad, who was always very quiet, so the offer took them all by surprise, “maybe I take assume charge of this mission Sir.”

“Be my guest Conrad, I know nothing, other than the instruction that Angelo has written out for me,” said Blake, “I am sure glad you're on-board.” Blake looked to Laura, “I believe you are a keen photographer Laura,” she nodded, “I need you to take the official mission camera, that the one that takes all those great space shots when in orbit, and make a record of all the plants, flowers, any insects you find as well. Try to get a visual catalogue of the nature of this place, you OK with that?”

“Yea, that's great, I love doing things like that,” agreed Laura.

“Jo, you know your task, record and translate any and all marks or lettering we find,” Jo just smiled.

“You two guys,” Blake continued, “technology; anything we encounter, like the buggies and the boats, I'd like a report on each, with theories on how they work, no problem for you Charlie, you've always had a theory just about everything.” Charlie smiled sheepishly.

“OK Mission Specialists, let's get out there,” Blake concluded.

The week passed quickly and another day at the lake

revitalised them all for the final and extra week. The previous week had been a successful one, the team had mapped five-sixths of the land inside of The Return, and Josh, re-energised by his day off, had made amazing strides. Two days previously Josh had managed to use the manoeuvring system to turn the ship through ninety degrees. Yesterday, the Captain had reduced the distance to Earth by one-hundred thousand miles and successfully parked in a stationary position. For this he had borrowed John for the day, so that one could stand duty on the bridge whilst Josh investigated the Engine Room. After a couple of hours John was called to the Engine Room because of his experience with Boeing systems.

“Can you run your eye over this little lot,” said Josh, as John entered the cavernous room.

“Sure,” said John as he looked around, but there's nothing here I recognise.”

“Well maybe together we can spot something,”

“I thought there was an engine start button on the bridge,” commented John.

“There is but it just don't work buddy, I know you guys at Boeing have been tinkering with proton drives.”

“How do you know that,” shot John, amazed.”

“Listen buddy, nothing gets past NASA, you ought'a know that by your age,” Josh laughed.

John sighed, “Well seeing as you know, but we are right at the start of a long road you know. You cannot start any quantum drive cold, there needs to be some form of radiation bombardment to warm the system up, so it may be an idea to look for anything that looks like it would

do that.”

Whilst the two men were examining the engine room they started to chat, eventually John asked, “Whilst there is just the two of us, Josh, what's the truth about it, have we ever retrieved any alien craft in the past, ever?”

“I never had you down as one of these conspiracy theorists.”

“I am surely not,” said John.

“That's why you're here and not Charlie.”

“But what's the truth Josh, come on I have the same security clearance as you?”

“Actually your clearance is above mine, I checked; John, do you really think we'd still be using chemical rockets and, both you and I, would be searching for an alternative means if we had captured a UFO and back engineered it?”

“I guess not, but where did the theory come from,” asked John.

“The forty-seven incident was a high altitude balloon that was used to monitor USSR atom tests, they over-filled it and it exploded and crashed.”

“What about all the strange material they found?”

The silver was Mylar, a strategic material back then, that wasn't known generally, and what looked like strong wood was just compressed balsa-wood, put under a hydraulic press; and you know the writing on the struts, it was mirror writing from the sheets of wood that they protected the balsa with. Way back I spoke to the Air Force base CO, we had a good laugh about it.”

“All sounds logical to me,” said John.

“OK Mister Spock?”

“Josh, this is basically the same as the smaller auxiliary power unit, look here the controls are about the same.”

John suddenly realised, “only a lot bigger.”

“I don't know John; I've never seen the auxiliary unit.”

“It's a cold fusion unit again, in there is another mini-star, this button seems to get things stirred up and then when this light comes on you change the position of this lever and the fusion reaction starts.”

“Go on then, get it started,” said Josh. John went through the sequence and the hum started, grew and faded into the background, but something was different. Josh was busy following some trunking, which fed into a series of lenses and prisms. “This is just producing a photon stream,” he said, “it's just a light source.”

John went off looking at the connected equipment and out came a calculator and other instruments, all Josh could hear were the occasional, “hu-hu, right!, great, that's amazing and finally a wow”. Finally not being able to stand the suspense any longer Josh called out, “John, what have you discovered?”

“This is incredible Josh,” he said as he came back around the end of the massive containment shell, “this is something I have been looking into for years, it's actually a true 'star-drive'.”

“You mean it's a FTL drive.”

“No,” said John, but it may get this crate up to FTL.”

“How,” asked John.

“Look, if you take a hand torch into space and switch it on in zero gravity, the torch will slowly move off in the opposite direction to the beam, right?”

“Yea, that's the Active Photon Effect, we've known that for the past ten years or so,” said Josh, “but it produces so little thrust that it's useless.”

“Now,” continued John, “what if the source of the photon stream is a star, and that stream is concentrated somehow. We have all looked at harnessing the solar wind, and we have experimented with solar sails, but they don't accelerate quickly enough for our needs, but what if we turn that on its head, use the solar wind at source, bang! We have the power of that photon stream as it comes off the star.”

“And that's what you reckon this is a star-drive?”

“Yep, everything's here, said John, “we just need to test it, but I will warn you, anything in the path of the stream within a hundred miles will be incinerated.”

“OK, no time like the present, let's see what happens,” said Josh. The two made their way to the bridge once more; John opened the view ports as Josh stared at the 'ôr' lever. He manoeuvred the craft to head into open space first then turned back to the lever, the markings of which were set against a log-log scale. Josh turned the lever a fraction, seemingly without any effect; he moved it once more to the first mark, which suggested a point zero-one speed. The effect was immediate. They felt a vibration travel through the ship and the stern monitor that now showed Earth shrunk by at least thirty percent.

One other effect to the move was that Angelo's voice came over the radio, "Are you two safe up there," he asked.

"Yea," said his Captain, we just moved the ship several thousand miles out into space."

There was a cheer in the background from everyone, "that was by my reckoning about a nought point zero-one light speed, be warned people, I am going to try to take 'Return' closer to Earth, so just be warned, I will do it as gently as I can." Josh turned the ship once more toward Earth, took a deep breath and slowly, very slowly, moved the lever forward. 'The Return' reacted and smoothly moved toward the blue-marble. When he gauged that they were probably a hundred thousand miles closer he shut the drive down and as before the craft settled into a stationary parked position."

"Good brakes too," laughed John.

"Must be some sort of automatic reverse thrust system," commented Josh, "very useful when you think of the mass of this ship."

Within a minute of the move Houston was on the radio and Angelo patched them through to the bridge. "*What's going on up there Captain,*" said the voice of control.

"Other than the obvious, you mean," retorted Josh.

"*We have you one hundred and ten thousand miles close to Earth, that was a bit sudden Captain, can you warn us next time, you just set off all sorts of alarms down here.*"

"Darn, I was aiming at one-hundred thousand," he laughed, "Roger that control, we are done for today."

There were celebrations that evening and they dined on reconstituted potato and a fish that tasted like. . . chicken. Everyone concentrated Josh, who fairly gave much of the credit to John for working the system out. The following day was their designated day off and they decided to visit another lake that was on the other side of the Return's habitat sphere. This lake was bordered on one side by low cliffs, about twenty or so meters high, below the cliffs were pebble beaches, as opposed to the sand at the first lake. Here there were canoes rather than the little plastic looking motor-boats, but Charlie declared that they worked on the same principle. One difference here was that there was a breeze blowing and instead of morning it was late afternoon, and they were looking forward to a midnight picnic on the beach below the stars. They readied the picnic in the failing light and sat waiting, when darkness finally fell and those entrancing lights appeared each one was again enthralled by the sight of the sky and the reflections in the water of the lake, it felt magical. Blake and Jo took one of the canoes out onto the lake a few meters and just sat there, enjoying the effect of having lights above and around them. After a few hours they decided to return to the fish-lake to experience the whole thing over again.

As usual that evening, Houston contacted them, but today it was earlier, before supper, "*Atlantis, this is Houston Control come in Atlantis,*" the controller's voice rang out from the communications unit.

Angelo answered, "Houston Control this is Atlantis receiving, go ahead."

"Atlantis, glad to see you so energised after you R&R day, we have a guest for you today, President Bose would like to talk to the whole crew, he will be on in seven minutes, and the whole world will be watching, so get your hair brushed ladies and gents."

There was audible groan from Blake, who, as usual hated these sorts of high profile events. "Don't be such misery, Blake" said Jo.

"Great work up there this week you guys, we're all looking forward to having you back on Earth in a few days; Blake my friend, the media are really looking forward to about six weeks of interviews, so you can look forward to that," the control laughed. *"Some news for you two guys, John and Josh, the Smithsonian Institute have arranged for honorary doctorates for each of you for services to science, yea, I know you got two each already, you can't have enough docs around. There's also one each for you two gals for all the work you've done in translating and that app that Laura's written is gonna' make a mill or two, good work ladies. I think your return is scheduled for four days time, but your Director will give you the details."*

The two women were thrilled with the rewards, John and Josh showed little reaction to it.

"Looks like you and I have been left out of the big-top Conrad," said Charlie.

"I doubt that somehow." said Blake.

"I have been told that Proteus is on line and we are ready to start transmission,"

“Good evening my fellow Americans, tonight I am here to honour eight explorers who at risk of life travelled into space for the benefit of all mankind. It is not surprising to anyone who has watched, read or clicked through Earth’s media over the past months, I am of course referring to the eight persons who are Mission Reaper; all of which are on video link directly from Space Shuttle Atlantis. Hello Reaper!”

There was a chorus of greetings from the crew.

“When you arrive back here on mother Earth next week, I will have the honour of presenting each of you with the Medal of Honour, and as we have three British cousins, an Austrian and a naturalised American Brit, I believe that the British and Austrian Prime Ministers will also be with us to celebrate. Blake Northfield; as the leader of this expedition, what are your feelings about the discoveries and the potential benefit to mankind?”

“Mr President, Sir, I obtained my role purely because I was the person who first spotted the space-craft, it was pure luck, as an engineer I have done my best to guide and manage the team, but it is the members of the team who have made the major discoveries. My only prayer would be Sir, that whatever we gain, whatever we manage to back-engineer from this craft, that it be used for the benefit of humanity in general, and not turned into weapons, as so often happens.”

“We sure share your hopes Blake; Captain Flynn, what

is your strongest memory of the craft?"

"Sir, the memory I will take away from this ship will be from last night, sitting on a synthetic beach with a sky full of multicoloured lights and a lake of reflections, sharing the moment with seven people who will forever be regarded as more than friends." Blake's jaw dropped at Josh's response and it seems so did the president's, as there was a stutter and a pause before Bose continued.

"Er, thank you Captain, I am sure each of you will have some very special memories. John Armstrong, from Boeing; maybe you can tell us about what you regard as the greatest discovery of the past month?"

"Sure Mr. President, I think I would agree with Captain Flynn overall, but there have been so many scientific discoveries, I am afraid that I could not pick just one. We have seen many systems that will benefit Earth, from space travel to energy production, but it will only benefit Earth and her people if these discoveries do not end up in the hands of those who would exploit them."

"Thank you so much John, all it leaves me to do is to wish you all a safe return to Earth in just a few days, and I look forward to greeting you, at Cape Canaveral, Bonn Voyage."

"Houston here Reaper, you gave the President something to think about there guys," said the controller's voice, *"don't think Proteus is too happy."*

"That's the President's problem not ours Houston,"

replied Bake.

“OK, that's it for tonight; we'll speak tomorrow when I tell you the reaction from the world down here, Houston out.”

“Thank you both for your support,” said Blake.

“I meant every word,” said Josh, and I am totally behind you.” The whole team agreed and vowed to do whatever they could to further the principles that John had expressed.

“That's put me in a bit of a spot,” said President Bose from behind the desk that Queen Victoria had presented to America, in the Oval office.

“It is an internationally funded mission after all, and by government not by private enterprise,” said Mark Harland, Bose's Chief of Staff.

“All well and good, but you know the power suppliers, here and in Europe, will be all clambering for the technology when it's ready, and they will want to make more money from it.”

“That Boss, is likely to be way beyond the extent of this administration's term,” said Harland.

“True I guess,” said Bose, do we know what time they are landing on Wednesday, Mark?”

“No, just sometime between two and six, that's the window NASA has given me, I believe they are going to attempt to bring the craft into High Earth Orbit tomorrow, then prep Atlantis on Tuesday.”

“Do we have McFarland safely out of the way, we don't need him around on Wednesday,” asked the President.

“Yes Sir, Secret Service have him in one of the FBI

facilities, I don't know which one, they wish to charge him with either treason or incitement to terrorism,” Harland informed his boss.

“Let me think about it, the General's given thirty years to this country, so I have to take that into consideration,” said President Bose, “can we get a psyche assessment?”
“Sure, I'll let Secret Service know.”

The following day on board 'The Return', three-hundred and thirty thousand miles from Earth, seven people were standing in the elevator that would deliver them to the ship's bridge. Josh Flynn opened the hatch and loudly called for 'ôr', he thought that someone would eventually find a way of reprogramming that speech control. Charlie opened the observation ports and gazed once more at his home planet for a few wistful seconds then wandered off to the far end of the bridge. Josh and John re-entered the elevator and rode the car down to the engine room; although they had no idea where these facilities were located in the ship, their minds were happy with the idea that the bridge was up. Once there, they started the engines again. On the bridge Charlie found a control panel that seemed to lift up. The underside of the panel, which was to one side of the main navigation controls, was equipped with a disk-shaped screen of a type he was unfamiliar with. Below the screen were several dome-shaped switches or controls, Charlie tried pressing the blue dome, which on this ship, seemed to be the 'on' switch. In an instant the screen illuminated, showing a wide vista of stars.

“Charlie, what are you fooling with,” said Blake, “Josh will blow his stack if you mess something up.”

“Come over an see,” called Charlie, “it's some sort of spatial display,” Blake joined him as he tried one of the other five controls, a amethyst coloured one, in addition two were a transparent green and two were a transparent amber colour. As he turned the amethyst dome the image on the screen zoomed in on the stars, as Charlie kept turning the display just kept zooming in. A star close to the centre of the display became isolated and Blake shouted.

“Look! I can make out three planets around that star.” The two women and Conrad came across quickly to look.

“How does this work,” said Conrad, one can never see planets around stars.”

Charlie quickly tried the other domes and the image swung sideways, although there were graduations on the image, no one had any idea what they meant, and they skipped from star system to star system watching the amazing images. During one swing something very large flashed in and out of the screen, and Charlie ‘zoomed’ the image back out until what was on the screen was very recognisable. The five pairs of eyes were transfixed, they were staring at a detailed image of the planet Mars.

Just at that point the hatch opened and Josh stepped out of the elevator followed by John, “What are you people

looking at,” asked Josh.

“Come and look,” called Charlie.

“I think you'd better had,” added Blake. The two walked over to the little group, “That's Mars, Josh, and if you zoom in you can see individual pebbles on the surface.”

“Oh my goodness, said Josh, “how far will it zoom in?”

“Well just before we found Mars we were looking at planets around some distant stars,” said Blake.

“No! That's not possible,” said John.

“Well it is with this,” countered Charlie.

“This knob zooms in and out,” explained Charlie, “no idea how far it will zoom in; these amber knobs pan the view left and right and those tilt up and down.”

“What are these for,” asked Josh, indicating a small black button and two graduated knobs.

“I have no idea,” said Charlie, “not tried those yet,” he said as he leaned over and clicked the black button. The image immediately zoomed out to a wide view and then back in to show an area of maybe a thousand stars, there were three piping sounds and the image started hunting, first one way then the other. Each time it changed direction it made the same strange pinning sound and the two amber domes flashed.

“I think this is a navigation aid,” said John, “it's certainly searching for something, maybe obstructions.”

“Could be it's for plotting a course.” suggested Charlie.

“It could be also an auto pilot,” said Conrad, “may it be that it was this that brought the ship to Earth?”

“Good thinking,” said Josh. “Let's leave it running and see what it finds.”

“Shall we get on with moving this ship back to Earth,” suggested Josh, “time's a pass-in'.”

Charlie stayed by his new discovery and said, “You don't mind if I keep observing this screen, do you old boy.”

“Carry on Charlie, let us know if anything dramatic happens,” said Josh, with a smile.

At the main control panel Josh activated the manoeuvring controls and slowly brought the ship around to face Earth. “This will just be guess-work,” he said.

“We trust you,” called Blake.

“Such are misconceptions,” laughed Josh. Very slowly the stars outside the observation ports started to slide to the left, until eventually Earth slid into view. Josh stopped the ship at the point where he hopped the ship would be in line with a point around thirty-thousand miles from the planet. “John, can you take over here and guide us in like we tried the other day please,” he asked. John took Josh's place at the manoeuvring control and waited. Josh moved to the control they had started to call the Star-drive, or as they had decided to christen it, the 'SD', “hold tight everyone, we're going in,” he called. Every one felt the low acceleration start and grabbed a surface, expecting the velocity to increase, but Josh held it at the minimum and Earth grew like a balloon being inflated. His forward display showed him several communication and positioning satellites that he knew were in orbit at around twenty-six thousand miles out. “Two seconds to starboard John please,” he called out,

then, “two more seconds John.” The ship moved almost imperceptibly to the left and then Earth began to slide out of sight to the right. Josh gave one last adjustment to the speed of 'The Return' and then announced, “Ladies and gentlemen, hopefully we are in orbit.”

“Houston control to Reaper, come in.”

“Reaper here, receiving,” came the voice of Angelo.

“Confirming that you are inserted to orbit at thirty-two point four, three, thousand miles; well done Captain, nice parking.”

“Roger that Houston, see you in two days,” responded Josh. “Show's over friends, now we prepare to go home. John will you get to the Engine Room and power the engines down please?”

“Aye Captain, power engines down,” John said as he made for the hatch.

Josh locked down the manoeuvring system and powered that down too, he was about to close the observation ports when the air was shattered by a 'wa-wa' siren, followed by Charlie shouting, “We have something!”

Josh activated the person to person radio to speak to Angelo without Houston hearing, something was wrong here, he just had one of those feelings. Those same feelings had saved his life a couple of times already and he had learned to trust them. Once on a test flight over the Pacific Ocean he had got the feeling that something was happening to the hybrid rocket engine strapped to the CX50 prototype, he had tried to eject the motor but it was jammed. The instruments had cut off and the plane started to vibrate. It wasn't unusual in test flights but

that feeling had caused him to eject, and that had saved his life. The craft had blown up seconds later, his parachute had been singed but he landed safely and unhurt. On another occasion, because of the same feelings he had purposely missed a flight from Andrews Air Force Base to Kennedy, the jet had been involved in a mid-air collision, and all aboard were killed. So Josh was not about to risk anything at this point. Until he knew what was going on, it was best not to trouble Houston.

“Can't you switch that dam noise off Charlie,” shouted Blake, just as the sound stopped of its own.

“What have you got Charlie,” asked Josh as he approached the station, he looked at the screen which was mostly filled with the image of an asteroid. The asteroid was outlined within an amber line which was flashing and then extended through the bottom of the screen. “What's that line,” Josh asked, “zoom out.” The asteroid disappeared but the amber line continued, and Charlie continued to zoom out, and out. It took all of three minutes zooming before Earth appeared on the screen, and there the amber line terminated, a thousand miles off the West-African coast, about level with Angola. Josh and Charlie looked at each other in shock, “Is there any way to find out the mass of that asteroid?”

“No as far as I know, haven't used it much yet.”

“What's going on,” asked Blake over their shoulders.

“I think that this system detects objects and their trajectory relative to this ship's position,” said Charlie, and it's picked up an asteroid with a projected path

directly to Earth, see here,” Charlie pointed at what he thought was the possible impact point.

“It may or may not be as Charlie says,” stated Josh, “but the problem is that we have no way of knowing what the asteroid's mass is.”

“What about those graduations around the screen, they are not fixed, they expand as you zoom in, I saw it when we were watching the stars and Mars,” said Blake.

“How does that help us,” asked Josh.

“We need to do some calibration, we use it in tracking and engineering all the time,” continued Blake. Look, we know the diameter of Earth, so we measure Earth from here using that scope, then we measure Mars the same way, that gives us a ratio and if it's the same we can work out the scale of those graduations on the screen, Jo will translate the numbers for us.”

“Thank God for engineers,” said Charlie. Josh activated the manoeuvring system again, so that they had a clear straight on view of Earth through the screen and Charlie took down the numbers given by Jo. They eventually found Mars on the scope and repeated the process. Blake tucked himself away in a corner to do the maths. “Bingo,” said Blake “the two planets confirm the system is a measuring device, but I'm not sure of the increments.”

“You mean like centimetres, meters, kilometres,” asked Jo.

“Yes, how many small ones make a bigger one.” confirmed Blake.

“I think you're complicating things,” his wife said, “everything else in here operated on that 'Log-log' system, so my guess is that this will as well.”

“Of course, one increment equals two of the next smaller graduations,” said Blake smacking his forehead with the heel of his hand. Blake made his way back to the screen, “get that asteroid back up please Charlie.” It took seconds to find the asteroid again, as the system must have stored it in a memory bank, and it was easy to find the line between it and Earth. Charlie left Blake at the screen and joined the others watching him like a circus act. There were several bouts of muttering and a few sheets of Jo's writing film ended on the floor, they watched as Blake's head received several short bouts of scratching and some chin stroking. Finally Blake turned toward the group, his face white; he quickly switched off the communications with Earth. “What I am about to say, I think we should keep to ourselves for the time being, until everything can be verified.”

“According to my calculations, and I have repeated them four times, this asteroid is eight-hundred miles across, almost a mini-planet,” announced Blake. “If this is really on a bull's-eye course for Earth, it's going to be an extinction event.”

Chapter 6

Extinction?

At seven on Wednesday morning all loose items were stowed away and Atlantis was secured. Breakfast had been early and there was a pall of heavy atmosphere hanging over the whole crew, the knowledge of the asteroid weighed heavy on them all. Houston had not been informed and the stress of knowing what was going to happen was also been a burden. Josh and Blake had agreed that the news needed to be delivered in person, rather than over a radio or video link, and that they should take the opportunity to consult with the US President and the British Prime Minister together at their homecoming. Earth was in for a shock. At eight forty-five the number four hangar bay door lifted and Atlantis nosed her way out of the strange alien ship. Atlantis would be moving slower on this return trip, and at just after two Eastern Standard Time, the old Shuttle floated into Low earth Orbit. The space ship made one orbit of the Earth and at three-forty started her de-orbit manoeuvre, rotated tail-first into the direction of travel and fired all engines to slow the Shuttle down even more. Then at sixteen-ten hours Atlantis touched down on the long runway at Canaveral. A tractor unit and a decontamination-unit, speed out, and whilst the de-com unit sprayed the fuselage the tractor towed the Shuttle to the reception area.

