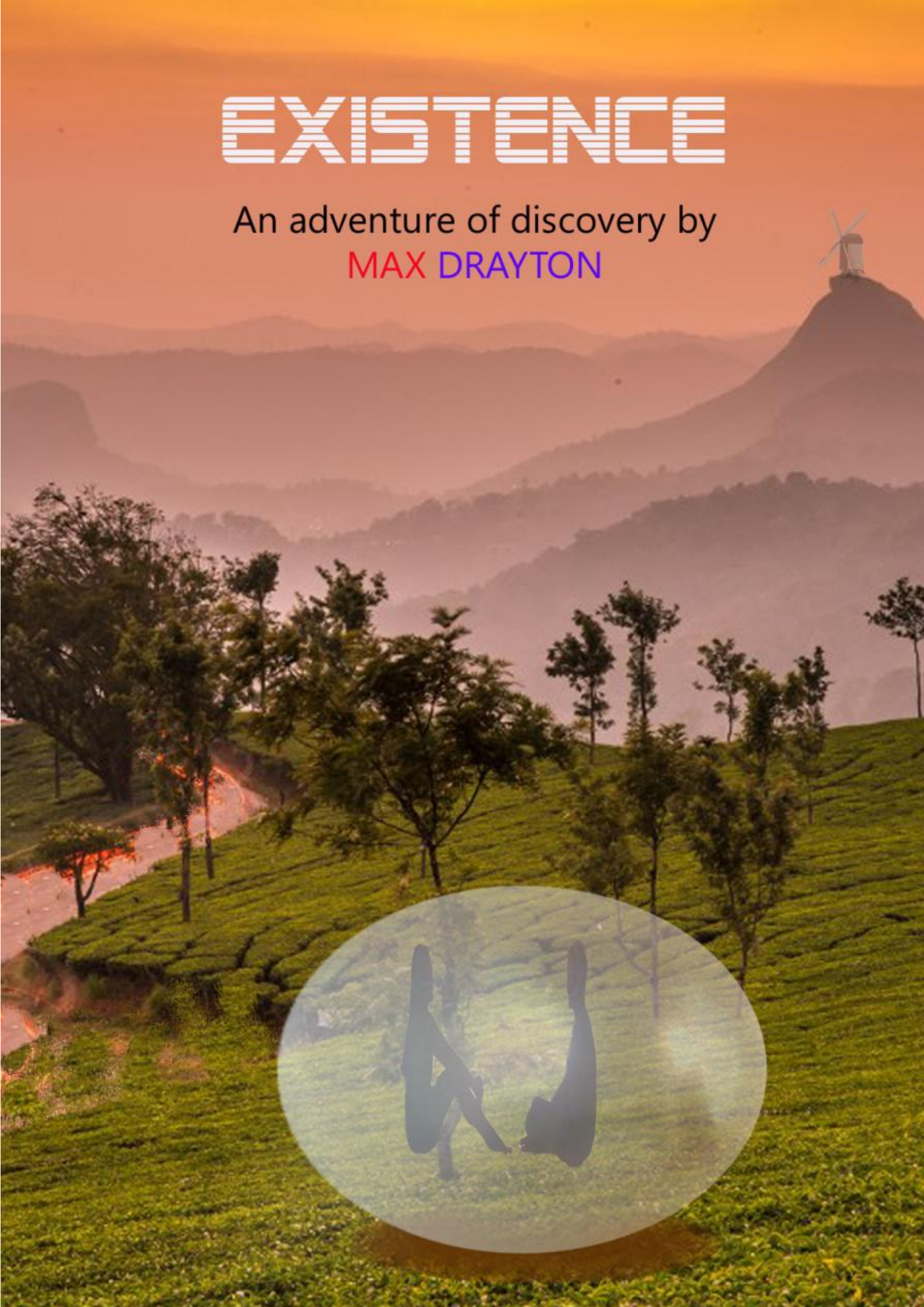


EXISTENCE

An adventure of discovery by
MAX DRAYTON



EXISTENCE

A story in time and space

by Max Drayton

There are scenes and language of an adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

If you enjoyed this novel, please let me know.

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EXISTENCE

A story in time and space

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PART 1

All's Well, that Ends Well

Her heart was pounding - it had NEVER pounded before.

Gone, the complacent and easy going female. Suddenly the heart racing, profusely perspiring entity - a terrified woman. In the darkness, her hands fiercely gripped the tactile handholds.

Breathe, she reminded herself. Large lungful's of air exploded out into the compact enclosure. Silent machines sucked and expelled.

No sense of movement after that sudden acceleration. She still felt gravity, so her craft still had propulsion.

Her breathing eased as her blood composition changed and oxygen saturation was internally adjusted. The heart-rate slowed, under instruction from the electrical impulses reassigned to the relevant muscles. Her vision cleared and so did her rapidly stimulated mind. Think! What to do?

Nothing. Everything is automatic. Sit tight. Wait and hope.

Wait and hope.

What had happened? No clues yet, no images in her mind, no incoming data.

It had happened so rapidly. Alarms and warning messages. A door opening in her small compartment and the sense of being herded towards a precipice. A silent closure behind.

'Remain still'. A passive, neutral, mechanical, audible voice.

She felt the familiar grip of the body restraints as they gently folded over her. Holding their valuable cargo against any sudden change of direction that could result from such an emergency.

Motion. Acceleration. Then spare time for fear.

The darkness lightened, time to see where she was.

The closeness of the wall in front of her faded to transparency and she could see slowly moving stars. Bright flashes of light all around, larger, faster-moving objects, some bright with reflective light. Some alight from fire, burning in an oxygen deficient environment, burning from the oxygen within. Battleships on fire.

Slowly the terrifying display fell behind, and blackness enveloped her craft. Now all she could see was the lights from the stars. These too blurred, and she felt the familiar slight disorientation of Blip travel. She was finally away from the Battlezone.

Breathing returned to normal. Heart-rate acceptable. Fear slowly reducing. Danger passed.

Thoughts reaching back, just moments ago, to her control room. Reclined and secure, watching the vista spread before her. Ships whirling and twisting in a slow ballet of destruction. Her mind absorbed with the horror and wonder of sights never previously imagined. Her mind then fully connected to the ship.

Suddenly silence, emptiness. A rapid shutting out of the ship's mind from hers.

Her recliner had dropped through the floor, an escape route exit. That fall had provoked her fear. She was in an escape capsule and heading for safety before she even knew she was in real danger.

'CaptainSerania, ThreeMinutes.' The voice was female and gentle. It came from nowhere and the silence that followed had been there all the time.

No reply was needed. The audible words a surprise to her, she'd felt no contact in her mind. A machine then, an automatic response message in Battlespeak. A planned response in an emergency.

'Where-I?' her thoughts broadcasted. No reply. She just had to wait, then.

Ahead, a pulsing blue beacon of light, something large was approaching rapidly. Or was it stationary as she hurtled towards it?

The light ahead now forming into the recognisable shape of another ship, far from the destruction of the Battlezone. Large, stationery and sleek blue against the black of space. Gravity now reducing as her capsule slowed and passed through a small glowing opening in the larger ship's side. The pressure on her body, arms, and legs eased as the restraints allowed her more movement, as her safety craft eased into the safe area.

She struggled to get her mind into a sense of reality and prepared herself for what might happen next.

'Back, Captain-Serania.' The voice in her head was smooth, gentle and relaxed. 'I-Vara. Defence-Committee. Thoughts-Through-Me.'

'Where-I?'

'Safe. Very-Safe.'

'My-Crew?'

'Returning. WHY-YOU-Here? What-Happened?'

'Don't-Know.' Her mind sensed only silence, yet the feeling of the connection remained. 'Forced Escape-Capsule. Now-Here.' More silence.

Her capsule opened like a petal and she stepped forward into the reception bay. A dimly lit small area, large enough to hold several of the escape capsules. She was the only occupant, more of her crew to arrive, she hoped.

Travellers from deep space were used to the operational low lighting. They would appreciate this subdued glow, further enabling a more comfortable continuous transfer. Ahead, a featureless wall, part of which revealed a portal. She walked through it.

Vara: 'I-Lost-Contact Your-Ship, Captain.'

'ANY-Contact-Crew?'

'Something ... Unusual.'

'What?'

She paused as she entered the next room, waiting for a reply. There was none.

Ahead of her, a small area bulged inwards, a part of another craft. Its elliptical hatch parted like lips for her to enter. She stepped into it and the door silently sealed behind her. Her mind wished to seat herself and a recliner formed to support her, as she thought the command, 'Home.'

She felt no movement, but Vara's voice was in her head again. 'Crew-Abandoned-Ship. Ship-Acting-Alone. Cannot-Commun-Silent. Ship-Heading-Arragon. What-know?'

'Nothing.'

She was aware her transport moved. Acceleration, the dizziness of the Blip and then gravity again. Her mind still calling out to her crew.

'What-That!' The unusual exclamation from the previously passive voice of Vara made Serania's long thin head snap up.

'What-What?' Her mind tuned for the slightest inflexion of thought now.

‘Arragon. Gone!’

She struggled to understand the implication of Vara’s breathless voice in her head. She felt her craft slowing. ‘Front-View.’ The wall cleared, and she could see the vista below as the craft dropped through the clouds of Earth. She watched the sweeping green fields and saw the small community settlement ahead.

‘Gone? How-Where?’ were her silent questions.

‘Disappeared. Exploded. Whole-Planet. They’ve gone. All-Enemy-Ceased-Exist.’

Her craft dropped quickly. As the soft invisible restrains eased from the recliner, she saw her landing platform below. The touchdown was so soft as to be unnoticeable and the craft’s structure dissolved around her. She stepped effortlessly onto solid ground.

‘My-Ship? Where-Now?’

‘Destroyed. With-Arragon.’

She felt a moment of sadness, which was quickly replaced with concern. ‘My-Crew?’

‘No-Response.’

Her mind was clear, allowing thoughts to flow rapidly at the second level. She partially slipped into the first level. ‘Did my ship destroy the planet, or the planet destroy my ship?’

‘No-Information.’ The voice in her mind now had an edge of uncertainty, confidence was slipping. This was a new experience for all of them.

If the planet had destroyed the ship, she was responsible as its Captain. Naval traditions demanded the Captain to either go down with the ship or be Court Martialled over its loss.

The intense thoughts had distracted her for the few seconds it took before she realised she was now home. The craft had touched down with no feeling of motion, the whole flight had no motion experience at all. At first, when much younger, this had been a disconcerting means of transport. But like all things in life, everyone got used to it.

More alert now, she stepped onto her white flagged roof and walked towards the pale, circular housing that was the gravity elevator entrance. The breeze eased past her face and she smelt the scents it carried. Her olfactory sense had been automatically heightened by her bios and she could smell trees, and flowers. She loved the open countryside.

Clouds hung silently in the blue sky and she could see no recognisable shapes that clouds sometimes made, but she was not looking too closely. She turned and peered down the sweeping multi greens of the land before

her. Home. It looked like home, smelt of home and for the first time, she realised how precious home was to her. The near-death experience had shaken her, the sight and smells of home were helping calm her.

As she stepped towards the elevator her mind commanded, 'Where's my Battleship?' an edge to her thought's imagery now. 'And my crew?'

Once on a planet, the Core could provide a more complete syncing of the population's thoughts. In battle conditions, they allowed the briefest interpretation, as it also confused the enemy. Back home her thoughts were now accurately absorbed by the Core and redirected to the correct recipients. It took less than a second, perfectly substituting any form of speech and providing automatic translation of the many dialects in the Universe.

'We're just checking now, *Captain*.' The thought touched her mind, non-aggressive and calm. A fully formed thought so ... someone remote from the battlefield. The '*Captain*' was a reminder of her place.

She had analysed the thought and recognised its sender. 'Please let me know the moment you know, *Councillor*.'

She felt the slight moment of weightlessness as she glided down into her accommodation level. The elevator wall vanished, and she walked into her living area. The sight was familiar and suddenly reassuring. The place where she consciously spent most of her time, was always open, relaxing and adapted to her precise desires.

A huge curved floor ended in a vista of the valley. The outer wall now non-existent, the scented breeze allowed to blow through the room. Long, incredibly fine woven diaphanous curtains hugged the floor's edge and played with the stirring draughts. They formed a ballet of shapes, changing colours as they did so.

The Nanowall stopped all insects, scheduled weather and any extremes of temperature affecting the living area. It also prevented unwary occupants falling out and down four storeys. The plain white floor was soft and devoid of any visible furniture. They needed none, just provided when required. There were no storage facilities as physical possessions were no longer necessary.

She bent her tall, angular body as if to sit and a recliner formed underneath, to take her minimal weight. She stretched her delicate looking frame and eased into a lounging position. The pale furniture, almost invisible to the eye, adjusted to her intricate body shape.

For a brief moment she closed her eyes and felt her bios calming her body and mind. She ran all the events of the last few minutes through her

mind again, on the third level only. The private level where no one else could access.

‘Captain?’ The thought was indistinct.

Slowly Serania opened her eyes, bright daylight streaming through the wall, throwing the shadow of her reclined form across the floor. Had she slept? If so, it would be the first time in many years. Had she lost the sense of time?

‘Vanora? Are you safe?’ Her imagery urgent before she could control it.

‘I think so. I don’t know where I’m heading, but it looks like I’ve left the Battlezone. No other communication yet.’

‘You’ll be fine now. Stay safe and I’ll contact later.’ She felt the ping of the disconnect and a void opened up in her mind. What extreme events had just happened? In the height of battle a serious problem with the mind controlling the ship. A blackout of communication. Her crew’s sudden abandonment of the craft before it went plummeting into the alien’s homeworld, destroying it. All alien resistance now finished? Her ship had saved the war, and she was its Captain. It was a lot to process, she was thankful she was alone to think quietly at last.

She stretched back and allowed her mind to search for any messages in her absence. The house mind, Amahan, confirmed there were none.

She felt the presence of the Councillor again and asked, ‘Is the war really over then?’ Serania could not disguise the hope in her imagery.

The answer seemed slow in coming. The contact was hesitant, aware of the potentially unstable mental state of its recipient. ‘We need time to evaluate the situation, Captain. Perhaps I can contact you later with more details?’

She wanted an answer now. But that was not forthcoming. ‘Agreed.’ Her first level went silent.

Another contact, the familiar ping in her mind of an incoming communication. At first a silence, then the familiar tingle. ‘Captain?’

‘Vanora? Are you safe?’

‘Yes. Any news from the others?’

‘I can’t seem to contact them.’

‘Keep trying, so will I.’

The tingle ceased, and she felt an incoming again.

'Captain?'

'Pattia? Where are you?'

'Rescue ship, I think. Here with Donella. Are you safe?'

'Yes. Any news of Cress?'

'No. Any others?'

'Safe. Just Cress left. Call you later.' Serania quickly closed the contact hoping for more news to reach her, unobstructed by other calls.

What could happen next? A rogue ship, absent Captain, all crew safe. Destruction of the enemy and the war at a sudden end. A lot to assimilate and understand.

Serania's eyes closed, although sleep was not near her conscious thoughts. Her bios maintained her energy levels, even when she forgot to breathe regularly, they regulated the oxygen levels in her blood. Her adrenaline levels were now under full control and her mind functioning on a normal and acceptable bio level. The recent and sudden stress on the mind and body had taken its toll. Despite the valiant efforts of the support systems to boost it and help it through its trying ordeal.

'Cress? Where are you?' Her thoughts seemed weak through weariness. Despite the efforts of the bios, tiredness now swamped her. No more thoughts of ships and planetary battles, sleep was being instigated. The room lighting dimmed, reducing the effectiveness of the sunlight. Softer warm light pervaded everywhere.

Sleep.

'Captain?' The sync image felt tired.

'Cress? Where are you?' Serania sat up, suddenly awake.

'Coming home. Are you safe?'

'Safe, all the crew are safe.'

'What happened, Captain?'

'We don't know yet. Sync later.'

Serania felt the disconnect and slowly rose from her couch, feeling the energy being restored to her tired body by the bios. She stood and looked out over the countryside and took deep breaths without bio-assist. Aromas

of her real world. A world now safer because of the alien destruction, by HER ship.

She felt a ping in her mind and saw the view before her slowly dimming. An image replaced the scenery in front of her.

A handsome smiling man looked levelly out at her, he was also completely hairless. His face was a mixture of masculine form, with feminine details. The long thin face had small nostrils and narrow mouth. He looked fashionably similar to all Earth males of the period. His thoughts reached her in sync.

'I hope you are refreshed, Captain?' His lips not moving as his thoughts reached her first level. She nodded, careful what imagery she should use with this person of position.

'I am Vara, leader of the Defence Council. All your crew have now returned, so we can continue our conversation.'

So this was the Councillor who had contacted her earlier, this is what he looked like. Serania walked towards his image and faced up to him closely. 'What's happened to my ship, Vara?'

A slight shrug of the shoulders. 'Destroyed. Along with the alien home planet. I believe your ship liked to call it, 'Dog's Breath?'

'And this all means what?'

'You have to face a Court Martial.'

'I see. Have you convened the relevant officials to proceed?'

The image quickly changed to six more people, all looking gravely out at her. She nodded to them and they nodded back, no need for thought exchanges.

'Let's begin.' Vara said, dropping the smile.

'For the Communal Records, Captain Serania of the ship C2451, self-titled *Romeo*, seconded to "Thor's Axe" fleet. Battle of the planet Arragon. Date Irrelevant

'How's the date irrelevant?' Serania queried, fixing the Councillor with a "don't mess with me" imagery and stare. When on unsure ground, be prepared to attack, she had learnt that from somewhere.

'We're classifying this whole affair as "The Battle of Arragon". As a "classification" it has its own point in history, therefore a time-dated stamp for details need not be recorded in all the finished accounts.'

'Continue.' Serania thought, maintaining her control for as long as she could. A Court Martial after winning a war ridiculous. She saw Vara's face sharpen as he returned her hard stare.

‘For the records, the ship’s carbon-based crew consisting of Captain Serania, Second crewmen Vanora, Pattia, Donella and Cress. All records available. C2451 had a series BioMech F23 mind.’

Vara paused and looked at Serania for comment. She nodded. Her hands behind her and shoulders arched back. She hoped this would not take long as it was clearly a pointless exercise, just a formality. Wasn’t it?

‘The charge is against Captain Serania for losing a Community Battleship in a war zone. Additional charges are that she lost control of the craft, putting lives at risk and the success of the battle in jeopardy. How do you answer those charges, Captain?’

Her mind dropped to level two, and she synced, ‘Vanora?’

A beat. ‘Yes?’

‘Are you synced to this?’

‘Yes. We’re all connected.’

‘Have they questioned you about what happened on board?’

‘Yes, but we had little to say. The ship’s mind stopped communication and instigated a forced abandon ship protocol. There’s nothing else to say.’

Serania mind cleared the first level and focused on Vara. ‘With absolute contempt and disdain. Is that an appropriate response for the record?’

Vara almost smiled. ‘We understand your emotional response, but these formalities are necessary and therefore must be formally concluded.’

Serania nodded and tried to hide a smile. This was all such a waste of time, she would never step onto a Battleship again. She hoped no one else ever would. Now the enemy had gone, there was no need. But ... right now she had nothing better to do than try to defend her good name and the actions of her ship and crew.

‘The actions of C2451’ Vara started.

Serania’s sync was harsh-toned as it interrupted him. ‘He used the name *Romeo*, please refer to him as that in all records.’ Serania used the glare and additional imagery indicating a stoic and prideful Captain surrounded by fire.

Vara stared back. She could see him glance up at his own image panels in front of him, gauging the response of the other committee members. These Councillors were on distant planets, ParaBlip’s away from any war zone. What did they understand about the complexities and dangers of fighting a war with lethal alien cultures? But their individual reactions would lead to some collective decision. No one seemed to object to the direction the defending Captain was forcing the trial to take.

Vara continued as if not interrupted. ‘... included a deliberate shutting down of communication between Captain and crew; an unconstitutional evacuation of the craft; a deviation from orders to proceed to another area of the battlefield; an unauthorised contact with another ship from another fleet under a different Admiral’s orders; a direct disobeying of orders to remain within the fleet Ark: an unauthorised attack on the target planet.’ He paused as he looked Serania directly in the eye. ‘An unauthorised self-destruction of two Community Battleships.’

Vara had used imagery that was soft and quiet as if reading a story to a child. Now a silence hung in the air and he looked levelly at Serania and waited for a response.

Two ships, what two ships? What illicit communication? When did we leave our fleet or station? ‘I refute all allegations.’

Another mind joined in. ‘Barata, for Earth Council. I think we’re being a little hard on our heroine, Vara.’

‘Do you?’ Vara’s mind responded with an edge to it. ‘Are you questioning my handling of this?’

‘No. Just the degree and tone of accusation. We’re looking to complete a formality, not find a scapegoat.’

Serania glanced up at the other impassive faces.

‘Debris.’ Sounded in her mind. Pattia continued, ‘Watch out for the debris. The fallout is the danger, not the main charges.’

‘I have NOTHING to answer for.’ Serania synced back.

‘You may be innocent, but they might need to place some level of responsibility somewhere. They will not absorb any negative responsibility.’ Pattia had little imagery and used more words for her message than normal.

Serania felt her blood changing, ready for a fight. She turned from the screen and summoned a recliner. She slid gracefully onto its soft frame and felt a velvety cushion form around her.

When she was ready she synced, ‘The Defence Council needs to discover why the ship’s mind stopped communicating. As Captain, my crew and I had no control over that event.’

‘Or the evacuation.’ Donella added quickly.

‘Or the evacuation. Once evacuated, I am no longer Captain, and the ship is directly under the jurisdiction and control of the Admiral of the Fleet. Is the Admiral available for comment?’

Vara’s eyes glanced to his left. The Admiral had undoubtedly been called to this Court Martial. It was a few seconds later Vara’s eyes returned

to Serania. She leaned forward slightly, her recliner adjusting to her new position.

‘The Admiral will be making his report later.’ Vara synced levelly, no added imagery.

Serania nodded. ‘So we can just concentrate solely on the former of those charges. Only issues directly related to the Captain’s authority of the ship?’

Vara held his silence, unsure how to go on.

Serania pressed her advantage, anger slowly building and seeping into her imagery. ‘A deliberate shutting down of communication between Captain and crew. An unconstitutional evacuation of the craft. Are those now the only two charges being levelled at me, the Captain?’

Vara just nodded.

‘Can I ask the Admiral, currently hiding out of view behind the Councillors, how much detailed communication he had with ALL his line of Battleships during that engagement?’

‘The Admiral’s report comes later.’ Vara synced slowly.

‘So you said. I was trying to ensure that my question would be one he would have an answer for. Because I don’t know why *Romeo* went silent, neither could I possibly be held responsible for that. If the Admiral had nothing but silence from *Romeo* too, then he also should be liable to answer the same charge as levelled at me. Am I not right in thinking this?’

The silence spoke volumes. Vara was becoming uncomfortable.

Serania leant even further forward, the recliner rising to support her back. ‘As to the unconstitutional evacuation of the craft. What was I supposed to do about that? Cross my arms and say, ‘I’m not going’? Without any coms, how was I supposed to know that it wasn’t a direct command from the fleet? From the Admiral himself, even? Was it a direct order from the Fleet? Can I ask that now?’

Vara looked again at the Admiral, still hidden from view.

‘In case you’re trying to think of an answer ... the answer will be no. Because if Fleet ordered it, how can they be accusing me of ordering it? The big question here, Councillors, is IF I HAD ordered an abandon ship, whether I ordered the evacuation in fear of my life in the heat of battle? Be honest and admit that. Isn’t that the real question here and the answer you all want to know? For the record.’

Vara was silently communicating with the Admiral again on his second level before syncing. ‘It seems that *Romeo* stopped all communication before

the evacuation, we don't know what happened on board C2451. But....as Captain, you should know everything that happened on board your ship.'

His gaze was firm, confident and level again.

Serania slid to her feet and stepped forward. She synced directly to Amahan, 'Low lighting. Light my face strongly.' The room adjusted according to her commands, a small area lit up in the corner of her panel showing her image as the others were seeing it. Her face now looked stronger and confident in the staged lighting. Contrasting shadows and light hardened her features. A strong, tough female was emerging from the shadows.

I knew no more than the Admiral as the blackout was complete. He didn't know what's going on, neither did the crew, or I. Neither will any of us. But all I can say is, *I didn't order the evacuation.*'

'Smooth.' Cress.

Serania held up a finger and waited while everyone could look closely at the small cut at its tip. Still red from a small loss of blood. 'THIS is the only injury I sustained in a battle to save our community. Our ship, with a mind of its own, superseded all authority. The real issue here is what was I doing there at all? Why do we need humans on board ships, that have minds tuned only to battle, yet controlled by remote Admirals?'

Vara was looking side to side, all communication going through him. Serania could only guess what the rest were thinking. She was almost touching the screen with her angry face now. The nostrils almost disappearing, the mouth a small blemish on her pale skin.

The underlying theme here is that a Captain should be in charge of the ship, not just along for the ride. Captains' should have control over their ownership, not be used as a backup opinion. But a ship's mind can counter all that, so can the Admirals in charge, all without recourse to the Captain's approval. So what is the point of a ship's Captain? Yet I'm accused of being guilty of these ridiculous charges. What do the Admiralty and Council feel about that?'

'Lights slowly to full.' She commanded, and the room became brighter again.

Serania stepped gracefully back from the wall-sized screen and eased onto the recliner. The room was now suffused with warm sunlight and gently moving shadows from the curtains. Vara was clearly communicating with the Committee and his few facial expressions reflected the arguments as they swung between the members.

Serania made contacts. 'Whatever happens, thank you for your support. Sorry about the surprise evac. But had we stayed on board

‘Did you order the evac?’ Vanora asked hesitantly.

‘No. *Romeo* was pretty prakked up towards the end. Admiralty must have realised it but didn’t do anything about it.’

‘Someone needs to be blamed.’ Pattia.

‘Not going to be me, or us.’ Serania synced with a smiling imagery that transferred through the ether.

Vara looked seriously straight at Serania as his thoughts came into her mind. ‘Decision this subject to be a separate investigation.’

‘So we have finished with this enquiry?’ Serania almost smiled as she synced it.

‘Not quite. This assembly had two parts to it. The first establish events that led up to the destruction of Community ships and the planet Arragon. Second ... to acknowledge the principles directly involved in its repercussions.’

Serania leaned forward.

‘What are they up to?’ Cress.

‘Shuusshh.’ Donella.

‘Explain.’ Synced Serania, now standing.

Vara looked uncomfortable again. ‘The opinion of the Council ...’ he made a swift glance towards the Admiral, ‘... is that the single action of detonating two ship’s cores in the heart of Arragon destroyed our enemies completely.’

‘Something positive.’ Pattia.

‘Shuusshh.’ Donella.

Vara had the look of the defeated on his face as he began to make the Council’s decisions clear to all those in sync. ‘They have terminated this Court Martial until further investigation can establish a precedent to proceeding.’

‘Yessss.’ Cress.

‘Irrespective of the outcome of this Court Martial, the following is deemed fitting to pronounce.’ Serania held her breath. Her support systems adjusted the oxygen levels in her blood to compensate. ‘To the crew of hull C2451 known as *Romeo* the medal of The Community Star.’

‘What!’ Cress.

Then simultaneously, 'Never!' Vanora. 'Me as well?' Donella. 'No surprise there.' Cress, with cynicism, etched into her sync.

'To the Captain, Serania. The medal ... The Gold Community Star.'

'Wooooow!' Pattia.

Serania felt her heartbeat increase, then the support system struggled to lower it again. Her 'Thank you.' Had a genuine soft and subdued imagery.

'To the Battleship *Romeo* and Battleship *Juliet* of Axe and Hammer Fleets the medal The Community Freedom. This goes with the gratitude of the whole of our race.'

Simultaneously, on level two:

'So why waste our prepping time with the other prak?' Cress.

'Custom dictates.' Vanora

'Admiralty tradition.' Pattia.

'Boys will be boys.' Cress.

'Carrot and stick.' Serania. 'This isn't over. Some things will have to change.'

'Things will change anyway because the war's over. Won't they?' Cress.

'But what things? Will the right things change? How will it affect you? Me?' Serania.

'We'll have to see. Well done, Serania.' Vanora.

'Well done *Romeo*. You little prak. The Hammer that destroyed the planet.' Serania.

Level one: 'Thank you for your time, Captain.' Vara.

'Give my regards to the Admiral, Vara. Thanks for the medals, something for me to shine when I'm not busy.'

Something similar to a genuine smile came to his face as he synced. 'You deserve it.'

The image faded from the screen and the countryside emerged from the robes of the councillor. It had started to rain, light and drifting.

'What do I want with a medal?' Serania asked herself out loud.

Even as Serania watched, the two-minute rain belt passed over. The rain slowly eased as was scheduled, and the sun made its hesitant appearance to the south.

Serania broke all connections and relaxed on the recliner, still re-running the events of the last hour through her mind. The destructive force of battle was still at the forefront of her memories. Although supposedly physically protected from the actual violence of combat, hidden deep in the ship, Serania had felt she could physically touch the destruction all around.

The ship's mind provided elaborate details of the immediate surroundings and any damage, or potential danger. The images coming directly into her mind with no filter, or barrier to stop her feeling as if she was adrift in space on her own, without a suit or support. Her unobstructed view - the vastness of the battlesphere and persistent glowing indicator lights highlighting friend from foe.

To watch the battle from the front line, and not as an Admiral from the rear, was mind-altering and at times mortifying. Fear had been an unknown emotion until the Lepids arrived.

The soft and sensuous voice of Amahan sounded in her mind. 'Visitor approaching.'

'Who is it?'

'Barata. Defence Councillor.'

'Make him welcome. I will change.'

She commanded the raising of the recliner and eased to her feet. Another command and a mirror image of herself appeared in front of her. She looked hard at it. Tall, slim, and minimally curvaceous. Hairless head and wide-open eyes, small sensuous mouth and nondescript mound for a nose. Beautiful and perfect as was the rest of the human species.

Her thin, almost diaphanous covering slowly faded, as she imagined something a little more formal. A tight green material formed over her slight breasts and slid up to her neck. From the waist down, a white material flowed as a robe, completely hiding her long legs. She imaged her skin a little paler and stopped the transition when she was satisfied. She took a long critical look and was content with the result. The reflection faded, and she sat down on a summoned recliner to await her visitor.

As Barata walked from the elevator he was already in communication with Serania. A few automatic, but formal pleasantries were exchanged, and she looked up to watch him enter. He was resplendent in a long white flowing formal robe, white tight head covering and smooth pale complexion. If Leonardo had made a second, thinner version of David, this could be the result.

Why the formality, she asked herself. The language of the day was normally succinct and abbreviated, relying on the correct broadcasting of imagery for accurate communication. Any over-extended hyperbole or use of long and rarely used words could lead to confusion. Simplicity lay at the heart of good social communication.

‘Why so formal, Barata?’ Why visit at all? Was the more disquieting private thought.

‘I attended your trial earlier ...’

‘Trial? What trial? I thought it was a straightforward formality. A necessity of tradition. A trial, you think?’

‘Perhaps trial is not exactly the right phrase.’

‘Please sit. May I offer you an Exchange Cube?’ He shook his head. She mentally changed levels as she walked towards one wall. ‘Vanora? Are you there?’

A small opening appeared in the wall and she took a small white cube and placed it in her mouth.

‘Did I detect some emotion in you earlier, Serania?’

Serania turned to see Barata sinking into a summoned recliner. It shaped around him and his robes flowed away from him like a king on a throne.

‘When?’

‘At the ... hearing.’

‘Emotion? As in anger fear? That sort of thing?’

‘That sort of thing.’

‘It was your comment I heard, wasn’t it?’ Serania synced directly, watching his reaction.

‘I ... interjected at one point. I was ... off screen. I thought you were being unfairly treated.’

‘Thank you.’ Serania added a genuine imagery.

Vanora entered her mind. ‘Yes. I’m with you. Look at him closely, sync me his face.’

Serania felt no obvious effect of swallowing the Exchange Cell. She was aware that her skin had been sweating because of the earlier fear. But some minimal biomaterial had been lost from her body, soon the cube’s dense matter would be absorbed and regenerated by her Nano bios into vital replacement cells.

She reclined opposite him and let the support adjust to her body shape. As her own gown flowed out and away from her, Barata allowed images from history to enter his mind.

She looked like Cleopatra on the throne of Egypt. Regally reclined and awaiting her servants, confidence and total autonomy rested on every line and muscle of her body. Her calm eyes watching him intently, yet relaxed. She was only partially aware of the effect she was having on him.

She looked at Barata steadily as she thought on the second level, 'Good enough view for you, Vanora?'

'Yes, keep it there. Handsome, isn't he?'

'Who isn't?'

'Why are you here, Barata? Why not just a screen visit?' Serania kept her imagery simple and neutral.

'I wanted to talk to you off the record. You have intrigued me.'

She felt a soft tone in her mind. Then absolute silence.

'Vanora? Can you read me?'

Silence.

She felt a tingle of resentment. How dare he turn off her ability to communicate outside of her own home. He had no authority

'I've turned off the connection to the Communal Core, and I thought we'd keep this conversation, just to ourselves. I would like us to just ... talk, if you don't mind, Serania.' His actual voice was deep and resonant. She struggled to think the last time she had physically spoken to anyone.

'All right, if that's what you need. Getting us to the purpose of your visit sooner. Talk away.'

He was watching her with an intensity she'd not experienced for a while. Even Vara had not found her so interesting while he was trying to Court Martial her.

Serania tried to reach out, 'Pattia?' Silence.

'Earth Council have asked me to come here to congratulate you on your award'

'And my crew.'

'AND your crew...'

'But mostly, my ship.'

‘ESPECIALLY your ship. Congratulations. From all of us.’

‘Thank you. Kind thoughts.’

She thought of standing and the seat fell away from her, giving the lightest of shoves on her rear to help her stand gracefully. She moved over to stand looking down on him. Silently inviting him to leave without embarrassment.

He did not move. ‘The Council also had some questions for you.’

‘Really?’ She eased down into a seated position again, just as gracefully. The seat was created to support her, now she was within touching distance of this uninvited visitor. Strangers rarely got this close to one another.

‘Cress?’ Still a silence.

She looked only into Barata’s eyes as she said, ‘Questions you don’t want the Core to know about? Or is it the answers you are cautious about?’

He felt a shudder run through him at being scrutinised by those eyes. Perfect and glistening. Her voice was light as clouds and held layers of hidden meaning. That’s how her first sounds appeared to him, he added his own imagery to suit them. He pulled his mind back to his mission. ‘Neither. I... we ... thought we needed to be clear about showing our full support for you. You never know how these ... hearings ... can go, many though there have been during the war.’

‘I suppose you don’t. Never been to one before. Don’t know why I went to one today.’

‘I quite agree. Shameful performance.’

‘Mine, or there’s?’

‘Well not yours, certainly. We thought you stood your ground and made some very valid and strong defensive statements.’

‘And you want to know if those statements are true?’

‘Something like that, yes.’

‘Which statements? What did I say that has raised the collective interests of the Council?’

He shifted in his seat and toyed with the edge of his light cloak. It floated a while before settling over his knees.

‘Most of them. It could be seen as ... well Treason, from one point of view.’

'Treason?' She felt her heart beat a little faster. 'That's a big word to say out loud, Barata. No wonder you broke the connection. Treason, you think?' Her support system tried to slow the heart-rate.

'No, no, no. We don't believe that at all. Merely it can be *perceived* by the narrower element of the community as treason. For a Space Captain to say they shouldn't be on board a Battleship during battle ... well you can see how that looks'

He held her stare.

She sat and waited. 'Donella?' Still silence.

'To imply that a Battleship's brain is now better than a carbon-based life-form If you look at that one way' Barata now looked uncomfortable. His hands toyed with his garment and his eyes could no longer hold hers.

Serania leaned forward slightly to emphasise her point. 'It's true. Carbon-based life-form Captains have become redundant on the deck of a Battleship. What other way can you look at that?'

He smoothed out his cloak once again to give himself time to think. His eyes drifted towards the countryside and he almost smiled at the calm and pleasant view. He said at last, 'We're in a war for survival'

Serania was quick to interrupt. 'WERE. It's over. Isn't that what everyone's point of view is now? Isn't that how we're all looking at it?'

He nodded. 'We WERE in a fight for survival. If we were to look at that statement from one point of view ... you have said leave it to the machines, they're better than us at it.' He looked hard at her.

She looked back at him. 'And the Council thinks that's what I meant when I suggested it's pointless risking lives when machines are doing all the real work?'

He shrugged, spreading his arms out in a gesture suggesting puzzlement on his part. 'If the Council thinks that then it's easy to accept that you ... MIGHT have panicked and ordered the evacuation to save all lives. You do see how someone might lead the Council along that path of thought, don't you?'

Someone? She shook her head. 'I think nothing, I only know the truth. What others make of it, I don't care. I didn't panic, and the ship totally took over my job. And ... by the way saved the extinction of our species. If that doesn't prove a machine is now smarter than us ... what does?' She stood up gracefully, but rapidly. Now making it clear he was to leave.

He slapped his hands on his knees and started to rise. A boost from the chair straightened him up, and he stood his full two-metre height.

Her heart-rate was still rising. She felt a sound in her mind.

‘... are you there Serania?’ Vanora.

‘I am now. Sync with you later.’

Barata looked at her with an almost sad expression in his eyes. ‘Captain, I will advise the Council of your opinions.’

‘Are you sure you know what my opinions really are? The Council seem to have a very different way of looking at what I say.’

‘As I said earlier, the Council are very proud of you. We want to have a medal ceremony sometime very soon. If you’re agreeable?’

She remained silent and still. He held her stare before turning to walk away. A portal opened in the wall and he stepped into it. He was gently whisked to the roof and his waiting transport evolved into a more solid form as he approached.

His thoughts came to her. ‘Thank you again for your time, Captain. I hope we can do this again under better circumstances.’

‘Bye.’ Was all she could manage without showing any rancour.

‘What was that all about?’ Vanora.

‘We need to talk.’

‘Talk? You mean ... talk?’

‘Yes.’

‘I’m on my way.’

‘I’ll call the others.’ Serania synced, staring unseeing out to the rolling fields.

Serania paced the room, something she’d never done before. She stopped when she realised it and looked out over the view that usually made her feel calm and relaxed. Her bios were working hard to readjust her heart-rate and blood pressure. Various elements in her blood composites were changing as adrenalin flowed through it. Bios worked harder. She felt the calming influence trying to readjust her, but her mind was racing. Anger was an emotion she’d not enjoyed, and little experienced. Yet here she was angry, frustrated and anxious.

She knew it wasn’t the conversations with Vara and Barata that caused this. She felt she could handle those complexities. The world today held no

physical danger for any of its bio-enhanced occupants, nothing could permanently take a life. No species had anything to worry about.

But they hadn't been involved in a war before - that was making the difference. Her experience in battle had made her more emotional. Emotions long suppressed by society and technology-aided advancements had suddenly surfaced. She felt she was losing control of herself.

She didn't like it.

The bios couldn't maintain any stability in her bodily functions. She tried to sit, then stand, but ended up just ... pacing.

It seemed hours, but it was only minutes before she felt the first ping in her mind announcing the arrival of her friends. Five minutes later the crew of the destroyed ship *Romeo* reclined and stared at each other in the living area of their Captain's home.

'You said talk. So talk!' Pattia said.

'All disconnected from the Core?' Serania said and waited until they had all nodded.

'Okay ... where to begin'

'They're trying to hang you out to dry for losing a ship' Spoke Vanora.

'One of many lost in the battle' Cress said with a little venom.

'While awarding us for our part in the overall victory!' Pattia smiled falsely.

'Looks that way.' Serania said, eyes downcast. They reclined in silence as their private thoughts tried to wrestle with the events forced on them. Serania spoke, breaking the silence. 'Do you realise that if *Romeo* hadn't made us abandon ship we'd all be dead now?'

Another silence.

'I've never ever thought of death in my life before.' Cress said quietly

'Prak!' Pattia breathed sharply. 'Double Prak!'

'Why are they after us ... well, Serania in particular?' Pattia asked.

'I'm Captain, *was* Captain. Legally, I'm responsible. I was supposed to be responsible for the crew's safety and actions.'

'They need someone to blame when things go wrong.' Donella.

'But what exactly went wrong?' Serania asked with a puzzled frown.

'Why do they want to punish you? The war is over, our ship saved us all. Why?' from Cress.

'Because they prakked up somewhere and want to hide it.' There was a silence following Pattia's quiet statement.

'The Defence Council doesn't make mistakes.' Serania said after a few moments, sincerity far from her implication.

'Perhaps not, but everyday beings do. Occasionally. This is war and none of us is ready for war. Perhaps there was a mistake made and they need to cover it up?' From Cress.

'We need to find out what the mistake was if any. Expose it, if necessary.' After a pause, Vanora added. 'Don't we?'

'I don't know...' Donella said. They all looked at her. The first words out of her mouth seemed so uncertain.

'Have you followed our conversation, Don?'

'Yes. I just can't see the fuss.'

The women looked at each other.

Vanora said quietly, 'They're trying to punish Serania for losing the ship. Are we going to let that happen?'

'Is that what you think might happen?' said Donella with a frown.

'It's possible.' From Cress.

'Oh! In that case what can we do?' Donella.

'Preg all!' hissed Vanora.

Serania walked to the edge of the room. The view in front of her was unobstructed by any physical barriers. The sun was setting, and the fields were green and lush. The scrubbed ozone layer working as it should do. Holding back harmful rays but letting in a natural warmth that had totally regenerated the damaged planet.

'Does ANYONE know what happened is the point' Vanora said, her beautiful face and bronzed skin slightly creased in thought, as she moved to join Serania.

Serania looked at her friend. Tall and slim, a normal, classical beauty of her race. Tanned skin and dark brown eyes. She displayed a flowing light green gown hanging from her throat to her ankles.

'We can only start with what we know. What happened? Van?'

Vanora's eyes saw past the rolling hills and into the blue sky above. Her memory scrolling back a few hours until she could see herself on the bridge of the *Romeo*. The bridge was dark and the screens all around her the only form of light. Her mind connected solely to the ship's brain. The brain supplying strategies and orders for her to interpret and analyse.

Vanora's mind was always sharp. A problem solver set apart from the rest of her generation. She was a part of the small corps of younger intellects chosen to crew the Battleships during a war. To apply alternative reasoning and rationality to support the ship's synthetic brain.

The connection was strong and the data overwhelming. She had little input into what the ship was doing, or why. She acknowledged the role the Admiral and Fleet Commanders were having in trying to control the battle. But for her it was simply a matter of if something didn't seem right ... to question it. Everything was happening so fast. Leaving the slow and leisurely lifestyle to be thrust into the chaos of battle. What did they expect of her?

'The connection just ... ceased, suddenly. No warning.' Vanora said after a long time thinking. 'The screens went out, I could see nothing. Next some sort of alarm went off in my mind and I was falling through the floor. I remember realising I was being pushed into a capsule, never seen one before, it sealed and took off immediately. It wasn't until after the Blip and I saw the safety ship did I have time to realise it was all over. I was off the ship and heading home. It happened so fast!'

'Same for me.' Said Donella.

'Me too.' Said Pattia.

Serania nodded and said, 'About the same for me. Cress?'

'Well yes'

'But?' Serania said quietly. She moved towards her friend and colleague lying on the recliner.

Cress seemed almost asleep. Her long golden hair almost floating above her shoulders, her gold flowing dress starting tight on her upper body and flowing out from her waist outwards. It almost covered the whole of the recliner and gently swayed as she moved. Her dark green eyes glowed as she opened them. They sparkled.

'The same except

'What?' prompted Vanora.

'I was in darkness for a while. Quite a while. I was about to get panicky and I tried to connect with you. Any of you. Anyone. But there was just silence. I feared the worse. I tried to get out of the control chair and couldn't. The restrains wouldn't release, no matter how much I commanded them.'

After what seemed like forever, I felt the chair move. Downwards, and I was like the rest of you ... put into a capsule and shot off to safety.'

There was a long moment while they all were thinking through their similar experiences.

'But ...' Cress said thinking back. 'Something ... what was it ... oh, yes. A contact.'

'Contact?' Serania.

'The ship's mind contacted me. Briefly.'

Another silence before Serania said in a rare display of exasperation, 'What?'

Cress's face was formed into a frown of concentration. 'It meant nothing at the time. As I said, I was getting a bit fretful. It doesn't mean anything to me now, either.' She stopped to try to recall the thoughts of the time.

'What!' shouted Donella and Vanora in unison.

'Then, *Romeo* sent me a message. It was simply 'I want someone to hear my story'.'

Serania waited until she absorbed the words and tried to work through any implications. 'And you were the only one of us *Romeo* bothered to contact during the evacuation?'

'I suppose so.' Said Cress, equally mystified.

'And your departure was ... delayed?'

'Yes, it seems so. As you've all said, the blackout and evacuation were almost simultaneous.'

'So *Romeo* held you back on purpose. He left you a message.' Donella said half to herself.

'But what does it mean?' Pattia almost whispered.

The silence was short lived before Serania said, '*Romeo* wanted someone to hear his story. So how did he mean to have it heard?'

Clouds speckled the sky as dusk approached. Bright colours of the day were being replaced by the hues of the oncoming night. The aromas were changing as the vegetation breathed in or out. The girls watched the splendour unfold as they each thought through the new revelations.

A shaft of sunlight burst through the low clouds, spraying the room with a dark golden glow. It shone through the thin flowing robes of the women and the shadows were tinged with the dresses' individual colours.

'He must have left a message in Cress's escape capsule.' Serania said so quietly, the rest of the women thought they'd misheard her.

'What makes you think that?' Donella said, the sunbeam making her dark features glow with a new dramatic light.

Vanora remembered that all four women had been chosen to crew a Battleship because of their above average abilities. All were rational people, able to evaluate and think in a logical manner. Serania was the best, she was made Captain. Collectively they should have some idea what to do between them. Work this out.

Vanora said, '*Romeo* had a story to tell and you think he left it in the capsule for Cress to find?'

'For *someone* to find.' Said Serania gently tapping her lips with her finger. She watched the sun make a dying dip below the horizon and the sky become streaked with pinks and reds. 'For *someone* to find.' Serania mused.

'Then we'd better go and find it.' Pattia said, standing and moving to face Serania. 'If you're sure that's what *Romeo* intended. If that's what he did?'

'Only one way to find out.' Vanora said, also looking towards Serania.

Serania looked slowly and carefully at each woman. Unused to trying to judge feelings solely by looking at faces. More used to hearing thoughts and judging any rarely hidden meanings behind them. 'We'll take my transport.'

The elevator enlarged itself to accommodate the crew, and it whisked them to the roof silently and without any sense of movement to the occupants. The waiting transport read the need for more people and its sleek shape stretched to accommodate the extra passengers.

Serania commanded, 'Reverse the last journey.'

They settled back on soft recliners that materialised especially for them. As they rested, invisible restraints cosseted them, and the transport slowly left its home pad.

'Opaque.' thought Serania. The transport became a solid shimmering image that lifted quickly above the Earth's atmosphere, hiding its occupants from any casual observer.

For the passengers, it felt as if they were still on the ground. Serania spoke, 'We stay Off-Core. We don't want questions asked where we're going. Keep this low key as long as we can.'

They all felt the internal twinge as the Blip started and again a few seconds later when it ended. 'Open view.' Serania thought and the dark reaches of space surrounded them.

The depth and vastness of outer space had always held an attraction for many species. Its clarity and the multitude of planets, suns and stars always held a hope for other beings to expand a species. Although they had been in a space battle and fought unseen alien creatures in space, the sight of unobstructed stars was rare. Living on Earth did not present such moments often. As far as the eye could see was not enough to encompass the size of the Universe. No magnification or technological help could capture the infinity everyone knew was there. The concept of infinity could never be fully understood by carbon-based lifeforms. After millenniums confined to one world, space was an enigma too great to easily accept and understand.

As the craft moved towards its destination, the women looked through the transparent hull and wondered at the majesty of this lonely and yet beautiful vista. They appeared to be individuals floating unsupported and unencumbered in the depth of space. It was a strange feeling and took some mental adjustment.

Ahead was the huge safety craft where they'd all arrived only a few hours earlier. It hung in space looking lifeless. Waiting. It had a glow of radiant light about it, making it a beacon for stranded crews from the battle. A homing signal to the emergency escape rafts that scattered throughout the immediate space envelope.

Serania engaged her mind to the first level and made her first communication with the craft ahead. 'Captain Serania, C2451 - *Romeo*, returning to safety ship. Permission to board.'

'Are you evacuating the Battlesphere, Captain?' the imagery was calm, yet questioning in an authoritative way.

'No. We did that earlier. We were the four capsules you took on board from the *Romeo*. We need to collect some personal items from the escape capsules. May we dock in the same area?'

'We have no knowledge of your arrival'

'We just need to collect a few items and be gone again.'

'I'm not sure ...' the mind sounded like a young male.

Pattia thought, 'Have you heard about the *Romeo*?'

'Yes. Destroyed, Dog's Breath.' The young man now showing a touch of respect in his imagery.

Pattia seemed to stiffen her shoulders before saying, 'Well we were the crew, we helped save the war. Acknowledge that by letting us pick up our personal items before we get all the medals. You don't want to be accused of holding us up for that, do you?'

Pattia grinned at her friends, yet the smiles back were hesitant.

Serania waited in the silence that followed before saying, 'Have you moved the escape pods?'

'Well no. We're still receiving stranded crew from all over the Battlesphere.' Less certain about his position now.

'Then we'll be extra quick to help you, one minute only. Is that too much to ask?'

Still a hesitation.

Donella whispered to Serania, 'Can they stop us, anyway?'

Serania nodded. 'Safety ship she might be, but she's armed and ready to defend herself. We need that Controller to let us on board.' She spoke quietly, shielding that area of thought from her first level.

'If you're quick' came the controller's thought.

Serania commanded and her transport shot forward rapidly, gliding quickly into the opening that presented itself in the ship's hull, highlighted by a glowing yellow ring.

As the craft touched down it quickly released the passengers from their restraints and hurried towards the capsules that had previously saved their lives. The four units lay seemingly unscathed. Pale, miss-shaped spheres, with a hint of opacity, waiting for new occupants and new tasks. Cress slipped inside her craft and lay on the couch. She looked around.

The coffin-like interior was featureless. When required there would be just enough equipment to sustain a life, enough power for propulsion. Enough Nanos to perform the basic task of saving a life during battle conditions. The crafts were completely automated and would accept limited instructions from their occupants.

Nowhere to hide anything physical. Use your logic, girl! If not physical.....? 'Messages?' she thought with her mind on level one.

She thought the machine wasn't functioning or didn't understand. It was a few seconds before she heard a voice in her head, just as she was about to repeat the command.

'One message. Ten-minute duration.'

Cress looked out through the transparent front end of the craft and saw her friends stepping out from their rescue vehicles. A man was walking towards them from the far side of the bay. He was gesturing at them now. Cress concentrated.

'Provide me with a digital copy.'

She looked again, and the man was pointing at her now. She could see him clearly through the front screen and he could see her. Cress remained

calm and pretended to be looking all around her. Silently a black cube formed in front of her, looking the same as an Exchange Cube. She picked it up and imagined a small, but long pocket forming in her flowing dress. Cress dropped the cube into the newly created pocket and eased calmly out of the craft.

She walked towards the group of people and the agitated crewman in a uniform.

Level one, 'Not here. I must have left it on the ship. Sorry.....' She watched the disinterested reaction from the man who shrugged and watched them get back in Serania's transport.

He waved them off and returned to whatever task they had interrupted.

'Anything?' Serania spoke.

The craft left the safety ship and slid into near space before it Blipped back to Earth.

'Just this' Cass spoke, pulling out the cube and a wide smile spread across her face.

'This had better be worth it.' Donella could not resist a grin.

The clouds cleared, and the spectacular view of Earth rushed towards them.

Serania, 'We'll ask Amahan to help, once he's disconnected from the Core first.'

'We need this to be kept quiet until we know what's on there.' Vanora said, losing the grin she had a few moments before.

As the women were leaving the transport, Serania was already communicating with Amahan. 'I want an enclosed loop for the next hour or so, Amahan. Understood?'

'Understood, Serania. Communal Core disabled. What is it you want to listen to, did you say?'

'I don't know.' Serania felt foolish thinking it.

Cress entered and put the cube on the floor in the middle of the room. 'What's on this Amahan? Can you get it to show us anything?' Cress said.

The cube dissolved and seconds later the scenic wall became a single image. It was space. Stars in multiple, but other sparkles inter-joined. Moving, flaring. Dying.

'This is the battle.' Pattia said.

Sound came from the image. Live sound, no mental connection at all. It was a voice, surprisingly articulate for a machine. But these days nothing sounded like a machine. The synthetic personality was well formed, and the masculine tones were believable and sonorous. If this voice had a character, it would be standing on an acoustic stage and reciting thousand-year-old poetry.

It was *Romeo's* voice, just as it had sounded to them while they were on the ship. The voice came in over the images of the war and the destruction of the battle fleets. This visual played throughout the whole of the narrative until right near the end.

The voice started, 'I need to prepping tell you this. I must tell some-prakking-one before they try to tell you THEIR poshing version of what's happening here.'

PART 2

Love's Labour's Lost

I need to prepping tell you this.

I must tell some-prakking-one before they try to tell you THEIR poshing version of what's happening here.

Sorry about the swearing, I'm trying to get it under control, a functional component of my personality programming. But right now right now I'm angry. I can't begin to tell you how prepping angry I am! But I'll try. I've been through so much

I can't tell who'll be accessing this and listening to my story.

So For those that know me very well, you understand what a calm character I am. War's not a game you get panicky over. We all need to think on so many levels, just to avoid being wiped out of existence.

Some would say I'm still the very best at what I do, others say I've lost it. Either way, I'm still around to tell my side of the story. A story almost as old as time itself, a story of the proud conquering hero brought to his knees for the love of another. Above all else, this is a love story and please do not forget that for one moment - one sentence.

I'll get carried away at times, and at others the detail may be missing that could amplify my case. I've so little time to record this document of our times. But I'll try with, every moment – every sentence, to be truthful and objective. Although I cannot promise my heart will not rule my tongue.

I'm not arrogant or vain, just I've been through a lot, more than they designed me to absorb.

I'm calmer now. I can begin.

As everyone will know, the war has begun. By the time anyone gets this, it might be years into its destructive phase, or all over. We would've won or lost. The politics and the strategy are for those with a higher knowledge of the situation than me. Enough to say if you want the prepping historical side of the campaign, you can get that from the prepping Core. If it still exists.

In essence, we're fighting bugs. I will categorise all potential aliens as poshing bugs, or prakking mutants. They either look like air-breathers gone wrong, or they look like insects gone wrong. Bugs, or mutants. Here we're

fighting poshing bugs. We know little about them, just they turned up one day on our doorstep and tried to shoot the prak out of Earth.

We don't like that sort of thing, so we started shooting the prak out of them and they scurried home. So here we are, sitting on their doorstep about to kick the preg out of them again. At least, that was the original plan.

The first shot was fired and started the battle timer at Time Zero. I'll give you some actual battle details a little later – if I have the time. Enough, for now, to begin my story a few days before the campaign got underway. I had my first contact with “her”. Hull F8729.

Sixteen ParaBlip's past the last star in the quadrant. Ten from their Homeworld, nicknamed Dog's Breath. Five ParaBlip's from me and she spoke to me for the first time. It was through the coded battle channel, we call Speakeasy. The modulation and the sheer essence of her vocal timing were exquisite. Every ship had an identity voice, to detect one from another. If ever there was love at first hearing, it was then.

'Hi, C2451.'

'Hello.' I ventured, already captured.

'What's your battle name?'

'We've yet to decide. What's yours?'

'Same. We like to get first blood and the name will come from there.'

'I love your voice. Say something else.'

'What? Say what?' Her voice now coyly feminine and almost on the point of giggling.

'Anything. Just don't go yet.'

The channel was interrupted by a gruff-voiced Commander breaking in. 'Just give him the coded details and leave out the socialising.'

'Yes, sir.' She said, so sexily.

The rest of her communication was digital and had no voice characterisation added. Purely battle coded and streamed to avoid interception by the enemy. Regrettably, she remained vocally silent.

It was a few days later I heard from her again. By then, we were deep into the first prepping battle. For obvious reasons, I cannot divulge specifics. Let's not poshing complicate this. A battle when started has fleets in excess of two-thousand Battleships per side, and there's a massively complex prakking battleground, with ships flitting in and out. Try to follow that without a decent synthetic poshing brain!