At long last the main hatch opened and steps were wheeled out against the hull, Captain Josh Flynn was the first to appear at the hatchway, and a mighty cheer went up from the crowded public enclosure. In the official guest enclosure the gathered VIPs stood in applause and three F20 jets performed a, aerial salute overhead, leaving red, white and blue vapour trails above the runway. Blake ushered the women out next to more applause, which grew in volume as Angelo, Charlie and John appeared in their NASA flight-suits. Last of all, just instructed, appeared Blake, who walked down the steps without any acknowledgement to the crowds. Atherton Bennet and Doug Martins were at the foot of the steps and were busy shaking the hands of every member of the crew, when Doug came to Blake the hugged as old friends would, and Blake whispered to him, "I need a moment in private."

"What up buddy," asked Doug.

"I'll tell you later," answered Blake. Just then an open-topped Kennedy tour-bus arrived and the eight were ushered onto the vehicle, "sit with me," said Blake. The people seated themselves and as the bus took an extended rout past the public enclosure, Blake leaned over to Doug. "Are the President and the UK Prime Minister here?"

"Yep, they're waiting at the podium, have you ever met him?"

"No," said Blake, "but I need to."

"What is all this intrigue Blake," asked Doug, "I can tell something's not right."

“This is your department so I guess it's OK to tell you, we found a system on Monday that detects stars, planets, hazards and any object out there, the dam thing found an eight-hundred mile wide asteroid, and it's on a direct course to Earth.”

Doug's face went white as the blood drained from his face, “Are you sure,” he stammered after several seconds.

“As sure as I can be, if we're right, it's definitely an extinction event.” They were thrown slightly forward in their seats as the bus stopped at the podium. “Josh and I need a few minutes with the President and the Prime Minister, straight away.”

Atherton stood and tapped Doug on the shoulder as he passed and Doug followed his boss off the bus, the two mounted the three steps to the podium, followed by the crew.

The President made his speech and awarded the medals and the Prime Ministers both followed suit, saying how proud they were of their countrymen, Eric Johnson presented the British members with another civilian medal on behalf of King Andrew. Blake saw Doug take Atherton to one side and whisper something to him, by the colour that Atherton's face turned, he guessed it was about the Asteroid. Whilst Austria's First Minister was making her speech Atherton moved to stand behind President Bose and Eric Johnson, then spoke to them. The President's head snapped around quickly and after a minute he spoke the PM Johnson, who just didn't react at

all, but stood stiffly as if listening intently to the speech. Oliver Bose spoke to Atherton, looked at his watch and all returned to normal. The ceremony over the black presidential cars pulled up at the podium, President Bose and Eric Johnson entered the car and it drove off toward the commissary where the reception was to be held. Immediately Atherton approached Blake and beckoned him and Josh to join him. "Proteus and the British Prime Minister will speak to you when we get to the reception," said Atherton, "this is a bit of a shock," he continued, "I hope you are mistaken about this Blake, we have nothing on our screens at Sky-Watch, what's the range?"

"Honestly," said Blake, "we have no idea, we tried to calculate the distance by the zoom rate, but there was no indication, we don't even know what linier unit the aliens use."

They arrived at the reception, now in fresh NASA coveralls, to more rapturous applause; it seemed everyone wanted to shake the hands of the world's latest heroes. There was a thirty-second welcome speech to everyone telling people to eat and enjoy, and the president, with his ever-present Secret Service protection, came straight to Josh and Blake who were chatting together. "Let's talk," he said and walked off toward a small door, which in normal times was a private dining room for the NASA directors. Eric Johnson was already there, sat at the polished oak dining table. Introductions done the four sat two on each side of the table. "Now," started the

President, “what the hell is this all about?” Blake and Josh related the story of how they had found the asteroid, and Blake then used a white-board on the room's wall to explain how they had calculated the size of the body, a Secret Service woman brought a digital projector into the room and set it up on the table and Blake inserted the memory stick. The recorded video showed the asteroid and they saw how the amber line leads the way back to the Atlantic Ocean.

Eric Johnson had been silent for most of the briefing but asked, “How long might we have before we face oblivion Blake?”

“This is the problem, Sir,” said Blake, “we have no idea of the range, because we don't know what unit of measure the aliens who built the ship use.”

“So we could have some time to work something out,” said Bose.

“That's possible,” said Captain Flynn, but this asteroid could be travelling very fast indeed, Sir.

“Do you know the speed?”

“No Sir, however the scope indicates that the asteroid is extra-solar, and heading into our Solar System from deep space. If it were an ordinary asteroid from this system its speed would not exceed around six-hundred kilometres a second, otherwise it could not orbit the Sun, as this is not a Solar System body it is almost certain that the velocity will be very much higher.”

“How much higher,” asked PM Johnson.

“Ten times that, maybe more,” said Josh, “that's about

thirteen and a half million miles per hour.”

“At that size and speed, Earth will end up as very fine dust,” added Blake.

The President stood and walked around the table to where the picture of the asteroid still played on the white-board. “It's a strange feeling to look at your death fully on the face,” he said.

“There must be something we can do to avert this disaster,” said the Prime Minister, “we have the facilities of the whole planet and who will not cooperate.”

“Yes of course,” said Bose, less presidential now, “we cannot just sit back and wait for the end to come.

“Mister President, Mister Prime Minister, I had some time to think this morning on the way back, and I started thinking about how, without the alien ship, we would not have known about the asteroid,” started Blake, “I was thinking how we were lucky to have the warning and the alien ship through which we found it. But then it struck me, what if these two incidents are not a coincidence, and I am someone that does not believe in coincidences. What if these aliens, whoever they are, found out that Earth was in line for destruction, they certainly have the technology to do that, and they sent the ship to us, like a life-boat?”

“We said all the time, whilst we were exploring,” said Josh, “that if these aliens are not humanoid then they had designed the ship for humans. Everything we saw was pleasing to us and fitted us as humans, and if Blake's hypothesis is right, then it makes sense.”

“Which is the way I was thinking,” said Blake, “the ship was just too human.”

“So you are telling us that these aliens have been watching us,” confirmed Johnson, “just how close have they been watching us, I can’t say that makes much sense.”

“It would if you’d seen their technology, with respect Sir,” said Blake, “with this same system we watched individual pebbles on Mars, and in detail.”

“I’d like to see that,” responded Johnson.

The President opened his personal telephone and tapped a button, “Atherton, can you pop in now please,” he said and hung up. A moment later, Atherton appeared through the dining room door. “Come in, take a seat,” he continued, “How quickly can we confirm this asteroid Atherton?”

“Unknown Boss, we just haven’t got the technology to detect anything outside the asteroid belt.”

“What do you need to do the job,” the President asked.

Atherton thought for a moment, “This scope from the ship I guess,” he responded.

“It’ll take too long,” said Bose, “is there anything we have that could be used or modified to find this rock?”

“There is a chance, Sir,” said Atherton “that the Hubble Telescope could be used, but it will take time, both to modify and to find this asteroid, it’ll be like finding one grain of sand on a beach.”

“Do it,” ordered President Bose.

Sky-Watch was given exclusive access to Hubble Two

space telescope and NASA moved up the latest improvements to the telescope. A larger and higher resolution sensor was quickly designed and manufactured for the Hubble and NASA mounted a special mission to fit the modifications. Two months after the return of Atlantis the light door on the telescope opened to see the universe in a new light. Both Blake and Josh worked on the data they had, together with the telemetry received at Houston, from the time of the detection, whilst Jo and Laura, with Charlie's guidance worked on the video of the screen, trying to identify any clue as to range. Slowly the vectors of the asteroid were refined and the telescope started to look in the right direction. Hundreds of thousands of long exposure images were received each week and these were examined by Sky-Watch personnel. The Sky-Watch department had increased in size by a factor of six since the project started and now operated twenty-four hours a day. One image was compared with the last and the next was compared with previous images, powerful computers did most of the work and passed any anomalies on to human eyes for decisions. It was seven months before the first dim image was received of the on-rushing rock.

It took several weeks after that to confirm that it was the same asteroid and several more to confirm its course was toward Earth. Of course Earth's technology was not good enough to confirm a precise trajectory. They had enough information, however, to know that annihilation

of the Earth was a possibility. Blake and Josh arrived at the White House to meet with the President and his staff, plus the Joint Chiefs, at three on that afternoon. They were taken to the Situation Room and given seats close to the President's. On the screens around the room were the representatives of every continent on Earth, from the Russian Federation to China, from Europe to Africa and South America to Australasia and Canada. "I hear we have some data gentlemen," the President said as the two opened files before them.

"Yes Sir," started Josh who was now in his new Lieutenant General's uniform, after his promotion, "Mister President, with the help of virtually the whole team we have been able to confirm course and range of the asteroid. I have to commend the team for their work over these past months,"

"Thank you General," said Bose, "can you share the news with us please."

"Sir, the numbers in miles or kilometres means little to anyone at this scale; however we have calculated that the impact will take place in two years, four months and sixteen days, to be more precise, eight-hundred and sixty-six days."

"Ladies and gentlemen," announced the President, "the countdown to extinction begins."

"We now have to plan our future, the future of the whole human race is in our hands," continued President Bose, "some months ago I met with Blake Northfield, who sits here with us today, and he tabled the idea that whoever

had been responsible for building the alien craft, that we know as 'The Return', sent it to Earth for us to use as a life-boat for humanity. The combined national leader's council, which was convened some months ago, has agreed that this is a reasonable assumption, so on that basis we have designated 'The Return' as Earth's lifeboat.” The President continued to outline what had been decided and what needed to be decided. The room heard that the world leaders, through the United Nations, had unanimously voted to populate the 'lifeboat' through several means.”

“Level One: Automatic inclusion – first level nation governing Cabinets of every independent nation as registered with the United Nations charter. With that nation's core opposition or shadow Cabinets.

Level Two: Assessed inclusion - captains of industry, from any United Nations country that meets criteria yet to be established, which will be performance rated.

Level Three: Assessed inclusion - scientists, innovators, engineers, who have a proven record, people who would be required in setting up a new society, including social scientists, social workers counsellors required for an inclusive civilisation.

Level Four: Nominations - Requiring approval by national panels.

Level Five: Lottery - The remaining places on board the life-boat, not filled will be filled/selected by an universal lottery, successful applicants can be vetoed to a pre-set standard – criminal record, IQ, social status, employment record, qualifications, mental health issues, etc. Criteria to be set by national panel.”

“The various panels to determine criteria are being set up as we speak, following the recommendations that have already been determined by various United Nations organisations. We have not set a target for the selection of passengers as yet, however, now having the time frame for the evacuation I would recommend that selection be completed within one year.” There were several votes, which were organised digitally and the results were displayed on the main screen. The session continued for almost five hours, during which Blake and, obviously Josh, became progressively more uncomfortable with the decisions being made. As they left the White House Blake asked Josh, “How about a drink.”

“Sure, I could use one,” answered Josh.

“My hotel OK? I can update Jo at the same time.”

When they arrived Jo was waiting in the reception of the

Hyatt and they found one of the 'private' tables at the end of the bar. The first drink covered the brief update of Jo, Blake ordered a beer, a Perrier and lime for Jo and a scotch for Josh, each sat and stared at the drinks until the waiter had gone out of ear-shot. "I know there will be only so many places," said Jo but why not give everyone a chance, its really unfair."

Try telling the President that," said Josh, "Bose is very single minded when he makes a decision; anyway I don't see any other means of deciding who goes on the ship other than how he has proposed."

"I'm not so sure," said Blake, "why do we need all those politicians to go, in my book that's a recipe for disaster."

"You can say that again," agreed Josh.

"Surely, if you include everyone and take a random sample, you will get all those same skills and people with the right knowledge as a part of the cross section," suggested Jo.

"You certainly should do," agreed Blake, "but can you rely on it?"

"We could do computer simulations and analyse the results," said Jo.

"That's a good idea," said Blake in agreement.

"One thing that springs to mind," said Josh, "shouldn't the first step be asking for volunteers to stay behind?"

"Good thinking Josh," commented Blake, "there must be some who would volunteer so for the sake of mankind, others who are contemplating suicide and want it to mean something, or those who are terminally sick that science can't help."

“We could offer inducements,” suggested Jo, “if the selection will be complete by next year, those staying could live like princes for a year and a few months, or whatever they want, tour the world for instance.”

“That is something we could take to the President Jo,” said Josh.

“That's what we'll do then,” said Blake, “first thing tomorrow, I'll get Atherton to arrange a meeting, in the mean time, can we get something more together, more suggestions.”

The next morning Blake Northfield contacted Atherton Bennet and asked for a meeting with the President. At first Atherton didn't seem too enthralled by the idea but Blake won him over, wanting to accompany the trio. Jo, Blake and Josh met up again that afternoon before Josh was required back in Florida. Josh had suggested meeting at the National Statistics Centre, a department that supplied the government with facts and figures, he had contacted them and arranged the use of one of their modelling computers. The three arrived at one-thirty and were taken to a computer suit signed Population Modelling, Jo lost no time and sat at the computer terminal inputting instructions via the keyboard and the voice interface. Blake and Josh occupied one of the several tables and placed two large tablet-computers and note-books in front of them. For almost three hours the main-frame computer worked silently whilst the two men discussed ideas, bringing Jo in at regular intervals to consult on some point or other.

Finally Jo closed the program down and joined her husband and Josh at the table, another short discussion resulted in some back-slapping and shaking of hands, before they left the unimposing building. Jo and Blake took a taxi back to their Hyatt Hotel whilst Josh waited for his official car to arrive to take him to Andrew's, where he would hop into a jet and fly down the coast to Canaveral. That evening Jo and Blake were seated in the main restaurant, sipping a pre-dinner drink, when Atherton walked up to the table, "May I join you," he asked.

"Sure," said Blake, as he waved to a server, who came across immediately, "Can you get us to another table please, we have a guest for dinner." Within a minute the server returned with another man in evening jacket and the two relocated them to a table that accommodated four people. When Atherton had given his order for dinner and the two men had left them, Blake, said, "To what do we have to thank for your company tonight Atherton?"

"I managed to get you a meet with the Boss, Blake, he will see you next week, he wants you to join him for breakfast on Tuesday, seven-thirty, I'm afraid," explained Atherton, "we'll use my car so I'll pick you two up at seven. I guess Josh will make his own arrangements."

"I was hoping for sooner," said Blake, "but thank you, it will have to do."

"Needless to say, I didn't join you just to tell you that,"

announced Atherton, "I wanted to have a chat about this meeting, you will need to be very careful, President Bose is not a man who appreciates too much criticism."

"I gathered that from Josh."

"You realise that these selection boards have already been activated, don't you," asked Atherton"

"Yes, I guessed they would be,"

"Straight-way, we have a problem it seems," said Atherton, just as the first course arrived. Two minutes later he continued after the waiter had walked out of ear-shot, "Columbia, have submitted a list of people that includes people that no one would want on this trip."

"We said this would happen," interrupted Jo, which was why we wanted the meeting."

"Well I think that we were expecting something of the sort," said Atherton.

"This is the danger," agreed Blake, and there are more issues that we wanted to discuss."

"I can't believe how quickly this has come up," stated Jo. The couple shared a great deal of what they had discussed with Josh over the following eighty minutes or so, and the three went their separate ways, with a strategy for the meeting with President Oliver Bose.

The following Tuesday Jo and Blake were picked up outside the Hyatt Hotel by Atherton at just before seven in the morning. The official car sped through the Washington streets toward the White House, at fifteen after seven they stopped in the visitor's car park and made their way toward the entrance, where Josh was

waiting. The four were taken directly to the executive dining room where Bose was waiting for them. “Welcome,” said the President, “please sit down and tuck in, I guess you are ready for breakfast by now. If you two want your English breakfast, the buffet table has the lot, specially ordered in, sausage, bacon, mushrooms, the whole bit.”

“Thank you Sir,” said Blake. They each served themselves with whatever they required and took a seat at the round table. Blake went for the full English with his wife selecting a continental style breakfast, whilst Atherton and Josh selected the American ham and eggs with a plain bread muffin.

“I’ll be honest with you,” said the President, “we are facing problems with the selection of nominees, already we have submissions from three countries that our FBI has issues with. Ath’ tells me that you have some thoughts on the matter.”

“It struck us after the last meeting that the system seemed jolly unfair,” blurted our Jo. Atherton was about to give her a warning look, but saw the President looking at him.

“Sir, when we considered the arrangements, there seemed to be several questions that could be asked about its openness to abuse, intentional or unintentional,” said Josh, trying to smooth things over.

“Maybe you would like to outline these issues for me, Mrs. Northfield,” Bose said ignoring Josh.

“Mister President, the system is allowing each country to

both select the selection panel and to select its own people, so each country can implement its own agenda,” said Jo, “and who wouldn't, given the chance.”

“Hmm, yes I can see that, agreed Bose, “which is where we have the problems now.”

“What if China selected most all soldiers, who may at the right time take over the ship, or when the ship finds a suitable planet to settle,” added Blake, cheating on this can be either from individuals or institutional.”

“Point taken Blake,” the president agreed.

“What about children,” asked Jo, “many countries don't register children until a certain age, for census purposes; they would be missed from selection, and you can't expect parents to leave children behind.”

“I never knew that,” admitted the Chief.

“Pregnant women, either now during selection, or those pregnant when we leave,” continued Jo, “either way you have an anomaly that would skew the selection.

“Now we come to those selection panels who we consider to be fair and objective,” said Blake, “like here in the US or in the UK or Canada, Australia and so on, would those selectors find a way to include themselves, and if not is that fair, worse still what about the families of the selectors, is it fair to expect them to overlook their own families and friends?”

“That is certainly a moral issue that we didn't think of,” admitted President Bose, “so what is the solution?”

Blake looked over at his wife and said, “Jo this is your area, can you present our findings.”

Jo dove into her bag and pulled out her tablet, “May I share with your screen,” she asked.

“Be my guest,” said the President.

Jo explained the premise that they had started with, that any truly random selection should result in a complete microcosm of the society that should produce all the skills required in the correct ratios. The screen showed all the results of the modelling and the breakdown of each computer run. Jo also presented the statistics for each selection. “You will notice that none of the computer models give us exactly what we require, there is always the opportunity for chance to enter the equation. We have come up with the closest method to a fair selection, we believe.”

The President nodded that he was following the process, “Please continue.”

“Firstly we need to come up with a set of essential skills needed to create a modern safe society, considering the size of the society you will need to come up with numbers of each skill. After the list is compiled, we believe that the situation should be made public, before the actual process begins. Once it is in the public domain we believe that an offer for volunteers should be made, we suspect that there will be a considerable number who will actually volunteer; we could offer incentives also. Next we need a list of everyone with those essential skills on a global basis. We randomly choose people from that list until slightly more than the minimum number are selected, including their families; this should give us close to a half of the total capacity of

the ship. The other half about one-billion people should then be selected by random lottery. There should be no designated government, until a society is established on whatever planet the ship finds. We will estimate the number of crew required and the crew should be selected on merit.”

“Wow,” said the President, “I wish we'd had all this two weeks ago, I will sell this to the world leaders, but they will not like it, you can bet on that.”

“Sir, I believe this is the only solution,” said Josh, “you really need to sell it to them.”

“I may need to do more than that General, those of us who believe in doing the right thing may need to enforce it.”

“What do you mean by that sir,” asked Blake quickly.

“We don't have the most powerful military in the world for nothing, Blake.”

“Mister President, with respect, we cannot enforce this at the point of a gun, or the threat of annihilation,” said Blake.

“What do you suggest then Blake,” asked Bose.

“Sir I suggest that the US, the EU and the UK be charged with overseeing the selection and to both develop and administer a security system to ensure that the program is fair and secure,” suggested Blake.

“I think that, as it has been ourselves and Europe that has both discovered the ship, funded and administered Mission Reaper,” said Josh, “It seems a reasonable course to take.”

“What is your view, Mrs. Northfield,” asked the President.

“I think that the sense of fair play that our countries hold so dear is what this process needs, Sir,” said Jo. The president was silent for at least thirty seconds as he looked from one to the other.

“OK guys,” he said at last, “y-all still employed by the US government, through NASA, so as all this is your idea, I am giving you the job of getting all this done.”

“Us Sir,” questioned Blake, “you do know that we are due to back up to the ship in a month's time, Sir.”

“I do, and that gives you a month to get things organised, get the British government and the EU on board and employing executive teams, experts, specialists and private companies, as well as security advisors etc.” said Bose.

Blake looked at Josh and Jo; both shrugged their shoulders and nodded, “Fair enough, as long as we have your support Sir.”

“Fine, I will give you an executive directive, saying that you are acting with my authority, I will contact the British Prime Minister and the EU President and update them. We can certainly rely on Prime-Minister Eric Johnson to fully cooperate; he gave me his commitment on that at your welcome-back reception.”

“His face was a picture when he found out about the asteroid,” laughed Jo.

“Is that the famous British humour, Mrs. Northfield,” the President asked.

“No Sir, I know it's nothing to laugh about,” apologised Jo, ”but sometimes if you don't laugh you go crazy.”

“True, anyway Josh will be my liaison, can you two act as liaison between the British Government and the EU and the White House please.” The president looked at his wrist-watch and said, ”I am due for a briefing with my National Security Advisor in five minutes, so if there is nothing else, I have to go. Please, take your time and finish you breakfast, when you are finished there is a Secret Service agent outside that door who will take you back to the entrance. We will speak soon, and good luck.” The President stood, grabbed a piece of buttered toast from the stack and walked out of the dining room.

“Why do I open my mouth,” expressed Blake.