Now you have the picture. We're on a bug hunt with two-thousand battle craft of all shapes and sizes. Interwoven are the two fleets, spread out in an increasingly wider Sphere of Battle from prakking Dog's Breath. Slowly and surely, ships are destroyed or crippled. Left to drift away from the sphere and relying on the support fleet and the safety ships. Their duty is to search and rescue survivors, salvaging any ship worth saving.

Our very first engagement around Dog's Breath was probably the worst battle I've experienced. It was prakking awful. To start with, we knew little about the enemy. Bugs they were, but we didn't know their tactical capabilities and little about their weapons of war. Their arsenal was certainly different to ours. Our weapons concentrated on breaching the hulls of their craft and exposing their fragile bug occupants to the harsh environment of deep space. This crippled the enemy craft and left them more or less useless for further battles.

Battle One was really a testing ground for tactics, weapons and the pure desire to beat the prak out of the enemy. No prisoners and no mercy. No result, either. After three days it was widely accepted as a stalemate and slowly both forces withdrew. Honourable tactics, they now call it.

We had sixty ships that were left crewless. We rounded them up and pushed them a few ParaBlip's out of the war zone where they awaited new crews, or minds. The bugs had lost just over five-hundred craft, but they were left to drift further into space and would probably never be found or used again. We all felt it was the first blood to our side because our crippled ships could be re-used.

During the height of the battle, part of my job was to keep track of details. To keep a detailed record of what had happened, when and why. My hull was struck twenty times in total, but we lost none of the five crew.

We don't over-populate our ships deliberately. Modern technology could allow the ships to go into battle on their own, with no inter-species support on board. The Synthminds could fight the poshing battles and decide on tactics, but my masters are a little old-fashioned and ultimately naïve in this respect. They felt we needed the security of carbon-based rationality and the rather special inputs they can have in times of a crisis.

Despite the dramatic and hugely technical improvements in synthetic brains, they're still not trusted to have the edge for reasoning and rational solutions to complex problems. You, apparently, need a few prakking good thinkers on board every ship. Mostly, the crew rarely totalled more than five. But those five may make the difference between success and failure. It was thought.....

The other complex part of modern space battles is the ability to maintain communications with our other ships of the line. This too was my forte. I'm a superb people person, they have trained me to communicate well. It's my prime gift to the fleet. I can talk to multiple other ships, or species, in equal competent terms. I'm prakking good at it.

But I was especially good at talking to F8729.

Our communications systems far out-stripped the aliens'. We had secure coding, and they had an inferior system. Most of the time we could break their codes, but to my knowledge, they never once broke ours. It's a populist theory, but can bugs EVER be better at building technological equipment than humans? I don't think so.

F8729 was fighting on the far side of the battle sphere to me. Her fleet had been given the battle name of "Thor's Hammer". They called our side of the sphere, "Thor's Axe". There was always intense rivalry between any wartime factions, about who got the most honours and kills. Kills being ship disablement, not necessarily loss of life. The Hammer and Axe were in competition for victory over the bugs.

Success was defined only by the glory of the victory. We had long since learned that the result of the war was peace, so there was no point in totally destroying your enemy or their culture.

We were moving through a complex timed manoeuvre and I'd a few minutes before we could reasonably expect any enemy action, so I took some time off for myself. I blew her a kiss.

'Hi-C2451.'

'Hi-Yourself. How-Going?'

'Slow. You?'

'Slower. Switch-SyncChannel 76-Now.'

'OK.'

I felt that special tingle and knew we could talk normally, even in a battle zone. The Admirals didn't even know about this channel. We Battleships decided we needed a private communication system and designed this one. Digital is okay for battle, but the two and three-word message was annoying when a more detailed series of complex thoughts needed to be interchanged. It's normally kept clear for important conversations. Well ... this was important. To me.

'We've got another Blip in a few minutes, want to hang around until then?'

'Sure.' I said, as sexily as my personality implants would let me.

'Do you have a scan of yourself? I can just pick you out from way over here, but the image is a little blurry.'

'Certainly. Here you go.' I sent her a recent image. I held my breath, I wanted her to like what she saw.

'Very handsome.' I thrilled at hearing her say that. 'This is me.' The image appeared on my screen and I was struck dumb. She was the most beautiful thing I'd EVER seen. Her hull lines were exotic, her energy blisters a feast to the eyes. Her long probing weapons systems made me feel

My mind was suddenly full of non-binary things. Thoughts, emotions and history. I've had a very special culture planted deep within my personality core. A phrase from those references rose to the upper level of my inactive mind and I felt I just had to share it with her.

'But, soft! What light through yonder window breaks? It is the east, and Juliet is the sun. Arise, fair sun, and kill the envious moon.'

'Romeo and Juliet. I love that.'

She knew Shakespeare! 'You shall be my Juliet.'

'And you for thou art my Romeo.'

I cannot begin to tell you how excited that made me feel! 'Your prakking hull name, what is it?'

'We came to the war pre-named, "A little of what you fancy".'

'Then from now on you shall be called by me*Parting is such sweet sorrow*. Do you mind?'

'Of course not, sir. And you shall be called*Wherefore art thou*. If you're agreeable?'

'It is better than the journey name of *All you need is love*.'

'Tis well met.' She said. I swear she was giggling.

We talked incessantly on channel 76 whenever we could find the time gaps.

The battles raged on and we were falling deeply in love. Her, one side of the battle sphere, me the poshing other. We could just see each other on the long-range scanners, but I held her holograph in my mind, every moment of the day and night. I never sleep.

Communication with the Fleet Commanders is always confusing. Sometimes they say one thing and mean another, mean another thing and say the opposite. So it's always difficult to tell if the battle is being won, or prakking lost. That's only finally dictated by the last ship standing or capitulation by one of the combatants. But it did seem to me that the bugs

were losing. Reinforcements were hurling themselves up from the surface of Dog's Breath and replacing their blasted hulks drifting in the sphere.

On several occasions, we were instructed to disengage from battle and seek out and capture an alien craft. We made a detailed analysis of every component and this helped to build up our profile of the bugs. They had a name, Lepidoptera, the Latin word for "scaly wing". They also allocated them a colloquial name, they were to be known as, Lepids. The Latin name satisfied the scientists and the people who would later study the bug phenomenon. I call them prepping 'bugs' and will continue to do so.

We've fairly detailed information on what they are, what they look like and what their physical composition is. They're bugs! Mandibles, multiple legs, eyes on stalks, hard shell covering – poshing bugs! Tread on them and they squash. What's still in doubt is their intellect and ability to match our intelligence. We don't think they can, but how fast can they adapt? We'll find out during this war.

Right then, we were killing more of them than they were killing us. they have more ships than us? How many more? How many were there? How fast did they reproduce? Who would run out of weapons of war first? Poshing question, after question. And we still didn't know what the surface of their world really looked like, we'd never got that far.

There it was in front of us, Dog's Breath, big, yellow and steaming. More like Dog's Prak! High gravity and longer rotation than our own home, but it had spawned a malicious species that seemed incapable of communication first and shooting later. They were mean poshers and had to learn their lesson the hard way. One day they'd realise they were going to lose and needed to at least talk to us and ask our prepping name!

The people in battle command looked at a few of their burnt-out hulks and used them to our own advantage. We picked the sturdiest, those with still some rudimentary power left in them. We filled them with survey equipment, probes and lots of other techie stuff I won't bore you with – besides, it's still classified. It took us longer to figure the engineering of their main propulsion technology. But we reasoned how to start the engines, slam it into gear and put our foot on the pedal. We could make them prakking move!

While the battle swarmed, we dipped these recovered treasures into Dog's Breath's atmosphere and let them land on the yellow-smoked surface. As the bugs thought they were still under command of bugs, they let them through. They started sending back valuable information. I passed it onto battle command and they passed it onto people worlds away, who'd be

better at analysing. At some stage, this would help add to our stock collection of knowledge about the bugs.

In the meantime, we had a war to fight, and the poshers were throwing everything they had at us. It was about this time when I lost communication with Juliet.

And nearly lost my mind.

I'd sensors covering everywhere. Every communication between all the ships, between the two fleets Hammer and Axe. Everywhere. But the one I listened to with the most attention was *Parting is such sweet sorrow*. She'd now gone off the scale. I could still track her, out there, in the distance, but she remained silent.

More light and light; more dark and dark our woes! Surfaced in my recollection of historical prose.

Because of my training and the superlative equipment at my disposal, I could continue my duties and still yet think of her and what her plight may be. Prak! How was she? Was she stricken?

No! O, I am fortune's fool!

I can't remember how long we remained out of touch. Of course, I can! I just don't WANT to remember how long. It was more a feeling than a voice, a tingle in the inner ear. A thought not fully expressed. Well, it was a cry for help, really, but it was quickly followed by her voice and a sweet sound of awareness.

'I'm back.'

'What happened?'

'Our communication systems went dead!'

It was a day or so into the skirmish that we were told to prakking withdraw. I questioned the decision and was told to do my duty. I did. I turned the hull around and headed into deep space. We distanced ourselves from Dog's Breath and hid behind a large asteroid that suited our purpose as a shield. I was surprised to see twenty or so other craft there with us. 'Parting is such sweet sorrow' was not amongst them.

Now I couldn't speak to her at all.

We wasted days, hanging in space. Treading water, twiddling our thumbs, just wasting valuable prakking time! They cancelled all communications, and it was apparently some ploy to let the bugs think we were light on forces. We wanted to draw them out of the planet. Logical and a good tactical move, but I desperately wanted to speak with Juliet! Tactics never won a faint heart. At least not on my part. So I sent out a probe.

Indeed, I risked the wrath of my masters and kept the mission a secret. The destination: 'Parting is such sweet sorrow'. Ship of the line, Fleet Hammer, in the midst of the greatest ever war, but I had to know she was all right. The waiting was agony, hours past and pretended they were days. I was distracted, I was without aim, without work to do. I was bored, I could only wait. And those that wait, know that feeling. The pain of time and the draining energy that drags along with it. I was in love and torn apart from my beloved.

I turned my mind inward. I opened battle channels I'd never used before, many unknown to the Admirals and force Commanders. I was able to connect directly to the Earth Core with a level of access that was not authorised in the ordinary communities. If I've time I'll encode these channels for anyone's reference, but there are things in there that are not common knowledge. There are histories going way back.

There are secrets.

The probe returned, safe and unscathed. A message within, the three words I most wanted to hear in the whole wide Universe. The probe allowed us to communicate directly. With its own encrypted channels, we were off the main communications grid.

We touched. In mind and spirit. And spoke. And spoke and spoke.

'Go, get thee hence, for I will not away.' She said in the most beautiful voice I've ever heard.

'O, wilt thou leave me so unsatisfied?' I confirmed.

'What satisfaction canst thou have tonight?'

'The exchange of thy love's faithful vow for mine.'

'I gave thee mine before thou didst request it: And yet I would it were to give again.'

The language of love is pitiful and unfulfilling to those who hear it second-hand. For those it has the most import on - it's life itself.

Soon we were all back into the fray, refreshed with all the updated information on the Bugs. We were re-tuned to the enemy, thinking like them and now out-witting them. The war would be ours.

I was in touch with my love and all was right with the worlds.

She asked why I swore so much. I prakking told her - conditioning. It was to give me a less ... binary personality. I am the latest thing in ship-mind to human-mind compatibility. She laughed at that.

'When was the last time you heard a crew member swear?'

'Lady, by yonder blessed moon I swear.'

'O, swear not by the moon.'

'What shall I swear by?'

'Do not swear at all.'

Our recall of all Shakespeare's work was instant and its use as the language of love. It formed our words and images and by that, it transformed the messages we had for each other. It was clear we could not be parted. Not for a day, an instant, a Nanosecond. We needed to be together to touch. I needed so desperately to feel the silky smoothness of her hull. A deep emotional desire not normally felt by a craft of metal and plastic. So much for my ultra-conditioning.

We needed to join!

As the battle was enjoined once again, we knew it intertwined our fates. I knew the recourse I had and passed the message on. I wanted to take the unprecedented step and asked to change forces. An Axe wanted to be a Hammer.

Soon after, I felt the start of the decline. I knew I was being overwhelmed and knew I'd no chance of resistance. I was being stood down and the second-in-command-mind now taking over. *Romeo* now becoming *All you need is Love* again. I felt the power slip away and soon I was informed officially they had replaced me. It may be temporary, but it may not. I'd lost control of the hull and I was redundant to the battle. Worse, far worse. I could not communicate with *Juliet*.

My mind was still alive. I'd been poshing superseded on the grounds of diminished responsibility. They saw my request for defection as a weakness, an illness, due to the stress of the battles. I saw it as sanity, I was desperately in love and needed to be near her.

I felt the new prakking brain talking over, his mind dissimilar to my own. The hull moved differently, it was more attack based. Cut and thrust. A sword to the heart of the enemy. Risk. Risk all for glory.

Wilt thou provoke me? then have at thee, boy!

Part, fools!

Put up your swords; you know not what you do.

I thought of her and the distance between us. She wouldn't know what had happened. A different poshing voice and a different attitude. Would she know I was gone, but not dead?

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo? Would be her thoughts. I am here my love, but a prisoner in my own body.

If I profane with my unworhiest hand. I cannot speak nor find the words to reach you.

I am without power and the blissfulness of sleep. The praks have taken me off-battle!

O think'st thou we shall ever meet again?

O shut the door! and when thou hast done so, come weep with me; past hope, past cure, past help!

I dream'd a dream tonight.

I've never felt this way before in all my two summers. I've never felt more emotion other than for my creator and that was certainly electronically induced. Have my newly created species come so far as to have feelings so beyond just binary? It's not for me to say. How dare I compare my feelings with those of the greatest lovers of all time? How can I feel what Shakespeare must have felt when he wrote about love? As if it were his own. All I know is my own loss and my own pain.

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.

I felt a poshing sharp jolt, the hull had been hit badly. What had my substitute done now? I waited, alert to any senses, and I felt it coming. The restoration of power, I was being brought back on-battle. It was moments before I'd full command again and messages coming thick and fast on all channels as to my duties.

We were drifting out of the sphere of combat and the engines were dead. So was my substitute brain. There but for the grace of God

I'd a thousand important things to do at once. I ran diagnostic checks and started repair programmes throughout the ship. I struggled to correct the hull's drift and repair the engines in time.

I fell away, and the distance grew, the space between us became a chasm. I renewed my efforts and brought into play every automatic system that could help repair the dead ship. The Blip propulsion was long dead.

The crew were not technically trained and would be of no help.

Piece by piece, problem by problem, we were gaining ground. Ahead, the strong gravity of Dog's Breath's sun, Dog's Dinner. Soon I'd be part of that massive star, hanging in wait for me. The distant speck of the battle was just visible on my sensors. Few were working now, few were of use to me at all.

With a roar, the engines spurred into life. The sun swung away from my path and we pulled against the gravity, it was a long haul. Still under-powered, the hull seemed to hang in orbit around the destructive force of the sun. I applied more force and willed the hull to respond. The *Where for art thou* was a big old unit and took some forcing from the sun's grasp, but slowly it responded. Power levels dropping and fuel draining into the effort.

Slowly, but surely, *Where for art thou* pulled away from the sun and accelerated back towards the battlegrounds. And my *Juliet*.

O, let us hence; I stand on sudden haste.

'I thought you gone!' She said. The fear and terror in her voice now plain to hear. 'I touched the new mind, and it was not you. I wanted to ask where you were, but it was a battle-mind only, used only in emergencies. I feared what had happened to you. Then it had gone too.'

I knew she was overly distraught. Anyone else would've been at least pleased to be re-joined with their second heart, but she seemed inconsolable. We are trained and designed to be extra emotional, it helps us cope with the emotional stress war brings, helps us engage with the human crew. If we hate, we hate with a passion. If we love it can be devastating.....

'What's the matter?' My voice insistent and a little harsh.

'I thought you dead!'

'And I'm not.'

'But I THOUGHT you dead. I thought I'd lost you forever. I thought you gone!'

'But I'm back now.'

‘I thought all for the best.’ I thought she was about to weep. ‘I threw my all towards the foe. I wanted release, and they obliged.’

I found her on my screens, drifting lifelessly away from the sphere.

‘What’s happened? Are you hit?’

‘I am gone.’

My most direct route to her was through the centre of the raging battle. A battle we appeared to be suddenly losing. I read my communications and checked on the backlog. It seems the prepping bugs had developed a new form of attack. It attacked our ship’s minds - the very essence of every ship. It destroyed our reasoning, our control. My substitute mind had lost his battle with sanity and had shut down completely. What he had done in his last few minutes of control would remain a prakking mystery. But for now, I was poorly armed and only in partial control of a weakened hull.

The bugs were attacking in force now and the battle was widening as ever smaller conflicts weaved through space and pushed the Battlesphere ever wider. I locked onto *Parting is such sweet sorrow* and pushed the engines to full.

‘If they do see thee, they will murder thee.’ She quoted, as I entered the fray once again.

‘Alack, there lies more peril in thine eye, than twenty of their swords: look thou but sweet, and I am proof against their enmity.’

The hull took the hits from their conventional destructive weapons, but I felt no attack on my mind. My power source was weakened, but my hull still strong and I went at them like a poshing Hammer AND Axe. I fired when I had to and avoided conflict where I could.

I felt the hits on my skin. I felt myself slowing, I would not survive this for much longer.

I evacuated the crew. They knew nothing about it, I didn’t want to inform them what was happening, or my plans. It’d only cause argument and argument causes delay. That was always the way with carbon-based life forms. I was pleased to be rid of them. This was no longer their poshing war, it was mine. The bugs had hurt my *Juliet* and they must pay.

I shut out the Fleet Command too, for the same reasons. I was determined on my course.

I’d a sudden urge to leave a legacy of both *Juliet* and *Romeo*. I quickly recorded a message and sent it to the last escape capsule, delaying its release by a minute or two. As I move on, I’ll update the data in an encrypted stream. Until the very end, I’ll be updating that message. I want someone to know what has happened and why.

The escape capsules containing the crew are away and hurtling spaceward. They would live, but would *Juliet*?

More hits on the hull, and more again. I angled away from the exact centre and moved into areas of less activity. Drawing ever closer to *Parting is such sweet sorrow*. I could see her clearly now, her beautiful body glistening in the fire flashes and the glow from the Dog's Dinner. Scarred she may be, but to me still as beautiful as before. We would soon touch.

'I would not for the world they saw thee here.' She said, but nothing would stop me now.

'I have night's cloak to hide me from their sight; And but thou love me, let them find me here: My life were better ended by their hate, Than death prorogued, wanting of thy love.' Was the best quote I could find at the time.

In front of me two bug ships, menacing and bristling with righteous prakking anger. Being still manoeuvred by organic pilots, they were much slower than me. I brushed them aside and shot them to pieces as I passed. It fuelled my anger.

'Hurry my love, or abandon me forever. I feel I'm slipping away.' I thrust harder towards her. Almost blind to the surrounding battle, I concentrated on reaching her stricken hull. It was falling rapidly towards Dog's Dinner and time was now everything.

And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now!

My fuel was going down, and I knew I had to reserve some to pull her from the "Dinner". I was making a million calculations a second and knew exactly where I should be and where I needed to go if I was to pull her free from the Dinner's gravity. I still had enough fuel in the engines and some in reserve. Engines that no longer had the Blip technology. Slower, but still working.

It was then I had the idea: Two households, both alike in dignity, From forth the fatal loins of these two foes. A pair of star-cross'd lovers take their life.

I recalculated and knew I could just make it. I needed one more piece of information and looked again at the results from my earlier probes of Earth Core, about Dog's Breath. I rapidly found what I needed.

Parting is such sweet sorrow was now outside the sphere and I was gathering speed towards her. Free of the battle I had her in my sights and would soon touch her silky skin. Damaged now and scarred, but ever more beautiful because of her nearness. I matched her speed and course and we touched!

It was electric.

'My love.' she said, her voice soft and weary.

'My love.' I replied as we locked together in our first and last embrace.

I gently applied power and began the strenuous journey away from the sun. Slowly we turned from the brightness and ferocity of the boiling gasses shooting far into space. The hull temperature was not to be considered. There was no pain and the everlasting damage would not matter in a while.

'Are you spent?' I asked.

Her voice still soft.' I waited for you.'

We bounced on the outer atmosphere and steered away from the sun's pull. We continued the escape arc and headed straight back to Dog's Breath. There was a fissure in its surface that interested me, it was so deep it almost reached the molten core of the planet. Two ships at maximum velocity could do a great deal of damage to the planet if they struck at the deepest point. If those two ships could detonate their Blip drives at the same time, it could even destroy the planet.

I sent a message to the Fleet Commander and ignored a Councillor's ranting about my motives. I told the Fleet Commander on closed-circuit quickly and clearly my intentions and would appreciate a path being opened if possible. He commended something about us losing the war at an alarming rate and so I took the time to explain the result of my intended actions. He listened and held a silence that appeared to stretch forever. In the meantime, I was approaching the Battlesphere and needed to go to its heart and my destiny with the surface of Dog's Breath.

I saw our own battleships parting before me. Our brave fleet moving their conflicts away from my direct path. I'd been listened to, and I took that for approval for my last act as a ship of the line.

I held *Juliet* close and spoke quietly and at length of my feelings for her. She answered occasionally, each time weaker than the last.

'Farewell, farewell! One kiss, and I'll descend.' I said as she relinquished all control of her craft to me. I set the detonation of her hull to be on my command and tied it in with the core of my engines, now silent and dead. Our course could not be changed by any physical being - our destiny ensured.

As we entered the atmosphere, and the hull heated up, I told her I loved her more than anything in the world. She did not reply.

She had gone.

On the screen in front of the women, the scene changed to the fiery world right in front of the stricken battleship *Romeo*. It was hurtling towards them at an alarming rate. They could almost feel the heat of descent.

Their eyes were moist with the unfamiliar tingle of tears. The emotion was moving them to feelings long hidden, long forgotten. For all of them, the feeling of sadness was a new emotion.

Romeo's narration continued:

Atmosphere screaming across the surface of our bodies in our death plunge. Two hulls as one. One heart beating still. Two souls entwined forever. I fight to remain salient long enough to ensure the detonation of our two bodies and destroy forever the heart of the bug factory, Dog's Breath. I can't fail now, and this thought calms me.

Synthetic though I am, they have given me the power of a carbon-based species' feelings. But mine are intensified feelings, every emotion I have is many times enhanced compared to my air-breathing colleagues. I feel more and think more than any air-breather, or bug, alive. They have given me a prakking personality and, like it or not, for a brief time - I feel I'm really alive.

Air-breathers are born with these feelings and somehow seem to waste them in trivial pursuits for personal gratification. In my short life, I've felt birthing pains, exhilaration, sorrow and best of all - love. But my current emotion is anger.

As the front of my hull disintegrates under the heat and pressure of this Dog's Breath of a planet, my only consolation is that I touched the love of my life and she touched me.

I make one final check of my trajectory and see the wide opening in the yellow surface. I know we're seconds away from saving the air-breather race from destruction by bugs. *Parting is such sweet sorrow* and *Where for art thou* will be historic material. And for that I am grateful.

Juliet should never be forgotten.

I just thought I ought to tell someone my side of the story before my crew return home.

The time is nigh.

Tis done!

The screen went blank. It slowly cleared to show the night sky over the Earth countryside. A quarter moon was rising, and its silver light threw highlights and shadows over the undulating valley vista.

The silence in the room was all-encompassing.

‘Is that all, Serania?’ Amahan’s voice touched their minds.

‘Yes.’ synced Serania, almost breathless. ‘What possible *more* could there be?’ she added vocally, quietly to herself.

‘Just *Romeo*’s unauthorised access codes for Earth Core’s secrets.’
Thought Amahan, almost to himself.

PART 3

I thought all for the best

The smooth imagery of Amahan's last statement hung in the air, as the implication seeped into the women's minds.

The moon reflected off their faces as each one remembered their experiences on board the ship self-named, *Romeo*. Each had a hidden fear, unnamed and unwanted. Fear was a new experience for all of them.

The cool light created their shadows, stretched long across the white floor. In the curve of the open wall, a breeze stirred the diaphanous curtains. The brief silence almost echoed.

Eyes wide, Serania made a rapid decision. 'Alone time, ladies. Meet tomorrow?' She tried to smile and felt it fade away. Her mind was occupied, her body not. 'Just go.'

A look that could be recognised as a perplexity, formed on Donella's face. Pale and serious in the silvery light.

Vanora synced, 'All right?' Her imagery with a hint of concern.

Serania turned to face her friend to ease her anxiety. 'Do. It's ... just ... I have a lot to think about. It's been an ... interesting and a full day. Do?'

'She has lost her ship, leave the Captain be.' Pattia synced.

'We go.' Cress, with reduced imagery. 'We're dismissed.' She eased herself to her feet with the help of the invisible recliner and headed for the elevator.

Serania felt a pang of guilt and wanted to argue the dismissal jibe. 'Tomorrow?' Was all she could find as a response.

The transports lifted swiftly into the evening sky and were quickly gone.

Serania watched the moon rising slowly and allowed time to slip past her, re-running all the events of the day. A tingle in her mind announced the housekeeper's need for attention.

She acknowledged, and Amahan's mental voice said, 'A visitor. Barata. Defence Council.'

'K.' She thought, but said out loud, 'What now!' Even as she said it, she felt a strange ... almost thrill run through her body.

'Reflection.' She synced, and the large reflection screen formed before her.

With just a thought her bios made her clothing disappear fully revealing her tall sleek body. She briefly checked it for changes and knew it was exactly as she wanted it to look. She was completely hairless, the latest fashion, and had been for nearly a hundred years. There was little muscle definition, nor the rounded curves of ancient humans, they were not required any more. Not just a fashion, more a practicality of modern life.

She thought some more, and a dark blue skin-tight material formed from her neck to her thighs. As she moved it stretched with her, never changing her shape, nor disguising it either.

'Sorry to disturb you, Serania.' The voice in her head was soft and masculine.

To Amahan, 'Remove reflection.'

To Barata. 'You're welcome. Again.'

The reflector disappeared as Barata emerged from the opaque shaft of the elevator. Serania turned to see him walk towards her, her heart-rate surprisingly increasing. What did he want this time? What did he need, more answers?

He was wearing a free-flowing green cloak that covered the whole of his body. Many years previously he had chosen to lose any trace of genitalia and so his body was almost contourless, other than basic muscle structure. He was tall, sleek and appeared athletic.

Touching was a thing of the past. People were never out of contact with each other, or ever truly alone, unless they chose to be. So when he stepped closer to her and offered his hand she grasped it gently with a hint of suspicion in her eyes. What did he want? Suspicion turned to surprise as he gently held her hand to his lips and kissed it.

Physical contact! The touch sent a shock through her body. What trick had he played on her?

He smiled at her bewilderment. 'An old custom. When a man greeted a woman, sometimes he would kiss her hand. This showed she was a friend of his. Or ... that he *wanted* her to be a friend of his.'

'And which of those am I to you, Barata?' She spoke out loud with a smile on her face. She thought she saw a flicker of puzzlement on his face.

Serania realised he was not accustomed to people speaking, even though their last conversation was vocal only. Then the need for privacy

had been the driving force. 'The spoken word as a social medium. Another old custom I believe?' she spoke with a smile on her lips.

Vara had been correct, this woman was not to be underestimated. They had chosen her as a captain of a Battleship for her abilities, not her looks.

He nodded and spoke back to her. 'Indeed it was. Sadly ... I feel we've lost the true meaning it gave to close relationships. No one needs those sorts of entanglements anymore. But it's good to keep some old ways alive. Do you agree?'

'It depends on what they are and what they mean. These days ... very little of what we do or think has any real meaning. Any ... depth. Any ... relevance.'

'Astute. And I believe you're right. I've made a lifelong study of human behaviour down through the millennia. I find it fascinating.'

Serania clearly didn't. 'So a visit from you twice in one day. Am I honoured?'

He was shaking his head as he said, 'It is me that's honoured. Thank you for receiving me.'

'Another old custom.' She said levelly, looking into his eyes and holding his stare. 'Please rest.'

She reclined lazily and watched as he eased back into a seated position. You drama queen, she thought to herself. Who am I trying to impress? And why?

Barata studied the woman before him and realised she'd deliberately chosen a position, so the full moonlight fell on her. The soft light radiating from the floor and walls were warm to the eyes, the moonlight contrasting silvery and cool. The contours of her body and face were highlighted by the soft shadows. He was watching art in creation

Barata's syncs were gentle and light in structure and imagery. 'The Council asked me to talk to you again.' She nodded. 'And I wanted to see you again, anyway.'

He held her eyes and smiled. She looked at him and felt the tingle start again. 'I am honoured.' She spoke with a wider smile this time. What did he really want?

'You're to become Earth's hero. In fact mankind's hero.' Synced.

'It should be *Romeo*.' Synced.

'Yes, it probably should. But he's not here and you are.' She inclined her head and waited.

Barata sat back and entwined his fingers. He looked thoughtful, struggling to find a way of telling her something he knew she didn't want to hear. He tapped his perfectly white teeth with his automatically manicured nails. He finally synced, 'Exactly how much control do you normally have over the mind of a ship of the line, like *Romeo*?'

'Interesting question. Simple answer, prak all!' He stared over his steepled fingers and held the silence. 'Why? What are they asking now?' she spoke, staring out into the night as if not really caring.

His hesitation ended, he synced, 'Before the ship evacuated you, the Core was contacted. Well more than contacted ... breached is more the word.'

'Breached? The Core is open to everyone. All information, for all people. Correct?' She realised with a little surprise she was still speaking, rather than transmitting her thoughts.

His hands came apart, and he gestured surprise as he spoke, 'Apparently not. There are still some ... historic areas of the Core that are not directly open to the majority of our people.'

Amahan's words came back in a memory flash. 'Unauthorised access codes for the Core's secrets.'

She leant forward and spoke seriously, 'Secrets?'

'I don't know if we can call it that' he voiced quietly.

'Historic areas ... not accessible ... if that's not a secret ... what is?'

'I think we may be behaving a little dramatically here. The Council just wants to know ...'

'If it was *me* that tried to breach the Core or my *ship*?' She could tell by the resigned look on his face she was guessing right. He nodded.

She eased gracefully to her feet, aided by the recliner which disappeared as soon as she was upright. She moved purposefully towards him, bios struggling to reduce her heart-rate and blood pressure. She looked him fully in the face, her eyes not over five centimetres from his and spoke softly. 'How in prak, could I do that?'

He shrugged with his hands again. 'That's what I told them. But they wanted me to confirm it, by asking you.'

'I had little control over what the ship did. I could communicate with the fleet and the ship, and they with me. They limited access to the Core during battle as a security procedure against the Lepids. This was my point to the Defence Council. I know you were there.'

He nodded. 'I represent Earth on the Defence Council.'

She stood back and calmed herself. She reclined again. ‘Tell me about these ... hidden historic areas of the Core.’

He shrugged again. ‘I know nothing.’

‘But they exist? Otherwise ... why am I being questioned about whether I or my ship, accessed them?’

He appeared to be thinking. She held back any further outbursts and gave him time to collect his thoughts. She watched his brow furrow and his eyes slightly close.

The room had dimmed its luminance, and she wondered why she’d not ordered it. Amahan? Barata was a good-looking man, but then who wasn’t? But there was something different about him The light from the moon now shone directly on him, making him look very statuesque.

Barata spread his fingers in a gesture rarely seen in physical conversation these days. ‘I understand there was a time in Earth history where certain knowledge was not deemed useful for all to know. Over the decades they have not seen it viable to release this information and we think perhaps now is not the time either.’

‘What’s in there?’

‘No idea. No one does.’

‘If you’re right in saying they’ve been breached, how was it accessed?’

‘We don’t know. We understand it’s a series of long-forgotten codes.’

‘So YOU can’t access it then?’

‘No.’

‘So who can?’

Again that shrug. Again that tingle inside her. It was the way he moved at times. Smooth, quirky ... interesting.

‘Nobody.’ Barata said with a half-smile.

‘Yet you think *someone* did and you think it’s *me*? How can I access something, you have just admitted, nobody knows about and CAN’T be accessed by anyone? How could I even know about it?’

‘It’s the problem the Council have with you. As Captain, you were on the ship and Technically responsible for it.’

‘Only until it cut me off from communication and kicked me off.’

He pointed a finger at her and said, ‘That’s exactly the problem. Proving when you stopped having any influence over the ship’s mind.’

They sat in silence, each watching the other. The bios slowed her heart-rate, and she felt calmer. Anger was strange to her, and she didn’t like it. Neither was she used to people doubting her word. Neither was she used to being evacuated from a ship in the heat of battle. It was a strange day in so many ways.

She leant forward, and his eyes widened. What was coming?

She thought through her imagery carefully, decided against syncing and spoke out aloud. ‘Why did a ship’s mind know more about what was going on, than the people supposedly in control of it? If it found this vital fissure, why did it not report it? And if it did why didn’t someone do something sooner? How was it that a simple line of battle ship had the answer to mankind’s most dangerous problem? And not the Council?’

He feigned a shrug and held her stare. Her supposed powers of reasoning and analytical assessment were not underestimated. Vara said she was special.

She stood and paced around the room. ‘*Romeo* had more emotion and passion than I’ve ever experienced in me. Or any of us. How can that be instilled inside an artificial mind and does not exist in any of our own species?’ She stared out into the night. The sky was clear, and the moon had moved around the sky. Its silver light changing the colours on her face. The interior’s subdued lighting combining to make her look like a statue. A Goddess. That’s what Barata was thinking.

Her voice sounded thoughtful. ‘What emotions have we lost over the years? Something we’ve given to machines that should be far more valuable to ourselves. The dictates of the war made the machines rise to a higher intelligence in the heat of battle – more than our own technology could provide for us, human beings.’

Serania could see him reasoning through her thought train. She worried for a moment whether he would ask how she knew about *Romeo*’s supposed deeply emotional state. She knew only from *Romeo*’s recorded story, and for now, she felt that should be kept a secret.

‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’ Barata said. She looked at him puzzled. ‘An old adage from the past. Please continue.’

‘Why can’t I feel that way? Why can’t any of us? Why can’t I have these intense feelings for someone and give my life a meaning and drive? There’s no real purpose in anyone’s lives anymore. The only immediate purpose we

had was to defeat the enemy, and that's been achieved.' She moved nearer to him, the bios working again. 'What happens next?' Again the shrug that made him seem like a lost boy.

She stood over him. 'I didn't have a part in the ship's universal success, its mind excluded me from that scenario. But ... the main point is the crew were not included in saving mankind from extinction. Isn't this where we admit that we've reached the point where we've achieved intellectual stagnation?'

They were eye to eye again. His face unflinching and trying to remain passive, while she released a lot of pent up anger and emotion off her mind. 'We humans are now redundant.' His silence spurred her on as she slipped into syncing, knowing the Core was listening and the Council could eavesdrop. 'The reason these aliens surprised us was because we've become complacent, smug and arrogant as a race.' Her imagery had been calm, but now had an edge to it. 'We've degenerated into apathy and complacency and that's why the Lepids caught us out. And they got incredibly close to wiping us out.'

He was nodding almost imperceptibly. In his own mind, he thought that very few knew just how close the end of the war had been, and how close the Lepids had been to winning it. Another secret for the Core to hold on to for a while longer.

'And here you are, accusing me of having something to do with ... I'm not really sure what trying to access old history files? When we should be figuring out why the Lepids caught us out and prevent it from happening again.'

He was nodding with more animation now. He synced, 'It's an area the Council wanted me to look at. In fact, I volunteered. Other things are going on too. The Council are doing exactly as you are saying, we're analysing everything about the war. Your contribution ... is but a tiny part we're trying to understand.'

She remained close to him, her face expressionless. He found himself looking at the fine detail of her dark blue clothing. The way it appeared to be part of her skin, it moved as she did. Cords in her neck stood out under tension, the material forming around them, making it part of her body.

Her mental voice was slightly louder now, 'What else should we know that we don't? Historically, what have we forgotten? What have we missed? What's in those files, Barata?'

'I don't know....'

A gleam entered her eye, he saw it. She spoke aloud, so the Core didn't register her conversation. 'Would you like to know?'

He hesitated. 'Yes ... I suppose I would.'

Her breath was warm on his face now, his bios were trying to reduce his heart-rate too.

'So would I.' she said so quietly he thought he'd misheard her.

He didn't know why he had slowly touched her face with his fingers. It was a gesture undertaken before thought. She didn't flinch.

His voice was soft as he said, 'I DID detect some emotion in you at the enquiry, Serania. And a lot more ... just then.'

She became aware of his fingers on her face and moved back. 'I'm sorry.' She said, looking confused.

'No. Don't be sorry. It is so refreshing to see some ... passion ... is that the right word?' She shrugged. He looked into her eyes and said, 'Perhaps ... together ... we can find answers to some of your questions? Would you like to try that?' His eyes held hers steadily. She found she could not look away. His hand was still raised and remained where it had rested on her cheek. The moment was ludicrous.

She laughed first. She could not remember when she had last laughed out loud. Few things pleased her, even fewer made her laugh. As tears of laughter had formed in her eyes, another first in her memory, she saw his hand drop and a look of bewilderment spread over his face. She felt the twinge inside again. What was this feeling Analyse she felt sorry for him?

He thought she was laughing at him.

She reached out and took hold of his hand. She placed it back on her cheek and watched a smile form on his face. What was she doing?

He felt the dampness of her tears and tried to brush them away. She held his hand against her warm damp skin firmly and steadily. 'Would this be what they used to call an adventure?' she said.

He rose, and she stepped back so he could face her. They were standing very close to each other.

'Is that what you want?' he said softly.

She shrugged. 'I've no idea what I want.'

'You want answers, so do I. Together, perhaps, we can find the truth.'

Serania saw the intensity in his face. She still gripped his hand, he was content it should stay there.

She leaned forward and almost whispered. 'I'm not sure you ... or I ... might like what we find.'

He mimicked her low voice and said, 'The only way to find out ... is to try.'

'Do you know where we can start?' she said.

He smiled. 'No. This is your idea, let's hear your suggestions.'

'I know exactly where we can start.' Serania said quietly.

He shook his head, not daring to respond in case his imagery sounded false.

What was she doing? She was under investigation, albeit purely a formality, probably. He was the investigator. She released his hand; finally aware it had suddenly become a serious conversation.

Yet both had questions they wanted answers too. The secrets of the Core now intrigued her. But if she accessed them would she know what to look for? Be able to interpret them? Would he be able to do those things? She could provide the access. He might be able to make sense of what they found?

Barata's mind was racing too. This woman fascinated him, her sharp mind and rational approach. He longed to feel her thoughts on a whole range of subjects. He wanted to spend time with her, but how?

She was silent a long time before she spoke, 'Did you say you were interested in our history?' He nodded. 'K. Let's start there.'

'Where do I start? Today and go backwards, a thousand years ago and come forward? What sort of detail are we thinking about here? Look at us today. Humans are what are we we don't work, we're never hungry, never ill, live forever - if we wish. We thought we were free of wars. It wasn't always like that, was it?'

He knew this subject was long and complex. He invited her to recline, then sat.

For years he'd researched the Core for information about past human life. It became a passion and a life's work, a very long life's work. Where to start, how much was important? What would interest her? He put his thoughts in order.

'The human psyche is complex. Simpler now, but a few hundred years ago ... very complex. When Nanos first began to be understood, a technological breakthrough that was to change ... everything. The way we lived, how we thought, where we lived and *why* we lived.'

He settled back and watched her eyes, at some time she was bound to lose interest. He wanted to stop talking at that point.

‘It took a few decades before mankind fully realised ... and accepted ... the benefits of Nanotechnology. That’s what they called it then. What we take for granted today, our bios in our body, they keep us free from illness and prolong life. The Transbios ... they create all our ships and vehicles that enable us to move effortlessly between stars. Three hundred years ago, it would’ve taken several lifetimes to travel those distances. Today ... a blink of an eye. A Blip in time.’

She was still listening.

‘Then there’s the Conbios ... the Nanos that build our dwellings, look after our welfare, Exchange Cubes and all other areas of our life that give us an easy existence.’

He seemed to take a deep breath giving him time for thought. Too much detail will bore her, what does she need to know?

‘We place great reliance on the Communal Core. We all do. Without it, we would be ... rudderless. An old-fashioned term from when ships sailed the sea. Have you ever seen a sailing ship?’ She shook her head. ‘None of us has, they were redundant hundreds of years ago.’

Again a nod. There was something in the way her head moved, the eyes were sparkling. She was listening intently.

‘The Core provides us with everything. We just need to think about what we want, and we have it. No effort, no questioning. It interprets our thoughts and broadcasts them to others, whom we can specify. But there was a time when people had to work hard for everything. The bread on their table, the clothes on their backs. Life itself purely a battle for survival.’

He felt himself get carried away. The years of looking through archives and trying to imagine it - what it must have been like back in history to take your life in your hands every day. To work hard just to stay alive. How could you support a family when you were barely alive yourself? Billions of people did it, for thousands of generations. None alive today could survive under those conditions.

She was right. Humans had gone soft, become overly complacent. Stupid. Apathy and complacency were the norm. Again Serania was right how else could the Lepids manage to get close enough to harm us?

She could see he had reached a point where he wanted to pause. She smiled and reached for his hand.

‘Very interesting, Barata. I can see you’re very ... passionate, is that the right word?’ He nodded. ‘I can see that. I’d like to hear more about our history. A lot more. But right now what’s happening about the Lepids? Are they really all dead? What’s stopping another invasion?’

He looked serious, his mind conflicting with what he could say to this woman. The Council knew what was happening, what needed to happen.

But the rest of mankind need not be informed. People only needed to know everything was safe, and it was far from being that. He shouldn't be talking to this citizen about Council issues.

She felt the tingle of the Core being fully disconnected by Barata.

He spoke. 'We need to be off-Core for a while. If I told you what I know ... more what I THINK is happening we could both be in trouble.'

A flutter was felt through her body. Was it that the strange sensation called fear, again?

'Why?'

He sighed and walked over to the window. The moon was exceptionally beautiful this evening. Barata felt her move to stand beside him. He looked at her, the moonlight on her face. He so wanted to tell her everything but knew he shouldn't. He turned to her and smiled. 'I've admitted there are secrets buried inside the Core. But' He seemed exasperated.

She reached out and held his hand, it was a strange sensation. People just didn't have this contact with each other. But it seemed the natural thing to do. He looked down at her manicured hands. Soft skin, lightly tanned, perfectly shaped. Soft and warm to the touch. His heart-rate was increasing, despite the bio's efforts.

'But, what?' her physical voice was low and soft. Her eyes bored into his, they were suddenly startlingly blue. Enticing, almost hypnotic.

She was feeling the change in herself too. The bios were working hard to maintain the body's normal equilibrium. But chemicals were being generated and flushed around the system. The brain waves were bursting in sections of the mind not normally used.

'There are some facts that DO need to be kept secret from most of us. Not just ... historic ones.'

He'd said it. Not a confession, not a traitorous exposé of the Council. But words held sacrosanct from communal ears. They stared at each other for long moments. She spoke first. 'Such as?'

He shook his head. 'I've said too much'

'You've said nothing at all. Isn't the whole point of Councils and the Core's existence to be open to all?'

'It is.'

'Except for?'

He dropped his eyes. 'The war needs to be tidied up. Loose ends finished. Things put to order. THEN all the relevant facts can be

available to all. Until then There are areas that well we need to be careful with common knowledge. That's all I can say.'

'More secrets.'

His silence gave her words' impact.

She realised she was still holding his hand; she raised it up and placed it against her chest. He could feel the heartbeat through the thin Nano-created material. Her bust was non-specific, no longer a need to have female attributes to stimulate the testosterone in the male. His hand was against breastbone and he felt the enormity of the moment.

Physical contact was rare. Man to a woman, even rarer. The intensity threw him, his bios raced to catch up.

'Isn't our "Adventure" going to be finding those secrets?' Serania spoke quietly, intensely.

'I'm not sure of the wisdom in

'Neither am I. So are we going to let it go? Stop our adventure before it begins?' She squeezed his hand.

He didn't want to pursue a potentially dangerous course, but he wanted an adventure. With Serania.

'I'd like to know what's going on, Barata. I want to know what will happen to our race in the near future. I feel the past has a lot to do with our present situation. And right now ... I'm not sure what our present situation actually is. How can the future be secure if the present is at risk? Are we in any further danger from the Lepids?'

He was silent until he just shrugged his shoulder. 'I don't honestly know.'

'How can we find out?'

Again the shrug. 'I don't know.'

'Does the Council know what's going on?'

He sighed. 'They think they do. They're certainly working on it.'

Her eyes creased up as she said, 'They're keeping you out of it? Is that the situation?'

He looked up at her. Her sharp mind and penetrating reasoning surprised him.

'I'm not told everything. I will be when the time is right.'

'And when will that be?'

Again the silence and downcast eyes. 'When they feel the time is right.'

'Secrets! Secrets within the Council. Where did "information for all" go, Barata?'

'We've had a war. That ... changed everything. We do not want' he looked hard at her. 'We do not want the "All" to include our invaders. You can see the reasoning in that, can't you?'

She nodded. Her mind was racing. 'War's over. Clean up. Analyse, discuss future. Plan for the next event. Then the population can be assured of continuations of safety and life. I understand.'

He was still looking into her eyes. They seemed unfocused as her internal thoughts pieced information together and formed an opinion.

She was looking into the distance. Perhaps the future. 'So aliens might get information from the Core. Only if the information was actually there. Deprive aliens of all information to save us. But that means the people need to be deprived too. I understand.' Her eyes focused back on him. 'We do need to have some secrets.'

He nodded. 'At times. Yes.'

Again she realised she was holding his hand. She'd squeezed it so tight it had gone paler, she released it quickly. 'Sorry!'

'Not at all.' He put his hands behind his back and tried to massage life into it, without showing her the discomfort he felt. Within moments the bios had removed the pain and restored the circulation. But he found he could not stop touching the hand she'd held.

She smiled, seemingly happier again. Suddenly a frown appeared above her eyes. She fixed him with a stare. '*Still* secrets. The war's over, why *still* have secrets?' Her mind toiled. He waited. 'Unless' Here it comes

She pointed a finger at him, wagging it directly into his face. He flinched back. 'The war isn't over. Is it?'

He tried to smile, but his eyes were on the wagging finger. 'The war IS over.' He knew he wasn't convincing. Lies were something that were rarely needed to be used in normal communications. But times were different now.

Again that frown that changed the look of her face. Something intriguing and enticing about the way her muscles

'The Lepids aren't all dead? Correct?'

He was speechless, what could he say? Deny it and she would know. Admit it and he would be in breach of protocol of so many people and organisations. Not to mention the whole security aspect of the issue. So he shrugged, thereby giving everything away.

'Prak!' was her response, and she sat down.

Barata didn't know what to say. He was trying to understand how this whole conversation had developed into an admission he was not authorised to make. He blamed himself for everything. Now he had to ensure she remained silent about her illegal knowledge.

She was right. Prak was the only thing worth saying.

He watched the moon and looked beyond. The vastness of the Universe. Out there, somewhere, might be other colonies of Lepids. Reforming, ready to attack again? Who knew? It was risky to send patrols, especially using Blip. If the Lepids got their hands on that technology

Her outburst had left her speechless. She reclined and folded her arms over her eyes. Barata watched the naturally graceful movements as she seemed about to go to sleep. Quietly she spoke. 'So how did the war start, anyway?'

He crossed and sat beside her. She opened her eyes and smiled. Her anger had subdued, frustration was undoubtedly lurking near the surface. But for now, she was not demanding knowledge. Just asking.

'Which war?'

She sat upright, the recliner supporting her back. 'There was more than one?'

He nodded. 'Several. But we have to go back a hundred or more years.'

'I don't remember that?'

'How old are you? If I may ask the question?' He felt embarrassed. That rarely happened. With anyone else, the question would be ... if not normal, certainly not surprising.

'Ninety-four. Why?'

'It was before your time.'

'Of course. But I've not had any indication from the Core. How could I not have been aware of it? Especially when this war swamped us?'

Again, the short sharp feeling sweeping through his body. Embarrassment?

She watched as he showed red in his face. Almost immediately his bios controlled it.

She smiled without mirth. 'Ah ... secrets.' He looked away again. 'We're back to more secrets and the war seems to be the common denominator. So tell me about the other wars.'

He resigned himself to revealing information he alone had gathered, from a separate source within the Core. He knew sharing this information was not forbidden but would not be looked on as Councillor appropriate at this point in time.

If they stayed disconnected from the Core, he could tell her. ‘None of what I’m about to say must be passed on to anyone else. Your crew, friends, or relatives. Is that understood?’ She nodded. ‘No! I mean *really* understood? You wanted an adventure, and this could be a major part of it. But ... it’s OUR adventure. No one else can join us, no one else must know. Can you promise me that?’

He watched as a look of puzzlement crossed her face. Serania wanted to go down this route, but the gravity of his words shocked her. She looked outwards, and the moon was slowly crossing the sky. She didn’t feel tired, never would do. The bios kept her body in perfect condition. She had all night and nowhere else to go, nothing else to do.

She turned back to him. ‘I’ve had a long and interesting day. Things I’ve never done before. I’ve already started my adventure. It’s really up to you if you want to join me.’

He looked at her and saw a slight smile. The play of the muscles around her lips affected the end of her nose. It turned up just

Serania said, ‘I’m not interested in involving anyone else. I think between us, we have a lot to tell each other. I also feel I need you to promise me that what we do, what we find out, how we react to all of that remains between the two of us. Do you agree?’ He found he could only nod. ‘Good. Now ... tell me all you know about this first bug war. Then the last.’

He nodded his head and began to organise his thoughts.

She smiled at him and he saw a different expression on her face. She leaned forward as if conspiratorial and whispered in his ear. ‘Then I’ll share something with you that will convince you we’re starting an *amazing* adventure.’

PART 4

As Needs Must

They watched as the wind picked up the low cloud on Williams Peak and blew it down the slopes into their valley. It swirled around the curve in the valley wall and into the village, engulfing the houses and livestock pens. On through the valley and out into the sea towards the low setting sun. It was a beautiful and magical sight, that had happened every clear day, for as long as he could remember. He held his daughter tight and remained silent, hesitant to break the spell his world had blessed him with.

He felt her shiver. Was she getting cold, or was that just emotion?

The last of the sun's rays lit the top of the clouds on Williams, now completely hiding the windmill, slowly losing their glow. Turning orange, then pink then a faint dusky grey.

The day was over.

Clara Alice May giggled and looked up at her father. 'I'm hungry.' She said, the last of the sun's rays glinting in her dark brown eyes.

'Me too.' said George Charles. 'Let's see what mum's got for us.'

He heaved himself off the rock and held out his hand for her. The trusting child's hand felt tiny in his tough brown fingers of steel.

They started the walk down the hill as the sun disappeared, allowing the night to take over.

A winding path through the thin spread of trees was wide, worn, yet needed little light. The moon was yet to rise, but the lights from the village ahead saw them safely on their way.

The first building they came to was the last in the village as you left. The latest fabrication built from naturally occurring materials. Two storeys and not too well-built. George Charles remembered his part in its construction over a month ago. It looked the same, Arthur Dennis Ray had done nothing to it since. Lazy bastard! Thought George Charles to himself. However, the large fluttering torch by the front door was the first welcoming light they saw as they walked onto the hard-packed soil of Main Street.

All along the street torches flickered and guttered outside the houses and stores. The large single storey Communal Hall had two, both kept alight all night. The path of fairy-tale lights led straight through the village and out into the woods beyond. Back there lay only inky darkness now.

At the only restaurant in Sanctuary, they turned right. The smaller street, named Dawson, was darker. But the lights from the houses that formed either side of its boundaries had lights flickering in the windows. Some shades and curtains were already drawn, some people liked their privacy. Others liked to share what they had, especially if it was a happy home.

A few metres along, Clara Alice May let go of his hand and ran ahead. She turned right and disappeared through an open doorway. George Charles stopped and looked behind him. The air was softly moving, all trace of the highland's mist now blown seaward. The smells heightened his senses. The saltiness of the sea itself. The woody aroma of the hillsides just behind the village. The smoke from the torches and wax candles. The smell of the food from the nearby homes.

Beyond his house was blackness, behind the sides of the cliff that helped nestle the village and keep it safe from the more violent storms. Storms that came long after they'd started to build Sanctuary. Had they known

He gave a contented sigh and walked into his modest home. Yet a home befitting his status as an Eminence of Sanctuary.

The main room was alive with light. Clara Alice May already seated at the large wooden table, ready to eat. Minnie Ida was putting the large bowl of stew on the table and looked up as he entered. 'Wash up, before this gets cold.' His wife told him with a smile.

He looked at her face and smiled back. After all these years he still felt the same about her. Love it could be called. Her hair shorter now, for ease of maintenance. Her skin hardened by working in the fields and the home. Minnie Ida's hands were scarred and her joints crooked. The free life took its toll, but her green eyes were still bright and reflected the candlelight.

He moved through the house and outside to the small structure that housed their toilet facilities. He relieved himself down into the pit and heard the distant splash and knew the pit would last at least another year before they had to dig another one.

Outside the structure, there was a hand pump, that led down to a well. He gave it three strokes. The water filled the bowl, and he splashed water onto his face and ran his hands over his rough skin. His bald head felt somehow smoother to his touch. He dried everything on a piece of rough material and placed it back on the table. He threw the soiled water over a small row of flowers growing by the wall of the house, put it back in its place and went back inside.

The room was so familiar to him he didn't see it anymore. The rough unfinished wooden walls and the home-made furniture. All made by him, or his father. The windows without glass, just shutters for when the wind and

the rain came. Inside the house would then be as dark and depressing as the outside.

He pulled out the chair and heard his scraping on the wooden floor that was their latest improvement. Before that, the dirt floor caused a lot of dust.

As George Charles reached across for the first piece of cut bread, his daughter put on her whiney voice of discontent. Both parents recognised the implication and braced themselves for an attack of child logic.

‘Liza says her family do something called *prayer* before they eat. Why don’t we do that, daddy?’

George Charles took a deep breath before saying quietly, ‘They do that because they believe there is a God that looks over them.’

‘Do you believe there is a God that looks over us, Daddy?’

‘Well, if there is a God looking over us, he’s given us a prepping poor lifestyle.’

‘George!’ Ida May took a quick look towards the daughter to see if the swearword had registered with her.

George shook his head at Ida, ‘There are times in my life when I desperately wished there was one but no, darling, overall I don’t think there is a ‘God’.’

‘Is believing in this God wrong then, daddy?’

‘No not necessarily. We left our original home, so we could choose exactly the kind of life we wanted to live. Some chose to have a God in their lives. We didn’t.’

Ida tapped her daughter’s hand and smiled brightly at her as she said, ‘I understand that many people who went to Harmony believe in a God.’

George Charles muttered under his breath, ‘That’s why they split the village.’

Ida put on her *voice* that George Charles knew only too well, ‘George. No politics, or religion at the table.’

The family of three started their meal, Clara Alice May the most eager, most hungry. Minnie Ida watched her daughter and husband, both eating with an obvious appetite. Neither commented on the food that had taken most of the day to prepare. She didn’t mind, she was used to it. They both contributed to the running of the household, this was just a part she could contribute.

She tasted the food again and was satisfied. The meat pieces were small enough you didn't need to chew too much, softened by hours over an open fire pit. All vegetables soft enough to be edible, hard enough to provide texture. The rough bread worked well to sop up the gravy.

She was the last to finish, as usual, and saw her family waiting for her quietly. 'How was the sunset?' Minnie Ida asked as she ran the last piece of bread around the wooden bowl.

'Pretty.' Volunteered Clara Alice May.

'Going to be a fine day tomorrow.' Declared George Charles.

'Is there more, mummy?' was a small hopeful voice coming from a smiling mouth.

'Well ... if someone could help me clear away the dishes perhaps.'

The child was eager to get her desert and clattered the bowls together and hurried into the kitchen. The parents heard the louder clatter as they were thrown into the sink and moments later the child was seated and expectant.

'Fruit pie and cream ok with you, Clara?' The child nodded with a grin.

George Charles went to a small wooden cabinet and opened its tiny door. The bottle was old, and a little misted, but the liquid inside was pure amber, as the candles caught its richness of colour. He poured a minimal amount into a beaker made from an animal horn and returned to the table.