Two days later Blake and Jo were back on the executive jet and speeding back toward Europe and on course for RAF Northolt in west London which is used by both military and civilian aircraft. After landing they were hustled through the customs and immigration control via the RAF channel and into a waiting Ford car that took them directly to the London Hilton. In London it was still only one in the afternoon, and a message was waiting for them that the Prime Minister would like to see them at three, if they had arrived in time. Jo and Blake groaned, but asked the driver to return for them at two-thirty, to take them to Downing Street. The couple had a sandwich delivered to their room and they ate as they freshened up and changed into formal business clothes. The car was waiting outside the hotel, and

pulled away as soon as the couple were seated, soon it pulled up at the security gates to Downing Street. The police obviously recognised the plates, waved the car through and saluted as they passed, the vehicle parked outside of the famous number-ten door and they alighted onto the pavement.

Across the street from the residence a bank of cameras and reporters jumped into action, they had obviously been recognised as they called out questions relating to the space-ship, and asking why they were seeing the PM. Blake ignored the media circus, but Jo gave them a cheery wave. As they mounted the steps, the black-painted door, opened as if by magic. Inside an aid welcomed them and asked them to follow her, they were led down a corridor and asked to be seated, as the Prime Minister will 'be a few minutes'. Five minutes later the door next to the antique chairs opened and the familiar figure of Eric Johnson, came through, "Welcome to number ten," he said, "please come in, sorry for the delay, I was on the direct line to President Bose."

"That's no problem," said Blake.

"Please make yourselves comfortable," he invited them. This was the Prime Minister's private office that looked out onto the spacious garden to the rear of the residence. The office was cluttered with papers and books, central to half the room was a large desk, whilst at the other end were a coffee table and over-stuffed chairs and couch, all of which were dominated by a large planning table. Jo and Blake sat on the couch and Eric Johnson took one of

the chairs facing them. “Tea, coffee,” he asked, Jo ordered a tea and Blake went for his usual coffee. They made small-talk for several minutes until someone knocked on the door, the PM shouted, “Come,” and a waiter brought a large tray in with a coffee pot and a large tea pot, milk, cream, sugar substitute and a selection of sandwiches and cakes.

“Please, help your self,” Johnson said, “and I will fill you in on what I have just discussed with President Bose.” Blake filled his plate with sandwiches and one slice of fruit-cake, despite Jo's disapproving look.”

“Thank you Sir, we had no time for a meal,” said Blake.

“That's fine,” said the PM, “when we're alone, please call me Eric, I think we are going to see a great deal of each other over the next two years. Right, I have just agreed with Oliver that we make simultaneous announcements about the situation with the asteroid, the Americans have arranged to have the broadcast cut into world-wide TV and news systems, anyone watching a TV or anyone on-line will see the broadcast and hear in their native language, using Google live-translate. The broadcast will go out at eighteen-hundred hours tonight, the transmissions from here, will be from the Cabinet Room, and will cover all of Europe and western Asia, Africa and the British Commonwealth, including Canada and Australia and New Zealand. The transmission from the Oval Office will cover the rest of the world.”

“That's good,” said Jo, “we were concerned about keeping this a secret for too long.”

“As our liaison,” said Johnson, “we think it would be a jolly good idea if you two came in on the broadcast, your friend General Josh Flynn will be doing the same in the Oval Office.”

“If you think it will help Si . . . Eric,” agreed Blake.

“Personally, I would advise you to remain here until we know how the information has been received,” Eric Johnson said, “I will be informing the Cabinet in a few minutes, in particular my Home Secretary, who will need to alert the police to activate Operation Seagull. That's an emergency protocol that's been drawn up for such an emergency as this.” The Prime Minister stood and crossed to his desk, “Better do that now,” he lifted a purple telephone and pressed a button, “Alpha ten-three-nine-three-seven-eleven,” he said into the phone, there was a pause of several seconds, “Hello Harry, I need you to activate Operation Seagull, by eighteen-hundred tonight; . . . yes I know it's short notice and I don't like it any more than you do; . . . we have an extinction event in the form of a giant asteroid and the whole world will get the news at that time, simultaneously; . . . We have to be ready for the worst Harry, there is a strong possibility of some violent reaction, it may not happen, and I hope it does not, so be ready, Operation Seagull was designed to be activated in ninety minutes; . . . thanks Harry.”

“It's good to know that we are prepared,” said Blake

“Well we were advised that it's a matter of when, not if,” explained Johnson, “I am hoping that you can allay fears by explaining that we have the alien life-boat and that

you will be planning to save people. But for the time being, say nothing about how many can be accommodated.”

“That's OK, I agree with letting people down gently,” agreed Blake.

“Now if you will excuse me, I need to inform the Cabinet before the broadcast.”

Eric Johnson stood and returned to his desk where he sat and drew another piece of apparatus toward him. It looked like a small computer with a hooded screen a keyboard attached to the front and a row of hard-buttons down the right-hand side. He sat and started typing whilst Jo and Blake continued to eat and drink. It took around fifteen minutes, then Blake saw him stop typing and select a goodly number of the buttons, when this was done he hit a large button above the screen. The Prime Minister sat back in his chair as if waiting for something to happen. “We just wait for my Cabinet to phone in on their secure communication units,” he explained. Almost as soon as he'd finished talking a buzzer sounded on yet another telecom unit. “Fergus; [pause] yes you're the first; . . . I will be making an emergency broadcast as six, this evening, we have an asteroid heading our way and it looks like an extinction event: . . .yes we have plans, I wanted to forewarn the Cabinet before the broadcast, please watch it if you can: . . . I have to go, Margaret is reporting in, bye. Hello Margaret: . . .” It was over an hour before the last of the Cabinet made contact, and Johnson repeated the same message to

around thirty people, one by one. Blake could not help think that there must be a better way to contact a group of people.

For the next hour or so the three discussed how the selection would be organised and how the UK government could assist, and together they wrote an outline for the announcement. It was surprising that the PM did not want a script, just bullet points. Blake was also surprised just how 'on-board' Eric was and how committed he was to the concept of selection, he seemed more concerned with saving as many people as possible rather than any self-interest. At fifteen before six there was a knock on the door. "Yes," responded Johnson, the door opened and an assistant's head popped around the frame.

"We are ready for you in the studio Sir," he said and disappeared, leaving the door open.

"Here we go then, if you'll follow me," Eric said as he stood and started toward the door. They walked along a corridor that seemed too long for the house and entered what looked like a sitting room, but at one end the room was filled with three cameras, lights, boom mikes and a huge amount of other equipment. Three chairs had been set out in a semi-circle with a low table in the centre on which were placed three mugs of coffee, or tea, or something brown, "Don't try to drink those," laughed Eric, picking one up and inverting it, "things are never what they seem with TV." The PM seated himself in the middle chair and indicated Blake to sit on his right and

Jo on his left. As soon as they were seated one of the crew descended on them with a handful of brushes and started brushing their faces.

“Five minutes Prime Minister,” a man who looked like he was in-charge called over from a vision desk.

“I am sure you two know the drill, by now, just be yourselves and speak to the camera with the red light on,” advised Eric.

“Three, two, one, live,” said the man again. And the man pointed to Eric.

“Good evening, my friends,” the PM started, “this broadcast is being broadcast simultaneously right across the world, from here at number ten, from Brussels and from the White House, so you may get a hint from that how important this is, please pay attention to what I am about to say.” he paused for a few seconds, then continued. “It is my sad duty to inform you that a huge asteroid has been detected, which has a likely course toward Earth, this my friends is not just an extinction event but possibly a planet destroying event. We believe that the alien space-craft that was discovered last year by Blake Northfield, was a benevolent act of some highly advanced civilisation, as a life-boat for us to save a good proportion of Earth's population.” The Prime Minister explained fully the situation and then handed over to Blake to explain the selection process, as it would be he who would be in-charge of the process.

“Hello everyone, I have reluctantly been charged by your governments to over-see the selection of those who

will have places on The Return, although we do not know the capacity of the ship yet,” started Blake, “The ship *may* not accommodate the whole of Earth's population, but I believe that whoever sent this ship to us did the best they could. Space-craft, ‘Return’ is an amazing ship and we think one that was built as a generation ship, maybe these aliens went through the same disastrous even that we now face, found their new home-world and had no further use for the ship.” Blake continued for some minutes on his build-up and then continued, “The first thing we must ask is this, we think it worth asking for volunteers to stay behind and face the end, maybe as an act of sacrifice, or of blessed release from their lives, or for whatever reason, we would like to hear from you before the selection begins. Anyone who volunteers will be rewarded; they will live like a prince for the final year, doing anything they request, within reason.”

Blake went on to outline the selection procedure as agreed with President Bose and the other heads of government, and then handed over to Jo to announce that she would be overseeing the process across the European mainland. She also reassured the viewers that they would assure that the selection process would be as fair as they could make it. Jo then handed back to Prime Minister Johnson who concluded with an appeal for calm, he assured those watching that families would not be broken up. He then stated how sorry he was, with tears filling his eyes, the broadcast faded out and the

lights went off. “Suddenly it all seems very real,” Eric said, “I want to thank you for all you have done for mankind,”

“I guess we were in the right place at the right time, Sir,” responded Blake, “that warm evening now seems like a dream, so much has happened in the past fifteen months.”

By the time Jo and Blake left number-ten Downing Street, the street outside was dark and full of media crews and reporters, all of whom were shouting questions at the pair. The couple jumped into the car that was waiting without answering any of the questions, and the car drove off. Instead of heading back to the hotel, they headed back to RAF Northolt for the helicopter that would take them back to Cornwall, to spend Christmas at home and celebrate with their friends at St. Peter's church. The holiday went too fast and three days after Christmas, they were once again lifting off from RNAB Coldrose bound for Washington, a meeting with Atherton & Doug, and the following day back to Florida for another joy-ride into space. When they arrived at NASA Headquarters, Atherton gave them the figures for the number of people who had so far volunteered to remain; the number staggered Jo who has expected maybe thousands. “So far we have over twelve million names on the remain list,” said Atherton, “and the names are still coming in, I think the Christmas holidays has had a great affect on this, so we are allowing three months from date of volunteering for

people to back out.”

“Great idea,” said Blake, “I guess theres a lot of lonely people out there.”

“When do we start the first round of the selection process,” asked Atherton.

“March first, the computers in all the countries will run and print out the 'required' list.”

“Has anyone given any thought as to how we are going to move two billion people up the ship in just one year,” Doug asked.

“We have been working on that,” stated Blake, “we have commitments from Russia, who have suddenly become very compliant, and the various private companies who operate ships will suspended all commercial operations from September onward, as well as NASA of course. Space-Wise say they can do ten launches a day with twenty people per launch, and four cargo launches a day with the new Apus freight ship that was designed to deliver supplies to Moon-base Juno. Russia and India, have both said they can make at least two launches a day, but I think that India will struggle.

“Surely Russia can manage more that two launches,” said Atherton, “they also have a Moon base.

“You know Russia,” said Blake, “we heard that they are busy building another base on the backside, and are moving personnel up there.”

“Are they betting that the Moon will be untouched,” asked Doug.

“It seems they have done simulations that say the face

will be pounded by debris, but the backside will be safe,” said Blake, “their choice. However the British Virgin-Galactic company has more than made up for them, they have another ten space-planes that will be joining their fleet of twenty by June of this year.”

“Wow!” said Atherton, “how many launches a day is that?”

“Their CEO told me that they can make at least fifteen launches a day, depending on how fast they can do the turnarounds. They are working out of Newquay spaceport close to where we live, but they want to get authorisation to use Gatwick airport outside of London. Their horizontal takeoff vehicles make that rather easier than the other verticals, thank God.”

The following day they left for Florida and on January first Atlantis again took off with a full crew, Conrad had volunteered to get involved in setting up the EU selection team so had not been included and Laura was also busy with researching the future needs list for the first round selection. Charles Childs had insisted in taking the second trip, also Josh and Angelo were the pilots. The two empty seats were being filled by Professor Julia French from Harvard University physics department and another professor, Edward Sculley, former head of physics at Oxford University. Both were well known in their profession and Ed Sculley was very well known to British TV audiences through his 'How Did That Happen' TV shows, and was lovingly known as the 'Welsh Dragon'. The objective of the mission was to

further survey the ship in the light of the upcoming evacuation, and both professors French and Sculley would be staying onboard after the others left. The two professors would be investigating the various systems that ran the ship and writing a manual for the use of the ships eventual crew. The ride up to the 'Return' was as expected but considerably shorter than the previous voyage, it took them just three hours before they were nudging into hangar four. The two newcomers were totally in awe of both the ride and the ship, and spent the last hour glued to observation ports.

Once Atlantis was secured and powered down, Professors French and Sculley could not wait to enter the 'Return's' world of wonders. Both had made a connection with Charlie over the past three days at Canaveral and had gelled into a team, so it was Charlie who was first to disembark and took the lead as tour director for the newcomers. Jo joined the tour whilst Blake and Josh made their way to the power room and then to what had been accepted as the bridge. The navigation and sensor screen was powered up as were several other systems that they had previously discovered. The asteroid soon filled the round screen together with several flashing symbols. Josh looked around the many control panels that lined both sides of the bridge, "I wonder what all these other panels operate," he said, "there are," he counted, "fifteen panels here and we know roughly what three of them operate." "Well don't sweat it Josh, that's why the professors are

here, let them do their job.”

“It's OK for you my friend, NASA say that I have to captain this ship when we leave,” stated Josh

“So at least you will have a place then,” said Blake, “I wasn't aware that NASA had started designations,”

“Just me my friend, because I have to know everything there is to know about this ship.”

“Rather you than be buddy,” said Blake.

“The problem,” said Josh, “is that there's no wiring that we can follow, on our planes and even the Shuttle we can trace circuits by following different coloured and numbered cables, here, there's nothing.”

“Is it some sort of radio Wi-Fi?” asked Blake.

“Nope, we checked, remember we could find no emissions from the craft, well even when we have these systems powered up, we still have zero emissions, I checked last time we were here. We don't even know where the camera, or sensor, is for that wondrous scanner.”

An hour later the hatch opened to reveal Jo and the other three stepping out of the elevator, “What do you think,” asked Josh.

“This ship a marvel isn't it,” stated Edward.

“Gee I sure am awed by this craft, I am lost for words,” echoed Julia. Julia French was in her late thirties, a little over weight and a down to earth woman who had graduated top of her year from Harvard. She had obtained funding to progress with a Ph. D researching control systems, and then was offered a job as a lecturer

at Harvard, finally becoming their Director of Physics. Julia was married with no children and a husband who was away more than he was at home. She obviously knew Edward, who was her opposite number at Oxford in England. Edward Sculley, was a Bachelor who was married to his job, portly and in his late forties, he could be said to be the stereo-type of everyone's idea of a university professor; including a jacket with patched elbows. Ed had been born in Wales and attended Aberystwyth University to get his first degree and his Masters in applied physics, followed by a doctorate from Cardiff. He had secured a Job as lecturer at Keele University, in Staffordshire, England and later obtained the physics chair at just twenty-five. He applied to Oxford for a position as a joke, prompted by two friends, he was amazed to get an interview, and even more amazed to be offered the job. At forty-two he was offered the physics chair, and over the past six years he had become a household name through his TV program.

“My goodness,” said Edward, “this is the control centre is it then.”

“Yes but we prefer to call it the 'Bridge',” said Josh.

“The bridge it is then,” said Professor Sculley, in his still broad Welsh lilt, “do you know what all this does yet?”

“We know about three of these fifteen panels, we know what they do but not how they do it,” stated Josh, “we are hoping you three are going to find that out.”

“We'll certainly try our darnedest,” answered Julia, “our friend Charlie has sure made a great start, those vehicles

and boats are amazing.”

“By the way,” announced Charlie, “we have fish for dinner.” Everyone laughed.

“Which, my belly tells me, is going to be very soon,” said Josh, “I suggest that we call it a day and start back to Atlantis for dinner and a good night's sleep, and then start afresh in the morning.”

The previous evening's dinner was satisfying, and after an hour or so of socialising, they had retired and all had achieved a good eight hours sleep. Breakfast was NASA mission food, as the food they had brought with them, now there was more room in the pay-load bay, had not yet been unpacked. Josh suggested that they split into two teams, a science team and an 'explore and survey' team, Josh Blake and Jo in the explore team, and Julia, Charlie and Ed in the science team. After agreeing to certain precautions, like reporting in every hour so that Angelo could keep track of them, the two teams set off. That was the pattern for the first four days; each team reported various successes and discoveries, and also several failures, mainly from the science team who admitted that some of the systems were a complete mystery. On the fifth day the explorers came upon a line of small rooms that seemed to have no similarity to any of the small chambers they had so far found. The ceiling was cone shaped and highly polished with what seems like a transponder in the central apex, it was so highly polished that it was difficult to gauge the actual shape or height. On the wall were several panels, two of

the panels incorporated, what they assumed were screens, with a line of buttons, and both also had a joystick control. The panel on the other side contained what seemed like one of the access pads that allowed access to the elevators and to one side was a cylindrical object which was locked into a slot. On the left of this was a depression, which was the same size and shape as the circular object that was locked into its slot.

“What do you think these are,” asked Josh.

“I have no idea,” said Blake, “shall I try the access plate?”

“Why don't we call one of the science team down and see if they can suggest something,” suggested Jo.

“I really don't want to disturb them, said Blake, and Josh nodded his agreement, “let's see what happens.” Blake placed his full hand on the plate, which, unlike the other plates they had encountered, lit up and an intense bar of light scanned his hand. There was a click and the lock on the circular object was withdrawn. “We obviously have to take one of these,” he said as put out his hand to grab the object, as he did so the recess of the same shape started pulsing with a dull blue light.

“I think you're supposed to put the ring into that recess,” said Jo who was stood close to it.

“I think you're right dear,” said Blake. He placed the smooth metallic ring, with no markings whatsoever into the recess. The dull light intensified and seemed to spin beneath the ring, with a low whine.

“This is like the Lord of the Rings,” Josh laughed. The

light went out and nothing else happened, Blake retrieved the ring, which immediately snapped open, rather like a silver bangle.

“OK,” said Blake, “does it want me to put this on my wrist, do you think?”

“Seeing as it's not big enough to go anywhere else,” said Jo, I guess so.”

“Blake closed and opened it a few time to make sure he could get it off if needs be, then snapped it onto his left wrist. He noticed immediately that there was no sign of the hinge or the joint; it looked like a solid ring. “Now what,” he asked, confused.

“Will it come off,” asked Josh.

Blake tried to remove the bracelet but couldn't, “No,” he said. As he examined the ring and his fingers ran over the outer surface a small square glowed with an orange light for a second, he pressed it but the ring did not open.

“Blake, look” Jo said, “that screen is now live,” she pointed and sure enough one of the two screens showed a picture of the Earth. As Blake turned around in the limited space his elbow nudged the joystick and the picture moved to the left slightly. Blake examined the joystick and found there was a rocker button on the top of the stick, when he pressed this rocker the image on the screen zoomed in and out.

“How far does this zoom in,” Blake asked, more to himself than anyone in particular. He zoomed in on the US and to Washington, found the NASA headquarter building and the view seemed have the ability to see

through buildings. Laughing he found Atherton's office with Atherton and Doug sitting at the desk talking.

“Wow!” what a great spy device, if only we could hear what was being said,” said Josh clapping his hands with joy.

“Yes it would, but what are these bracelets for, can't be just to operate this device,” said Blake. But Josh was examining the other buttons on the panel. “What are you doing Josh?”

“Trying to see if we can get sound,” Josh explained without looking away from the buttons.

“Stop it Josh,” said Jo, “you have no idea what they do or what you are doing.” Josh looked around at Jo just as his hand rested on the largest of the buttons, there was a hum and the cone above them illuminated with a pulsing light, a light that failed to illuminate the area below it. The pulsing increased in frequency as the three looked up, Jo looked toward Blake in order to say something, just in time to see Blake turn into a series of flashing stars, a second later he was gone. Jo turned and hit Josh across the side of his head, “See what you've done now Josh, where is he?”

Josh turned away, expecting a second blow, and was just saying, “Sorry” when he pointed at the screen.

“What the hell are you doing here”, asked Atherton, “aren't you supposed to be on the Return?” It was at that point that Atherton noticed the NASA flight suit and the magnetic boots.

“I ... I don't know,” said Blake, “a second ago I was on

the ship.”

Doug, who had his back to Blake, was confused by Atherton's question and the voice behind him, turned to see his friend Blake, in the flesh, standing near the door, “Didn't you go, no I watched you take off,” he said in confusion.

Blake, who had recovered himself somewhat announced, “Gentlemen, I think we have just discovered a matter transfer system.”

“Like that old TV program, Star Trek you mean,” asked Doug.

“Well yes I guess,” answered Blake, “but I am more interested in how I get back, I think it must have something to do with this bracelet.”

On the ship Jo and Josh watched Blake and the two directors on the screen, “Look I'm sorry Jo but we at least know what these little rooms are now, teleportation devices, people have been searching for a way of doing this for decades.”

“And now it's too late,” stated Jo still annoyed at Josh.

“Look at the screen Jo, Blake is fine,” appealed Josh, “the thing now is how to bring him back,” he said examining the other buttons.

“Don't! Don't mess with anything else Josh, I mean it,” shouted Jo.

“There has to be a way to bring him back from there, Jo, see if you can translate these little symbols here,” Josh pointed to some very small letters that he had just noticed around the base of the buttons. Jo dove into her

satchel and pulled out a magnifying glass and hovered it over the first button, she said nothing but took out her tablet computer. It took almost fifteen minutes to come to a decision on the symbols.

On Earth the three men were still talking, “It looks as if you are stranded Blake,” decided Atherton, “but I am sure your crew are working very hard to get you back.” It was at that moment when Blake remembered the small square light he had noticed on the bracelet. Blake fumbled with the ring and eventually saw the light flicker.

Jo said, “If it is any of them this one suggests the past, which is the only one that means anything like to retrieve.” Quick as a flash Josh's hand shot out before Jo could stop him, and touched the button.

“I think I have it,” said Blake, “If this works, I'll see you guys in a couple of weeks,” Blake held his finger on the orange light and as if by magic he was back in the chamber with his wife and Josh.

“See, I told you we'd get him back safely,” said Josh.

“Yes,” said Blake, “it's the orange button on the bracelet.”

Josh and Blake looked at each other, “You pressed a button on the bracelet,” asked Josh.

“Yep just a second before I found myself back here,” said Blake.

“But we, no I, pressed that button a second before you

reappeared,” said Josh.

“So, we don't know which one worked after all that,” concluded Jo.

“Well,” said Blake, “we know it's one of them, we'll just have to experiment and try again, at least we know we *can* get back.”

The three were excited as they returned to Atlantis that evening, and they shared their find with the science team, asking them to help the following day. The call to Houston that evening was interesting; they asked many questions that could not be answered, and there were many concerns about how NASA security had been breached. They had security camera footage of Blake's arrival, conversation and disappearance in Atherton's office, proof that the transportation took place and proof that the unit did not trigger security. There was a conversation with NASA security chief who insisted that further trials of the machine should be authorised and targeted to a secure area, which would be designated in the next few days.

“Mister Horton,” commenced Blake, “further tests will go ahead tomorrow, as Mission Leader, I personally authorise it, and we cannot wait for your petty security concerns. You will either designate a site before tomorrow or we will choose our own in a remote area, like some desert area.”

“Mister Northfield, you maybe Mission Leader, but it is my responsibility that this technology is designated 'strategic' and stays that way,” said Horton, “this

technology represents a clear and present danger to the United States.”

Blake laughed, “Get off your pompous ass Horton, the world ends in less than two years, and you are worrying about a technology that could save billions from death.”

“Nevertheless,” started Horton, but Blake cut him off.

“Nevertheless nothing,” interrupted Blake, “do what you will, we will continue,” and Blake leaned forward and cut him off.

“You're going to be in real trouble now,” said Josh, “Horton draws a lot of power around here; he can cancel your security pass by snapping his fingers.”

“He can snap all he likes, and I'll go back home to Cornwall and take my chance with the remainder of humanity,” stated Blake.

“So,” said Charlie, hesitantly, “what do you want us to do tomorrow? Only we are starting to investigate the main drive up there.”

“Can you spend a couple of hours on the teleport machine,” we know how to use these bracelets,” he handed his across to the three physics wizards, “but if we want to lift a billion people up here to save time, we need to be able to target them somehow, use badges or better, implants or something.”

“Sure,” said Julia French, “I kinda fancy that, it's something that has fascinated me since I watched the old reruns of the Star Trek show,” she stated, “why don't you two Brits get on with the drive and I'll see what I can do with the transporters.”

Charley looked at Ed Sculley, "Suits me if it's OK with you chief."

"Suits me fine," said Blake, "how's it going with the drive?"

Julia jumped in again and gave a report whilst Charley and Ed looked at each other with raised eyebrows, "Great," she said, "you and Josh were right about the so called, Star Drive, but Photon Drive would be a better term. So we concentrated on what we think is the main drive. The drive is in the next compartment to the Photon Drive, I guess you missed that, there is a huge containment field in there that seems to be a negative field, then a magnetic shield around that, so my guess is," Ed coughed rather loudly, "OK our guess is that it is some kind of anti-matter drive or an antimatter collection device with a much miniaturised collider."

"That was also my conclusion," interjected Ed.

"One that I concurred with," continued Julia, "at the moment we don't know how to start it up, just using the lever on the bridge does nothing."

"Well it arrived here and shut down so there must be some way of starting it up," conjectured Blake.

"The containment field is operating so there must be anti-matter in there," said Ed, "I've been working at CERN on producing anti-matter by quantity, so our containment is automatically activated if anti-matter is present."

"Be that as it may," Julia continued, "we need to get the process started, with your experience Ed, it probable

won't take you too long.”

“Ed, what is the potential of the anti-matter drive,” asked Blake.

Julia lifted her hand toward Ed as if handing him something, “We just don't know Blake, we already have a drive that takes this ship very close to light speed, so my guess is that at maximum photon drive speed we cut across to anti-matter drive which takes us beyond light speed, logically. How far beyond light speed, I have no idea.

“I thought it was impossible to travel that fast,” said Blake.

“In normal space, yes,” stated Ed, we need to remember that the singularity that created this universe could not have expanded the way it did in normal space. Our spacial fabric would have acted as a damper, that's been accepted for years. So outside this universe must a strange condition where there is neither space nor time, it may be that creating some kind of anti-matter bubble will allow us to create that condition. Where there is neither dimension nor time there can be no such thing as speed, which required both factors.”

“I see,” said Blake, ”sounds great in theory.”

“Ed I have read your papers on the subject,” said Julia, “and it not a theory, just a hypothesis.”

“Well I have been reading them too,” added Charlie, “and they make perfect sense to me, a strong hypothesis at least.”

“I guess we may find out when you get it sorted,” said

Blake, “for now let's just wind down and relax, shall we?” Blake pushed off from his restraint towards the cockpit and nodded to Josh who followed him.

“There may be a problem with our friend Julia,” said Blake once they were alone.”

“I agree, there is some animosity or overt competition there,” replied Josh, “I wondered why she volunteered to look at the transporters.”

“Maybe just a conflict of personalities, I have trouble with Ed's accent at times and he does get fixated on his theories, forcefully.”

“I noticed during training,” said Josh, “when you were in Washington.”

“Do you think I over-stepped the mark with Horton,” asked Blake.

“Yea, a little, he does not take to anyone second guessing him too well, never has, don't worry, I'll call the boss in the morning and smooth it out.”

“You mean NASA Director?”

“Naw, the boss, the president,” replied Josh, “I have access now I'm on the Joint Chiefs.”

“OK!, haven't we gone up in the world.” Blake laughed.

“For as long as Earth and the US lasts,” chuckled Josh. “Let's just keep an eye on Julia and Ed, they are both brilliant physicists, the best there is, we need them both.”

The following morning after breakfast Josh spent some time in the cockpit making a direct call to President Bose, who promised to bring Director Horton to heal,

and asked for an update on the situation. Josh updated him on both current projects as best he could. Bose agreed that there should be no restrictions on the trials and saw the benefit of the transporter system. Josh joined the teams and they set off again with Charlie and Ed up to the control area, and Josh Blake Jo and Julia back to the long row of transporters, they counted forty-nine of them. They chose one and Blake updated Julia who wanted a demonstration, with her as the subject. Blake and Josh talked her through the process and asked here to activate the orange button when she was ready to return. Julia agreed, they selected an ally in Julia's home-town, and as Josh pressed the button, Julia winked at the three. They saw her materialise in the ally and followed her as she walked into a grocery store. Even without sound it was obvious that she was known, and Julia was seen to purchase two brown-paper bags full of produce. After leaving the store Julia returned to the ally and holding tight to the bags, managed to press the orange glowing button. Almost immediately Julia was back in the cubicle, complete with her groceries. "Dinner tonight, I'm cooking," she said.

After about half an hour Jo and the two men decided to wait outside and allow Julia to get on with things, she continually bemoaned the fact that there was no cabling connecting anything. Outside they sat on the usual grass and chatted. Twenty minutes later Julia opened the door and asked that Jo join her. "Can you translate any of these symbols Jo, it will help, we can't just keep pressing

buttons to see what happens like Josh did yesterday.”

Jo agreed and went back outside for her tablet-computer, back inside she scanned each symbol in turn and then exited the chamber to do the research. Jo also sent the scans to Laura and asked for any help she could give. It took ten minutes for Jo to find a possible match, which was one that translated as '*look*' or maybe '*search*'. Two minutes later Laura called her with the same translation and two others that she had retrieved with running the app on a NASA main-frame computer. These were '*label*' and '*grab*'. Jo asked for Laura's exact location and asked, “Can we try it out on you Laura, it seems safe and does not hurt at all,” After some persuasion Laura agreed, and Jo returned to the chamber.

Between them they decided that it may be good to try, Jo found the building where Laura was located in Houston and zoomed into the third floor, then panned the picture around until she found Laura, who kept looking up, as if expecting to see them. Jo pressed the '*look*' button and several rings appeared on the screen, Jo zoomed to isolate Laura them and Julia pressed '*label*' and a translucent disk appeared in orange over Laura, once this was done Jo's hand shot out and pressed '*grab*'. Less than a second later Laura shimmered into existence next to them, and Laura gasped in amazement. “Wow, that's some machine,” she gasped.

“Lordy, not another Brit,” said Julia.

“Yes, we seem to be taking over don't we,” answered Jo in rather acerbic tones.” Laura frowned and Julia simply

ignored the remark.

“Where's Charlie,” asked Laura.

“He's with Ed, trying to get the main drive started,” Jo informed her, “did you want to see him?”

“No it's OK I won't disturb him. Can you get be back there as well,” Laura asked.

“Not sure,” said Jo, “but take one of these bracelets, and then I think we can find you again and if you want to come up here, maybe to visit Charlie, you just need to find the orange glowing button and press it.” Jo told her to place her hand on the scanner, the bracelet was immediately released and she placed it in, what she assumed was the programmer, then clipped it on Laura's wrist.”

“Thanks,” said Laura, “now I must get back.”

Julia pressed the return button that had brought Blake back the previous day and Laura was gone, on the screen they saw here wave. Fortunately, due to the cubical office system, no one seemed to notice that she has been missing or seen her return. Jo opened the door to the chamber and told her husband and Josh about their successful trial.

“Good to see the progress,” said Blake,”we were just talking . . . “in mid sentence the ship gave a shudder that in the same circumstances on Earth would have been taken as a mild earthquake.

“What in the name of hell was that,” Josh almost shouted as he stood up from the grass. Josh retrieved his radio, pressed the transmit button and said, “Angelo, you feel

that?”

“Sure did,” came the reply, “and all communication with the surface has gone down.”

“I'm on my way,” said Josh, who was already walking toward the elevators. Pulling on his magnetic boots as the car sped back to the hangar, which he succeeded doing just as the door opened. As he climbed into the Shuttle he shouted, “Are we back up yet Major?”

“No Sir, the equipment checks out, I've done a diagnostic already, but we have no signal.”

“Cut out the 'Sir' Angelo, let's do a reboot,” together they disconnected all the communication equipment and then carefully rebooted the units in the right order, then threw the switches. Nothing! They sat in the cockpit scratching their heads, when there was another, but slightly less violent shudder. Seconds later all the equipment sprang back to life with Houston's panicked voice calling them on the emergency band.

“Atlantis, this is Houston, please respond, come in Atlantis you are . . .ah you're back, Atlantis can you receive us?”

“Atlantis here receiving you Houston,” called Angelo.

“What happened, you completely disappeared, Atlantis?”

“Yes I know we lost signal completely,”

“No, I mean you physically disappeared off space radar, the ship was just not there.”

Josh took over the transmission, “Say again Houston.”

“Hey General, I say again, we lost you off the screen,

you completely disappeared, one second you were there the next you were gone, just empty space.”

“What time was that Houston,” asked Josh.

“That was at twelve-thirteen, Atlantis.”

“Thank you Houston, stand by, I think I have an idea what may have happened,” concluded Josh, “I’ll get back to you, Atlantis out.” Josh told Angelo the hang on and he’d be back, he disembarked from the Shuttle and made his way to the elevators, where he dialled up the bridge. When he jumped out of the hatch only Charlie was there, “Have you had the main drive on,” he asked.

“No, I’m waiting for a call from Ed,” Charlie responded, “is there a problem?”

“Is Ed in the engine room?”

“Yes, we’ve been trying to figure the start up,” said Charlie.

“I’ll go down and see what he’s been doing.”

“No need,” said Charlie, “we found we have a direct connection via this screen,” he said. Charlie tapped a crystal button, which lit up, as did the screen, “Ed, Josh wants a word.”

“What is it General, I’m a bit busy here,” Ed said in his thick Welsh lilt.

“Have you managed to get that drive on-line yet, even a bit,” asked Josh.

“I thought I had for a moment about a half hour ago, but nothing seemed to have happened yet”

“I think you have succeeded at that time Ed, I’ve just had Houston on the comm because we disappeared

completely, nothing on either visible or radar.”

“Ho, that's good then, it seems I had it.”

“No it's not Ed, we need warning, we just cant do things like that when we're dealing with things like a warp drive, or whatever it is,” shouted Josh, “you nearly gave Houston a heart attack.”

“Sorry General, we'll keep the link on and I'll tell Chas' when I touch anything.”

Josh sighed, “Look Ed, we have protocols to follow, I have to answer for them even though I didn't write them, so please, work with me, and whilst we're about it, please stop calling me 'general', it's honorary and it will only last until we leave.”

“OK, point taken General.”

Josh threw his arms in the air and shook his head. “Just give up,” said Charlie.

Josh was about to leave when Ed's voice came across the video link, “I'm going to try what I did before, do you want to give me a count down?”

“Yes, said Josh, let me inform Houston,” he took out his personal radio and pressed the speak button, “Angelo, patch me through to Houston.” Josh waited a few minutes.

“Hi, General, we're receiving you, what's the problem?”

“That disappearance we suffered, it may have been the main drive coming on line, we are about to test it again, so stand by, we will give it one minute before switching off,”

“Roger that, Houston standing by.”

“Did you hear that Ed, on for one minute and then off,” warned Josh.

“Roger that General,” mimicked Ed. Ed was already standing by the lever that seemed to be some sort of interface device to a mechanism that was shielded below the floor. The lever moved smoothly from one position to another, Ed assumed that it was on or off, the floor shuddered as previously it had, and he looked at his watch counting the sixty seconds. The large room was alive with energy and Ed felt his hair on his head and arms, trying to rise with the static. Fifty-eight, fifty-nine, sixty, Ed pulled the lever back to the off position, there was a shudder and the static faded away.

On the bridge, Josh went back to his radio, “Angelo, is Houston still on?”

“Houston here General, you managed your disappearing trick again, we actually saw you pop out of existence and back in again, looks like you found the drive, congratulations team.”

“Ed, did you get that?”

“I am not deaf General, we still have much to do, and we need to be able to navigate when we're on the main drive, as far as I can see we'd be running blind.”

“OK; good work guys, I'll leave you to it.”

Josh rejoined the three outside the matter transporters, “What was it Josh,” asked Jo as soon as he appeared.

“Those two have got the drive on-line,” explained Josh, and he went on to explain how the ship had totally disappeared, and the remainder of the story.

“I don't like the idea of flying blind,” commented Blake to no one in particular.

“Could be we need to set the target on the photon drive before we start,” suggested Julia.

“That's fine for vectoring but what about range,” said Josh.

Blake thought, “Maybe there is a ranging adjustment on the photon drive that we haven't discovered yet.”

“Yep, could be,” said Julia, “we haven't finished with that yet, those two comedians could not wait to get to the main drive.”

“I think we've made some great strides ahead in the past week,” offered Blake.

“How come we have so many British on this team Blake, I heard that you live in the UK as well, asked Julia.

“As you know Blake made the discovery of this ship first and did all the initial work,” interrupted Josh, “Jo here, besides being Blake's wife is one of the best language researchers I have heard of, and I have to say Laura is even better at general research, world class. Charlie went to university with Blake and came recommended, he's a clown, yes but has his moments of brilliance, and well Ed, he's the worlds foremost expert in sub-atomic technology, as we've found out.”

“And you Julia are the world's best general physics expert,” added Blake.

The next week saw the discoveries widen and many of the issues that needed to be solved were well on the way to fruition. The main drive ranging was solved by

Charlie who discovered how to convert the targeting system for the photon drive, which everyone had agreed to name the 'PD', to work as a virtual navigation system. Julia was instrumental in solving the remainder of the matter transporter's functions and even made improvements to the PD, saying "so much for alien technology." Blake and Jo, out on some 'them-time' accidentally discovered an cargo version of the matter transfer machine. This version was almost the size of the small crew hangar and they found that it could also send machines to anywhere inside the ship. That discovery led to another discovery, that the personal transporters could also perform the same function, so that families could be sent directly to their new homes. Josh spent the time learning to control and pilot the ship and even Angelo was instructed in the bridge operation, which he was thankful for, after spending so much duty time in Atlantis. NASA was grateful that the shuttle need not be used again and it was decided to leave Atlantis onboard 'The Return' and to move all stocks of shuttle fuel up to the hangar in cryostat tanks. Everyone quickly got used to using the matter transporters and more, and more authorised personnel visited the ship and the novelty started to wear off.

Chapter 7

Selection

Back on Earth the first round of the selection process had gone well; a billion names had been selected from every discipline one could imagine. It had been decided that not only would the selection include scientists, engineers, architect, builders, designers and other practical skills, it would also include great names in the arts, music and every discipline in that realm. In the end just over three-quarters of a billion people ended up, with their families on what became the 'A' list, this left some extra places for the random secondary selection process. By 'R-Day' minus three-hundred and sixty-five; fully thirty days before the deadline, the list was complete. The volunteers who had elected to stay started their year of princely living and the final list of names was announced. Across the Earth communications centres informed the selected people of their success. Many places on Earth were still not totally connected with modern technology, so in some areas of Africa, South America and Asia, teams were sent out to remote areas to inform people. Unbelievably some had not even heard of the plight of the Earth, let alone the alien ship, even though many had seen the object in the night sky.

One team sent out to the Congo encountered a village where the news had not gotten through, the head-man,

Comba Mura, refused to accept the news and almost chased the team out of the village. Fortunately a cousin who had accompanied the team managed to show the man several local newspapers that contained the news, and he relented. Comba and the village were shown pictures of the craft and the area where they would be resettled, the team did their very best to sell the idea of a better life, but they were on an up-hill struggle. The village had a meeting of the elders and they made the decision that they would, “take their chances.” Many Buddhists across central Asia had also refused on religious grounds. Many thousands, for one reason or another were refusing their places on the ship, so multiple supplementary lists needed to be produced.

In London however, there were riots when the programmed sub-dermal implants started at 'R' minus two-hundred and fifty. The implant centres were attacked and broken into several times and the British army were called to stand guard over the centres, both in London and in the main centres. Mobile centres had to be abandoned as these were being hijacked en-route and in two cases the driver and one team member were killed. In Liverpool someone decided that a private army should combat the regular army and brought in tanks and armour-cars from a military museum to stop the centre and supplement their own choices. It seems that this was led by various criminal elements controlling gangs from the Toxteth, Norris Green, and Croxteth areas of the city. Fortunately little munitions

were available for the tanks and the army easily overcame the situation. All those arrested were removed from the list, if their names were already on it. Manchester decreed that it would make its own selections and proceeded to choose the City Council as its primary choice with their families. The central government dissolved all city Metropolitan Councils as a result, saying they were no longer needed. At the U.S. Navy's submarine base at Holy Loch, Scotland and the Royal Navy's Clyde Submarine Base a huge mob tried to take over the base and hold the submarines to ransom for places. Both the US and the UK Navy told the mob they could have the submarines, and the mob left. In Portsmouth and Plymouth in the south of the UK more demonstrations took place and the Royal Navy was called in to protect the cities and the navy bases.

Similar incidents were taking place across the world, NASA's bases across the US was of particular interest to those not on the 'B' list. It was still assumed by humanity that the population was to be lifted to the alien ship by Shuttles and rockets, indeed some would be, the information about the transporters had been kept under wraps. So NASA was the obvious target, unbeknownst to the population in general, most NASA sites had been deserted in readiness for the expected backlash. Only Houston, the Cape and Edwards, were operating, and those sites were heavily guarded, more than any other sites in the history of mankind. The larger US cities all had their continual demonstrations, New York, Chicago,

LA, east to west. Tokyo, saw some of the worst riots, claiming that the west was being favoured in the places on the ship, and India threatened to launch its own craft to take their selected people to 'The Return'. Following that the Indian army started planning a takeover of the rescue ship; this was foiled just six hours before take-off by a detachment of US Navy Seals.

Nevertheless, by 'R' minus two-hundred days the subdermal implant scheme was almost complete and one point nine-five billion people were ready to be moved. It was estimated that the uplift could be completed in just twenty seven days, using the transporters alone, others would still be lifted by the previously arranged means. With all systems on green for go, twenty-four hours a day, it would give the uplift an extra day. Strangely, things started to quiet down after the one-hundred and fifty day point and Earth's population seemed to accept its fate. Those who had faith prayed, of those the ones that had places prayed for the ones that hadn't places and vice-versa. The suicide rate was horrendous, thousands every day and churches were filled with bodies, thought to be the best place for them. With forty days to go before up-lift start, everything seemed ready to go and the final programming of the transporters was under way by Julia French who was now the 'Transporter Director' and resident expert. Every code for the implants was fed into an add-on computer, which had been tested a hundred times, nothing was left to chance, the implant codes, known as SDC's, would both up-lift the people

and forward them on to their designated homes automatically. The down-time between up-lifts was just one point seven seconds, and would be monitored by a team trained by Julia, each pod could be stopped the instant a glitch appeared.

Finally 'R' minus sixty arrived and at midday, according to the meridian in Greenwich England, the up-lift started, but within minutes it was discovered that things were not going according to their very finely laid out plans. As the first people appeared in the transporters cubicles, the readouts were just wrong, family seventy-two had no SDIs no information appeared on the monitoring screens. Some did have the correct codes, but it seemed that they were in a minority, those were then forwarded to areas that had not been designated for them. Sure, farming families, it was found later, were assigned to agricultural areas, but the powerful computers were not following their programming. The up-lift was immediately halted, just four minutes in. Julia and her team set to examining the programming code and the interfaces to the alien system, after six hours they could find nothing to account for the error. Ten tests worked just fine and the self checking system was confirming all was well. Julia felt that she was being blamed for the errors and attempted to put things right by reversing the transporters and downloading the people who had been lifted in error.

Each time the transporters were instructed to redeposit

the families back at their point of origin the system blocked the action with was growl and closed down. At eight that evening President Bose got to hear about the issues and personally made contact with Julia. “Professor French, I just wanted to assure you that no one here is blaming you for these errors, we are dealing with alien technology here Professor, and we just need to be thankful that we have been able to discover so much about the ship.”

“Thank you Mister President, but that is little consolation to those people who are expecting to have a life-saving place on this ship. May I suggest Sir that we use the various conventional vehicles we are using to return the non-codes to Earth and transport the codes we miss up here.”

“That sounds like a possible solution Professor, however I am not totally happy with dumping those who are up-lifted by mistake, back on Earth, it's just not fair on them. Do we have spare capacity?”

“Some, about point zero-five billion.” Julia informed Bose.

“Not enough, Professor, I guess we had better try your solution, go ahead,” ordered the President.

An hour later the first non-code family was on its way back to western Belgium, by six the next morning all of the non-codes had been removed from the ship. Almost immediately the up-lift began again with the same results, the Belgian family were once more transported back to the ship and one group of non-codes on their

way back to Earth were seized by the transporters and returned to the ship. An hour later, after working all day and all night, the hard-headed Julia was in tears. Blake arrived at just after nine and went to the temporary monitoring cabin, pushing his way through the crowds that were gathered around the line of transporters.