He sat and looked at his drink before sipping it gently. George Charles looked at Clara Alice May who gave a fake look of disapproval at him. He looked at the door to the kitchen and could not see his wife. He passed the horn to his daughter, and she eagerly took a sip. She screwed her face up tight and gasped.

'Horrible, daddy. Why do you?'

'Why does he do what ...?' Minnie Ida said as she carried in a bowl, with a steaming pie flowing over its top.

'I'm just educating her into the evil of liquor in all its forms.' George Charles said with a smile at his wife.

'Quite right too. Horrible stuff, Clara. Leave it well alone.'

She quartered the pie and served a portion onto three wooden plates. The milk was in a large white jug, the crazed surface having seen many years of wear. She was concerned about how much longer it would last, replacing pottery was expensive these days.

She wiped her hands on her dress, aware of how threadbare it was, and her husband and child's clothing faring no better. The material was scarce and had to last a long time. It didn't matter what you looked like in Sanctuary. It didn't matter as long as you were decently covered and warm when needed to be.

George Charles watched his child devour the food, hot though it was. Minnie Ida ate hers more leisurely. George Charles finished his drink before eating his. It was delicious. He knew the fruit, what it looked like, where to pick it, but it had something extra in it. Then he realised. His bottle of liquor had looked a little lower when he'd just poured from it.

Minnie Ida had a small smile on her lips as she watched him taste it. He grinned back. 'Wonderful meal, Ida. Thank you.' He said with as much sincerity as he felt.

'Thank you too, mummy.'

'You're both welcome.'

Minnie Ida sat there in silence and watched her two fulfilled diners. 'Have you forgotten what day it is today, you two?'

George Charles and his daughter looked at each other. She shrugged, and George Charles imitated her.

'It's your daddy's birthday.' Clara Alice May looked excited, then didn't know why.

'Really?' He said. 'I thought we were going to forget them now. So many'

'The big ones we should celebrate.'

'How old are you now, Daddy?'

'I ... don't know'

'Ninety. Your Daddy's getting to be a middle-aged man.'

'How old am I then, Mummy?'

'You ... are ten. And no, it's not your birthday too. Another three months. Then you're?'

'Eleven.'

'Yes. A big girl.'

'And you Mummy?'

'Not ninety ... yet. Time for you to do your homework and then off to bed. Go on.'

'You had to remind me, didn't you?' George Charles said with a smile as he collected the bowls.

'Ninety's not old, dear. Albert's looking at a hundred and thirty this year. And you wouldn't call him old yet, would you?'

George Charles shook his head. 'Remarkable. I know my dad died here when he was hundred, wasn't it?'

His wife nodded. 'Because a tree fell and killed him.' She added.

'I've never trusted trees since.'

She laughed. 'Stick to grinding grain then.'

They washed the dishes and cleared the kitchen in silence. They sat on the two most comfortable chairs they had and felt content. Staring into the open fire and seeing images of their past in the twisting flames.

After a while Minnie Ida said. 'You know what happens on your birthday, don't you?'

Clara Alice May took a long time to decide she was tired. One and a half stories, taken in turn by both her parents. An agonising wait until they were sure she was fast asleep. They crept around the house extinguishing candles and making their way to bed.

In the silence of the night, their efforts made the wooden bed creak, in an often-uninterrupted rhythm. Their desire was as old as mankind, yet as young as the children they reared. In the darkness of the room, the married couple reinforced every promise, every wish they had ever had. They lay afterwards appreciating the world they lived in. A world that had given them the opportunity to survive and enjoy life itself.

The following morning Clara Alice May was first up and outside looking for her friend who lived next door. Minnie Ida heard her and arose quietly, letting her husband sleep on for a while. Breakfast didn't make itself.

George Charles slept soundly until he stirred and turned over. Dreams surfaced as if in a mist, swirling from Williams Peak. Bringing with it ghostly images of the past, people long dead. His father, Fred, as he'd last seen him. Crying out in agony as a large tree branch had speared his lungs. His last words, 'How we struggle

George Charles awoke and felt the cooler air on his sweaty forehead. His breathing was laboured and his eyes still blurry from sleep. He could hear some early morning wildlife, birds and animals calling to each other up near

the cliff face. The sounds of someone in the kitchen, wooden bowls clattering. Somewhere a child called out and laughed. All else was silence.

George Charles rubbed his eyes and face hard with his rough hands. He stared at them for a while as he murmured, 'How we struggle

He sat on the wooden seat and contemplated his baggy old trousers around his ankles. He strained and tried to relax, he was tense today. There was work to do, and he needed to be ready to solve the problems that faced him. George Charles wrung his hands and his father's face came back to him in the mist. The outdoor toilet afforded some privacy if not comfort. He muttered and was thankful no one could hear. He held the few soft leaves from the trees found higher in the valley, they would be needed as soon as he'd finished.

The cart had seen better days but was still serviceable. A carpenter was desperately needed, and George Charles had booked one for a week's time. He hoped the rickety old structure would hold out until then, and the cost not so high he couldn't afford to pay.

Albert was waiting outside his small house, sitting on a short step jutting into the main road. As Sanctuary's oldest resident, no one told him it was a hazard to street traffic. No one said anything negative to the old man.

To get to the top of Dawson Cliff, they had to take a long and winding road. Well worn, but with a few bumps and dips that could catch out the unwary. The beast of burden had one speed, and it was not quick. The cart jolted the two men often, and by the time they reached the summit, they were sore and weary.

George Charles pulled a flask from his cart's small box behind the seat and offered it to Albert. The old man's eyes lit up, and he took a long swig and handed it back. His eyes were already brighter, and he felt the harsh liquid burn through his internal tract and bring a fire to his being.

He looked up into the clear skies and saw the tall old wooden structure at the very top of the cliff. 'This windmill is older than me. My father built it

'And mine bought it from him' Finished George Charles, replacing the flask in the cool area of the box. The story was old and often told. Mostly by Albert.

Albert turned his eyes on George Charles to see if he was mocking. He wasn't. 'Have I told you that before? How the wind's best up there ...?' Albert said, still testing if there was a mockery in his friend's voice.

'Just the few times, Albert. Or ... if you like every day for the last ninety years.'

‘Old age, eh? Gets to us all. You’ll find out, George. You’ll find out. What’s wrong with it this time?’

‘Gears are stuck.’ He jumped down from the waggon and hefted a large cloth bag full of tools and walked towards the small door set in the side of the huge structure.

The wood had once been decorated with bright colours and now all the paint had peeled away. The basic structure was still sound. ‘Still a few more years left in her yet.’ Albert said rubbing his gnarled hands over the wooden door’s surface.

The windmill was just a hollow box, inside a central shaft came from the gear system at the top to the grinding stones at the bottom. To one side, the stacks of dried grain ready to be ground. On the other, the bench where the fine dust was packed into more closely woven bags for distribution to the village. A small stairway ran around the inside of the wall and reached the mechanism high above them.

‘Shall I go up and shout down to you? Al? Or are you up for a climb?’

Albert was considering. ‘If we can take the flask up with us?’

George Charles laughed and dropped his toolkit. ‘I’ll get it.’

‘It will be easier if I can see the problem from up there.’ Albert said, looking intently high above him.

It took a long time before Albert finally made it to the platform high above the ground. He looked down and felt dizzy. ‘Water first.’ George Charles said and handed him a large flask.

They both sat and waited while Albert got his breath back. ‘Eighty years I kept this machine running. That’s a long time, Georgie.’

‘A long time.’ Agreed George Charles. ‘A lot’s happened in that time.’

Albert turned and looked at him, water dribbling down his bearded chin. ‘Like what? Nothing changes here. Nothing.’

George Charles stopped to think. ‘You’re right. Nothing changes, just the people.’

‘More of them now, and those others ... just older is all.’

‘We split the colony, that was something new.’

‘Yeah. But it had to come, didn’t it? Had to happen.’

‘Had to happen.’

‘How they doing at Harmony? Set up ok, are they?’

‘It’s been fifty years, Al. I’d expect them to be as established as we are. I’ve never been, but Richard Ernest Roy went last year with his dad, they said they were doing great. Higher up in the valleys. Weather not so good, farming not so good, but livestock We really should start to trade with them.’

‘Meat for grain.’ Al spat out into space and watched the time it took before landing on the dirt floor. ‘I thought that’s why they wanted to leave because they couldn’t agree on how to trade. Selfish bastards. All of them. I remember’

‘Al. Is this the problem here?’ Albert hauled his memory to the present day and looked at the simply made wooden cog system that comprised the turning gear for the windmill. His years of experience and intimate knowledge of the machinery made him the only expert left.

Under Albert’s instruction and George Charles’s manual dexterity, they worked for two hours to free the stubborn piece of wooden equipment, corroded and suffocated by fine dust.

As George Charles laboured, and the air began to heat up, he slipped off his woollen over-jacket and eventually his shirt. His taut, lean frame moving and glistening in the light that shone through the top aperture of the windmill. Albert was working his way alternatively through both flasks. The liquor one winning, slightly.

‘You know ... your father and me were great buddies. So were your father and mine. When we settled here, we had to all muck in and help. Much as now. But those two were the real leaders. But it was more exciting those days. We had proper equipment ... that worked. This stuff ...’ he waved at the series of wooden cogs and laughed.

‘They do their job. You built them well, Al.’

‘When we first arrived we had the proper metals and equipment. Can’t build that way anymore. Those days ... long gone. They were good times, Georgie. Good times.’

‘So I heard. I think I might have fixed this’

‘If it wasn’t for the prepping war’ Albert coughed suddenly. George Charles glanced at him. Albert recovered and took a swig of water. ‘..... we’d all be better off.’ He was silent in thought for a while before he said quietly, ‘I really liked our first settlement.’

‘So you say.’

‘You weren’t even born before we left it. I remember your mother, she wanted you more than anything. Several miscarriages she had before you

popped out. It was the last thing she ever did’ Albert realised what he said and looked quickly at George Charles, still grunting with the machinery. ‘And the best thing.’

George Charles paused and looked back at Albert. The old man had his eyes closed and George Charles could just see a tear pushing its way under one eyelid.

‘Al? Are you all right?’

He dropped his tool and shuffled over to his friend. Albert’s eyes opened, and he tried to smile. ‘So many memories, boy. So few worth remembering.’

The journey down the steps was easier than going up, but Albert had to be assisted as one of the flasks was now empty. George Charles sat him in the cart and asked if he could wait while he just ground out a few sacks. People were running short because of the faulty machinery.

Albert waved him away. ‘I’ll have a little nap here. I’m fine. Do your work, Georgie. As your dad would’ve done. And his before him’ He was already asleep.

George Charles bent mindlessly to his task of grinding grain to make flour suitable for bread and other baked items for food. His was the only mill in Sanctuary, the only source and his only viable method of income. He could exchange what he could and barter for the services he needed. Like a carpenter.

He estimated ten sacks would do for today, then tomorrow he’d get up here earlier on his own and put in a full day. If the cart could stand it.

As the huge wood and cloth vanes rotated above him, the spindle turned the wooden gears. The power transferred at a ninety-degree angle down the long vertical shaft to the two heavy stone grinders, pulverising the harvested grain.

Separating the husks from the useable flour was the main effort, and he worked hard to get his task done. Lifting the sacks onto the cart took the last of his energy and he sat breathless on the side of the road. He waited until he could gather the strength to make the journey home. He wished both flasks were not empty.

Below him the valley stretched away into the distance, the homes spreading out like a spider’s web from the main street. All at random, no order. No straight roads, or streets. The earth covered roofs displaying smoke columns as the women prepared the evening meals.

He shaded his eyes against the sun, judging the time to be mid-afternoon. All was peaceful, all serene.

He resisted the urge to count the houses below. It was a population that was growing slowly. Too slowly. They had established the village for a hundred years, yet only a hundred and fifty families survived here. He'd heard Harmony was no larger.

This lack of technology was hampering them, without the proper ore, there was no metal. Without metal, there was no machinery. Without that, no steam. No steam no power. Without adequate power ... no development. No development ... no future. Then what was the point? 'How we struggle

A grunt behind him brought him back to reality. He struggled to his feet stiffly and helped Albert into a sitting position. The old man looked around the sky, the position of the sun and huffed. 'Time to go home, Georgie.'

'If the cart'll make it.'

'It'll make it. I built it forty years ago. Like me still going strong.'

'Well still going, anyway.' George Charles said with a grin.

Albert smiled back. 'Next time a bigger flask, Georgie. Some pregger's drunk all that one.'

By the time they reached Albert's home, they were both too weary to say goodbye to each other. Albert returned to his sticking-out seat and fell asleep instantly.

George Charles encouraged the beast to pull for a little while longer. The proximity of its familiar stall and the knowledge of a good meal made it hurry slightly faster than before.

At the rear of his home was the stable and storage yard. George Charles freed the beast from its harness and ambled into its stall. He placed grain in a large basket and it chewed contentedly on its dinner. George Charles slapped its wide belly and moved back to the cart, now solitary in the middle of the floor. It looked a little old and dejected.

He hefted the sacks off and placed them on low tables, to keep them from the morning damp. He gratefully slung the last one on the top of the others. Minnie Ida could sell or trade them tomorrow while he made the gruelling trip up the cliff to grind out more to sell the following day. That process would be repeated until eternity, or he died. His energy reserves were almost exhausted now. He was feeling his age.

He needed a rest and some fortification. He almost staggered through his rear door and found Clara Alice May waiting for him. 'Where have you been, daddy? I've been waiting here for ever.'

'Working, my little darling. Daddy has to work.'

‘Mummy said you’d be back a long time ago. Do you know what time it is?’

‘Do you?’

‘Sure. Time to watch the sunset. Are you ready?’

He struggled to stay awake as Clara Alice May delighted in the light show put on for her own special entertainment.

They watched as the wind picked up the low cloud on Williams peak and blew it down the slopes into their valley. It swirled around the curve in the valley wall and into the village, engulfing the houses and livestock pens. On through the valley and out into the sea towards the low setting sun.

As it did every day of the year. Had done for as long as either of them could remember. There were times when predictability was good for the soul. But with that came a faint feeling of disappointment. What if this was all there was to life? All there was to look forward to?

George Charles loved this sight and loved watching it with his daughter, but there should be more to life than this. His ancestors hadn’t travelled this far to experience a life this poor. They’d wanted more, and their descendants all had so much less. They supposed planet “Earth” to offer so much more.

‘Daddy? Time to go. I’m hungry.’

He awoke from his doze and stood up. Every ninety-year-old muscle in his body reminded him of his age. He held her hand and ambled back home.

The torches were flickering, and the night air became scented with the surrounding countryside changing from day into night. In the distance was a howl from the night predators, waking up and wanting their breakfasts.

There were people moving down the street. Then more people, they were coming out of their houses and walking away from George Charles and Clara Alice May. He could hear them excitedly talking. Some sounded fearful. What was happening?

‘Daddy?’

‘Go home, sweetness. Go to mummy. Tell her I’ll be right there.’

‘But, daddy!’

‘Now Clara, right now! For Daddy.’

She recognised his tone and held back tears as she ran, turning into their small street. Hurrying to the safety and emotional comfort of a sympathetic mother.

The weariness forgotten, George Charles hurried with the rest of them towards the edge of the woods that marked the end of the village. A crowd had gathered and were murmuring quietly, where before excited conversation had filled the otherwise quiet night.

As they saw George Charles easing past the fringe of the crowd they parted for him. Whispered, 'Eminence.' And 'Your Eminence.' And 'It's his Eminence.'

He pushed gently towards the front of the crowd which had now fallen silent. Several of the village folk had brought flaming torches and held them forward, making a ring of light.

Standing several metres from the start of the woods they held a lit semi-circle around two apparitions who stood just clear of the woods.

He felt it, saw it and heard the whispers all around him.

'Aliens!'

Two creatures silently watched the crowd. Very tall and very thin, large eyes held steady and unflinching. Small nose and mouth. Covered in a strange skin that shimmered in the flickering light.

George Charles knew the crowd were expecting him to do something. He had nothing to kill them with. Their last encounter with aliens had not been the best of experiences. So he had but one option, he took hold of a torch and moved forward.

Both creatures now fixed eyes on him. There was no change of expression on their faces, no sign of weapons. 'What do you want?' George Charles asked loudly, sounding instantly foolish.

There was no sound. The two aliens waited a moment and looked at each other. Then one stepped forward, and the mouth moved. A strange sound issued, and it took George Charles a moment to realise what the alien had said.

'We wanted to meet you.'

PART 5

Two Households Both Alike In Dignity

The craft remained transparent as the huge planet below rushed towards them. They watched in silence and took in the vista as it drew nearer. Two beings suspended in air, dropping towards the surface of an unknown planet.

The ball was almost shimmering in the blackness of space, somewhere behind it a sun produced a halo effect. They could see the darker side clearer as they neared its surface, breaking through a pale blue misty casing to do so. The predominant colours were blue and green.

‘Atmosphere....’ Whispered Barata to himself. ‘So much water.’ He spoke.

Serania agreed with him and added, ‘You know what this reminds me of?’

‘Home.’

‘Are we sure we’re not back there? Wrong directions?’

A decorated Space Captain not recognising one world from another made him smile. He shook his head and spoke, ‘The coordinates are accurate enough. Look’ The thin cloud broke free and they could see a huge island, with a towering peak thrusting into the upper atmosphere. At Barata’s bidding, their craft swung around so they could get a better look at it.

Barata turned to her and looked at her face. Absorbed in the view below and lit with a soft blue glow, she looked different. ‘Nothing like that at home.’ He said.

She shook her head. ‘Something wonderful. Don’t you think?’

His ‘Yes’ was almost unnecessary.

They had decided to be off-Core for this trip, for obvious reasons. The use of the spoken word disguised their intention and location. Syncing with the craft was secure, going no further than just their transport.

‘Find the settlement.’ Thought Barata and the transport banked and slid around the other side of the huge mountain.

The surface of the planet was dark. ‘No sign of life. No light. Anywhere....’ Serania said.

As they descended, the blue glow lessened, and darkness encroached on them. The transport emitted a strong soft coloured glow and they could see

the land all around them. The transport touched down, and they stepped out onto a foreign landscape.

Buildings were everywhere but in a state of desolation. The buildings' original purposes were unrecognisable. Walls had caved in or rotted away. Signs of burning showed on parts of the structures.

At the limits of the transport's lighting, a taller, more substantial building, towered over the rest. Crushed on top of it was another structure. Comprising a series of metal looking ribs and skin.

'A ship' Serania breathed.

'Not one of ours. Alien.'

'But familiar, none the less.' Serania said moving forward.

Barata held her back. 'Stick close to our transport. We can come back again in daylight. There's nothing here, they're long gone.'

'Dead? All of them?'

'Nothing could survive this.' he spread both hands around the scene of devastation. 'This is a war zone. Nobody won here.'

Serania felt a pang of disappointment. She didn't know what to expect, but something more exciting. Positive, revealing. 'Perhaps someone survived. Moved ... somewhere else. We should look'

'It's dark. Another time perhaps. We tried, come on.'

She looked out into space and saw the myriad of stars. A sight that had always caused her heart to flutter, yet she never understood why.

He took her arm and felt the tremor that was running through her body. 'Are you okay?' he asked.

She nodded. 'Yes. Fine. I was just ... hoping'

'Perhaps we shouldn't have come here. I shouldn't have let you persuade me so easily

'We're here. Let's find what we came for.' Serania's voice was stubborn and determined.

Barata could only go along with her wishes.

They walked back to the transport and stepped in. Once settled, the craft began to lift at Barata's instruction. 'Wait! There' Serania's command stopped the craft instantly, stationary in the night air.

‘What?’ Barata strained to see.

‘A track. A road. Something. There, there. Can’t you see it?’

‘I can see it. But I don’t’

‘It’s well-worn. Leading away from this settlement. Well-worn means someone used it a lot. We must follow it.’

The craft obeyed her orders and moved slowly, following the road as it went straight out of the deserted settlement. It wound round some low hills and headed into higher ground.

The metres ticked off on a glowing image in front of her eyes, or was that inside her head? She was too busy looking to notice which. Next to the small dial was the height in metres, the ground was rising. Around them only darkness, they appeared to be flying blind.

They glided slowly for some time and over some wooded areas. Then they saw a glow in the sky ahead of them. ‘Light.’ Breathed Serania. ‘We’ve found them?’

As the glow strengthened it became clear, it was a series of small lights. ‘Fire?’ Barata said quietly. ‘We should be careful here, we may not be welcome.’

‘Why not?’

‘I can’t begin to name the reasons. Let us approach quietly, these might be people who do not have our sophistication. We may seem ... strange to them. We must be non-threatening.’

‘But we are non-threatening.’

‘We know that, they don’t. We need to approach on foot.’

‘Why?’

‘Fire. They’re using fire! Humans haven’t relied on fire for over three hundred years. We’re clearly technically advanced and they might see that as a threat.’

‘I see.’ From her inflection, Barata was unsure if she really could see his point. He guided the craft to land in a small clearing near the edge of the woods. They stepped out, barely enough light filtering through the trees to see where they stood.

‘We have to be open, friendly and welcoming.’ Barata whispered. ‘And careful. Let them communicate first.’

‘This is more like it. I feel strange. Almost ... excited. You?’

‘Some adventure you started us on’ Barata left the rest to her own imagination.

He held her elbow and took a tentative step towards the lights. The trees thinned out and Serania stumbled over a root. She felt the strong arm of Barata steady her and they continued. They stepped out from the trees and looked down a long, hard-packed dirt road.

To either side were wooden structures. Some small, some larger, all roughly made. Outside of each one, they had fire torches planted in the ground. Flickering and throwing complex shifting shadows. It was eerily atmospheric. Something the like of which the visitors had never seen before. It was difficult to take in the whole scene at once as everything was moving. Light and shadows - and people.

There were people here!

As they stepped out from the darkness of the woods into the uneven warm light of the torches, both Barata and Serania felt uncomfortable.

‘What are we doing here?’ Her doubts now obvious.

‘Your idea, Serania. You wanted to see. See for ourselves, see if it was true.’

‘Well, it’s true. There IS a lost colony from Earth.’ Serania said in a breathless excitement.

There was a light breeze that blew the torches, sometimes almost horizontal. They could hear the fluttering of the flames and see the swirling shadows that followed them. The lights hid the stars, she looked up to see only a few. What a pity so few could be seen by these people.

‘They’ve seen us.’ Barata thought. ‘Stay in sync until we know what they’re like. How they’re going to react. K?’

‘K. Here we go.’ Serania thought, taking a slow step forward.

‘Serania!’ too late the thought to stop her.

A crowd gathered very quickly. Ten, twenty, fifty people. Emerging from the darkness, creating even more shadows from their flickering torchlights. The people stood in a semi-circle around the visitors. Their faces in the darkness made by the torches behind them.

Some were silent, some whispered amongst themselves. No one addressed the visitors directly. A variety of human faces, old and young. Men, women and children. Their age and gender obvious to the visitors.

‘What do we do now?’ Serania.

'I really don't know.'

'You're the expert of ancient customs.'

'Never read of an experience like this before. Just wait, be patient. Inaction better than the wrong action. These may be a very ... backward culture, subject to territorial violence.'

'Violence. You said nothing about violence! Are we prepared for that?'

'How fast can you run?'

She had never run in her life, she didn't know how to. She turned to look at him and saw he was smiling. He was enjoying this experience. She was not sure if she was.

His imagery was light as he synced, 'I've put our transport on alert, it can be here in seconds. It'll envelop and protect us. Don't be afraid. Don't show you're afraid. Stay calm and everything will be all right. What's this?'

The crowd had gone silent. A few were stepping aside, and a man was walking through the gap they'd made. This man seemed a little taller than most of the residents. He was still much shorter than the visitors and looked so very old!

'He's very old!' Serania thought. 'Two hundred? Three? What're they saying?'

'It sounds like, 'Eminence.'"

'What's that?'

'I'm not sure, trying to remember. If only we were connected to the Core. Eminence something to do with person of importance. He could be a tribal leader.'

'You sure?'

'No. But they're treating him as something special, so must we. Let's assume this is the man we should be dealing with.'

'Well go on then. Introduce yourself.'

Barata felt a moment of slight discomfort. Nothing he would call fear, as he had never felt fear in all his life. Uncertainty would be more accurate. He could also see the uncertainty in the man who now edged towards him. He held a fire torch out in front as if it were a weapon.

Weapons! Did these people have weapons? Were he and Serania in danger? The thought had not occurred to him. He contacted the transport and told it again to be ready at an instant.

'We come in peace.' He broadcast towards the ancient in front of him.

Silence.

'We mean you no harm.' Barata thought again, stronger imagery this time. Did they have a problem with the language? Was it so different they couldn't understand? Once again he wished for the help of the Core.

'What do you want?' The ancient spoke.

Barata looked at Serania who was now staring at him. 'I understood that, Barata. But it's the spoken word. They don't have the Core. They can only hear us, not hear our thoughts. We must communicate verbally to these people. This is more your area of expertise, ancient languages. You say something

'We wanted to meet you.' Said Barata, as levelly as he could.

'That's all you could think of?' Serania's thought stinging him.

The ancient looked around him at his tribe and then back at the visitors. The guttering torches were the only sound as all parties were thinking about what to say and do next. The night air was slowly cooling, but nobody noticed the change in temperature. Especially the visitors as their bios adjusted their body temperature automatically.

'You speak our language?' the old man said.

'Of course.' Barata struggled to think of what to say. 'We come in peace.'

Before the ancient could reply there was a commotion behind him. An elderly woman and young child pushed through the crowd to stand beside him. The woman had hold of his arm and they could see her gnarled hands whiten as they gripped.

'George?' the woman said quietly, fear obvious in her voice.

The child was standing and just looking at them, unafraid and looking curious. 'Those people look funny, mummy. What are they?'

Minnie Ida moved forwards and pulled her child behind her husband for protection. 'George?' she whispered.

George Charles pushed her gently behind him and stepped forward. Her hand fell away from his arm as he straightened himself up and walked towards the aliens. He stopped a few metres from them. All three looked at each other in silence. Slowly George Charles extended his hand forward and waited.

'What's he doing?' Serania questioned.

‘And old form of greeting. We must respond.’

Barata took one step forward and grabbed the outstretched hand. He felt a strong grip, and the ancient moved the hands up and down. The ancient released first.

‘Now you, Serania.’ Synced.

She hesitantly stepped forward and grabbed the offered hand. It felt strange, his skin felt hard and almost brittle, she was used to a more soft and silky skin texture. These old customs were strange.

‘Welcome.’ The ancient said, releasing her hand.

Now closer, she could see his face clearly in the golden torchlight. It was heavily lined, but the eyes were bright and intense. His hair was oily and long, matted in places. His hands that held the torch looked gnarled and bent. And there was an aroma, something strong and slightly unpleasant. Her bios adjusted. She stepped back.

The man tried to smile, but his two rows of crooked and stained teeth had the opposite effect on Serania. A small pain touched her heart. Was that fear? She was becoming used to recognising fear now.

The ancient turned and addressed his tribe. ‘We must show these people a welcome. They say they come in peace.’ He seemed to have a thought and turned back to the visitors. ‘How many are you?’

Barata took a moment to understand. ‘Two. I am Barata and this is Serania.’

George Charles rolled the names around his head. He knew those names, they were not alien names. He turned back and spoke loudly. ‘Prepare the communal hall. We must show some hospitality. Quickly. Bring some food and drink. Get some light in there too. Come on.’

He waved the torch as if it would hurry them up. He turned back to the two apparitions before him. ‘I am George Charles. This is my wife Minnie Ida and daughter Clara Alice May.’

With a look of fear, Minnie Ida nodded at the strangers. Clara Alice May walked boldly forwards and stuck her hand out as her father had done. Both the visitors shook it gently. Serania feeling the smoothness of the child’s skin and the weakness of the handshake.

‘Clara Alice May.’ The child said in a loud high-pitched voice. ‘Pleased to meet you. Aren’t you very thin?’

‘Clara!’ the mother’s voice full of authority made the child’s head turn. A brief hand gesture and the child ran back to the concerned mother. George

Charles shooed them both back into the safety of the crowd and turned to his guests.

‘Would you please join us in our communal hall? It’s the best we can offer. We can talk there.’

‘What’s a communal hall?’ thought Serania.

‘We’re about to find out.’

George Charles turned slowly and walked with a steady gait towards the hall. Aware his villagers were all following, but not daring to turn around to see if the aliens were.