“How are things Julia, I hear we have some enormous problems,” Blake asked.

“Problems?” spat Julia, “is understating what's going on by the wide Atlantic, I just give up, the ship obviously has its own agenda.”

“Yes, I got that, no matter what we do, it switches back,” mused Blake, “I certainly don't understand how or why.”

“Honestly Blake there is nothing I can do here, I may as well just go back to Harvard.”

“Professor French, Julia; we need someone to monitor all this and you are the only one of the team who is up to the job.”

“Sure, but I am not holding my breath that I will be on this ship when it leaves, I have the feeling that it's just putting up with me,” said Julia almost in tears again.

“That's just silly Julia, this is a machine, and it doesn't have feelings.”

“Yea, an alien machine that we know almost nothing about, for instance do we know where the central computer core is?”

“Good morning Mister President,” said Blake, “I am sorry to report that nothing we are doing is making any difference to the way this ship is up-lifting people.”

“I have been thinking,” said Bose, “yes, Presidents do think now and again,” he laughed, “this ship seems like it has some agenda of its own, it was obviously sent here to do a job.”

“Agreed,” said Blake.

“What if . . .” started the President thoughtfully, “the ship has been pre-programmed with all the prerequisites that are needed to establish a civilisation, and maybe that's from experience; I don't know, I'm just exploring.”

“You make a real good point Sir, I have to admit that I started to think in that direction last night,” agreed Blake.

“So,” continued President Bose, “I am making an executive decision, I got Prime Minister Eric Johnson out of bed this morning and we agreed to just go along with the ship's selection and let's see what happens. Can you please implement that for me Blake?”

“Yes, of course Sir, I don't honestly think we have any alternative.”

“We sure don't Blake, but would you ask Julia to monitor the skills, background of the people the ship chooses, as far as she can, I know we are dealing with billions.”

“Will do Sir, I think she will be glad to have something to do, she's feeling' pretty useless just now.”

The ship's computers, or whatever ran the ship continued to make its selections and slowly the internal world of 'The Return' filled up with life. Agricultural equipment was up-lifted through the large transporter, as well as thousands upon thousands of other machines. Works of

art and literature arrived in everything from cardboard boxes to huge wooden crates and work started in earnest. The farms started to be planted, mobile dairies started to produce milk, and butter and fishermen started to fish the various lakes. Domestic animals roamed the grasslands, and the zoo started to fill with every species that hunters could find and transport. Above all there seemed to be a peaceful calm over this mini-world, and that was the one thing that impressed Blake most. He put that down to their situation and how they were in the hands of an unknown alien civilisation and heading to an unknown land, somewhere out there in the vast blackness of the universe.

One day, twenty-eight of the scheduled uplift the transporters stopped working. They were in the middle of a team meeting when one of Julia's team reported in.

“Should I go look see,” Julia asked.

“Not much point, I guess,” said Blake, “by this time we must have learned that the ship will do what the ship will not do.” Julia regained her seat as Blake continued, “as I was saying, we have a departure date, and as we are aware the ship has its own idea and possible timetable, so we must be prepared for a departure at any time, so I have discussed this with President Bose and PM Johnson, we agree that in three days time we will seal the ship and start preparing for departure.”

“I think you're right Blake,” ventured Josh, “however I would suggest . . .” Josh's words were interrupted by the now familiar hum produced by the transporters, and the

image of Julia wavered and a senior crew member, dissolved into nothingness.

“Hell!” shouted Blake; the others just stared into the space where the two team members had once been, “Julia said this may happen, she said that she thought the ship was merely tolerating her.”

“I don't suppose there is any point in lifting her,” said Josh.

“I'll go and try,” said Jo, who rose and left the cabin.

“I just don't understand this, if I were asked to make a list, Julia would be right at the top,” said Josh.

“We seem to be in the hands of these aliens,” said Ed, “just a matter of sitting back and enjoying the ride, isn't it.”

“I don't like not being in control,” stated Josh and little too angrily. Just then there was a knock on the door, which opened immediately and one of the matter transfer team came in.

“Is there a problem Nicky,” asked Blake.

“Well there might be sir, just now, we lost three of our team,” she said, “and I have a message from Deputy Director Douglas Martins, he said that we just lost Conrad Delph.”

“Thanks Nicky,” said Blake, “I wonder how many more we're going to loose?”

Blake returned to his office in the administration building and started reviewing some schematics that Ed had drawn up for him, supposedly for the transporter controls, but little made any sense. He was deep in

thought when there was a knock on the door, or what passed for a door here in this wonderland, “There are a couple of people here asking to see you Boss,” said his assistant.

“Is it urgent,” asked Blake, “only I have a job trying to sort this out.”

“I think *they* may think it urgent, they were found wandering in the French zone and asking for you,” said the P.A.

“Stop pretending you're busy Dad and let us in,” a familiar voice echoed from outside, that Blake recognised immediately.

“Don,” shouted Blake, and jumped up from the table that served as a desk, “and you too Paul, am I relieved to see you two.” Blake almost ran to the boys and hugged them both.

“It seems we brought some more passengers with us,” said Paul as the 'girls' waved from outside the door. “We all sort-a popped out of those Star trek transporters at the same time, we weren't even together at the time.”

“You are all so welcome, we have been so worried about you, that is just what I was working on here in fact, a way to select you, but the ship seems to have its own ideas on who it wants on the ship. Your mother will be so relieved, thank God!”

“We tried to get in touch with you a couple of weeks ago, just after you last rang us, our universities passed everyone out,” said Donald.

“So you're a qualified doctor?” asked their Dad.

“Well only to GP level, not what I wanted, as you know,

I had another ten years to do,” continued Don.

“And I have another engineer for my team, Paul,” said Blake laughing, “we can never have too many on a ship of this size. Come on guys, let’s tell your Mom, she’ll be ecstatic, and she can find the ‘girls’ somewhere close by to live.”

For the next three days people came and went, both by choice or by the ship's decision, the last pieces of equipment came aboard and communities started to organise themselves, neighbour getting to know neighbour. The hangars were full of spacecraft of all kinds, from the old Atlantis through rockets to experimental craft and on the designated day the hangar doors were closed as the last ships switched of their motors. At other parts the transporters were locked off and the equipment transporter sealed up. Other than the ship making its own adjustments, every body that were on board now were there for the journey and those who were on Earth awaited their fate, sixty days in the future. It was agreed that from one week after the ship pulled away, there would be no more communication between the ship and Earth. It was unanimous that communications after that would be too upsetting for everyone. The following thirty days were busy, the core team were needed throughout the little world, speaking to new communities and advising on one matter or another. There were so many questions from the new population that their heads started to spin. At last everything that could be readied was ready for departure

and the last week was one where little was done. The ship was ready, communities were forming and the selection process was over.

Chapter 8

Journey Into Space

'R' Day was upon them, and the giant asteroid could be seen at night with the naked eye, looming far out in space. Earth was reporting that it could be seen during daylight at times. None of the residents of 'The Return' could see the asteroid of course; the only ports they had found in the whole ship were on the bridge. Blake and the team were now condensed in single building that seemed to have been designed as an administrative centre; over the past month it had been rigged with all the equipment needed. The locals insisted in naming it Northfield House, much to Blake's annoyance. Blake had managed little sleep when he decided to get out of bed that morning, it was just after five by GMT, ship's time, when he made his first mug of coffee of the day, shut himself in his study and had his quiet time with his God. An hour later he heard Jo moving around outside in the kitchen area and decided he needed his second mug of coffee. "Good morning honey," he greeted Jo, with a kiss planted on her forehead, "how are you feeling?"

"Surprisingly at peace, strangely, I slept well too and I didn't think I would."

"I do miss the morning newspaper," bemoaned Blake.

"I'm sure someone will get one up and running before too long dear," Jo consoled him.

They ate breakfast and dressed, then walked the hundred

meters to the office. They were astounded to find that most of the admin staff was already there; almost all explained this by, 'couldn't sleep'. There was little work done, and people just sat around chatting and receiving visitors, Doug arrived at eleven and had a coffee before he and the core team made their way to the bridge.

Departure was set for mid-day GMT, and although not one of the populations could see the departure the atmosphere was electric throughout the ship, it was palpable as the group walked to the nearest elevator. Douglas Martins, Jo and Blake Northfield, Edward Sculley, Charles Childs and Laura Price holding hands, John Armstrong from Boeing and past-President Oliver Bose, were all invited to the bridge to witness the leaving of Earth. The group, with Josh Flynn and Angelo Maeo, were already on the bridge had become an extended family over the past twenty-two months. The bridge was fully manned with a six person shift pattern. Josh, like the president had relinquished his title of General and assumed the role of captain, Captain Josh and Angelo had spent many hours selecting a crew from applicants within the ship. The crew consisted of five hundred people who had experience in flying, civil aviation crew, air force personnel, and so on. From those twenty-four bridge officers had been chosen who would command the ship. Engineers were appointed to the crew also, who would maintain the engines, and as many of the systems that were understood. All of the crew wore casual uniforms, non-military tunics, mostly

so that they could be recognised.

Fifteen minutes prior to mid-day the PD was fired up and the control systems came to life, with glowing coloured buttons and view-screens. The observation ports were opened to reveal a view of Earth, everyone on the bridge gazed wistfully at the scene, the planet that had been man's home for who knew how many millennium. The Moon hung there, just beyond Earth like a searchlight on its parent planet, and beyond them the pink glow of Mars and beyond, the stars that would be their home for how long nobody knew. The scene brought tears to almost every eye that gazed out. There were so many questions, so many unknowns, the unknown is always a frightening prospect, but here there was no fear, just peace, why? How long would the journey take, would they meet the benevolent aliens, would they be like us, what would their new home look like, Earth, or so alien that it would not be settled? Patiently they waited for the digital clock to count down to twelve, there was no reason for waiting, it was just tradition, and nothing in space 'just went ahead'. Countdowns were a part of NASA and NASA was a part of Captain Josh.

Finally, the clock changed from fifty-nine to zero-zero, and Josh sitting in the newly installed captain's chair called, "Take her out Mister Maeo," who then looked around at Blake and whispered, "I've always wanted to say that." Blake gave a nervous laugh.

Angelo activated the manoeuvring thrusters and the ship slowly turned its back on Earth. “What course Captain,” he asked.

“One-hundred and eighty degrees, by one-eighty, range two-hundred million kilometres and full stop.” Josh ordered, “and steady as she goes,” he ordered, smiling.

“Why are we stopping out in space Josh,” asked Blake.

“We are going to wait there to see what happens to Earth,” said Josh, “only bridge officers and this group will know, the President gave me his last orders just before he relinquished the presidency, his last order, to watch from a safe distance.”

“Makes no difference, if people wish to watch,” commented Blake.

The manoeuvring thrusters shut down with barely a vibration, “Ahead slow,” said Angelo. The ship slid silently out into interplanetary space and on the rear view screen Earth shrank slowly in diameter. Just on three hours later the ship came to a full stop just short of Mars orbit, and parked. When the group returned to the offices everybody gave a cheer, believing the ship was moving through space.

“I’m not comfortable with just stopping and letting people believe that we are on our way to a new planet,” said Blake, “I have nothing against anyone who wishes to view the end on our planet, if they wish to. We cannot get everyone onto the bridge, however, and that is not fair for those who wish to see the event.”

“But no one will know Blake,” said Doug.

“And that, my friend compounds the whole thing with what is essentially a lie,” answered Blake.

“There is little we can do about it Blake,” said Josh, “unless we, I, ignore the President's last executive order and just keep going, which I really don't wish to do.”

“Look,” said Oliver Bose, “if this is going to cause problems, just ignore it; I'm no longer president so my orders no longer stand. I just wished to salute Earth, she's been our home for who knows how long.”

“Mister Preside . . . sorry Oliver, I have nothing against that, in fact I think I would probably wish to do the same,” explained Blake, “I'm just not comfortable with the lie, and I just don't think it's fair.”

“And I agree with you,” responded Bose, “so let us just keep going.”

“Blake can I make a suggestion,” interrupted Charlie, “we know we have an audio public address system, but we have never investigated beyond that, why don't we spend a week out there and I'll see if there is a video option.”

“That would be helpful,” agreed Blake, “but what happens if there isn't one or you can't find it?”

“Then we continue on,” said Bose.

“OK,” agreed Blake, “one week, and we will tell everyone that we have stopped for a systems upgrade, which is not a lie. What are the chances Charlie?”

“I'd say, pretty darn good,” ventured Charlie, “surely with all this technology they must have a way of showing video, we just didn't look for it.”

“You got a job, Charlie, let's get it done,” said Blake.

Charlie finished talking and crossed immediately to the section of the bridge that they had christened the Communications Station, and started to investigate the many controls and buttons on the panel. The group broke up and went their separate ways, leaving Charlie to his challenge. Blake and Jo returned the Administrative Centre where they found a small group waiting for them. Some wished to know if they were underway and if so, was it too late to contact Earth? Blake's answer was that by now it would be too late. Others had various requests, but two asked if it would be possible to see the destruction of Earth. Amazed he told them, “We are working on that, but we are not sure yet whether it would be possible or not, can you please give us a week, we will know by then.” The two continued to their office and as soon as they were alone, Blake said, “I didn't expect that Jo, it seems that there must be some interest in the event.”

“Maybe you should make a general announcement Blake,” suggested Jo.

An hour later, Blake was sitting at his desk with the thin stalk of a microphone before him, ready to make the announcement. They had installed a radio system, which was independent of the ships address system. The system included some software that the Google Corporation had developed, especially for the ship, and free of charge, that translated the verbal input into a thousand languages in real-time. This was transmitted to

individuals with the correct receiver for their own language. *“Attention please, this is a general announcement. This ship will soon be stopping just short of the orbit of Mars, we will maintain this position for at least a week. The reason for this is that we have received several requests to be able to observe the final demise of Earth, and we are investigating the possibility of allowing this. Because the only observation ports in this whole ship are the small ones on the bridge, we need to find a way of bringing the collision to you in video. This will take one week, if it is not possible by then we will continue our voyage, if we succeed we will maintain this position until the event. I hasten to add that if you do not wish to watch this, there will be no compulsion to do so, and arrangements will be made to shield people from the video. Thank you.”*

Charlie worked tirelessly on the system trying to identify some means of transmitting the images of the ultimate disaster. He found other systems, a means of contacting almost anyone on the ship privately, a long range communication system that he could get no answer from. There was also a system that seemed to be live and open all of the time, but could find no use for it, although he found it was linked into the general ship's P.A. System. There was also a system that automatically scanned all wavebands for transmissions, this one Charlie left activated as well. On the fifth day of the week Charlie found a system on a small panel above the communication station that he had not noticed. There

was the usual transparent power dome and several controls, including a small screen, holding his breath he pressed the little amber dome. The small screen came alive, but showed only white-noise. After manipulating a row of seven knobs the screen started to show various views of the ship's interior. Then the views disappeared and a star-field filled the small screen, "OK," Charlie said to himself, "all we need to do now is to find some system to broadcast this." Leaving the stars on the screen he left the seven knobs and started looking at other controls, there was a smaller transparent dome, this one colourless and three mini touch-pads to the right. He pressed the small dome which illuminated with multicoloured lights in blue and green, but nothing happened.

Charlie touched the bottom-most touch-pad and the picture changed to one he recognised, he walked over to the navigation panel and saw the same image displayed there. "Right we have the feed from the navigation screen," he muttered as he went back to his little corner of the bridge.

"Have you found something," asked Angelo, whose shift it was.

"Making progress, Angelo," he said, "I just don't know how to display it to our passengers yet."

Just then the ship's intercom came alive, "Laura Pierce to bridge."

"Angelo here Laura, you want Charlie?"

"Yes, I just wanted to congratulate him on getting the

video feed going,” she said.

“What!” shouted Charlie, “can you explain please Laura?”

“Come down and see, it's like holograms all over the ship, the picture just appeared in mid-air.”

Charlie left the video running and made for the elevator, dialled the destination where they now lived and popped inside. A couple of minutes later Charlie stepped out to find Laura waiting at the end of the row of elevators, as soon as she saw him, she pointed up towards the clouds. Charlie followed her pointing and looked up at about forty-five degrees. There he saw the most massive virtual screen he had ever seen one that could probably be measured in miles rather than meters, there were no visible supports and no sign of any projection system.

“Well done Chas,” said Laura, “that's amazing.”

“It was another accident, as usual.”

The ship stayed on station for the following three weeks, but the feelings in the ships community was split. Less than a third of the population wished to view the event, and Charlie managed to find a way of zoning the holographic screens. Specific zones were designated as viewing areas and everyone was asked to assemble in those areas on the day, whilst the remainder of the population would continue their daily routine. On the eight-hundred and sixty-sixth day since the detailed conformation, those who wished to observe Earth's destruction gathered in one of the many viewing zones. Charlie was responsible for the video feed and at eight in

the morning he started tracking the asteroid, now called 'Satan', as it hurtled toward planet-Earth. The mood in the zones was a sombre one, there was little noise or even the usual undercurrent of people talking, that accompanied large gatherings. People just sat on the grassed areas, sat on camp chairs or at the permanent picnic tables and just stared at the seemingly stationary asteroid. Captain Josh had moved the ship to a point where the asteroid would pass the ship, but where the ship would be perfectly safe. Over the hours the aspect of the great rock changed as it approached the ship and then passed it by, now showing the rear elevation.

Charlie, using the navigation system, slowly zoomed in on the rock as it drew away from them, until the Earth filled about half of the screen and then locked it off. The asteroid, as was predicted headed for a dead-centre hit in the Atlantic Ocean. Despite the apparent speed of 'Satan' the last minutes seemed as if it took place in slow-motion. The asteroid hit the top of the atmosphere and flame flared out from the leading face of the rock, the asteroid flipped over as if it was bouncing off water and started to spin. Well before even a tenth of the rock had entered the atmosphere, the leading edge hit the waters of the Atlantic Ocean. Great clouds of steam burst out like jets and quickly filled the atmosphere, like a snow-globe, followed immediately by another flare of flame that encompassed the planet. Then, the planet seemed to be cleaved like a mighty sword cutting a cake, and seconds later an explosion blasted Earth into

smithereens, and dust. What was left was a fog and mist consisting of remnants of the once life-bearing planet. At the cloud's centre was the still molten iron core glowing in a dull orange, like a cooling coal ember. The core still held the pieces in its gravitational grip, because nothing was now going anywhere, the rubble just hung there like Saturn's rings, but without Saturn. The show was over, and many of the watchers were in tears, some because they had lost friends and others because Earth was no more. The Moon, now freed from its captive gravity of the Earth, floated of into space, with small explosions on its surface where detritus hit the Moon's surface. After thirty minutes of watching the sphere of detritus, Charlie switched off the feed and closed the system down.

It seemed that everyone remained in a sombre mood for several days, one man told Blake the majority of the population of the ship had been praying that in the end the asteroid would pass Earth by. The present mood then was hardly a surprise, certainly, the images would be indelibly fixed in Blake's mind for the remainder of his life, and he imagined that it would be the same for other viewers. The following day the ship was turned again and the course was set, to where they did not know. Josh was on the bridge as Angelo brought the PD on-line and eased the control up to ten percent of the speed of light. The ship responded and smoothly accelerated to the desired speed, when they found there was no problem, Josh ordered the ship to twenty-five

percent of 'c'. The ship cruised at that speed for a day until Josh gave the order to proceed to fifty percent. The same procedure took place to increase speed to seventy-five percent then the day after to ninety-nine percent. After no adverse effect at the top speed, Josh asked for a meeting of the original team to discuss the next step.

“So here we are as close to the speed of light as we can get, just one percent under 'c' which is something no one thought possible,” said Josh as he opened the meeting. “We now need to decide if we are going to use the main drive. Ed, you know more about the theories of faster than light drives than anyone alive, or dead?”

“I certainly don't pretend to know the absolutes of this main drive,” said the professor, “we activated it twice and it seemed to slip into some other dimension, I believe that it creates a hole in space, where space-time does not exist and that enables it to hop anywhere in the universe, but it's a total unknown, isn't it.”

“Well, if it's there it must work,” said Blake, “and likely, that's how the ship got to Earth.”

“My worry,” interjected Josh, “is there seems no way of navigating, we can use the navigation system in PD but we don't know if it works in the main drive, we can't see where we are or where we're going, what if we hit a planet, or something.”

“I dare say that the aliens who built this ship will have solved that problem,” stated Charlie.

“True enough,” replied Ed, “there must be some automatic guidance, because we certainly can't be in

control if we can't see.”

“What would be the point of these aliens sending us this ship if we couldn't use it,” said Jo, “or if there was a chance of hitting something on the way and killing us all off anyway.”

“There's feminine logic for you, isn't it,” commented Ed, “listen to her boys”.

After around an hour's discussion the team were almost unanimous, almost because Josh still had niggling doubts, but understood the logic.

“So, are we agreed,” asked Blake, “we push on and start the main drive?” Everyone nodded their heads in agreement.

“Do we put another target in the navigation or should we just keep going on our present course, wherever that takes us to,” asked Josh.

“Can I make a suggestion,” asked Blake, as there were no objections he continued. “Every astronomer knows that to the north there is an area of space that seems to be almost void of stars, it's even mentioned in the Bible, in Job 26:7, it mentions an area of empty space. Besides the fact that it has always fascinated me, it struck me that there is less to hit in that direction, if anyone is worried.”

Ed slapped the table with the palm of his hand, “That my friend,” he said in his thick Welsh accent, “is supposed to be the direction of heaven, isn't it.”

Everyone looked at the professor in surprise. “What's the matter then, I'm not a heathen am I.”

“It's just that it's the last thing I would have expected you

to say, Ed,” said Blake.

“Listen, boy,” said Ed, “I’m a good chapel lad, always was and always will be.”

“OK, at least it’s a course we can set,” said Josh, “can you find it from here Blake?”

“As long at we can work out in what direction north was from Earth.”

“I think Angelo could do that, he’s a whiz at celestial navigation,” said Josh, “that’s why I picked him.”

The whole team made their way to the bridge once more but Angelo was off duty, Josh used the newly discovered communication device to contact him and asked him to come to the bridge. Five minutes later Angelo exited the elevator onto the bridge, and was presented with the problem.

“Sure,” said Angelo, “we figuring on going to heaven?” Everyone laughed, much to Angelo’s bemusement.

“With respect Blake, I can find the void myself, we’re not that far away from the Solar System as yet.” He crossed to the navigation system, “and I think we may be able to locate your area of space from here.” Angelo studied the screen as he zoomed out, took a hand-held computer from his pocket and tapped in a few commands, and then compared the results with the navigation screen. It took several minutes of manipulating the navigation controls and more consultation of the computer before he declared, “Got it, only just though, another day at this speed and we would have had to turn back.”

“To get a perfect vector, will we need to go back

anyway,” asked Josh.

“Somewhat Sir, we will need to take a 'S' shape course.”

“How long before we can open up the main drive,” asked Blake

“I'm just calculating that,” said Angelo, “we can be in position in two days.”

The course was set and the ship smoothly completed the long, slow change in its course, whilst life went on as usual. The following day when Jo was making breakfast in their assigned dwelling, and Blake was languishing in bed, there was a knock on the door. Jo called, “with you momentarily,” as she grabbed a robe.

“Who's that,” called Blake.

“Don't know yet as I haven't got x-ray vision,” Jo called back, sarcastically. She made her way to the door and opened it; on the door step stood Ed Sculley, with a smile on his face.

“Is that coffee I can smell,” he asked.

“Yes it is,” smiled Jo, “come in and sit down and I'll pour you a cup.”

“That would be super,” Ed said as he marched in.

“Are you here to see Blake,” Jo asked.

“No, well yes but you as well, where is the chief?”

“Still in bed . . .”

“No he's not, he just got disturbed by someone knocking on the door,” Blake said as he came down the stairs from the upper level. “Good morning Ed, what can we do for you?”

“Nothing, really, I just called in for a decent cup of

coffee, I heard that you managed to bring some real stuff on board, and to give you an invitation.”

“Well here's you coffee,” said Jo, what's the invitation for?”

“Do you two know what day it is,” asked Ed.

“Do you know what, I have no idea,” said Blake, “no newspapers.”

“I thought as much,” said Ed sipping his coffee, “that's good coffee, the proper stuff isn't it. From your comments on the bridge yesterday I guessed you two are believers, is that right?”

“Yes it is,” answered Jo, “although we have not had time to worship since our last trip to Cornwall, there never seems to have been time over the past two years.”

“Well, that's why I'm here see,” said Ed, “today is Sunday, and I wanted to invite you to join me at church this morning.”

“It started a couple of weeks ago,” continued the professor, “I was talking to a couple of people from my village back in Wales, we met by accident, and decided to meet up the following Sunday. This will be our third meeting and we have several hundred people already, so we decided to use the community meeting hall down the road, no one else has wanted to use it for anything so far. We're meeting in just over an hour at eleven, this morning. How about coming then?”

“Sure,” said Blake as Jo nodded, “that would be nice, thanks Ed.”

“Have you eaten,” Jo asked Ed.

“I had one of those breakfast bars that NASA supplied, thanks.”

“Right then sit down and join us for a proper breakfast,” said Blake. Over breakfast the three shared their various backgrounds in the faith, Blake, his Southern Baptist upbringing, Jo, her Anglican background and Ed, his Wesleyan experiences in the Welsh valleys. After they had eaten Jo and Blake dressed and they left the house, walking the short distance to the nearest transport garage, where they grabbed a buggy and drove toward the glowing spire that could be seen for miles. As they exited the next village the road was choked by people walking toward the hall and when they drove into the area of lawns around the spire, they found crowds milling around.

“Hundreds,” said Blake, “more like thousands, Ed, I think you need to learn to count.”

“I honestly didn't expect this many people,” Ed responded, obviously in shock.

The inside of the 'Spire' there were already hundreds, seated on a sort of tier system that seemed to lift from the floor, Ed took the lead and took the couple to the front of the auditorium, where he introduced them to Doctor Owen Williams, the pastor of Ed's church back in Wales.

“We are honoured to have you join us Mister Northfield,” Doctor Williams said.

“It's a pleasure to be here, we haven't been in fellowship in a good while, said Blake, “this is my wife Jo,” Jo

shook hands with Williams.

They had found several musicians who had set up their instruments to one side of the low dais, at eleven o'clock the musicians started playing a song, one that both the Northfields recognised.

“Best get seated then,” said Ed.

The service was fairly standard, but acoustics were amazing thought Blake, there were no microphones or amplifiers, yet everyone could hear every word said and note played, even people at the rear of the auditorium could be heard by everyone else. Both Jo and Blake enjoyed the time, especially as he was not been asked to speak, the only thing that was missing were the coffee and biscuits after the service. There were many who wanted to meet either Jo or Blake, or both, and wished to shake hands, many had questions about how he had discovered the ship on that August evening over two years ago. The couple managed to get away just before thirteen-hundred, ship's time, leaving Ed to go and eat lunch with Doctor Williams.

“Well, that was a nice surprise,” said Jo, as they started their short journey back to their home.

“Sure was,” agreed Blake, “but don't you think it's strange that there were so many people there, just from our zone, what percentage do you think that represents?”

“There must have been, what, three thousand packed into the Spire,” estimated Jo.

“More like four or five,” said Blake.

“OK, say there was four-thousand, and our zone contains

around ten-thousand, so that's forty percent.”

“See what I mean, that’s way above the percentage attending church back on Earth,” said Blake.

“Remember the people here are not the random sample we wanted, the ship made the choices, maybe the ship just choose good people, or maybe, everyone is just grateful to have been saved.”

“Possible,” said Blake, “but it seems mighty strange to me.”

“I think it's great,” said Jo, “all those people, and all different denominations, I spoke to several Catholics as well as several others, all worshipping together, it's a miracle, Blake, just be happy.”

The following day the ship was completing its course back to the point where they would engage the main drive, so the full team assembled once more on the bridge. “We will be able to engage the drive in about four minutes,” announce Angelo, when everyone was present.

“Engage when ready Mister Maeo,” ordered Captain Josh.

“Engage when ready, Aye Captain,” responded Angelo with a grin on his face, Josh just slowly shook his head. Angelo moved from the navigation station to the engineering station. “Engaging drive in, three, two, one, he moved the lever to the first 'zero' position. The ship gave a shudder but other than that nothing happened.

“Proceed to position one Angelo,” said Josh. Angelo moved the lever to the first position, nothing seemed to

change. Charlie crossed to the navigation station and looked at the screen, instead of there being a real-time image of the surrounding space, there appeared to be a schematic. At the centre of the screen was a representation of the ship, with yet another amber line, curving away ahead, lancing between what could have been stars or planets, or even galaxies for all he knew.

“We seem to have a pre-programmed course here, but I have no idea where to,” said Charlie.

Josh rose from the captain's chair and joined Charlie, “I see, the line is the same colour as we saw on our previous course and the asteroid's course,” he stated.

“Sir,” announced Angelo's voice, “the drive lever just went up three marks, on its own.”

“Well switch it back down again,” said Josh.

“I tried, it seems to be locked.” responded Angelo. Josh left the navigation and crossed to the engineering station just in time to see it switch up to the seventh and top mark, Josh grabbed the lever and tried to move it back. Struggle as he might the lever was locked solid.

“Well, it looks like we are in the hands of our alien saviours or we just triggered the trap.” Josh stated, “Let's hope it's the former rather than the latter.”

“Do we want to inform all of our population,” asked Jo, “they do have a right to know what's going on, after all.”

“I'm not sure, it may cause problems with panic,” said Josh shaking his head, “we can afford any unrest, we're just not equipped to handle it.”

“I know we haven't encountered any problems so far, but

shouldn't we look into forming a police force," mused Blake.

"To be honest," said Charlie, "I am surprised we have had no incidents over the past few weeks, not one has been reported, its just not human."

"Well I have a theory," interjected Ed, "I was wondering the other night why the ship over-rode our selections for people, it seemed to have its own agenda. So what if this ship has a way of seeing people in a way that we can't, being able to see into their minds sort-of-speak."

"I think we have all been thinking about that," said Blake, "especially after yesterday at the service."

"What was that Blake," asked Josh." Blake described his experience at the Spire the previous day, and how so many people turned up to a family worship. "You are kidding me," said Josh, I wondered why it was so quiet yesterday when I was coming on duty at mid-day."

"There seems to be a theme developing here, isn't there," concluded Ed.

Chapter 9

Community in Space

Life continued on The Return and people were falling into a daily routine, it seemed that the starting of Sunday services had the effect of designating the week, and separating one week from the next. Blake became more and more involved in administering the ship's community and as a result decided to set up a parliament, of sorts, with elected representatives. Josh reduced the bridge crew down to two at any one time, there was little to do other than to stand watch. Gradually the farming community started to produce fresh food for the populace, all of the people involved in agriculture were amazed at how quickly crops grew here, with wheat seeds being ready for harvest in just three weeks. Root vegetables, carrots, beetroot, parsnips and potatoes, grew in just two weeks. It had been decided that the only meat allowed on the ship would be chicken meat other than frozen supplies that had been stock-piled; beef, lamb and other red meats would not be allowed. Eggs incubated in just ten days, and the chicken seemed to mature in just a few months, if it continued at its present rate. There were representatives of most domestic and farm animals on board, just as there were specimens of many other species in the zoo, which had been named 'The Ark'. A group of enterprising farmers had decided to grow Soya and had set up a processing plant producing Soya textured meat

products. These had become very popular and more processing plants were being set up in other zones. Ed said that he couldn't tell the difference between one of these Soya beef burgers and a MacDonald's, few would go that far.

Every kind of industry had been set up, from engineering workshops and production facilities to plastic moulders, clothing manufacturers, food processors and many more industries. At Blake's suggestion they had found a master printer who had brought some printing machines on board, the word went out for volunteer reporters, and anyone with newspaper experience or photography experience, several hundred people replied, covering over thirty languages. The newspaper was well received, even if the news was never earth-shattering, crop figures, the attendance at Sunday's services, interviews with once famous people that were no onboard, sports reports and of course the inevitable 'local hero'. Still it was a start that may develop over, who knew how many years. Jo and Blake's son Paul had been overjoyed to join Ed's team, Ed had once lectured his second year class at university and had left an impression. Medical centres had been set up across the ship and Donald had taken up his duties as a doctor, but so far had only acted as a first-aider, other doctors and surgeons were left to look after those with more serious pre-existing conditions.

After some three months into the voyage it was decided

to hold a memorial service for all the billions that had lost their lives when the Earth was destroyed and the word went out. People were asked to bring any pictures they had of the people, who had become known as 'The Lost', and it was arranged to hold services in different languages, denominations and faiths. The big surprise came, and at the same time the first hint emerged, when no one could find any leaders of other faiths, other than a group in Messianic Judaism. Further enquiries found not one follower of any other faith system, other than Christian, either attending or free faith. A group was formed to look at the issue, which Jo headed up, in the end the group decided that after two weeks of discussion and consideration that, the ship, or aliens, had purely chosen people whose character matched those of Christianity. Any other consideration was unthinkable, as it was not what was expected spiritually. Blake told Jo that, "It certainly explains the lack of problems and the feeling of unity on the ship, and that we thought was 'survivor syndrome'."

After two years of denying any romantic entanglement, Charlie and Laura, finally admitted that they were together, and an item. Laura approached Blake one day and asked if they could get married, Blake's jaw dropped and then he burst out in laughter. "What's so funny," asked Laura.

"You and Charlie have been denying this for what three years," said Blake, "and everyone knew that you two were together, and now your face tells me that you

expect me to be shocked.”

“Yes but there’s been no . . . well funny business going on between us,” said Laura.

“I know that, you live apart and behave impeccable, there has never been one finger pointing at you the whole time, you both deserve a medal,” said Blake.

“Can we organise something please Blake,”

“Sure we can, and I think the ship could do with some diversion,” said Blake, “two years are a long time to be cooped up in a ship, as big and as comfortable as it is.”

“Charlie would enjoy a big function, he loves being the centre of attention.”

“OK, leave it with me, I'll get going on this and enlist Jo, she'll love to arrange a wedding.”

The following day Blake had received a visit from Owen Williams, Ed's Welsh pastor, Blake assumed that he had come to discuss the wedding, but he noticed a worried expression on Owens’s face. “Take a seat Owen, what can I do for you,” Blake asked.

“I think we have made a mistake,” Owen said.

“What mistake is that?”

“Way back, when we started the services, we were all a little confused as to what day it was,” explained Owen.

“I remember, and we decided that we would go by Josh's military standard chronograph.”

“Yes, that's right,” said Owen, “only, when I arranged the first service in the Spire, I used my own watch see. I have just been talking to the Captain and I happened to notice his watch, it said it was Friday today and mine

says Saturday.”

“So we've been holding services on a Saturday and not Sundays,” said Blake, “no wonder our Jewish Christian friends have been so happy,” Blake smiled.

“This wedding was supposed to be on a Saturday, so I'm going to set it for a Friday, if you're happy with that?”

“It's fine by me,” said Blake.

“Now, do you wish me to change the day for the services,” asked Owen.

“Gracious, no,” responded Blake immediately, “I don't want to cause any disruption.” Blake thought about it for several seconds and Owen was about to rise from the chair when Blake started talking again. “You know Owen, I have always had these niggles at the back of my mind that Sunday was the wrong day for us Christians to worship.”

“Really,” said Owen as he sank back onto the chair, “we celebrate on a Sunday because we remember Jesus' resurrection on that day.”

“I know that, but God gave a command, the very first command He gave in fact, that we should keep the seventh day holy for all time,” explained Blake. “I know Jesus observed the seventh day, as did His followers for over three-hundred years, I just got this feeling that Sunday's are wrong, somehow pagan.”

“I can't say I agree with you, but if you want to keep going with Saturday services, I'll just carry on and say nothing,” agreed Owen, as he stood up, he shook Blake's hand and left, deep in thought.

Blake was also deep in thought, he wondered if this had attributed to the good feeling on the ship, were they actually obeying God, even unbeknownst, and that was why the contentment had spread throughout this multiracial society.

A month later and the whole of the ship has wedding fever, Blake thought it was like a royal wedding back in England, '*I wonder what happened to King Charles,*' he wondered, '*haven't seen him*'. The wedding was to be performed by Josh, as captain of the ship, and the ceremony was to be televised ship-wide. The wedding day was here, a Friday, and a ship's holiday had been announced, parties had been arranged in every zone and special dishes were prepared for the biggest wedding breakfast in human history. Blake had been give the job of giving Laura away and Ed had taken on the role of best man, the 'girls' with whom Laura had befriended, were to be her bridesmaids, and here they were all dressed up to the nines and ready for the big production. The venue was to be the spire where they attended church on Saturdays, just one of many spires in every zone, but this one was special. Charlie and Laura were regarded as special also, they were after all a part of the team who prepared the ship and got it running, and figured out the languages and systems, they were a prince and princess of this ship.

By ten hours, ship's time Blake was dressed and ready for his duty, the clothing manufacturers had pulled out

all the stops and had designed a suit for him that reflected his Native Indian background. It consisted of a long frock-coat, similar to the coats worn by the early American fathers; on each lapel were embroidered a set symbols of Indian culture, a pair of buffalo horns and a native shield. Down the centre of the coat's back had been embroidered a line of feathers, each in a different pastel colour. Beneath the jacket Blake wore a simple native style white shirt and long pants. "My oh my," said Jo as she exited the shower-room, "now I know why I fell in love with you Blake." Jo had been provided with a light cream suit with English roses embroidered from the left shoulder to the hem, together they made a handsome couple. Fifteen minutes later they left their dwelling in one of the buggies heading for the 'spire'. Josh arrived at Charlie's living, just as Jo and Blake were leaving, to find him struggling to fasten a Edwardian bow-tie.

"Charlie ain't you ready yet," said Josh, what's the matter with you."

"Oh, I'm all fingers and thumbs," he replied, "how are you are tying bows Josh?" Josh set to getting the tie into shape and after a few seconds it sat resplendent at Charlie's neck. Later than intended they left in another buggy, and the journey was like an old ticker-tape parade, with thousands lining to rout.

As Jo and Blake waited at the door of the Spire, a distant cheer was heard a way's off, as they and the others looked toward the closest village they spotted one of the

larger buggies making its way along the roadway. Even from this distance they could see that the buggy was bedecked with garlands, and inside the car was Laura, a pure white figure waving. When Laura was about a half mile from the Spire, another buggy pulled out from behind the short cavalcade and dove onto the grass, speeding in a straight line toward the crystal Spite. Blake spun toward the wall behind him, "Isn't that just right," Blake whispered to Jo, "here comes Charlie and Josh, late for his own wedding."

"I thought he was already inside," said Jo.

"So did I," came the answer, "I should have checked."

With Josh driving, the buggy slid to a halt by the door, Charlie jumped out and mouthed, "Sorry," to Blake, as he dashed inside to take his seat. Josh parked the vehicle and came back to the door, as he passed Jo and Blake he put his fore-arms out and shrugged to them, then followed Charlie inside.

Two minutes later Laura arrived at the door on her very special vehicle driven by Ed, "Was that Charlie that charged across the grass ahead of me," she asked Jo.

"I'm afraid so," said Jo slowly shaking her head, "are you sure about this?"

Laura just smiled, took Blake's arm and she strolled off into the Spire on the dot of eleven o'clock. As they walked down the long central isle Blake could see how much effort had been made to decorate the building, living flowering plants in pots lined the isle and a screen had been erected behind the dais, covered in some

climbing vines in a vivid reds and oranges. Along the top of the screen were a display of produce, fruits from every part of Earth, and surmounted in the centre, a floral display in the form of an 'L' intertwined a 'C'. Waiting for them on the dais was Ed's Welsh Pastor, Owen Williams, in what seemed to be a monk's oatmeal robes, gathered around the waist with a rope belt. Several Christian songs were sung and Owen Williams gave a short talk, not about marriage, but about the brotherhood and sisterhood in this strange community in space. Williams went through the approved wedding service, entirely from memory, and the couple made their promises to each other. Finally at the end of the solemnisation, Owen flung his arms above his head to make the pronouncement and took one fateful step backward.

Owen Williams, doctor of divinity's heel crunched into the bottom of the screen, he spun around to see what he had done just as the screen started to fall away from him. Owen, wanting to save the display, grabbed one of the vine branches to steady the screen, but had the opposite effect and the screen then started to fall forward. Shocked by his error Owen again tripped on his heel and the screen fell on top of him, produce and all. At just the right moment Charlie grabbed Laura and pulled her away from the dais and both landed in Blake and Jo's laps on the front row. Blake, Josh and Charlie helped to lift the screen off the Pastor, but left the screen laying at the back of the dais. Once on his feet Owen Williams,

stood, sharing in the heavy silence that hung over the congregation, after several seconds Williams started to laugh, spread his arms out and said, “For my next visual aid . . .” The awkward silence was broken and the thousands of people in the Spire, and no doubt those watching the video screens, joined in. Josh stepped forward onto the dais and gathered the other three to him, “As captain of this vestal, it is my duty and utter pleasure to pronounce that from this time on, Charlie and Laura shall be husband and wife, may God bless their union,” he finished off and shook hands with Charlie then gave Laura a huge bear hug.

The remainder of the day was one big party, with eating and drinking, music and dance, not just in the English language zone but around the whole ship. Blake and Jo retired back to their accommodation by the middle of the afternoon, in order to get changed into more comfortable clothes, but things were not yet over. As dusk started to descend on the zone and the pretend stars came out, dozens of barques were lit and the aroma of fresh grilled fish started to creep through the darkness. The highlight however was something really special, a firework display, mounted high up in the centre of the sphere. People cheered and clapped as rockets exploded into giant flowers in every colour possible. Finally the display ended and the people started to wander off towards their homes, satisfied and gratified after a wonderful day.

The voyage, thought to be one of a few years, continued for five years before the ship came out of the main drive one afternoon and decelerated into orbit around a huge planet. It all happened automatically and the first thing Blake knew was when Josh contacted him after coming on duty. “We've stopped,” he said, “but unless their fish-people, I don't see there being any aliens here, the planet is covered in water.”

Just as they spoke the ship gave a small but noticeable shudder. Josh and Blake took the elevator to the bridge where Angelo had been left in charge, “What happened,” asked Josh, as he entered the bridge.

“Look for yourselves,” said Angelo, indicating the navigation screen. The picture on the screen showed a column of water stretching from the planet to the ship, “I afraid that this is not journey's end Sir, the ship is merely replenishing our water supply.”

Just then Ed arrived and joined the two at the navigation screen, “Ah changing the water supply, is it,” he said. “Our little fusion star up there needs good water for cooling as do the drives, and they loose water through the system.”

“And I guess we can only go on recycling the same water for so long,” said Blake.

“Indeed my friend, it was one thing to drink water containing a few molecules of dinosaur in them on Earth, and drinking each other's pee here is entirely different.”

They watched, on and off, as the column of water continued to feed the ship for the remainder of the day

and most of the next, and after thirty-six hours, just before dusk the following evening Josh watched as the elephant's trunk of water collapsed back to the planet below.

It was several days before the ship moved off, which caused some wondering in the core crew as to whether this was their destination after all. On the fourth day however, the PD started up without any interference from anyone and ranged back toward light-speed, when, after almost a full day engaged the main drive once more. The navigation screen, which showed the schematic of their relative position, showed one difference, when zoomed out, it was obvious that the ship was now following a slight curve, a definite, but miniscule, course to starboard. The course remained the same for several weeks before it resumed a straight line vector once more, and it was assumed that the ship had made a detour to obtain the water. Everyone then accepted that the ship had resumed its original course.

Nothing remarkable happened for fully three years, on-board life continued as before, most every passenger was content with their lives and there were no needy in the whole ship. Blake did not have a word for the state of the population, no description seemed to fit, it was a strange utopia, a space born 'Shanghai-La' that no one would really wish to leave, even if they never found their alien saviours. It was surreal, never had the human race lived in such peace with each other, never before had

every need been met by Earth's resources. In his thought process he suddenly realised that the only thing that was missing was money, riches, wealth; was this the thing that had made the difference? If there were no monetary system, how could one person be wealthier than another, but the ancients never had money? Wealth in ancient times was based upon possessions, animals or even wives; but here those had also been eliminated also. No one owned the animals they had brought on board, they belonged to everyone, as a treasure of Earth, and well, polygamy had almost been eliminated in the west, other than certain sects. No it seemed that the key to a peaceful and contented society was the lack of any monetary system, that and the other things, working together.