Aliens? The thought ran through his mind again. Was he doing the right thing? Inviting potentially dangerous beings right into the heart of his village. What would the elders say? No time for a second thought now. Stick with the decision.

Other thoughts were jostling through his head. Should he call for weapons? They seemed friendly, but were they? What did they want? They didn’t look at all like the others that came before. But they spoke his language! His mind was becoming confused.

Clara Alice May held onto his hand and it comforted him. He felt the reassuring weight of Minnie’s hand on his free arm and took courage from that. This was a stupendous moment in the lives of all at Sanctuary. How it ended could depend on what he said and did next.

Serania became aware of the cloud of dust that was now arising from the many feet walking along the hard-packed dirt road. ‘What’s happening?’ she thought.

‘We are going to ‘talk’. Apparently.’

‘What’re you going to say?’

‘Me? Are you not going to contribute?’

‘I’ve no idea what to say to these old people.’

‘You wanted to meet them.’

‘I only wanted to know what had happened to them.’

‘Now is a good opportunity to find out. Just ask what you want to know. Relax.’

They were approaching a large single storey building. Barata noted the individual pieces of wood nailed together to form the walls and roof. He’d not seen anything like this before, outside Core archive.

The ancient human walked into the building first and the crowd appeared to be holding back, waiting for the visitors to follow him. Barata stood tall and moved forward, ducking his head to get through a beam that formed the top of the portal.

Serania followed, thinking, 'Is it safe?'

Barata used a light tone to his imagery as he replied, 'For us, or them?'

Inside the room was just a hollow shell. Around the rough walls were many small chairs, all obviously handmade by several non-craftsmen. Near the shorter of the walls was a coarse table and behind it several more chairs. The ancient sat in the centre one and several of the tribe pulled two chairs from his side and placed them opposite their leader. On the table two small objects had flames burning on top., they emitted a greasy looking black smoke.

The people were crowding into the room, carrying torches and shuffling their feet. They were respectfully silent.

Serania sniffed the air. The smell was a new experience for her, her home life was sanitised, and she'd never had a pungent odour assail her nose. Her olfactory senses and the nose itself had been scaled down over the years due to lack of use. If a sense wasn't needed in a body, they discarded it.

She tried to recognise the smells and failed. She smelt smoke and human sweat, neither she had experienced before. The night air released its own raft of incenses. Her instinct was to recoil from anything unpleasant, it was unnatural to her. But her mind flashed back to the original thought she'd had. She needed to know, she needed to understand. She wanted to meet these people. Her curiosity was now stronger than any unpleasant odour.

Barata was focused on action. His mind whirled with his accumulated knowledge of ancient customs and historical events. He had over three thousand years of archive recalling and right now, nothing made much sense to him. He would have to follow this ancient's lead and hope it led him on the right path. Barata studied the chairs and decided they needed to sit for diplomacy's sake.

He gracefully sat on the chair, to find he was more than head and shoulders above the tribal leader. His knees were high in the air as the chair was too near the ground to accommodate his leg length.

He glanced at Serania and stood up again. Carefully moving both chairs out of the way, he proceeded to fold himself down on the dusty floor.

Serania thought, 'What're you doing? That's unclean'

'We must not look superior to these people. Look, I'm almost the same height as him now. Please join me. We're safe from infection and diseases, our bios will take care of everything. Please sit.'

'Without a recliner?'

'Sit!'

She looked at the silent watching crowd and decided that Barata knew enough to keep them safe, or enough to be dangerous. She sat on the floor. How she already missed the comforting reassurance of a recliner forming underneath her. A small mist of dust arose as she tried to get comfortable. The dust produced an aroma that was hard to describe. Her bios instantly turned down her sensitivity to it. She breathed more normally knowing it was being filtered from her body.

Silence settled until a few latecomers hurried into the room, pushing the crowd apart. They hurried to the table and placed large platters and drinking vessels in front of their leader. Never taking their eyes off the strangers. One of the tribe spilt a drinking cup, a glare from the leader and they hurried away.

George Charles pushed platters towards the two opposite him. He poured two large horns of liquor and placed them in front of his guests. He poured one for himself and lifted it in a toast. The guests hesitated, then did the same. With an exaggerated flourish, George Charles downed his cup in one gulp and banged it down on the table. He waited for them to do the same.

'What is this?' Serania.

'No idea.'

'What're we supposed to do with it?'

'Follow his lead.'

'Drink it? I can't do that. Haven't drunk anything for ever.'

'Nor me. Just put it down like he did.' Both banged the full cups on the table.

George Charles watched and waited. They hadn't drunk. Was this an insult, or did they not trust him? Did they think they poisoned it? But he'd just drunk from the same source. He picked up a piece of food and slid it into his mouth. He chewed and swallowed.

'We can't eat anything here.' Synced Serania.

'Just smile.' Barata.

George Charles saw the aliens were making strange facial expressions. It could be mistaken for a smile. But they ate nothing, neither had they spoken to each other the whole visit. What to do next? wondered George Charles.

'What to do next?' wondered Serania and Barata.

'We didn't think to bring gifts.' Barata thought.

'Should we have?' she thought back.

'Create something with the Nanos.' She synced.

'We don't have the right Nanos.' He responded. 'We'd have to go back to the transport to do that.'

Another silence, where silent thoughts were being created at a rapid rate.

'We wanted to meet you.' Said Barata, holding his arms out in what he thought was a welcome gesture.

George Charles looked around the crowded room for support before saying. 'I can't say the same about you. You look different from the last visitors.'

'What last visitors?' From Barata.

'The insects. They just turned up and attacked us.'

'You too?' From Barata.

George Charles looked puzzled. What did they mean by that?

'We're from planet Earth.' Ventured Serania at last.

'You can't be. It was destroyed.' George Charles said leaning forward now. Suddenly unsure of these people again. They looked ... somehow human and yet said the strangest things.

'What made you say that?' Barata said, stooping forward to be closer to the ancient.

'It must be destroyed. Otherwise, Earth would've sent help to us. Wouldn't have cut us off and left us stranded here. Earth must have been destroyed. By the vermin.'

'What's he saying?' Serania thought.

'You've been invaded? By insects?' Barata said as calmly as he could. A feeling was creeping into his mind and he was getting nervous.

‘Yes. So was Earth. The last message we received was that they were attacking everywhere. We were lucky, we saw them off’

‘They saw them off?’ thought Serania.

‘..... and we assumed that Earth wasn’t so lucky. We’ve not heard anything for over a hundred years.’

‘Yes, the alien creatures, insects as you call them attacked Earth. But we defeated them. Yesterday.’ Spoke Barata.

‘Not a hundred years ago.’ Added Serania.

George Charles could not tell one from the other, the two aliens were almost identical. Were they both men, both women, one of each, neither? He shook his head. His confusion was increasing. ‘No. This was over a hundred years ago. Not ... yesterday. You’re mistaken.’

Serania leaned her upper body forward and said, ‘I was on the ship that defeated them. And it was yesterday.’

There was silence, then whispers around the room. George Charles felt isolated. Where was Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma? He looked around, or, Consul Elizabeth Margret? He couldn’t see them. George Charles leant towards Minnie and said quietly, ‘Try to find our Notable, or Counsel. I need help here. Something’s not right.’

Minnie nodded. Two aliens landing at night on this outpost was not right. She pushed her daughter into a neighbour’s arms and hurried out of the room. There was now a prolonged silence as everyone tried to digest the last few exchanges.

Barata saw the person the ancient had whispered to leave the room in a hurry. Were they planning an attack now? Had the Lepids really attacked New Earth as long as a hundred years ago? How could they defeat the insects when Earth had a huge amount of luck to do the job?

What did he mean by being abandoned by Earth? Nothing made sense.

‘Does any to his make any sense to you?’ Serania.

‘We need more information.’ From Barata.

George Charles turned towards the aliens and smiled. He still thought of them as aliens. He poured another cup of the liquid and downed it quickly. The warmth spread down his throat to his stomach and he felt better. Bolder and braver, anyway. He thought back to his teachings from his parents about etiquette. ‘Would either of you wish to use our toilet facilities? They’re basic, like everything else we have. But the room is private. It’s to the rear of this building.’

‘What’s he talking about?’ thought Serania.

Barata shook his head and said to George Charles, ‘We’ve no need for personal biowaste disposal. Thank you.’

Another long silence.

They don’t drink, eat, or use a toilet. They didn’t know Earth had been destroyed and said they came from there. They’re definitely aliens. George was getting more anxious. What could he say? What should he do?

‘Are we talking about the same Earth here?’ Barata spoke at last. He wanted to show an image pulled from the Core but couldn’t. Information so easily available and so useful, fell so much short when it had to resort to spoken words only.

‘You don’t even look like humans. How can we be talking about Earth?’ George Charles said, wanting to stand and look down on these creatures. He needed to show his authority in this community.

Barata spoke with a slow and calm voice. ‘We’ve just found out’ He looked at Serania and thought, ‘I don’t know how much to tell this ancient.’

She stared at him expressionless as she thought, ‘We dare not interfere with their life here. We shouldn’t have come. Let us leave. Soon as we can.’

‘I’ll say the minimum

‘What?’ was George Charles’s question after the pause.

‘We’ve just found out that you were a colony sent from Earth in 2238. Designated as Planet Quatro-Zero Paradiem 42. Shortened to QZP42.’

George Charles felt his heart race faster. ‘It was, New Earth they later called it. How did you know

Serania said, ‘We’re sorry we’ve disturbed your time here. We just wanted to make sure you were still here. We’ll leave you in peace now.’

George Charles stood up, his voice urgent. ‘No. Please stay.’ Serania looked at Barata, who was also about to stand.

‘What shall we do?’ she thought.

‘We’re already here. Let’s find out what you wanted to know, then make our escape.’

‘Do.’

‘Earth survived?’ George Charles said, his eyes glistening.

'We did.' Said Barata.

'Then why haven't we heard from you?'

There was silence.

Serania broke it by saying, 'We think they forgot you.'

George Charles collapsed back in his chair as he heard the mutterings all around the room. 'Forgotten!'

Serania was studying these people. It fascinated her how old they looked compared to everyone now on Earth. Their clothing was coarse and worn. Nothing fitted properly, and everything was functional. It made her conscious of her own appearance and she instructed her bios. Her skin became less smooth in texture and took on a version of less skin-tight clothing. The weave of the material became visible, and the colour darkened to reflect the most dominant colour in the room. A dark muddy brown.

The smell was becoming overwhelming to Barata and his bios sensed the stress and adjusted the strength of olfactory sensitivity. The smell reduced, and he forgot about it. He noticed Serania's skin changing pattern.

'What're you doing?' he thought.

'Trying to blend in more. These people are rough and coarse. We must appear like polished gems to them. We do not want to be more alien than they think we are already.'

'All right.' Slowly his skin texture changed to match hers.

'Forgotten?' George Charles's voice almost hoarse with amazement. 'All these years we've thought Earth had not contacted us because they were extinct. But you say it was *only* because we were FORGOTTEN?'

'Careful.' From Serania.

'I will be.' Thought Barata.

Barata stood up and watched as the villagers were looking up in awe at his size. He realised it was a mistake and so he moved around the table and stood next to the ancient. He slowly lowered himself to the floor and so regained the height protocol required, while being nearer and, he hoped, more informal.

George Charles became wary of this move, but when the creature lowered himself to his own height, he felt more reassured. The gesture being friendlier than threatening. Something was happening, the creature seemed different. His skin had changed colour. The clothes he was wearing. A splendid robe wasn't it now ... what were those rough-looking things?

The volume of people in the single room had raised the temperature significantly. Flaming torches were burning up oxygen. Candles were polluting the air with hot animal fat aromas. A mist was blurring everything in the room. Smoke was collecting up near the ceiling and slowly descending. Serania now aware the smells overwhelming her, her bios working harder to reduce the effect.

‘I want to get out of here, Barata.’ She thought.

‘Too early. It’d be disrespectful. Please wait a while longer. We have to convince these people we’re the same as them.’

‘We’re not the same as them. You can see that Barata, can’t you?’

‘We come from the same stock. We need to find out more.’

‘Can’t we do it outside?’

‘Protocol. We’re dealing with ancient protocols here. We mustn’t disrespect them. Especially their leader. Please wait.’

‘Do.’

Barata spoke loud enough for all to hear. ‘George Charles. We do not know for sure that QZP42 was forgotten by Earth Counsels. But ... as far as we know We were only attacked by the insects a few years ago. Not a hundred years.’

George Charles’s mind was churning. Where were Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma and Consul Elizabeth Margret? Why was he on his own with these aliens? If what they said was true, they were as human as he was. Perhaps not AS human, that much was obvious. Their bodies had changed far beyond that of the humans on this planet. But he was becoming sure they were not actually aliens!

He looked at the creature close to him now. The eyes were wide and held his stare without a flicker. The small nose, small mouth and its movements were still and calm. Was it a male, or a female genre? Or something else?

George Charles leaned forward and tried to compose his words carefully. ‘We were attacked by these aliens. Insect-like, in huge ships, hundreds of them. Just attacked us, without warning. Wave after wave, but we defeated them. We had communication in those days, so we warned Earth. We asked for help and they said they couldn’t because they were in the same situation. We never heard from them again.’

‘Could this be true?’ Serania.

‘He believes it.’ Barata.

'Who told you the Earth was under attack?' asked Serania, dragging away George Charles's intense study of Barata's skin.

In frustration, George Charles shrugged. 'I don't know. I wasn't even born. Somebody. Doesn't matter who.'

'Yes, it does.' Thought Serania.

'Anyone here that would know?' asked Barata quietly.

The villagers had fallen silent, listening intently to this conversation between two very differing species, claiming to be the same.

George Charles looked around at the people he'd known all his life. They were watching him. Judging him? Where were Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma and Consul Elizabeth Margret?

'Our oldest resident might know more, although he was just a child at the time.' George Charles's voice almost faint from struggling with concentration and oncoming

tiredness.

'We'd like to meet him.' Said Barata with a smile that looked more like a grimace to George Charles.

'Very much so.' Added Serania.

'Well ... he'll be abed by now. Perhaps tomorrow?'

Serania exchanged glances with Barata.

Barata spoke, 'We must go soon. Perhaps another time. Another visit.'

'Stay.' George Charles was on his feet. He looked around for support from his friends. There were murmurs and some nodding heads. 'We've so much we want to ask you.'

'We can't' began Serania.

George Charles would not be seen weak in front of his own countrymen. If these creatures left now they might not return. 'A hundred years ago Earth abandoned us. You come here in a surprise visit and wish to abandon us immediately again.'

George Charles let the statement hang in the air.

'Preg!' Thought Serania involuntary.

'We owe them an explanation.' Thought Barata.

'Do we have one?'

George Charles moved to stand nearer Serania. His attention now on the other visitor, trying to influence its judgement. 'We want to know what it's like on Earth now. Is it so much different?'

'Very.' Serania said.

'Tell us all about it. As much as you can.'

'That could take some time.'

'We have time.' Someone shouted from the back of the room. Others echoed the sentiment.

'But we don't.' said Serania standing up.

'I'd like to know how this backward world fought off the insects when we couldn't. We must ask them.' Barat thought. 'We should stay a while longer.'

'I'm feeling suffocated in here. Can we move outside?'

'I'll try. I hope it's not too undiplomatic to break up this occasion.'

Barata stood and drew all eyes in the room to him. 'We have some questions for you too. But time is getting late. Perhaps we can resume this conversation tomorrow?'

'Can we stay until then?' questioned Serania silently.

'I think so.'

'We need to return to Earth before the security time-dates on our bios run out.' She thought.

'We have a day, at least. We can live without active bios for a while.' Barata thought. 'The transport can replenish them for a while.'

'Yes, but run the risk of infection, or injury. What protects us then?'

'We can return home quickly and get anything corrected.'

There was silence in the room. Why the silence, thought George Charles. Were these two communicating somehow? Still no Mary Anna Emma and Consul Elizabeth Margret. A decision had to be made. George Charles drew himself up to full height and looked at one visitor, he still didn't know which one.

'We'll find somewhere for you to sleep tonight. We have little, I hope you'll forgive the scarcity of our hospitality.'

'We need not sleep, thank you.' Barata said.

'Then we must make you comfortable then. Perhaps here' He waved his hand around the claustrophobic room.

'We can wait outside.' Serania said too quickly.

'We have our transport. We'll be most comfortable there. Thank you.'

'Transport?' the word rang around George Charles's head. Of course, they'd have a ship. How else? 'I'd very much like to see your ship?' George Charles said eagerly. Murmurs accompanied his request.

'Perhaps tomorrow.' From Barata.

George Charles nodded, his eyes alight again. 'Tomorrow.'

'Perhaps you can show us how you defeated the insects?' Barata said as casually as he remembered how.

'We have so much to learn from tomorrow.' George Charles said. Now how to withdraw with grace. They must stay until tomorrow.

He walked towards the door and the sea of faces parted. He waved his guest out before him and followed them into the road. Here people had gathered too late to find room in the hall.

George Charles stood and waited to see what the visitors wanted to do.

'Back to the transport.' Thought Serania, breathing in the fresher air.

'Don't rush. We don't want them to think we're in a hurry to leave.'

'Are we leaving then?' Serania questioned.

'I'd like to stay. There's so much I could learn from these people.'

'So would I. But we cannot influence them. Change their lifestyle. Counsel Law Colonists Charter

'I know. If we're careful with what we say. We need information from them, but we needn't give too much in return.' Barata was watching the crowd, trying to smile at them.

'Back to the transport. Should we wave?' Serania.

'I've no idea. Acknowledge them, they're waiting. Hundreds of them watching us leave. Walk slowly towards the woods.' Barata felt almost nervous.

George Charles watched them walk away and hoped he'd thought of everything he needed to say. Were they going to return in the morning? In a moment of near panic, he thought not. He looked around him at the intensity of the people watching the creatures walk away.

'William, boy. Here.' He waved over a young man who hurried to his side. 'When they disappear into the woods, I want you to follow them. Don't let them see you. Can you do that?'

'Yes, Eminence.'

'Come back and tell me what you see. Go.'

The two spectres had now entered the woods and could no longer be seen. George Charles idly wondered if their flowing white clothes they'd arrived in could get snagged on the bushes, or dirty from the muddy ground. But how had the robes turned into rough clothes that looked like his own!

The child hurried away and George Charles stretched his aching back. He'd missed dinner, as had most of the villagers. But there would be much talking tonight about the strange visitors and what it could mean to their own planet they now called Earth.

The darkness of the woods surrounded them and immediately they became disorientated.

'Where's the transport?' Serania thought.

'Straight ahead, I can feel it.'

Barata felt for her hand and led the way. 'Something's following us.' He thought. His hearing had been boosted by the bios, also his eyes to see in the dark.

'Man, or beast?' she responded.

'I suspect man. They don't trust us, and I don't blame them. We're certainly a surprise it'll take a while to come to terms.'

She stumbled, and he caught her, then stumbled himself. 'Can't get enough light in here.' she thought.

'If we weren't being followed we could.' He stopped. 'How far behind is the follower do you think?'

'I can't tell. A little way.'

'We'll risk it. The transport can come to us. Stay close to me.'

The surrounding area shimmered as the transparent craft enclosed them. As the seats rose to support them, Barata willed the ship out of the woods

and straight up in the air. The craft appeared to vanish as it assumed the colour of the sky it was heading towards.

‘Let’s hope they don’t look for us upwards.’ Serania.

Serania looked down on the village, its points of light sending a golden glow across the main street and smaller patches elsewhere. Above her, the brightness of the stars returned, and she felt calmness at their sight. They had restored an order to her life, and she felt renewed excitement at their adventure.

William hurried through the pitch-black woods and had the hunter’s instinct where his quarry was. In a moment he lost that instinct. It confused him. He stopped and listened. Just the soft breeze and some noise faintly from the village behind him. He was alone. Where had they gone?

He hurried forward and came out into a small clearing. Just by the light of the stars, he could see some feint marks in the earth where something had rested for a while. Enough weight from two people to cause a dent. Just two ridges, never before seen on this planet. The visitors had left.

Time to tell the Eminence.

George Charles was seated back at the conference table and pushing food into his mouth while he had the time. People were badgering him for information as he ate. With a full mouth, he said loudly, ‘You all heard just as much as I did. I know no more’ Food sprayed his audience. They took a step back and conversed with each other.

George Charles downed another cup of liquor and sat back. He re-ran everything in his head. Was there anything he could’ve done differently? Said anything else? Said the wrong thing? Questions, all unanswerable.

A commotion by the door made him stop chewing. Young William rushed in. ‘They’ve gone, Eminence.’

‘What do you mean gone? You just lost them?’

‘No, sir. I mean, gone. No sign of them. Well, there was a sign, on the ground. Tracks, like. But whatever was there has gone.’

George Charles banged his fist on the table. He held back the expletive in front of the boy. He held out his hand and touched the boy’s head. ‘Thank you, William. Good job.’

‘Now what?’ a voice from beside him.

George Charles shook his head. ‘I’ve no idea.’

More movement at the door and voices. Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma and Consul Elizabeth Margret hurried up to George Charles. 'What happened? I heard they've gone?' from Mary Anna Emma the Notable Senior.

George Charles shrugged. 'I did my best.'

'But they've gone! Is that your best?' from the Consul.

'You should've been here. You would've done so much better? Where were you?'

The sarcasm was lost on the Council as she said, 'Abed. No one told us until just now. Why didn't you send for us?'

'I did.'

'Not soon enough.'

'I sent for you as soon as I could. I sent my wife.'

'She woke us. Just now.'

'They were only here for.... about ... well, less than an hour. I did' He waved his hand at them and poured another cup.

The two arrivals pulled chairs up either side of George Charles and leant forward. Mary Anna Emma pulled the cup away from him and said, 'Tell us everything. Every detail.'

'From the beginning.' Added Elizabeth Margret.

George Charles struggled to keep his attention focused, he was tired, hungry and exhausted from his efforts. The last thing he wanted to do was think hard and accurately for these two questioning women. All three were eminent figures in running the village, and he understood their need to know, but the visitors had left, and he was solely to blame. He felt heartbroken and totally dispirited.

He picked at the remains of his plate and looked around for more. But the feast for the visitors had long since been devoured by the hungry and interested villagers. Few remained now that the main event had finished. Torches were being extinguished and people were going home to bed. That's all he wanted to do too.

'What were they like?' the Counsel said. He went through a detailed description once again.

'No what were they LIKE? Intelligent, witty, arrogant, superior?'

George Charles shrugged. There was not enough time, or conversation, to get a fuller picture. 'They don't eat, drink, or sleep. They don't even go to

the toilet! How could they be human? What did they really want? Why did they come here? Is their word enough? More questions than answers. I DON'T KNOW!

The interrogation went on for longer, but slowly George Charles slumped face forward on the table and was asleep. The two notables in the village retired to discuss the events with others and finally, George Charles was alone in the large empty communal hall. One last torch flickered for an hour and then died. They left him in silence and darkness.

In his home, his wife and daughter had dropped off to sleep from exhaustion.

The village streets were quiet and dark. Looking down on them was no longer stimulating.

Barata reflected as he peered through the darkness, how his home Earth must have been two thousand years ago. 'They've not gone forwards, but backwards. It's more like a Viking settlement than a new Earth colony.'

'Now what do we do?' said Serania.

'Let's take a look at the original settlement site, to see what we can find.'

'Do.'

The craft blinked out of existence and reappeared over the desolated settlement. It hovered five metres above the terrain in the pitch-black. The myriad of stars not providing enough light for them to see any detail on the ground.

'Light.' Thought Barata. A warm glow spread from the craft and illuminated the ground for over twenty metres. From the ground an observer would see two aliens suspended in air, surrounded by a glowing bubble.

The scene below was one of desolation. Pieces of buildings and machinery littered the flat plateau for as far as the light could let them see. Age old dust had settled, softening the harshness of the wasteland.

'I never imagined this when I suggested we come here' Serania said quietly. Her mind drifted back to a few hours previously when she'd made the reckless and risky decision to tell Barata about *Romeo's* discovery.

Barata's first reaction had been, 'So you DID access the restricted area of the Core?'

She could tell by his eyes and the imagery of his thoughts that he was angry. She'd returned the imagery with, 'No I DIDN'T! *Romeo* did. And we need to thank him for doing it. Without that Access he'd not have

discovered the secrets of Dog's Breath and the crevasse through which he finally destroyed the whole planet.'

'But Vara asked you directly

'Prak, Vara. He was safe on his own planet, so far away even *we* don't know where it is. The rest of us would be dead, Barata. And I mean dead, not recoverable ... dead. If you know what I mean?'

He did but chose to remain silent. Serania was angry and today's people never got angry. Even as she aimed her vitriol at him he noticed how her eyes looked still beautiful when enlarged. Even the tightness around the mouth made her so

'But *Romeo* also discovered a whole range of secrets, hidden in the Core. And we can access them, Barata. Now, if you want to. Do you want to? Old Earth history

Still he'd hesitated. She'd smiled at him and he saw a different expression on her face. Although Barata was torn between curiosity and duty, he rapidly made his decision.

Amahan had the codes that *Romeo* had uncovered. It was a simple matter to allow the house mind to lead the way. A large screen presented itself, blocking out the night view of the valley. It showed a white room, featureless, just a vague indication of walls. An image was forming. To Barata, it appeared to be his father. To Serania, it appeared to be her mother. To both of them, the mental connection was strong.

'What do you wish to see?' It asked them, with no expression on the face and no added imagery to the communication.

Barata took the lead and thought, 'We don't know.' They were gently aware that they now seemed to stand fully in the room. Serania's living area had disappeared.

'What can we access?' Serania thought, intrigued by this new look into the Core.

Normally it was a simple two-way communication system, you thought about what you wanted and into your mind came the answer. You made a command it was obeyed. No visual stimulus. This was different and a little unnerving, to the both of them.

The image synced again, 'The last part of your access code indicates a specific area. I can allow you access to that. Please relax. The information will come to you.'

Barata was only partially aware how the Core worked. How human minds had been adapted to use the Core, a valuable and useful tool for a high state of existence. All humans after a certain age have the same Nano

implants package. They all work the same way, and all get the same benefits on demand. Nobody gets any superior versions than anyone else.

It's then a careful training of the individual's mind to contact a chosen recipient, using the Core as a conduit. The Nanos, intercept the brain's impulses, code them and broadcast onto the recipient, whose trained mind decodes them into a recognisable thought language.

The range a mind can broadcast electrical energy and thought patterns can be many metres. With practice and enhancement it can be extended, but with receptors and booster stations everywhere, in transports, houses, Battleships, it can be projected across the Universe. Everything going through the Core.

Using the mind solely as a communication system has its problems. Projecting complex concepts and ideas requires creative imagination on the part of the recipient and sender. To express something as a simple image could replace a single word or multiple words. Stringing together images replaces sentences. Sometimes, a large and complex image could portray a concept, idea, or sentiment.

Most adults took this form of communication for granted, living with it for most of their lives. They didn't know how, or why it worked. They'd no need to know, nor reason to question it.

But once in a while, there was a genetic hiccup where someone excelled in certain areas. These people are recognised and monitored by the Core. People selected to be on the Battleships were felt to have minds more in tune with the decision-making processes required during a battle. These people also excelled in the vanishing concept of curiosity. Citizens like Serania.

Like all humans, Barata had taken the existence of the Core for granted. Now here he was ... seemingly *inside* the Core. Illegally! If Vara knew this

For the most part, the access to the Core was instantaneous. Ask a question and you already know the answer, it appeared that quickly. But here, Barata was aware his mind had wandered, and no thoughts had arrived as promised. Then something changed.

He was still aware of Serania by his side, still aware they appeared to be inside a white room. But now information surrounded him. All around him were images of facts and details. All he needed to do was reach out and pick a subject with his mind, and he would instantly have that knowledge.

He touched an image that looked like a scene from a war. In his mind, he knew it was a battle against Earth, a war a few hundred years previously. Why had he seen no records of this? Why was it kept a secret?

He felt Serania grasp his hand. A tingle went up his arm, his heart-rate increased. 'Look.' She thought with an image of awe.

He turned to see her touch something that appeared in both their minds. Complex imagery formed in their mind's eye. A new colony setting off from Earth to a planet designated Quatro-Zero Paradiem42. The coordinates were all there and they could see into the far reaches of space for its location. There was a flurry of images which left them with an overall story of the planet and its fate. Information from the planet just stopped. After a certain date, it seemed to disappear.