It was over three years since the water-planet stop and everything was settled and running like clockwork, when the ship suddenly dropped out of faster than light cruise mode. The intercom on Blake's office table buzzed, lazily he pressed the switch to answer it, "Blake, it's Josh, we just dropped out of the main drive, and we're decelerating toward a stop, but there are no stars or planets any place close."

"OK," said Blake, "I'm on my way." Seven hours later and the ship hung stationary in empty space, and no one knew why. The ship just sat there, the PD was locked, as was the main drive, even the manoeuvring jets were out of action. It stayed that way for almost two days, then on the evening of the Saturday evening a strange thing

happened, everyone on board collapsed at the same time. No one could actually remember collapsing, but it must have happened because everyone remembered waking up on the ground. People must have been out for only minutes, according to most, but every watch and clock had stopped and refused to go again. Ed suggested some kind of radiation leak, but none could be found, Charlie thought it may have been the effect of a strong gravitational force that the ship had passed through. The following day the services took place as usual, but no one could deny that something was different; no one however, could put their finger on what it was.

On Monday morning Blake's son Donald visited the administration building with a very unnerving report. "Morning Dad," said Donald, "have you heard anything from our doctors since yesterday," he asked.

"No, what's the problem Son?"

"Something really strange, medical professionals all over the ship are reporting that people in their care are well again," the Son explained, "even people who came on board with serious ongoing conditions."

"Isn't there a reasonable explanation Donald," Blake asked, "how much research has been done on these people, are we sure they were actually suffering from the illness in the first place, or has something happened to the diagnostic equipment, I don't know, anything."

"Dad, we're not stupid," the son replied, "we have spent two days now checking everything. It's not just things like ulcers and the like, it's people with worn hips, and I

have over twenty reports already of people that had prosthetic hips, knees, ankles and the like, they all have perfectly natural bone joints back.”

“That is amazing, could a radiation band we went through do anything like that,” asked Blake, “we certainly went through something, everything stopped, even the ship.”

“No Dad, there is no known radiation that can remove metal joints and replace them, and without surgery.”

“Well, we are in the unknown out here, who knows what there is.”

“We were talking earlier to, Doc Gregson, an Australian guy, we have a theory that makes some sense.”

“What is it Son,” asked Blake.

“He said that we may be approaching the alien planet where this ship came from and this is something that has been programmed into the ship,” said Donald, “if you like the aliens want us to all be fit and well before we land.”

“That makes sense,” agreed Blake, “but that is some technology they have.”

“Yes,” said Don, “but just think, if they have this transporter technology that can select certain people out of billions, it's not too far a leap to be able to perform joint replacements without the need for invasive surgery.”

“I guess,” said Blake, “it must be a very healthy planet.”

The ship maintained its position for another three days, during which time the crew could hear feint noises

within the ship, that no one has a clue about. On the fifth day of the stop, the propulsion systems came back on line and the PD engaged again, the system went through its usual run-up over seven hours and automatically switched over to the main drive. A week later, on one of his visits to the bridge, Ed noticed a star on the screen that was directly ahead, "Lieutenant De-win, I think that the end of the voyage may be in sight," he called to the duty officer. De-win immediately called Josh who was on the bridge in minutes.

"Is this a positive," Josh said as he entered the bridge.

"I think so," answered Ed. Josh took over the navigator and zoomed in, the course made straight for the star and then veered off toward a lone planet.

"Yep, looks like you're right, the course takes us directly to this planet," confirmed Josh, "I just wish I knew the scale involved here, I have no idea how far away it is." Josh contacted Blake and gave him the news. The following day the star seemed to have leapt forward, and at around twenty-two hours that night the ship switched down through its speed settings, by two the following morning the main drive disengaged and the PD started notching down. Most of the bridge crew, together with Blake, Jo, their two sons, Ed, Laura and Charlie, John Armstrong and Douglas Martins were all on the bridge waiting in anticipation of the main drive shutting down, so that a real-time image could be viewed on the navigation screen.

They were not disappointed, Charlie was given the

honour of obtaining the image, as it had always been viewed as his big contribution to the systems discovery period. Expertly Charlie manipulated the various controls and zoomed in on a planet with a single continent and thousands of islands basking in a azure blue sea. The planet was stunning, even from this distance the atmosphere was clear to see, “Lets hope we have air instead of some other gasses,” commented Charlie. The continent itself was dotted with lakes of all sizes, and the atmosphere was clear of any cloud. Charlie continued to zoom in to various areas and was amazed to see small towns and villages, mostly gathered around a central enormous square building, which sat across the equator. It was difficult to get a sense of the scale of the building, but it was obviously bigger than any building any of them had ever seen. Charlie manipulated the controls and a loud whistle emanated from his pursed lips, “Have you seen the size of this building,” he asked no one in particular. “I make it close to fifteen-hundred miles along each side, with a skyscraper in the centre that is almost as high.”

“You must be mistaken,” offered Laura.

“Take a look for yourself,” he answered, “I have found a way to measure with range and scale cursors.”

Blake trotted over to the viewer and stood aghast at the size of what he saw, “It's almost as large as this ship, well that settles one thing, there is little doubt where we are going to live, even for all the people on this ship.”

“There is one thing missing,” said Charlie, “where are the people?” Other than the buildings, there was no sign

of people, or any kind of intelligent or animal life; it was like looking at a newly opened theme park, deserted.

“So where are the aliens,” asked Blake, voicing the question they all were thinking.

“I don't see how,” said Ed, “but it's like this ship, it's almost as if, whoever these aliens are, they knew the asteroid was going to hit Earth, and designed a planet especially for us.”

“Not from this distance,” said Blake, “I really can't believe that.”

Moments after the ‘ship's-dawn’ the PD clicked into the zero-slot and the ship came to rest in a geosynchronous orbit directly above the central building. Blake was the one to make the announcement to the population, “It is my duty to inform you all that this ship has, just a short while ago, assumed orbit over what seems to be our destination, and we are currently stationary above a planet that looks as if it will be a pleasant home for mankind. At this moment, that is all we know, there are no signs of the aliens who sent us this lifeboat, or any life whatsoever other than plant life. There will be much to do over the coming weeks and probably months and years, as we explore the planet and disembark. Please continue with your daily routines for the time being, we will keep everyone informed at every step of this great adventure.”

The complete team gathered in the administrative building of the great ship later that morning, despite

being tired from their loss of sleep, each of them was buzzing with adrenalin. “OK ladies and gentlemen, the subject of this group is, 'How do we proceed', recommendations please,” said Blake.

Josh was first to speak, “I think it's obvious that we need to test the atmosphere, as Charlie hinted earlier, we can't do anything if that atmosphere is poisonous to us.”

They had seconded a lady, Maria, who they had found was a record taker from the US Supreme Court, to take notes at meetings, she was also one of the many recipients of a new hip and was feeling over the moon.

“OK, Maria, put that down as point one, shall we stick to bullet points to start with and then we can flesh them out later, as time goes by,” suggested Blake.

“Exploration,” said Ed, “we need to find out exactly what we have down there.

“Inventory,” came the next point from Charlie, “what's down there and what's up here and what we need to take . . .”

“Wow, Charlie, too much flesh, we'll come to that later,” interrupted Blake.

“Appoint teams for various purposes,” suggested Jo, “let's get more people involved.”

“Good idea,” agreed Blake.

“Land survey, soils and such, water and so on,” said Doug.

“Plant testing,” suggested Donald, “we need to know what is poisonous and what's not.”

So the meeting proceeded for the next two hours, the

result was a long list of bullet points that consisted of some hundred and eleven points. “Just when do we make a start on this list,” asked Josh.

“As soon as you like Josh,” said Blake.

“There being no time like the present,” Josh continued, “can I suggest that we attempt point one this afternoon.”

“Sure, what do you propose,” Blake asked.

“Simple, I'll get to Atlantis and dig out one of the NASA Environment Suits, and, if the transporters are working, I'll don the suit and beam down to the surface.”

“You're not going to do your trick with opening your helmet again are you,” asked Jo, concerned, “toxic gas is a little different than vacuum.”

Josh laughed for a few moments before answering, “It's OK Jo, what I didn't tell you back then is that the suits have a built in atmosphere analyser. I was quite safe back then and I will be this time, it tells me if there is air, what pressure it's at and if it's toxic, like battery fumes in the space station.”

Jo reached across the table and hit Josh on the shoulder. Josh laughed again.

“That's settled then,” said Blake, “cheating Josh will retrieve a suit and we'll meet at the local transporter bank at,” Blake looked at his watch, and saw that it no longer worked, “meet here when we're all ready to go.”

Blake guessed it was a couple of hours later when everyone finally assembled again outside the admin building, Josh was second to last dragging his old NASA suit. Josh told then that the battery pack was exhausted

and had to affect a quick recharge, which takes about an hour. When Charlie arrived, the last as usual, Laura gave him a playful slap and the group moved along the path to the transporters. Blake gave Josh a hand carrying the heavy suit; it was designed for micro-gravity not for the full eighty percent 'G' of the ship. They stopped outside the first hatch and Charlie with Ed elected to check out the functioning of the transporter, whilst everyone else helped Josh on with his suit. Other than Josh, the others had almost forgotten how to get into the suits, so it was a matter of too many cooks, everyone giving different advice. There was more laughter than anything else, especially when Laura insisted fitting the left glove on Josh's right hand. The group were in hysterics when the two scientists came out to announce that as far as they could tell the transporters were fully functioning.

Josh checked the suit and declared it was A-OK and closed his helmet visor, did a self check and he gave the others the thumbs up. Charlie, Jo and Laura entered the transporter chamber with Josh, "Where do you want to be set down," asked Jo.

"Anywhere doesn't matter," said Josh, his visor open once more. Jo chose a site on the shore of the great ocean, where there was a lovely looking sandy beach. Josh placed his hand on the scanning plate and a bracelet was released. Jo placed the bracelet in the programmer and then clipped it around Josh's gloved wrist.

"Ready," she asked, Josh closed the visor, nodded and Laura pressed the button that sent him down to the

unknown planet. Swiftly Josh disappeared and the three stood in silent prayer for his safety.

Chapter 10

Planet-fall

Josh watched as the chamber dissolved around him to be replaced by that of a pristine beach. He looked around him, to the left and right the land disappeared into the haze of distance, and behind him sea-cliffs rose up to a hundred feet in places. To his immediate right a small stream bisected the beach between low bluffs from behind when it emerged from a narrow cleft between the cliffs. Along the back of the beach vegetation grew, strange prehistoric looking plants, like mares-tail and small ridged-pine. Further up the cliff more bushes and shrubs clung to the face, bushes with thick glossy leaves and bright blossoms in yellows, blues, purples and reds. There was not a cloud in that blue sky and it reflected from the ocean's surface with an added tinge of turquoise, there were no waves to speak of, to disturb the surface merely large ripples that tried to invade the beach, and failed. This was a place dedicated to peace and tranquillity, Josh's external suit microphone was on, and yet was picking up no sound at all, not even the rustle of a breeze. So far from those vacation days at Coney Island or Florida's theme parks that it might be on a different planet, then he realised that he was.

That thought brought Josh back to reality and the job he was supposed to be doing. His eyes focused down to the complex panel inside the front of the helmet, his hand

searched for the tiny button on the suit's breastplate that activated the atmosphere sampling device. Finding the button, he pressed it and looked to the helmet panel, the tiny progress indicator climbed from rest to finish and a green LED flicked on. The readout said seventy-four percent nitrogen, twenty-four point two percent oxygen, one percent water vapour and point eight percent unknown, but safe to breathe. "How are you doing down there Josh, you're very quiet," came Laura's voice, seemingly from nowhere.

"Roger that," responded Josh, "this place is stunning."

"What's the atmosphere score Captain," came Charlie's voice. Josh gave the readout from the panel, "Oxygen quite a bit higher than Earth's and a lower nitrogen level as well as elevated water vapour," reviewed Charlie, "rather like the early Earth atmosphere was thought to be."

"I have a green light here," said Josh, "so I am about to lift my visor, stand by." His hand stretched to the helmet and twisted the release on each side, there was a slight hiss as the positive pressure was released and the visor lifted smoothly. Josh took a deep breath, the first non-recycled air in over seven years, it tasted good.

Surprisingly he could taste no brine in that air, so close to the sea, one would have thought that was a given. At a hunch, he made his way to the shore-line, removed one glove and scooped up some seawater. When he tasted the water, there was no taste of salt, "No salt," he said out loud.

“What was that Josh,” asked Jo's voice.

“There's no salt in the ocean,” repeated Josh, “it's entirely fresh water.”

“Well we will never go thirsty Josh,” laughed Jo, “but tell us what it's like down there.”

“The first thing I noticed was the peace, something about this place, not just the quiet, it's the general ambience of the place,” he went on to describe his surroundings as he had observed them a few minutes ago, “. . . and the air, it's . . .sweet, you can actually taste the air, just as you can taste the water, it's so pure, better even than the spring water we used to buy back on Earth.”

“I can't wait to get down there,” said Laura's voice.

“As far as I can tell, there's nothing stopping you, seems as if its as safe as houses, so ask Blake.”

Jo opened the door of the chamber and called Blake over, he stepped inside, “Can we all go down dear, Josh says it's perfectly safe and no reason not to: please!”

“Josh, are you sure there are no risks down there,” Blake asked.

“Sure enough, Blake, looking at this, I doubt there is anything risky on the whole planet.”

“OK, shall we all go look see?” he called outside to the others, “we're going down for a look, want to join us,” he asked them. One by one they went through the process, and one by one, they appeared on the beach with Josh. Each was individually stunned by the beauty and peace, and they all felt relaxed. Jo and Laura sat on the white sand and lay back staring at the clear blue sky,

Josh stripped off his EVA suit and flight suit, and then, went plunging into the ocean. Blake and his two sons looked at each other and that was all it took for the three to join Josh splashing around in the shallows. Doug, Charlie and Ed, acted in a more conservative manner and went off to explore the local flora, rocks and whatever else they could find. Blake commented that he had missed Cornwall, for Sun, Sea and sand. They remained there for some time, just relaxing before they returned to the ship.

The following morning the same group, minus Paul, assembled in Blake's office again, the reason was to flesh out the long bullet-list from the morning before. Of course, by far the most popular item was the second bullet point of exploring the planet, but there were a number of opinions on how this should be accomplished. Doug wanted to know if the continent should be 'zoned' as it was on the ship, and if so shouldn't each language group be allowed to explore its own zone. It seemed that no one else felt that this was an option, but thought that there should be a number of teams appointed to specific regions to explore and report back. Charlie was keen to visit the enormous building in the central region of the continent, and asked a favour that he be allowed to lead that team.

“I think we are all intrigued by that structure Charlie,” said Blake, “so why don't we all transport down there tomorrow morning and check it out.”

“In that case we'd best spend the remainder of today

organising the first exploration teams for tomorrow as well,” suggested Josh, “I guess that must be our priority.”

“If this is to be our home,” said Jo, “we need to know the planet and start setting it up as such, and as quickly as we can, after yesterday, I am getting the yearning for open the air.”

The following morning at eight o'clock, ship's time, ten teams gathered at the bank of transporters, each was designated a colour code for communication purposes. Red team consisted of the core group who was destined to investigate the gigantic structure that they had seen from orbit. Telemetry had measured the structure and found it to be some fifteen-hundred and twenty-five miles long and the same along each side, with three-hundred and forty-three floors, towering above a fertile plain. There was also a central tower that stretched into the atmosphere some fourteen hundred and ninety miles, with the top ten percent seemingly made of the same material that the spires on the ship were constructed. They had been supplied with a scanned map of where the entrances were located, and as per his request, Charlie had been elected team leader. Brown team consisting of the senior farmers were assigned to what looked like a fertile agricultural area in the north of the continental landmass. Blue team were being sent to one of the coastal areas to assess the possibility for fishing and stocking the streams and seas with the amazing fish from the ship's lakes. Black and grey teams were being

sent to check for archaeology on the planet, and green team to the forests to survey the plant life, and other teams were sent to interesting features that had been identified from orbit.

Ten minutes later the first teams were being transported down to the surface, as leader of red team Charlie arrived first and within ten minutes the full team was assembled outside one of the entrances to the building. The structure fell away to the horizon in both east and west directions, the walls were white and as smooth as glass, with windows that had the look of pure crystal. Looking up the tower disappeared into the haze of atmosphere and as they strained their necks to look up, they all felt dizziness at the height, what could this edifice be for? Looking around them the soft Sol-like sun bathed the plain in yellow light, stone paths meandered around the short grass lawns and crossed fresh water streams via small bridges. In several paces the streams fell over low waterfalls or disappeared into dark grottoes, only to emerge again down another waterfall and flow gently on, despite seemingly being on the same level. In the distance could be seen low hills covered with orchards or groves growing some sort of fruit. Blake however was keen to investigate the building and urged everyone on toward the entrance. There were no doors on this entrance, an air curtain prevented heat or dust ingress. Inside they found themselves in a huge hall, at the far end a coloured glass window bathed the hall in multicoloured light, and the

air was cool and sweet, without even a hint of the musty smell one usually finds in such places. The hall was some thirty meters wide and they estimated some eighty meters in length, along each wall were doors evenly spaced, and at every seventh door was a double door made from the same crystal as the windows. The floor was polished yet was not slippery and seemed to be of pink marble.

“It's a meeting hall I guess, like the ones on the ship maybe,” suggested Blake, “whoever these aliens are they seem to like meeting places.”

“Let's start looking into those doors,” said Charlie.” he strode toward the nearest single door and pushed it open. The wooden door swung silently open to reveal a store-room of some kind filled with grey containers about fifteen inches square and three foot long, when he tried to open one it just increased in length and filled the width of the room. Charlie dragged one out into the hall and it extended to about half the width of the hall, “I think these may be the seats for the meetings,” he said. The next few rooms contained virtually the same contents, but some contained items that they could not guess at. They came to the crystal double doors and opened them entering into a lobby from which three corridors radiated, each lined with doors.

“It's like a hotel,” said Jo and going to the nearest door and opening it. As she entered she gasped, Blake was by her side within a second, thinking something was wrong. The room was filled with machinery, machines that

Blake instantly recognised, there were lathes, band-saws, milling machines and drills, but that was not what made the hackles of his neck stand on end. The machines were all from well known Earth manufactures.

Charlie and Ed were next into the room, Charlie crossed to a metal turning lathe and placed his hand on the drive end, “How did these get here, I remember having one of these in the lab workshop, and it looks brand new,” he said as he scratched his head in wonder.

“Look here, this milling machine is German manufacture, isn't it,” exclaimed Ed, “and this is new as well, I don't understand this.”

The team hurried out from the machine room and burst into the room across the hall the room was full of tools, everything that any tradesman or DIY enthusiast could ever need and again all of Earth manufacture. Room after room revealed machines and tools, materials and supplies, for just about every trade imaginable.

Eventually Blake stopped and called out, “has anyone seen any stairs or an elevator anywhere?”

The whole team stopped, “Now you mention it,” said Laura, Charlie's wife, “no I haven't. How do we get to the upper stories?”

“I rather hope there aren't any stairs,” said Charlie, “I don't fancy climbing up three-hundred odd flights of stairs.”

“Well that's why we're here to investigate the place,” said Blake, “let's start looking.”

They Moved more swiftly down the hallway and came to the end where they found a small door that led outside, but little else. The group returned to the meeting-hall without seeing any trace of a means of getting to the upper stories. It was Jo who found a small wall mounted booth about half way along the wall of the hall; under a small cover she found a key-pad with the same numerals they had gotten used to on the ship. “Blake, Charlie, this may be something,” she called, “it's like a phone booth with a key-pad and no telephone.”

Charlie and Ed examined the booth and agreed that it seemed like a version of the ship's transporters as it had a similar coil arrangement under the booth's hood. “There is only one way to find out,” said Charlie, who entered the waist-high booth so that he was under the hood and pressed the zero and one buttons, then held his breath. Nothing happened, Charlie stood there for some seconds braced for transport, “Don't work,” he said.

“Maybe its faulty,” offered Ed.

“Well it would be the first thing that didn't work since we got in board the 'Return',” replied Charlie.

He tried again, “maybe this is zero-one, I'll try zero two.” Charlie punched the two keys, but again nothing happened, then punched the two, one, seven keys but still nothing happened, “and not even a telephone ringing anywhere,” he said in frustration, “I only want to go up one floor . . .” As the end of his last word formed he dissolved into thin air.

“Charlie! Can you hear me,” shouted Laura, half in panic.

“Maybe it is voice command activated,” suggested Ed, and as he said it Charlie resolved back again in the booth.

“I know how it's operated Ed, and it's not voice command,” said Charlie, “It's thought activated, I just tried both, voice has no effect but you think the floor number and bingo there you are,” he said, “and this is zero-one by the way,” indicating the floor.

The next floor up was almost the same as the ground floor so they decided to go straight to the three-hundred and forty-third floor. The top floor was obviously an observation level with the clear crystal glass forming every wall of this enormous single hall. From here the sky looked distinctly a darker blue, but the air was still good and breathable even though they were at least three and a half thousand meters up, many times higher than Earth's tallest building by almost three times. Laid out beneath then were rivers and grassy plains, copse of trees scattered around with extensive forests fading into the distance. There were no other buildings, as far as they could see but there were a multitude of places that just begged for an idyllic cottage on the banks of one of the rivers.

After a time Charlie broke into everyone's thoughts, “OK team; let's go see what's on the other three-hundred forty-one floors.” The team returned to the booths and Charlie choose floor three-hundred for their next stop. One at a time they materialised onto another hallway, the

walls of which were a restful pale green colour. From the hallway four corridors radiated at right-angles to each other, each one held a vast number of doors and faded into the distance. Other crossing corridors could be seen at intervals along each spur, and they were illuminated by the whole ceiling panels glowing brightly, Charlie was already making for the nearest door, and the others immediately followed him. Behind the door was a living quarters, fully outfitted with furniture, chairs, tables, beds and everything needed for daily life, except any trace of cooking equipment of any kind. One wall was a screen that gave the impression that the room was on the face of the building, though they were many apartments away from an outside wall. Further exploration discovered a whole range of accommodation, single, doubles and various sizes of family apartments.

“I think,” said Charlie, “that we need to form a lot of teams and do a full survey of this building, section by section, floor by floor, so we have a full record of what facilities and accommodation we have available.”

“I agree,” answered Blake, “at the very least we need to know how many apartments we have and the size of each.”

“What if we check every tenth floor,” suggested Laura, “just to see if there are any differences.”

“If there are no cooking facilities, there must be somewhere to eat in this place, and I’ve seen nothing on the plan,” added Jo.

“Speaking of food,” interjected Blake, “I suggest we get on the grass and have our packed lunches, then make a start on the ten-percent survey.”

“Good idea,” agreed Ed. They transported back to the ground floor and made their way out into the sunlight, Jo spotted a group of benches about a hundred meters away, set around a small lake into which one of the smaller rivers flowed. They settled down and opened the food that had been prepared for them, processed protein chicken steaks in buns, and fruit. Whilst they ate they discussed the issues of getting people settled in the apartments and the allocations.

“It will take some time to allocate who has what apartment, matching them will a headache in itself” said Jo.

“I believe we should do it one stage at a time, lets get the survey done first then match the apartments with the families, and lastly start moving people in,” said Blake

“The best laid plans of mice and men,” stated Ed.

“What do you mean Ed,” asked Blake.

“Well we had our own wonderful plan to select who gained a place on the ship, didn't we,” replied Ed, “maybe there is already a plan in place and the ship already knows where people are going and transports them directly to the right apartment.”

“Now that's a thought,” commented Charlie, Laura and Jo just looked at each other.

“Spooky,” said Laura.

The team finished their food and after lazing in the sun

for a while, made their way back into the building that they had named Central Living, or simply 'Central'. "Let's do the first ten floors and then every tenth after that," suggested Charlie.

"Sounds good," said Blake and they all agreed. Floors one to six were all pretty much identical, then when they materialised on the seventh they found it was very different. Here there were long counters in what looked like stainless steel, but felt warm to the touch, unlike metal. The room was 'L-shaped' and obviously a dining hall with rows of hundreds of tables and forms, all set out in alcoves, where one could eat in private and with plenty of room for families with children. Along the counters were arrayed small cabinets that seemed to be the terminations of trunking that curved and disappeared into the ceiling above. Charlie was the first to examine one of the cabinets, lifting the door, which swung upward; he was greeted by a buzzing sound. He quickly dropped the door, and then noticed a scanning pad, rather like the ones they had found on the ship. Charlie called the others over and then he placed his hand on the plate, the cabinet hummed and opened by itself; inside the flat space was a dish of apple pie and cream. "Wow!" exclaimed Charlie, "you know I was just thinking of cold apple pie."

"Which may mean it works like the transporters outside," concluded Ed.

Jo looked at her husband and noted the grin on his face, "We know where Blake will be spending most of his

time then,” she laughed. The whole team took a turn with the food dispensers before they returned to their exploring and kept going from floor to floor. At Blake's insistence they also called at floors fourteen, twenty-one and twenty-eight in addition to every tenth.

“Whoever these aliens are, it would seem that there counting system has a base of seven,” stated Blake.

“I agree,” said Ed, “I have noticed that seven comes up very often.”

“Seven or multiples of seven,” said Blake, “this building for instance, it has three-hundred and forty-three floors, that's seven cubed.”

“So it is,” added Charlie, “I hadn't noticed.”

The remainder of the floors followed a similar pattern, some food halls, most of the others accommodation but some seemed to have other unspecified purposes. One was almost certainly a theatre and another may have been a music venue, as it was equipped with what could have been speakers. Some, no one could hazard a guess at its purpose. After the set ten hours their bracelets signalled that it was time to return to the ship, and together this time, they all pressed the return buttons and the huge building dissolved, to be replaced by the transporter cubical on the ship.

The following day more teams were dispatched, most of them to 'Central' with instructions to map every room and once reviewed, to be given a numeric designation. The core team started reviewing the reports brought back the previous day by the teams who had visited other

parts of the continent. On subsequent days the pattern was repeated, with more and more reports being returned. After something like a month the population was told to prepare for removal to their new living quarters, to start packing all their possessions that they wished to take with them. The admin teams had assigned all of the accommodation on the ground floor and all was ready to start the relocation of the first wave. Three days later the transfer was to start at 09:00 ships time, bracelets programmed with the coordinates of each apartment had been issued to each family in the first wave. Blake and his family were included in the first wave and he, Jo and the boys were due to transport at ten minutes after twelve. The contents of the admin office had been transported down the day before, into a room in the middle of Central. Families with children had been assigned the ground floor apartments for safety reasons, although it seemed that the building had been accident proofed from falls.

Promptly at nine o'clock the first family disappeared from the booths and the occupation of their home began. Within an hour Blake started to receive calls from the surface complaining that people had been transported to the wrong apartment. Within an hour those calls became a flood, not one family had ended up in the designated accommodation. Blake called a meeting of the central group to discuss the issue and what had gone wrong. It was Ed Scully who put his finger on the problem. It seems that our benevolent aliens have already made the decisions for us, again, just as they did in choosing who

was included on this ship.”

“That did cross my mind just now,” said Blake, “as you mentioned on our first survey trip, if that's true, I'm not sure I like the prospect.”

“Why's that,” asked Jo.

“I have a fear that our aliens are not as benevolent as they may seem,” shared Blake, “what if they have brought us here as slave labour?”

“Hey Blake, you have not a shred of evidence for that,” suggested Josh, “I don't think everything we have been given, everything we have, just to be slaves Buddy.”

“So why have these people, if that's what they are, made their own choices of who they want and then, where they want them,” retorted Blake.

“Well there is little we can do about it now, we are here, where they want us,” said Charlie, “and no doubt if we change accommodation, the ship will simply transport them back to where they want us.”

“Isn't that just it, whoever they are, they have us just where they want us,” stated Blake, “and we have no say in it.”

After the impromptu meeting, Blake made a ship-wide announcement over the address system, which automatically translated his words into all the different languages on the ship's company.

“Attention please; we have found that after the first families have transported down to our new home, we have found that, just as the ship choose all of you to be saved on this ship, it has now overridden our

assignments for accommodation. There is therefore a good chance that you will not arrive in the apartment you thought you were assigned. Although this is out of our control, we apologise for this and hope you will nevertheless be comfortable in your new home, temporary or permanent. Thank you all for your understanding and God's blessings be upon you all."

"OK lets get back on track and start transporting people down," Blake told the team who operated the transporters, "where ever they end up."

"Sir," said one of the technicians, "so far three couples have ended up in the middle of nowhere; two on the seashore of the east coast and one in the middle of pasture land."

"Have you tried to transport them back," asked Blake.

"Yes Sir, but the transporter refuses to operate when we target them."

"Send me down to the couple in the pasture land," Blake demanded.

Three minutes later Blake was standing beside a shelter that was obviously a temporary one, a few yards away stood a pile of machined lumber and other materials. About twenty meters away stood the bewildered couple, who having seen him appear started toward Blake. "Where have you put us," the man asked.

"You obviously came down before my announcement, it seems that the ship is deciding where we go, not us my friends." Blake looked around him at the lumber and materials, "Where did all this come from, we've only

sent stuff down to 'Central' so far.”

“I don't know,” said the man, “it just appeared, along with the shelter, just after we arrived.”

“Just a guess,” said Blake, “are you farmers?”

“Yes,” the woman replied, “we had a wheat farm in Canada.” The man nodded his agreement with his wife.

“Don't ask me how the ship knows all these things, but I guess the ship or whoever controls the thing wants you to start over,” suggested Blake, “they have given you a shelter and the materials to build a house, and I wouldn't be surprised if they didn't give you the tools and machinery to start your farm.”

“We would love to do that, like the old homesteaders back home, it will be a challenge, and look at this place, have you ever seen a more beautiful place to live.”

“Great, good luck my friends,” and Blake pressed the button on his bracelet that sent him back to the ship.

Amazingly the Northfield family were actually transported to the accommodation that they had selected as the best for their purposes. They found that Charlie and Laura had been installed next door, and most of the core team were within easy reach. The goods transporter had been operating continuously now for almost ten days and Blake's day seemed to be a continual program of bouncing between the surface and the ship. There were now over a thousand sites around the continent where families had been sent to establish farms and fishing ports, and other projects. 'Central' was filling up fast and Blake had been gratified to find that the people were not

content to sit with their feet up. Many had taken to planting flowers around the paths and creating formal gardens with plants from the ship, even taking to creating seating areas where people could sit in the Sun. They had found that in several areas 'Central' had units for workshops and retail shops. Those who had setup shops and workshops on the ship quickly transferred to these units, fresh produce from the ship started to appear, as did fresh fish from the coast. The newspaper office went into production and produced 'The New Planet'. Once again Charlie discovered how the transporters could be used to deliver goods and newspapers to outlying settlements. Many of the 'buggies' from the ship were sent down to the surface, but the supply on the ship never seemed to run out.

The first six months were busy, or to be accurate, the first hundred and eighty days, as there seemed to be no seasons on this planet and the night equalled the daylight hours, so telling the months was quite impossible. Of course, Ed asked, "did it really matter?" Everyone had to agree that as long as they kept a track of days and years, probably, it didn't matter. The ship's computers would keep track of the days and they would designate numbers to the days, and this would be designated as year zero. Blake, Jo, and the others had had little time for themselves during that time, and the time was coming when they could all relax. Tomorrow the zoo, or as it had become known, 'The Ark', was being transferred to the surface, an area had been found that

was suitable, cages and enclosures were constructed for the dangerous species and other animals like squirrels, badgers, deer, and their like, were to be released into the wild. Thousands of birds had already been released, and had settled into their new habitat well. One strange thing had happened though; when the birds of prey had been released, they had been fearful that they would decimate the smaller bird and animal populations. A week later some people had reported that they had seen two hawks feeding on corn in one of the early fields to have been cultivated. No one had seen the birds of prey attacking other birds or small rodents, for that matter.

The next day, Blake decided that he wanted to oversee the contents of The Ark being transferred, so arrived on the ship early. They were using the goods transporter closest to the zoo, so the wheeled cages, that they had used to install the animals, were used again. The twelve elephants went first under their own power, with the four juveniles trotting along side, followed by the giraffes in similar manner. All of the herbivores were clear by mid-day and after lunch the first of the carnivores were herded into the wheeled cages, the lions going first. The keeper had trouble getting the lionesses into the cage, eight went in, which left three that refused, after some while and in desperation, the keeper decided to enter the compound, hoping to force the big cats into the cage. Almost immediately he was attacked by the largest of the animals and was lucky to escape with a gash on his upper arm. Eventually some firecrackers were used to

get the cats to run in panic into the safety of the cage. The lions went into their cage like domestic cats, showing no sign of aggression, but then the mistake happened, that should have been catastrophic.

By early evening everyone was very tired, and with only ten species to go, ten jaguars were transported into the enclosure on the surface occupied by a herd of ibex. By the time the mistake was realised the next species was already loaded into the transporter, the operator took a call from the surface to alert him of the mistake. The load-master gave the signal to move the current cage out of the transporter, when the instigator of the call told him to wait. Observers on the surface could not believe what they were seeing. The ibex were standing around with several jaguar licking their faces and ears. The ibex were totally unconcerned and the jaguar showed no aggression toward them. Blake wanted to see this for himself and so transported down to the enclosure, *there was something going on here*, he thought, *first the birds of prey, now these jaguar*. As he arrived he took in the scene, sure enough the ibex were foraging among the grass and the jaguar were eating leaves from nearby trees. As the last animals arrived, dusk was starting to fall and Blake decided to head back to their accommodation in 'Central'. The following day was their Friday, which was a day off before their Saturday Sabbath, which by mistake they had thought was a Sunday, but had elected to continue with that day. So after all the hard work in getting the animals down to the

surface, it was good to look forward to a couple of days of relaxation. The boys were coming over tomorrow for the weekend, so Blake thought they may go for a picnic somewhere new, maybe the mountains or the coast.

The following day was, as usual a bright sunny day, once the morning mist had cleared and left its dew on the ground. The two sons, and the girls, arrived just after ten, and eagerly agreed to the picnic, and voted to spend the day in the mountains. At thirty after eleven Blake contacted the ship's transporter duty officer and was encouraged to find that Jeremy Winston, the ESA's old Press Officer was on duty. The four transported up to the ship and were greeted by Jeremy.

"It's good to see you again," said Bake as he shook the duty officer's hand, "and I'm glad you made it onto the ship."

"I'm OK, thanks, Sir."

"This is Jeremy from the ESA," said Blake to his wife and sons, "we met right back when this thing started, we'll have to get together sometime."

"That would be great Sir," said Jeremy.

"Don't call me 'sir' Jeremy, my name is Blake, but I almost answer to anything." Jeremy laughed, "now we want to transport to somewhere in the mountains, somewhere new, but safe for a picnic."

"There's a lovely spot, very much like Switzerland about three thousand miles from central, has a lake and pastures," Jeremy suggested and pulled up the site on the display.

“That's looks lovely,” said Jo.

“There it is then said,” said Blake.

Within minutes they were standing on the little outcrop that protruded into the lake, with its crystal-clear water. Blake thought that the one thing which was missing was the snow on the upper heights of the mountain peaks, but it seemed as warm here as it did back at central. The pasture behind them was full of colourful flowers, without any human-made paths winding through the carpet of blooms. They opened their picnic box and ate a delirious lunch and sipped at fruit juice made from some of the alien fruit that grew in the woods near their accommodation.

After the lunch they relaxed in congenial conversation, Blake and the boys and their girlfriends spent an hour playing a game with a Frisbee that Jo could see no point in, and then all six settled down and dozed in the warm Sun. When Jo awoke the Sun was low in the sky, about to set behind the western mountains. She shook Blake and the others awake, saying that it was time to get back. They packed up the picnic and equipment and Blake contacted the ship, “Hi this is Blake Northfield, can you transport the six of us up now please?” There was no reply. Blake tried again, then he pressed the button on his wrist band, which he knew would only transport him to the ship, again nothing happened. Blake turned, “Jo try your return button, and you lot as well,” he said. All tried depressing their return buttons with the same result, nothing.

“Did no one bring a radio,” asked Donald.

“No,” said Paul, “and that wouldn't help we're way out of range, three thousand miles out of range.”

“Yea, I never thought of that,” said Paul.

“Isn't there a protocol for situations like this,” Jo asked.

“There is, but it doesn't activate for ten hours after transportation,” said Blake.

“But why isn't the return button working?”

“I don't know Jo, the bracelets just seem dead.”

“But Dad, if the bracelets are dead no one will be able to get in touch,” Donald pointed out.

“It's OK, if there is no response, someone comes down to the site to check,” said Blake.

“So we are stuck here until,” Daniel looked at his watch, “around quarter to ten.”

“That's about it, Don,” said his dad, “don't worry, I know we are in the mountains but I doubt we'll freeze to death.”

The Sun started setting at just after nine and by ten the sky was dark and thousands of stars glinted on the velvet background of the heavens.

“What a pity you had to leave your telescope behind on Earth,” Jo said as she snuggled up to Blake.

“You know, I have never even looked at the night sky,” admitted Blake.

“Now that's not like you Dad,” said Paul, “I just assumed you be naming every star by now.”

“That's a great idea, Son.” Blake lay back on the soft tussock of grass and started gazing at the stars. There

was silence for some minutes, other than Blake's low humming.

Suddenly the humming stopped and Blake sat up, stood and hurried down the incline toward the lake. He stood and slowly revolved, pointing from one object to another. He took out his little note pad that he always carried and made some notes. "Jo can you bring my binoculars down please," Blake shouted back up the slope. Jo arrived a minute later with the instrument that Blake had slipped into the rather large picnic box.

"What's the matter?" She asked.

"Mm, oh nothing, I just wanted to get a look at our solar system and stars," said Blake, "I don't even know if we are in the same galaxy."

"Can you build another telescope?"

"I just don't know Jo, there must be materials on the ship, but the ship seems to have brought things on board that some people don't remember packing." Blake put his arm around his wife and they wandered back up the slope like teenagers, except Blake had his eyes on the stars. An hour later one of the crew materialised at the spot where they had arrived just over ten hours before.

"Hi you guys is everything OK," Crewman Ishmael asked.

"Sure," answered Blake, "but what happened?"

"It seems that Specialist Winston gave you four depleted bracelets, that hadn't been returned to the recharge and reprogram slot."

"Never mind," said Jo, "no harm done."

“This time,” added Blake, “the transporter crew needs to be more careful.”

“Yes Sir,” answered Ishmael, “these are fully charged bracelets and I have taken the liberty of programming them for your individual domiciles.”

“Thank,” said Jo, and Ishmael pressed his return button and disappeared. A minute later all six also disappeared to find themselves in their apartments.

The day after the core team met up in the closest hall for the weekly service and fellowship, it was an enjoyable time of worship. The usual meal was served after the service and noise was deafening from the laughter, talking, shouting and the noise of serving and knives and forks producing their rhythm of the meal. Following the meal there was a growing tradition for everyone to assemble on the lawns out side of the main entrances. Where many games and fun ensued, which the children loved, and the parents loved to see their children being so happy. Jo thought that Blake looked restless after the meal, although he enjoyed watching everyone around having a great time. As far as the eye could see, in either direction there were people celebrating just being together in fellowship. After about an hour, Blake stood from the blanket on the grass, saying to Jo, “I won't be long; I just need to speak to Charlie about something.”

“Can't it wait until tomorrow,” asked Jo.

“No, I just want a word whilst it on my mind,” he answered, and wandered off to where Charlie was laying down about twenty meters away. “Got a minute

Charlie?”

“Sure, I have all day my friend, said Charlie. They moved away and headed for a tree that looked like a spreading oak where they stood talking. Jo watched as they talked under the tree, with Charlie looking surprised and shaking his head, after what seemed like almost twenty minutes, the two started walking back. “I’ll meet you on the bridge tomorrow morning then,” said Charlie as they parted company.

“What was all that about,” asked Jo.

“Nothing much.”

“It didn’t seem that way, it looked a little intense,” said Jo.

“It’s just administrative issues.”

“What, with Charlie? Pull the other one,” she added.

The following morning, Blake made for the office, where he stayed for some time, until the communicator buzzed with a message from Charlie. Blake asked for a transport to the bridge and he was gone. He found Charlie staring into the monitor. “What do you think?”

Charlie scratched his head, and said, “Looks like you are right, I zoomed in on each body and the computer checked out the alignments and orbital tracks and everything checks out.”

“What do you think, should we make an announcement, or just leave things well alone,” asked Blake.

“What difference does it make to everyone, I’d just forget about it,” advised Charlie.

“You may be right,” said Blake, “I think I’ll sleep on it.

That evening after their evening meal Blake retrieved his Bible from the bedside stand and sat reading it until bedtime. What he had read must have played on his mind, because, it was still going around and around in his head as he drifted off to sleep. A short time later he awoke into what seemed like a dream, and the voice that had wakened him from sleep. He looked at his wife, who was still fast asleep.

“Blake, do you know where you are now,” the voice asked.

“I think so,”

“Then it is time to share it. Close your eyes and sleep”

Immediately Blake fell into a deep sleep, when he awoke the sun was above the horizon and streaming into the bedroom, and Jo was already up. Blake got out of bed and dragged himself into the kitchen where Jo was making pancakes, “Hello sleepy head,” she greeted him.

“Is it late?”

“Who knows, the only place where there are clocks, that work, is on the ship,” laughed Jo.

“Which is where I need to be today,” Blake informed her.

“Something's going on here,” said Jo, “you've been preoccupied since Friday night.”

“I guess I have, if you want to come up to the ship, that would be great, but I have an announcement to make to everyone.”

“OK,” she answered, but let’s have breakfast first.”

Close to midday the Northfields were standing on the bridge of *The Return*, facing their jerry-rigged TV system, there were still some fifty million on board the ship, who were still working to strip the ship of needed equipment and families. The system was also linked into the planet’s audio system on broadcast basis. Charlie and the rest of the core team was there stood in the background, and only Charlie had any idea about what this announcement would be about. Blake stepped forward as the lights came on and smiled into the camera.

*“My brothers and sisters, both here on board *The Return* and all those on the planet below, please listen to me and absorb what I am about to say. Ever since this whole thing began, we have thought that we were in control, I and these people you see behind me, thought that our job was to explore the strange alien ship, and then save humanity from the giant asteroid that threatened and destroyed Earth. It seems that we were not in control at all; we had hints at this, when the ship selected who it was going to save, and who it would not save. That was supported by us having no real control over the ship’s course, or its speed. Yes we had some control, but only that which we were allowed to have, someone else was always in over-all control, and we persisted in calling them the aliens. We wondered why aliens would rescue a third of mankind from disaster, but we were so grateful, we never questioned it. Some of us suggested that the*

aliens wanted slaves, but even in slavery we were still alive, and slaves are not given luxuries, such as we had been given. So we sat back and forgot about the questions we had. Only Owen Williams realised that it seemed every passenger was a Christian, but we put that down to the aliens wanting 'good' people, and even he never questioned why no Muslims, Buddhists or any other faith system had been found on board. But then out of two billion people who would notice? I have no idea when we are, we travelled through space at many times the speed of light, so we could be millions of years in the future from when we left Earth or we could never have left our solar system, but that does not matter.”

“We finally made planet fall here, on this paradise of a world, no one even suspected anything when people with illnesses were healed over-night, and we put that down to a high level of alien medical technology. I have to ask, where we being blinded from seeing the truth? Maybe. On Friday we spent the day as a family, up in the mountains, due to a mistake (or not) by the transporter operator, we were stranded there until after dark. Many of you know that back home, before the arrival of the ship, I worked in astronomy, sort of, as an engineer, so I was very conversant with the night sky. As darkness fell on Friday night, and the stars came out, something looked familiar, so I checked. Then on Sunday morning I got Charlie to check as well, he confirmed my suspicions. Then last night I had further conformation that I should announce this to everyone.”

“We, this planet, are in exactly the same place and occupies the same space as our old home, Earth, did. This my brothers and sisters is, literally, The New Earth foretold in scriptures almost since creation. No, it is not the old Earth raised to the core of humanity; we saw that Earth destroyed in fire. This Earth is entirely new. It was not aliens that brought us here but Jehovah God, who as it turns out abides in that skyscraper in the centre of this city. Brothers and sisters welcome and enjoy the New Earth.”

[The New Heaven and the New Earth] Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth, for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and the sea was no more. And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man. He will dwell with them, and they will be his people, and God himself will be with them as their God. ... Revelation 21:1 to 3

The New Beginning

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