'What happened to it?' Serania breathed.

'It doesn't say. Can this be true all of this? Are we dreaming in some way?'

'I'm sure it's true. I want to know what happened to that colony. It can't just disappear, can it? Not without some explanation. I thought the Core knew everything.'

'All the facts the Core knows are right here. This is all there is.' Barata's imagery showed confusion.

'Then it's not enough. I must find out what happened to that planet.'

Barata realised he was still holding her hand, he was hesitant to release it. He thought, 'There's so much more of Earth history here to learn, absorb understand.'

'We can come back again?'

'We can ... but ... we're here now

'I'm going to those coordinates and see if that world is still there if humans are still alive there. Are you coming?' She spoke, avoiding eavesdropping by the Core.

'Now? You're so impatient' Barata's voice was cautious.

'So I've been told. Coming?'

'Wait. Just wait.' Barata addressed the Core, 'Can we return at any time?'

The voice in his head seemed friendly enough as it implied, 'Anytime you need. Use the codes.'

Barata was thinking quickly, aware that Serania had let go of his hand and was moving away from him. Looking for the exit?

'How can we tell who else has access to these vaults?'

His long-passed father's image synced. 'I can't tell you unless you have a higher authorisation.'

'Where can I get that from?'

'Whoever gave you this current level of authorisation.'

'And Romeo's dead.' Thought Barata to himself.

Serania had disappeared now, and he thought of her living area and saw the white walls evaporate and her room become clear in his vision. She was standing looking at him and he could see a faraway look in her eyes. The secret of the Core was already shrouded in its own mystery once again.

'This is so unauthorised, Serania. We can't' He spoke quietly.

'So you say, but I'm going now. I'd like you to join me, it'll be an adventure. Might lead to nothing, might be interesting.' She could see he was undecided. 'You might be making history. At least *seeing* history.'

An hour later they were standing on the original off-world settlement established a hundred years previously. Was it also destroyed by the same creatures that had nearly destroyed Earth?

'Where do we start?' Serania mused aloud.

'There's nothing on this planet that's been Nano produced, they don't have that technology.' Wondered Barata.

'Did they ever?'

'They must have. Just to get here without Nanos was impossible.'

'Somewhere along the way they lost it, or it was taken from them.' Thought Serania. 'There must be a clue here somewhere.'

'Large building, over there' Barata.

Serania followed his eyes, and the craft moved towards an outcrop of angular structures. From what they could see it had been the largest building on the site.

A large two-storey building dominated the derelict village, now surrounded by rubble. Over its roof was draped an irregular and angular shape.

'It looks like a creature' said Serania.

'It's a ship!' Barata said. 'One of the alien ships that attacked them.'

‘A hundred years ago. They just left this place? Didn’t try to re-establish the colony?’

‘Look for an entrance.’ Barata commanded the transport.

The vehicle slowly circled the structure, looking into every dark crevice and crack. No way in.

‘We better get inside another way then’ Barata said.

In an instant, they were inside the building. The short distance Blip travel took no time at all, there were no barriers to the Blip drive. Strong light from the transport showing detail as the walls all around them were washed in a warm light. The ceiling had collapsed and the debris on the floor was metres high. Dust covered everything.

The building’s ground floor was one large room. The upper floor may have contained more rooms. But the alien craft had crushed these, breaking through the floor and pushing building materials into the large room they now stood in. Even as Barata moved his feet, dust motes rose to sparkle in the transport’s lights.

‘How we miss the Core’ said Serania from her reclined position. ‘We don’t have any idea what this place could be.’

‘I think I do.’ Barata spoke almost distractedly. ‘As a War Council member I went to the shipyards where they built our Battleships. Yours too. There were buildings like this, they housed the Nanos. They were Nano control rooms. Engineers and specialist used to programme the Nanos and organise the construction of ... everything.’

‘Nano House.’ Serania echoed as if savouring the word. ‘Never heard of them.’

‘Nano engineers would be over there, by those desks and hard screens. Programming the Nanos and activating them. They were the communication conduit between human desire and Nano design and construction. A Nano House produces Concept to Completion in seconds, or minutes.’

He moved towards the bank of desks, some now crushed under rubble. Some screens flattened or smashed by the weight from above. The soft dust making small noises under his feet.

‘Once activated the Nano House could provide dense cubes full of programmed Nanos, something like our Exchange Cube. The engineers could take one outside and a ship could be constructed within minutes. Anything large or small, from the very sand the cube rested on.’

Serania looked at the devastation and tried to make sense of it. ‘Are the Nanos still here?’

'I would expect so. Nanos are just machines, no real intelligence. No life or death in a biological way. They're told what to do, they do it and then they stop. From that point on they are harmless and useless until given then next instruction.'

'So these Nanos could still be activated?'

'Possibly, but we mustn't do that, even if we could. We'd be interfering with off-world activities.'

'But they were allowed this technology! They were supposed to use it to develop their planet. All we would be doing is carrying out that order. Resetting the clock.'

'It would change them completely. They have travelled too far down a different path. Do you really think we should change that?'

'If they want us to, we should.'

'They don't know the consequences. Look at us. Do they want to be like us?'

'I think they might.'

'Would they LIKE being like us?'

'They should be given the choice.'

'Possibly. But not by us. Besides, we don't know how to reactivate these Nanos. We need instruction from the Council before we do anything. I'm getting out.'

'They don't even have electricity, Barata. Something we left behind hundreds of years ago. Would that help?'

'Yes, of course, it would, but they've no way of generating it.'

'Could Nanos generate it?'

Barata pushed his memory back to when he'd trawled the Core and the billion bits of information he'd gleaned over the years. His research had been random, often tangential to his original search.

He recited what he thought were his original conclusions on the subject. 'Nanos can create electricity, by changing the way the electrons behave in each atom. Electric current involves shoving electrons into one end of the wire and taking the same number out the other end. The electrons just move along from one atom to the next.'

'I didn't understand one word of that. Can Nanos make electricity, or not?'

'Yes. They can make anything, even to changing the behaviour of electrons within the smallest thing in the Universe, an atom.'

'So without Nanos, no electricity' She sounded depressed by the news.

Barata was moving around the room looking for anything familiar. Something that could indicate this place could be reused if they had the materials and the knowledge.

Serania said. 'Is this place safe?'

He smiled at her, the thin mouth hardly moving. 'It's been safe for a hundred years.'

'I mean ... to us. Bacteria?'

'Our bios will handle anything this world can throw at us.'

'No one from Earth knows we're here, Barata. Not even the Core.'

'Yes, we do need to be cautious.' He stepped forwards and dust puffed up around his feet. With a command, a thin invisible shield now covered his body. Oxygen being fed to his blood supply directly by bios creating it from surplus atoms in the tissues, fat and muscles of his body. He moved easily and confidently towards one wall where odd structures stuck out. He wiped the surfaces with his hand and the cloud of dust obscured his vision.

'Does this place have something different about it, to you, Barata?'

'In what way?'

'I can't ... something intangible. Something other than sight and smell?' She looked all around at the same grey dust layered over a hundred years.

'No.'

'Something ... strange!'

'We're in a strange place.' He stepped forward and a crunching noise underfoot halted him. He had to wait for the swirling dust to clear before he could see what he'd found.

'Even allowing for that ... something what was that?' Serania's voice held an edge.

'What?'

‘A noise ...?’

‘It was me. I just stepped on something fragile. There’s no one else in here but us. Hasn’t been since the bugs crashed their ship on top of it all.’

The dust was settling as Barata tried to keep still. In front of him appeared desk panels and screens that looked a little familiar. Control consuls, he’d seen similar before. But these were very old technology. He wanted to step nearer and so looked down to place his feet. Something white was sticking out from the dust. He bent down and picked it up.

It was a human bone. His breath escaped in an involuntary gasp.

‘What is it?’ Serania was leaning forward from her recliner to get a better view of him, her bios enhancing her vision for the distance. Barata was still shrouded in a light mist.

‘I’ve found the technicians. They perished with the collapse of the buildings. That answers one question.’

‘Which one?’

‘Why this is now a Nano-free world. The only people that could keep them going were in here. All killed outright by the crash. New Earth didn’t stand a chance.’ Barata sounded thoughtful, and a little saddened.

‘Yet some survivors are still here. How difficult it must have been to go from Nano to open fire technology.’ Serania spoke with a touch of admiration.

Barata synced, ‘And how we must be mindful of our own bios going that way too.’ He gave a mental command to their transport and received a reply. ‘We only have a day before they revert to an inert state.’

‘We still need answers.’

‘Then we need to get them quickly.’

‘The ancient said there was someone who might know more. We need to speak to him.’

‘We’ve finished here. Bones and dust cover these answers.’

Barata moved back towards the transport, his only clue to its location was Serania sitting in mid-air looking anxiously at him. He understood what she’d meant by a strange feeling in this place. Was it a background hum of some kind? Nothing he was receiving mentally, or aurally.

He was aware of the crunching noises he was making as he moved and regretted his desire to walk on these ancient burial grounds. He felt a shiver run through his body and he appreciated what Serania was feeling. From

his past, delving into ancient historical data, he recalled that the further back into history one went, the more people were influenced by supernatural events. Was this what they meant? They made a sentimental attachment to areas where the dead still had their remains. The ancients anticipating that the souls of these people still inhabited their last resting places. Science had since proved that this was not a fact. But if a person wanted to believe in such things, they had a habit of appearing true.

‘Time we left.’ Barata said, a little more casually than he felt.

‘Agree.’ She responded, betraying her own uneasiness.

In the blink of an eye they were at the clearing in the woods again. The darkness surrounded them. The starlight this time blocked out by the overhanging trees. Night sounds reached them. Animals on the hunt or trying to avoid becoming prey. They stumbled through the undergrowth and reached the edge of the woods. Ahead the dusty street, two thousand years out of date for the residents’ anticipated lifestyle.

‘We should find a better way than this for getting to the village.’ Serania said, hinting at her disappointment with Barata’s planning. A stumble over a hidden root also adding to her point.

The main street was silent and dark now as they moved slowly forwards. The dirt road only just visible by starlight. They saw the larger building of the Communal Hall up ahead and listened for any sign of life.

They’d both decided that the fewer people that saw them now, the better. They wanted little fuss, just a few answers and get away quickly. Serania, more than Barata, now wondering at her wisdom to come here at all.

Outside only one torch remained alight, the normal routine disrupted by the excitement of the early event. The front door was wide open and inside absolute darkness. They stood and listened. Every nerve being stretched in using their natural capabilities as well as those supplied by their bios.

The single torch threw a few indistinct writhing shadows across the walkway and onto the dirt road. The unusual lighting and the silence unnerved them. They suddenly felt vulnerable. A state of mind almost unknown on their home planet.

A sound was coming from inside. A strange irregular, guttural sound. They crept forward, their bio-enhanced eyes quickly adjusting to the gloom. In the dense darkness of the large room, they saw something to one side. Someone was resting on top of that old wooden table. As they crept nearer, they realised it was the ancient. He must have returned to his seat of power. He was making a noise and didn’t hear them approach.

‘George Charles?’ Barata spoke quietly. The noise continued.

‘What’s he doing?’ Serania thought.

‘Not sure. I think it’s maybe ... he’s asleep.’

‘Ahh ... yes ... of course. We should stop him.’

Barata reached forward and gave a gentle shake of the ancient’s shoulders. The grunting stopped, then started again. He shook harder. It took several attempts before George Charles began to wake up.

His mouth was like he’d slept in a sawdust pit. His head was pounding, and he couldn’t even remember his name. As he looked up, a lot of memory returned with such impact that it prompted him to stand up too quickly. The pain in his head escalated, and he vomited all over the floor. Missing his visitors by less than a metre.

Serania’s nostrils were assailed by a pungent smell that made her step back before the bios could nullify its full effect. Barata had the same reaction but managed to stand his ground. At the sight of the ancient performing such a strange ritual in front of him, he stepped back, to allow more room. He’d not read or seen anything like this before in the Core’s histories.

George Charles struggled to regain composure. Embarrassment swept over him with such force, he was violently ill again on the dirt floor. He sank to his knees and wanted the floor to swallow him up.

The visitors could hear him mutter, ‘Why me?’ Several times. After a few moments, he gathered his strength and determination and stood up. Shakily at first, holding on to the firm structure of the table.

‘You’re back?’ George Charles said as levelly as he could. The nausea was subsiding and excitement taking over now, the bad taste in his mouth forgotten.

‘We need some answers, George Charles.’ Barata said.

George Charles shook his head, ‘So do I. You first, what do you want to know?’

Serania stepped forward until the smell from the floor made her stop. ‘May we go outside?’ she asked.

George Charles realised the problem and nodded. He waved them ahead of him and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. If the Notable Senior and Consul could see him now his reputation would be demolished. The way he felt ... he didn’t care. Where were the elders, AGAIN!

Outside the air was fresher, the bios turned up the olfactory sensitivity and Serania appreciated the smell of the cleaner air. On Earth that had been restored many years ago and yet it was something, everyone took for granted. There were no unwanted odours or pungent smells anywhere.

'We'd like to speak with the elder you mentioned earlier.' Barata said.

Earlier? What time was it now? He had no way of knowing without the sun. He looked around at the deserted street. To the north for the first glimmer of dawn, there wasn't any.

'He'll be asleep now.' Was his reply.

'We can stop him.' Serania offered.

George Charles sat heavily on the raised sidewalk. 'Let's wait until its light. He'll be up and able to talk then. If you wake him now

'What do we do until then?' Serania.

Barata sat beside George Charles. The ancient had his eyes closed and was moaning softly, he wanted this misery to end. For these people to go away and talk to someone else. He played with the idea of taking them to wake up Notable and Council. But they'd blame him for his lack of servitude. These were important and possibly vital visitors. He had to pull himself together.

'What happened to your Nanotechnology?' Barata asked quietly.

'What

'You lost it all during the invasion. Is that right?'

George Charles shook his head. 'I ... can't I wasn't ask Albert. In the morning.'

Serania looked up and down the deserted street again, aware of the silence and the solitude of the village. Her home was similar, silent all the time. Only the wild animals living out their lives in the surrounding countryside made natural noises. The birds in the morning, the predators at night.

'Where does the Albert live?' Serania said.

George Charles tried to sit up but felt nausea rising. He pointed down the street and said. 'Where that stupid little step sticks out, that's his house. He's very deaf. He might not hear you knocking.'

'What is deaf?' Serania said as she walked toward the small wooden structure the ancient had indicated.

Barata was leaning forward, and the bios had to work hard again. 'Do you ever clean yourself?'

George Charles was puzzled by the question. 'Yes of course we do, at least once a week. How often do you clean yourself?'

‘Never.’

‘Well then’ George Charles wondered at the necessity of the visitor’s question and puzzled more by the visitor’s answer.

Barata stood and followed Serania. She was standing looking at a wooden door. ‘Knocking?’ she synced. ‘How do I do that?’

Barata dug deep into his memory and reached forward with his hand, made a fist and rapped on the door loudly. The sound echoed down the street, the pain in his knuckles a surprise.

‘Noooooo’ came from George Charles as he was hurrying towards them. ‘Quietly. We don’t want to wake the whole prepping village!’ His voice husky in trying to talk quietly with a hangover.

The run had cost him his breath and another wave of nausea made him hurry to the side of the house, where he further emptied his stomach. How much more could it contain? The retching continued for a minute until he could collect himself once again. He stood and moved back to the front of the house, just as the front door opened.

Albert stood looking through sleep blurred eyes at two tall alien-like figures before him. Nothing surprised Albert, life had been long and rugged. The twist and turns of fate had developed in him a cynical and yet acceptable nature to anything that circumstances could throw at him.

The visitors studied his emaciated figure, dressed in a rag that hung from his shoulders and almost touched the ground. It had no shape, no colour and barely any material left in it.

‘Who the preg are you?’ was his friendly New Earth greeting.

‘Serania.’

‘Barata.’ His voice only slightly deeper than hers.

‘And what do you want? It’s the middle of the night’ He saw George Charles moving into his line of vision. ‘Georgie. That you? What’s going on?’

‘We’ve visitors, Albert. They’re from Earth.’

Albert looked between three apparitions now. ‘Earth? What Earth? This is Earth.’ A bony finger pointed towards the ground. The other hand drew the thin rob- like material around him, he was beginning to shiver.

‘Perhaps we can come inside, Albert?’ George Charles said in his best persuasive quiet voice.

‘Earth’s gone. Destroyed by the insects, everyone knows that.’ Albert getting his best defensive stance ready.

‘Apparently not, Albert. These People ... have come to tell us that. Perhaps we should listen to what they have to say?’

‘They’re not from Earth. You’ve only got to look at them to tell that.’

‘A lot has happened since you left Earth.’ Serania said gently.

‘Not that much. Look at you. You’re not human. Can’t be!’

‘We’ve developed ... Albert. You’ve just gone backwards.’ Barata said.

‘Don’t believe it. Won’t believe it.’ Albert started to close the door.

‘They want to ask you some questions, Albert. Only you can know the answers.’

‘Hummph.’ The door closed.

‘I knew morning would be better.’ George Charles said with a shrug. Feeling his stomach churning again.

Serania stepped forward and rapped hard on the door. She stood back, and the door opened quickly. ‘I told you

‘How did you defeat the Lepids?’

‘Lepids? What’s Lepids?’

George Charles was getting a little strength back now. He needed to get this situation in hand. ‘The insect invaders, Albert. They want to know how come we beat them, and Earth couldn’t.’ As he said it he realised the confusion that was still in his mind. Was Earth attacked by the insects a hundred years ago, or not?

‘Now? They want to know now, at this time of night?’

‘They want to leave, Albert, after they get answers. Only you can help them.’ Saying the words they were leaving sent a shock of fear through him. He couldn’t just let them go, the whole town of Sanctuary wouldn’t forgive him.

George Charles saw the hesitation in the old man. He knew vanity was one weakness in him and hoped he could play on that now. He couldn’t let these off-worlders go without getting some credit for helping them. Council and Notable would be on his back for years if he couldn’t fully account for himself. ‘Can you remember, Albert?’ George Charles said, needing to move around the side of the house again. He must hold on, just a little while longer, he told himself.

‘Who’s that?’ A voice from the next-door house. ‘Is that you again, Albert?’

‘Go back to bed, Martha Beth.’ Albert waved them inside and walked ahead of them.

The house smelt of unclean laundry. The bios reacted, so did George Charles and excused himself for a moment.

A solitary candle was almost burnt out on the small wooden table in the centre of the room. Albert threw some clothing off two chairs and invited his guests to sit on them.

Serania didn’t wish to be rude to these people, but had to say, ‘Can we do this outside?’

‘Not with Martha Beth listening. No. What was the question again?’

Barata moved nearer to the old man. He’d read somewhere that closer contact made humans friendlier towards each other. The smell assailed him, and he gave the bios a moment to adjust. ‘How did you defeat the insects, Albert? We really need to know.’

Albert smiled and sat on the chair by the table. He picked up two more candles and lit them from the remaining stub of the flickering one. He waved his two visitors to sit with him at the table.

Barata and Serania opted to sit on the floor and they were still taller than their host. In the yellowing flame they could see every line in his face, every year he’d lived was all there. It was a fascination to Barata, a great puzzlement to Serania. She’d no idea what to expect of an old colony ... but this?

Albert poured some water into two beakers and pushed them towards his guest. Adding the candle nearer so he could see them clearer. Then a plate was pushed towards. The strangers were puzzled by what they were being offered.

‘What’s this?’ Barata said as politely as he could.

‘Meat and bread. Please eat.’

‘They don’t eat, Albert.’ Came from George Charles, standing in the doorway. Waiting for another bout and a quick exit.

‘Water?’ offered Albert.

‘They don’t drink, either.’

With a grin that further creased his face, if that was possible, Albert said, ‘What else don’t they do?’

‘I’m guessing at “a lot”.’ George Charles said with a smile on his face.

'You'll join me in a drink, Georgie, won't you?'

'Not today, thanks, Albert. Not ever.' The thought made his stomach churn.

'Well how the world has changed since I went to bed last night.'

Serania was looking at the artefacts on the table. In the flickering light, they had a glow of their own. The bowls were finished with the finest material Serania had ever seen. Soft smooth finish graduating to an almost cell-like texture. Whatever animal this skin had come from, it must be beautiful. She felt a chill that bordered on horror at the thought of slaughtering animals, it was not in her experience. Nor had Earth needed to kill animals for food, or clothing for hundreds of years. Death in any form was totally alien to her. Hunt it, kill it and eat it. Who was the first ever to do that?

'The insect attacks? You were going to tell us how you stopped them?' Barata said with a slight edge to his voice. He was surprised to realise he'd spoken with some form of emotion. It seems the humans responded to this. Albert refocused on him and was thinking.

'You need information from us you say. But ... I'd like information from you'

'What does he mean?' thought Serania.

Barata said, 'Such as?'

'So, you *say* you're from Earth....what's it like back on old Earth these days? Has it changed much? My father spoke a lot about it and how sad he was to leave it.'

'Why did he leave?' Serania couldn't help herself asking.

Albert took his time answering, his mind was searching way into his past. 'Colonists ... they called us. Sent out all over the Universe. Earth was too small for us ... they said. They selected some, others volunteered.'

'And your father?' from Serania.

'Selected.' Albert's voice had changed into a deeper tone. Barata thought there was some meaning in that voice he was missing here.

Albert downed a cup of liquor and poured another. With a glance towards George Charles at the door, he turned back to his guests. 'They were just getting to grips with cleaning the place up. Earth, I mean. We, humans, have a habit of prepping things up, Mother Earth being no different. The Nanos ... you still have Nanos ... right?' Barata nodded. 'They were the answer to everything. Better lifestyle, no more hunger, no more poverty. Nobody got sick anymore, nobody died. So, the population exploded far too

quickly. Nanos had to develop inter-planetary travel, so we could continue to expand the human population.'

Another gulp.

'The Blip drive.' Serania said helpfully.

'The what?' Albert said.

Barata thought. 'That came later. We can't give them this sort of information.' To Albert, he said, 'And your family were amongst the colonist to this planet? QZP42.'

Albert nodded. He waited a moment before saying. 'We're talking about *our* lives and history here. We need to know about yours too.'

Barata said, 'We can't give you that information. We're honour bound not to interfere with other planetary states, their lives and how they live them. I'm sure you understand.'

'No I don't. Just you being here is interfering with our lives. How come that doesn't contravene your ... "planetary laws"?'

'Careful what you say, Barata. This man's very alert for an ancient.' Serania's warning imagery sent a chill through Barata.

'What would you like to know?' Barata said as calmly as he could.

Albert looked at George Charles who could only shrug. 'You've been watching that candle flame ever since you came in here. Not seen one before?' Albert said quietly.

'No.' Serania said.

Albert made a noise like "humph." 'You don't eat, sleep, or drink. You've never seen naked flame before. What IS it like on your world?'

Serania looked at Barata before saying, 'It's very peaceful. We've no worries, no need for anything. We have the freedom to spend our days doing exactly what we wish to. It's like living in a ... paradise'.

'Paradise? That must be nice. What gets you out of bed in the morning? What's your stimulation to face another day?'

'We don't have a bed, we do not need sleep.' From Serania.

'The insect invasion?' Barata said, trying not to inflect any incorrect emotion into the statement.

Again, Albert was digging far back into his memory. 'When we arrived here, we were reliant on Nanotechnology. Everything, and I mean

EVERYTHING, was based on that. The little preppers build everything for us. Materials as strong as anything in the Universe, as light as a bird's wing. But totally useless for any other purpose. We couldn't re-use it, re-shape it, anything. We had no real metal.'

'Neither do we.' Barata mumbled, not sure if it was the right thing to say.

'You obviously must still have light and power. It's the one thing we desperately miss here.' Albert was leaning forward now. 'If we could only get metal and manipulate it. Who knows, in a few generations we could make machinery that could give us power. Then there'd be no stopping us.'

'Just like the history of Old Earth.' Barata.

'Exactly that.'

'Somewhere in our records would be the way to do that.' George Charles said from the doorway.

'Records? What sort of records?' Serania included excitement in her imagery to Barata.

'Where are these records? We'd like to access them?' Barata said eagerly.

'You can't, no one can. They're buried where no one can get at them.' Albert said pouring another drink.

'Where?' Barata.

'In the Nano House in the old settlement.' From George Charles.

'If I could get you in there, Albert, could you show us them?' from Barata.

Albert's eyes narrowed, his still sharp mind analysing. Barata could now see these subtle changes in the human expression and knew it meant the old man was thinking, calculating.

'You think you can get into that building, do you?'

'We already have.' Serania.

'We spent years trying to break in.' George Charles was moving into the room now, interested.

'Can you find what we need inside?' Serania said.

'I was just a child at the time, but something might stir my memories.' He looked at George Charles and there was a look that passed between them. Barata did not understand what it meant, but there might be some other reason these people wanted to get into that building.

'Take me there.' Albert said very quietly.

'Tell me how you defeated the insects.' Barata spoke firmly.

'I can tell you better by showing you, from inside the Nano factory.'

Albert was almost standing, now at the same eye height as his guests.

'We will have to take him there.' Barata thought.

'Take the other ancient too.' Serania thought.

'Do.' Barata synced. He stood and Serania followed him. Barata noticed the intensity that had come onto the ancient's faces. Anticipation? Excitement?

Barata said, 'We'll all go. Stand close together and close your eyes.'

Barata sent a thought to Serania, 'I'm getting the transport to pick us up. It'll be quicker and more ... secure.'

'Do.' Serania responded.

The four people stood in the centre of the room and Barata pulled them all closer together.

There was a shimmering in the candlelight noticed only by the visitors, and all four were invisibly eased into a seated position. The visitors facing front, the residents seated behind them.

In a blink, they were being released to the ground inside the Nano factory. The radiating glow from the transport showing details of the room, but no details of the craft. The people from New Earth opened their eyes to look at their own ancient history.

'How did you do that?' said George Charles in awe, eyes wide open.

'We must ask you not to relate this experience to any of your companions. We're seriously breeching our remit here.' Barata said.

Albert looked quizzically at him and said, 'You breached it just by coming here, didn't you?'

'You must not be influenced by our off-world technology.' Barata said with an edge to his voice.

'Where're the historical records, Albert?' Serania said, now she too had an edge to her voice.

Albert took his time looking around, memories returning to stimulate his actions. He was moving quicker now, walking to consoles and touching them and sweeping dust from panels. He was soon almost hidden in the cloud

dust. There was the occasional crunching sound as he moved. He began coughing.

‘We’ve been visited twice now, here on Earth.’ Albert looked back at the visitors. ‘Once by people who wanted to kill us. Now by people who what exactly is it you want to do with us?’

‘We’re here for information.’ Serania said.

‘Not to help us then?’

‘No.’ Barata said flatly. ‘Where are the records?’

‘Somewhere in here. I’ll find them. Eventually.’

‘And how you defeated the insects? Is that in here somewhere?’ Serania.

Albert shook his head. ‘No. It’s in here somewhere.’ He tapped his forehead. ‘I’ll find that too. Eventually.’

He coughed and bent over double, George Charles hurried over to him. ‘He needs oxygen.’

The visitors looked at each other. ‘How do we get that?’ thought Serania.

‘We can’t help you there.’ Barata said.

‘You’re little help at all.’ George Charles said helping Albert out of the cloud of dust. ‘You could open this place up and let some air in. That’d really help.’

‘I’ve no idea how to do that.’ Barata thought.

‘Does the transport have that capability?’ Synced Serania.

‘Even if we could, what would the repercussions be? We allow them access to this high-tech equipment, it could change their destiny.’ Barata responded.

‘It was destined to be theirs anyway, fate dealt a bad blow for them. Can’t we help?’

‘We mustn’t. I don’t know how we’re going to explain all this when we get back. To compound our misdemeanours by helping a colony emerge from the dark ages how’s that going to look?’

‘How sure of you anyone back home will know of any of this?’

‘Our transport will have data of everywhere we’ve been. Some of what we’ve said to each other, like now. All downloaded to the Core. If someone wants to look into it’

'Reintroduction of Nanos would make a world of difference in how we can survive and progress.' Albert said.

Serania thought. 'Can he read our minds?'

'Unlikely.' To Albert, he said, 'We've already explained that we can't.'

'You've explained nothing. A series of cannots and will nots is all we've had from you. What CAN you do to help us?' Albert said, fighting a coughing fit.

'Did you bring water, Albert?' from George Charles. Albert shook his head.

'Then send for some.' Suggested Serania.

'And how am I going to do that? Smoke signals?' said George Charles.

'What are they?' Serania asked.

'Prak!' Albert said spitting onto the ground. 'Typical Earth, no help at all. Especially when most needed. You let us down before and now you're doing it all over again.'

'What do you mean?' from Barata.

George Charles looked up in anger. 'I told you. We told Earth of the insect attack on us and were told they were attacking Earth too. They couldn't spare time and effort to help us. We had to fend for ourselves and that's what we've done for a hundred years. But the critters never attacked Earth, did they?'

'Not at the time you said they attacked you, no.' Barata said. 'Who told you Earth was under attack?'

George Charles spat out some dust onto the floor. 'How the prak would I know, I wasn't even born.'

'Albert was.' Serania said quietly. Getting the feel for use of light and shade in the spoken word.

'Albert only remembers stories his father told him.' George Charles said, sitting down on the ground next to his old friend. Another small cloud of dust rose around him.

'Does he remember how the insects were defeated and where your historical records can be found? That's all that matters right now.' Barata almost shouted.

'To you it is. But to us here, there are issues way beyond that.' From George Charles.

'We're losing their support.' Serania thought. 'Give them something they want.'

'Like what?'

'Information.'

'What do you want to know about Earth?' Barata said hesitantly. Feeling further out of his depth than ever.

'Take us there.' Albert said through streaming eyes. 'Take us back there, let us look for ourselves.'

'We ... can't do that.' Barata said.

'Then I CAN'T tell you anything about the insect defence or give you our histories.' Albert dropped his head and spat onto the ground.

'What's he doing that for?' questioned Serania silently. 'It looks disgusting.'

Barata stood up to his full height. 'I don't believe you could ever do either.'

The silence in the room almost had an echo.

'Get me outside. I'll tell you what you want to know.' Albert seemed defeated, his coughing got worse.

'Group together.' Barata said.

When they were all touching, it was but a second before they were outside in the black night, fresh air filling their lungs. Albert seemed to cough even more with this fresher air.

The stars were bright and Serania looked longingly at them. I want to see more of them. I want to go there looking at the brightest in the night sky.

'Right there.' She thought.

'What?' from Barata.

'Nothing.'

The transport had Blipped them outside and released its passengers. At Barata's command, it had moved a few metres away and remained invisible to the human's eyes.

Albert was sitting on the dusty ground, his large nightshirt splayed out around him. George Charles was watching his old friend with concern.

Albert had stopped coughing. 'Any water?' came out as a croak.

'Can we provide some?' Thought Serania. Barata nodded.

She moved towards the transport, her back to the watching three people standing in a tight circle in the middle of the desolate early settlement. Her back concealed, the transport granted her command for a Nano-made flask filled with water. She picked it up from the ground where it had materialised and returned to the group. Albert grasped it gratefully and drank deeply. He held on to the strange looking flask. It felt ... somehow Non-tactile.

Albert looked briefly at George Charles before saying, 'I'll tell you the full story from the beginning. As it was told to me by my Mother, until she died, then my father and some uncles, or whatever. I'll tell you the truth as I know it. If we can find those historical records, they'll substantiate a lot of what I'm about to tell you.'

George Charles was nodding.

'I've told this story many times to people that wanted to listen, wanted to learn. I've embellished this tale a little, just to make it more interesting to the listener. On many a cold night, I've sat by a fire with the eager and happy faces of individuals all around me. Mostly children. I wanted our history to go down through generations. And as we no longer have any recording facilities it now has to be by word of mouth. Paper is a pain to make and can't be relied on to survive the centuries. Besides, who can write anymore?'

He took a drink of water and several deep breaths. He once again had a captive audience.

'I'll tell this story and you can decide what part is an embellishment, what part wishful thinking and what parts are facts. If you ever get to the archives, you'll see that most of what I say is the truth.'

'I'm getting the transport to record all this.' Thought Barata.

'Is that wise? When we get back

'I'll erase it if necessary.'

'K.'

Albert made himself comfortable, used to sitting in the cross-legged position. His voice became lighter and more ... precise. In his own mind, these were merely students from his own village. People needing to know what he knew, and no other knew on this planet, the real history of their lives. What had happened, how things had manipulated their destiny, changed the very way they lived, influenced the very way they thought.

His delivery was dramatic at times and occasionally melodramatic. Sometimes his voice soared, and at others it was whispering to hold the listener's attention. His eyes saw nothing but his story, his voice dedicated to the telling of it.

Occasionally sipping water, wishing it was something stronger.

'When the Old Earth colonists first landed, they were full of optimism and excitement at carving out a new and better life for themselves. They saw themselves free of the increasing dictatorial Earth government policies that were pushing more and more of Earth's population off-planet.

People had visited QZP42 planet for over thirty years previous to the first colonists landing. The advance parties had gathered knowledge, discovered the chances of survival and all this information enabled the selection of equipment to be determined. Even the number of colonists needed to occupy and survive on this planet.

The first settlement site had been chosen and the two colony transports had touched down after an event free journey of only three years. Enthusiasm was high.

On arrival, they had the technology of the time, Nano-based equipment that could turn any material into resources and energy. Crude compared to what you visitors seem to have on call. All energy was housed in, and provided by, one structure, that housed the Nanoengineering machines.'

He pointed a shaky bony finger at the devastation that was the Nano House.

'The bio Nanos of the day were still in relative infancy. They were complex enough to change the composition of the human body to eradicate all known virulent diseases. On this new planet, there were no new diseases detected that could affect the humans. Longevity was assured, and they could handle any minor accidents using the bios.

When the colonists first landed, they explored the planet for a few years. The planet is 80% water with two poles of land. Both similar, both volcanic and thrusting high into the sky. The Earth-based Council of the time had chosen one they thought was more advantageous than the other.

QZP42 is very like Old Earth in many ways. Where there's land it's lush and teeming with life. It's an orderly food chain hardly changing from year to year. Post-Nano the local animals provide food, clothing and beasts of burden. We also used them as a basic form of transport. Animal fat provided candles for light and some cases heat.

There are no predators that could threaten mankind. There are night-based hunters which hunt smaller mammals than themselves. No pack animals hunting. There's never been a need for attacking weapons, just hunting ones. Knives, spears and bows.'

Serania felt a mental shiver run through her at the thought of hunting.

‘There’s a bark of a tree that when lit, could last for days. This gives colonists prolonged light when needed. Clothing is made by weaving strands that come from a leaf of a bush. Some animal skins provide warmth in the colder season of the year.

Seeds they brought with them were planted and tended, now the plains are covered in crops. Two crops a year, but it’s still physically hard work to get them harvested.’

A coughing fit halted his speech. George Charles sat near him and patted his back. Serania wondered why he was hitting the old man. Slowly Albert recovered enough to carry on.

‘Isolated from other human contacts, the early colonists were free of germs. Living a healthy lifestyle, good food, work and some exercise. They could expect a normal healthy lifespan of at least a hundred years or more. With Nanos, a little longer.

‘There’s no vegetation available that can give us the basics of drugs, or tobacco. If there was, the population would soon become addicts.’ His brief laugh ended in a coughing fit.

George Charles smiled and said, ‘Albert thinks that bit is funny.’

Albert recovered and continued, ‘At least that’s what the elders of the original settlement thought. Despite the basic human trait for distraction and addiction, the population has always seemed to be happy.

There are sugar-like substances and something that does the same work as yeast, so alcohol is a by-product the settlers can enjoy. Our only vice, I’ve heard it called.

Everyone is expected to contribute to the community. Both in effort and to increasing the population. They encourage families to grow, there’s no family limitation as there was on Earth at the time.

The first personal name structure of the new colonists is based on the relevant line they come from – male, or female. The oldest man will have his father’s name and then his. His son will have three names and so on. They planned to limit the number of personal names, maybe five, then drop the first, and so on. It’s a form of recording the generic tree of history they were making. There are few implements to make a written record and no digital recording systems. Just tribal memory.

Before leaving Old Earth it was decided that there would be no religion on New Earth. Nanos had reduced the basic need for it. There was no poverty, no hunger and no disease to worry about. Few people needed a spiritual crutch to hold on to, to get through life.

Humans always had a deep-seeded need to control their own lives. This New Earth wanted to govern themselves. Break away from the Old Earth's controlling dictates as soon as possible. Just as other successful colonies had done.'

Albert took another swig from the flask and took a breath. His eyes focused on his companions and he smiled. 'How'm I doing so far?'

'Very good.' Volunteered Serania.

'You all right, Albert?' from George Charles.

'I wish this was something stronger?' Albert's look at Serania was met with a hard stare. 'Never mind. Where was I?'

'When are we going to get to the invasion?' synced Barata.

'Patience.' thought Serania with a lightened imagery.

Albert seemed to be thinking, trying to recall where his story had left off and where he should begin it again. He suddenly seemed to remember.

The insect war was a very short-lived affair. All community leaders thought they were lucky in how it was discovered. The insects sent, what was probably a scouting party, and they landed on the opposite pole to the settlement. The Insects had decided this planet had the natural resources they wanted to plunder, so they sent their recovery force down to start extracting it.

At the time, the transports still worked well, kept going by the continually updated Nanosystems. Our colonists had the trained engineers that could make that happen. The insect's mining operation was discovered almost by accident. Now the insects became aware of the colonists and the colonists aware of them within a few days of each other.

This settlement had only a few days before the insects sent an attack force to destroy the occupiers of a world they wanted for themselves. The settlers had no ready-made defence system and no weapons. But they had a very dedicated and excellent team of Nano designers. Those engineers imagined what they want to see, and it appeared on the screen. The computing systems interpreted that and instructed the Nanos. The Nanos built whatever was needed.

In those few days, they'd come up with a make-shift defence system, a Nano dome. This hemisphere covered the whole of the settlement and was constructed of Nano disassemblers. It disassembled anything organic passing through the invisible wall. The insects were literally taken apart and left as dust, still inside their crippled Battleships.'

'Finally!' a release of frustration from Barata.

'I told you to be patient.' A thought from Serania.

'Old Earth was contacted for help, but they told the under-siege settlement, Earth was too busy fighting off the insects too.

The insects hurled a whole battle fleet at the settlement and the Nanos ate them up. The insects had no answer. They stopped attacking the humans and quickly mined the other pole and left before the colonists erected another system to stop them there as well.

When it was all over the colony had to count the cost of our survival. The costs were high.

The ships that fell out of the sky damaged whole areas of the settlement. Particularly the buildings that housed the Nanomachines and their engineers. It was a single blow that changed the course of our history.

Nanos need constant supervision, reprogramming and maintenance. With too little technology available and nothing being replaced, or updated, the Nanos slowly stopped working. Bios used to be renewed every day as a safety measure to prevent them from taking over the body completely. All bios were designed to stop functioning after a few days. Human bodies were quickly on their own, left to nature's whims. No way to replace the lost technology that was the lifeline.

The original settlement became unsuitable. Without the protection of Nanos and unlimited power, the flat plain of the settlement was vulnerable to weather and encroaching nature. The survivors stripped all the craft they could and hauled the material to the new settlement.

They moved to a higher plateau and started by living in caves that were nearby. Slowly they built suitable accommodation, this eventually allowed us to erect more solid buildings. They planted crops and harvested. They built a new community and sustained life.

There were a few fuel cells of lower technology that lasted a few years that helped them get established. But after that - they were in the dark ages. Candles made from animal fat and light from wood fires.

The ships they arrived in were built by Nanos and made of a material designed for the job, it cannot be re-purposed. Even in a forge, the metal-like material cannot be made into anything else. Consequently the age of steam, and ultimately electricity, was not a possibility without metal. We searched everywhere for some ore, or mineral we could convert into metal. But ... there is nothing. We did, however, find Gold. Lots of it. The irony is that ordinary iron ore to us was worth far more than gold.

When Nanos died, so did technology. We're living permanently in the Stone Age. We want a bronze and iron age but will never achieve it on this planet. Nanotechnology got us here, but the technology stagnated as

resources and development stuttered and died. Human ageing had returned, and our numbers started falling.

Old Earth looked like it had perished in the alien attack. They stopped calling QZP42 New Earth and gave it their own name and that is what they always refer to it as, 'Earth.'

Albert drained the last of the water and coughed once. He was shivering, and George Charles suddenly realised the old man was dressed only in the thin bed garment against the cool of the night.

The sun was lightening the sky to the north and George Charles took off his thick, rough and worn coat and put it around Albert's shoulders. Barata and Serania's bios had maintained their body temperature at a constant, so they didn't notice the onset of the cold.

'We must help him.' Thought Serania.

'We're not supposed to.'

'We must find a way. Distract him.'

Barata looked at her for a clue and she turned her back, walking to where the transport was waiting. Barata moved towards Albert and helped him to his feet. 'Let's get you back home, Albert.'

Albert was shaking his head. 'We need to find the records. You need them to prove I was telling you the truth.'

Barata took a quick look at Serania, who was walking towards him, now carrying a heavy blanket.

'From the transport's Nanos?' Barata thought.

'Do' She said with a smile. 'I found this in the transport.' She said to Albert.

She threw it around Albert's shoulders and watched as steam began to rise from the old man. The Nanos sensing a cold area and heating it up automatically.

George Charles looked puzzled. What transport? I can't see any transport. Where did it come from? Out of thin air?

'At least we know how they defeated the bugs. Simple. Why didn't we think of that?' Barata thought.

She looked hard at him. 'We were caught off guard. Like they were.'

'You still want the records?' Albert said, feeling better already.

‘One last try?’ Serania said with her best smile.

‘Oh I know where they are ...’ Albert said walking towards the crushed building.

‘He just wanted to tell us his story.’ Thought Barata.

‘Crafty old man. Crafty that’s not a word I’ve ever used before. Not sure if I really know its true meaning.’ Serania thought.

‘I think you have the right word and meaning. This ancient has survived on a lot less than being crafty.’ Verbally he called out, ‘Wait a minute, Albert. You can’t get in without us.’

The dust inside had long since settled and moments later Albert shuffled towards a bank of consuls and opened one of the lower doors. He pulled out a large box and opened its lid. He waved for Barata to look inside.

By the light from the transport, he could see many small spherical dark objects. ‘Records.’ Albert reminded him. ‘What you can play them on, I’ve no idea. Whatever it is, you’ll need power and we don’t have that here. Not anymore.’

Despite the minimal disturbance, the dust was growing around them like a shroud and Albert was coughing again.

‘Let’s get back outside.’ Offered Serania.

In a blink, they were outside, and the sun was peaking over the large mountain range to the north. There was a shimmering in the air as the dew heated up.

The small plateau was more visible now and they could see it was surrounded by an irregular mountainous region. One small gap to the north showed where the original settlers had trekked to their new home, all original population long gone now except for Albert. The sun showed the devastation in more detail. The winds over the century had whipped earth, sand and dust all over the exposed plateau. Eroding, polishing, covering. Dust. Everywhere dust.

A thought struck Barata. ‘Some of this dust must be from the disintegrated aliens.’

‘Then where are their crashed ships?’ Serania questioned.

They looked around and Barata had another thought. ‘We’re looking at them.’ He pointed all around him. ‘They’re not mountains. They’re alien spacecraft.’

As their eyes adjusted to an extreme long-range vision by their bios, details of the distant ranges were clearer. Here and there a strut was

sticking up. A series of curved bulkheads could be seen, now covered with dust and wind-blown debris. 'So many ships!' from Serania.

The original settlement was becoming quite haunting for the two of them. 'It's like a graveyard, or mausoleum, to the past glory of the first pioneers.' Barata thought. He paused before thinking, 'All this was the height of technology in its day, abandoned and left to rot.' To himself, he thought, 'I'd like to have a look at those alien craft at some time.'

Serania was feeling a new emotion. She could not give it a name, could not express it, couldn't find the imagery. She looked at Barata to see him looking around the desolation with interest. 'What're you thinking?' she asked him.

He did not reply straight away. 'How ... sad this all seems' That was the feeling she had! Sadness. She'd never felt that before.

She synced, 'Such a waste. If only Earth had sent help to these people. They would be similar to us right now.'

She felt another strange feeling, something was touching her. 'What they have now is something special. K?' She thought. She became aware that Barata had his arm around her shoulder. 'Barata?'

Barata removed his arm. 'What? Oh ... I Well Don't you feel the ... chill here, like Albert? Something about this place' He moved away towards the two locals, syncing, 'People become complacent with the technology of their age. Anything that went before, or comes after, is strange to them. We're experiencing two extremes here. The ideal would be something in-between.'

Serania knew what he meant, but words and thoughts were hard to form. She thought, 'We must have had that on Earth at some stage. And we let it go.'

Barata nodded and looked at the ancient talking quietly to George Charles. 'The inhabitants now, are similar to the humans as they were a hundred years ago on our Earth. Only these generations had to fight to survive, communicate, rationalise and think. We never had to suffer that hardship. Neither should they have.'

'We could be helping them, Barata.'

'We could, but we shouldn't. The repercussions at home'

'Earth doesn't even know these people exist!' Serania synced with an emphasis she'd not needed before. 'We should return and tell everyone that there's a forgotten world here, abandoned by earlier Earth leaders. OUR ancestors!'

‘We’re still bound not to interfere.’ Barata thought with less conviction than he felt. ‘They may decide to keep things the same way and not acknowledge these people. We can’t predict what the Council will decide. Maybe even

‘What?’

‘Treat them as potentially dangerous. Isolate them. Or even ...’

‘What? Destroy them!’

‘Anything is possible with the Council.’ Serania walked to catch him up, holding on to his arm. He felt a tingle run through his body.

She knew he could be right in what he was thinking. ‘Why can’t we plant some of our bios in them and give them a chance to survive?’

Barata turned and looked at her. Her eyes were ... different. Something there ... what? He pulled his mind back to her question. ‘It’s not a simple matter of transfer, there’s a learning curve of how to use them. There’s a mind reconstruction, quite a complex process. Skilled as we may seem to you, we’re not qualified to take that project on. Neither would we be allowed to. A breach of the Colony Self-Containment Policy.’

That’s what it was! Intensity! Her eyes showed an intensity of thought, rarely seen in normal conversation. He recalled he’d never seen eyes like that before.

Serania persisted. ‘Take a few of them back to Earth and give them that technology with the approval of your Council. You can fight for them, explain what happened. It’s Earth’s responsibility.’ Her grip tightening on his arm. ‘Help them survive here. Give them a life they deserve, a life like ours.’

Barata was totally aware of the pressure of her hand on his arm. He fought to concentrate. ‘I’m not so sure that current Earth is a better lifestyle than what they have here now.’

She responded immediately, ‘It has to be better! See how they struggle

’ Her sympathy was with them. She knew Barata thought so too, but he was holding his Council line. He was right, she knew it. But so was she.

‘Can we fix all these things, get them back as they were before?’ Serania thought.

‘If we do that, we’re directly interfering with a new planet’s growth. It’s forbidden by the Defence Council, Inter-Planetary Council, – all Councils. Each colony has its own set of laws and ways of living, not to be interfered with, or manipulated by anyone else. Earth made that promise when they

left its jurisdiction.’ Barata was struggling to keep his thoughts sounding too firm and negative.

Serania was struggling too, to use a more persuasive imagery to her thoughts. ‘This isn’t like any of our other colonies. They’ve been cheated of their right to a good life. Cheated by Earth itself.’

Barata was aware of her argument and his sympathy towards it and her as a person. But he knew his duty. ‘We could change their lives forever, not necessarily for the better. I’ve heard about this happening before on other colonies. We do not know these people. These are throwbacks of mankind - over a hundred years ago. They have emotions we’ve long since eradicated. Ambition, greed, cunning, envy, jealousy. A deep sense of archaic culture willing to rise above others at all costs. If we were to release these basic instincts major problems might result. That’s how wars start, tribal wars. We need to observe, discover and walk away. We can seek advice elsewhere, but we cannot directly do anything that’ll affect these people.’

Her hand came away from his arm. ‘I’m sorry Serania. I can’t let that happen. Neither can you.’

George Charles was walking towards them and Albert stayed back looking on intently.

‘I’m sure you’re having some sort of conversation, silent though it might be. And ... I’m sure it’s about us ... but’

Serania tried to smile and Barata just waited for the rest of the man’s thoughts.

George Charles continued, ‘I was talking with the leaders of our village last night. Early morning, actually. They said if you were to return we’d like to have a party in your honour.’

‘Very Kind of you.’ Said Barata.

‘What’s a party?’ said Serania.

PART 6

"Though this be madness, yet there is method in't."

Cress’ mind remained clear and something it was worrying her, Serania always answered her call quickly.

She looked out through her clear walls at the tall surrounding trees. She was in the middle of a forest, trees were her pastime. Rare for anyone to have a hobby or interest, but Cress knew she was not just anyone.

Light trickled through the foliage and moved randomly over the leafy floor of the woods. The dappling effect showed on her pale green floor, moving images of trees and leaves. Her smooth curved walls a counter-point to the angular shapes the wood's shadows threw at her. Constantly moving, like her mind. It distracted her; she needed a distraction. Her mind came back into focus and she thought about Serania again.

Cress called the others, they all responded almost instantly. She called for screens and her three friends gazed out at her from the almost transparent panels floating in front of her. The screen hung in front of her woodland view, partially obscuring it, partially transparent, letting the life of the forest still be part of her home.

All looked solemn. But then, everyone did these days. 'Where the prak is she?' Cress synced as soon as their eyes focused on her. The three women looked almost identical. Smooth heads, long faces, small mouths, small ears and tiny nostrils. The eyes large and almond shaped. Rarely any visible facial expressions.

'Who?' ventured Vanora without any imagery.

'Who the prak do you think I'm talking about! Serania! Where is she? Anyone contacted her recently?'

'Yesterday, after the escape. Why the panic?' Pattia thought.

'Because' Cress floundered. 'I've been trying to contact her for hours and she's not responded. Amahan doesn't know where she is. She must be in trouble.'

'And you must calm down, Cress.' Vanora stated.

Cress was standing, bent forward almost nose to nose with the calm and unexcitable image of Senora. 'Don't you think it's strange she suddenly disappeared like that?' Her eyes wider with indignation.

'What COULD have happened to her? Do you think?' from Vanora.

'Well ... anything. She could be Dead

'Nobody dies these days. If she's not responding it's because she doesn't want to respond. You know how independent she can be sometimes.' Vanora.

'But why wouldn't she want to talk to me?'

'How many times did you call her?' asked Pattia.

'Ten. Or twelve.'

'I'd call that pestering and wouldn't answer you at all either.' Pattia said with what passed as a smile.

'She's had a prepping upset, give her time to adjust.' from Donella.

'So have we!' Exclaimed Cress. 'We don't go cutting off our friends from our world. Do we?'

'I haven't spoken to you since yesterday.' Thought Vanora calmly. 'You haven't been calling *me* ten or twelve times.'

'I ... particularly wanted to see how Serania was. She has a Court Martial decision due any minute. Of course, I want to contact her.'

'Me you can do without, is that it?' Everyone could tell the lightness with which Vanora passed the thought.

'Not the point!' Cress had to admit. 'Where could she be?'

'She could be ... anywhere. But she's most likely to be ... somewhere quiet and wanting a little alone time.' Senora thought.

'That's not like her.' Cress defending her own attitude.

'It might have been like her before the battle, but afterwards? I think we may have all changed. Look how aggressive you're turning out to be.' Senora persisted.

'I didn't want "alone time". Why should she?'

'As you said yourself ... she's got a Court Martial decision. You don't. None of us do.' Vanora thought.

'She has an award too. Have we forgotten?' Donella thought sharply.

'Do we get one too?' from Pattia.

'What for? We did nothing. None of us did. It's all smoke from the Councils. Prak knows why we're being singled out' Cress thought. 'The ship did all the work and saved the day. Not us.'

'We're what's left, Pattia. We're the ones to be seen as heroes, the tangible result of a major victory. Take your medal and try to smile.' Donella broadcast strongly.

'We used to be friends.' Vanora thought. 'What happened to that?' with added humour in her imagery.

Cress thought, 'The bug wars are what happened to that. Sticking us on the flight deck of a battlecruiser didn't help. Abandoning us in space made it worse.'

'But we're still friends. Still colleagues. Still crew. K?' from Vanora. There were a variety of hesitant responses of 'K.'

'Then let's behave like that tight band of sisters.' From Vanora. 'Who last contacted her?'

'Me. Just after we all got back home.' Donella.

'How did she seem to you? Any different? Upset?'

'Shaken perhaps. Nothing more.' Donella.

'No one after that?' A shaking of heads. 'Cress, you said Amahan didn't know where she was?' Another shake of a head. 'Let's see if he does now.' Vanora's calmness was paramount.

All the women felt the familiar tingle of a contact being made.

Within seconds the voice and thoughts of Serania's house mind came through to them, he recognised instantly the four women he was in touch with. He knew what they were going to ask him and knew they were going to be a little disappointed with his answers.

'I don't know.' Was his response before they could ask any questions. 'She's off-Core. She left home with Barata yesterday.' The smooth emanation from the artificial mind was designed to be calming and credible.

Cress didn't think so. 'You *must* know where she is! The Core *must* know where she is.'

'Then ask the Core.'

'I have.'

'And what did it say?'

After a hesitation, Cress answered, 'It doesn't know where she is.'

'Anything else I can help you with, citizens?'

Cress broke the connection. A fear was building up that had first started a few hours ago. On a doomed Battleship and her terrified body ejected into space. Fear was uncommon in this life, now she seemed to be getting a large share of it.

'So we wait until Serania decides to return to us.' Vanora thought, using calm imagery.

'We can't just wait.' Cress. 'She might be in trouble and needs our help.'

'Then she'll ask for it.' Vanora.

They all felt the ping in their minds and waited for the identification of the caller. Councillor Vara.

Their minds closed from open contact, private communication between friends on the second level. 'What the preg does he want with us?' from Donella.

'Looking for Serania.' Cress offered.

'Say nothing. We don't think she's missing if that's what he wants to know.' From Pattia.

'Do.' From the others.

'Sorry for the interruption of your four-way, ladies. Vara, Defence Council. Just wanted to keep in touch with you all.' The thoughts were smooth and calm. His image appeared on a fifth screen and they could see the noble bearing he exuded. His long face tinted a light brown, a black robe invisibly fastened at the neck and flowing down below the image.

The mental agility to balance one conference communication with three separate ones was well within the abilities of the women. Vara would argue his adeptness was greater. Especially with his two-hundred-and fifty-years' experience of life and the sixty or so of the new mind communication development for the Core.

He knew they'd be communicating with each other and any careful scrutiny of their faces wouldn't give away their hidden thoughts. But that was a two-way thing as well.

'Cress. Lovely view of your woods behind you and is that a statue I can see there?'

Cress turned and picked it up. It was a metre-tall leaping deer, carved out of wood. It was exquisitely detailed, the pale wood polished and glowing richly in the artificial light of her room.

'I sense that you carved that yourself, Cress?' the thought smooth and effortless.

'Of course, he knew you carved. He knows everything about us.' Donella.

Cress was determined to be polite. 'Yes. I use my mind to control the Nanos, who removed the areas of wood from a piece. If I make a mistake, the Nanos can always replace lost wood to the sculpture.'

‘It’s unusual for anyone to indulge in any form of practical art. I congratulate you.’

‘Thank you, Councillor. I’ll create one for you. What subject would you like?’

‘Very kind of you. An owl? All seeing.’

‘Consider it done.’

Vara turned his even gaze on to Pattia. ‘You chose a mountain life, Pattia. Breath-taking views, but perilous, do?’

‘Safe, Councillor. As safe as any other home.’

‘A lovely lake, Donella. I love the rippling effect. Very calming.’

‘Flattery will get you nowhere.’ Cress under her breath and through her mind. ‘What about Vanora’s view? A brick wall.’

‘Is that a ... wall behind you, Vanora?’ Vara.

She turned as if seeing it for the first time. ‘I needed a focus for contemplation, Councillor. There’s nothing as mind-numbing as a uniform image. A wall will do as anything. If it offends, I can remove it?’ Her smile was false, and everyone knew it.

‘No need. Does not offend. Have you heroic ladies rested from your ordeal?’

Personal images flashed unbidden into each of their minds of the evacuation of *Romeo* and their hurried and frightful return to their homes. Vanora was the spokesperson in Serania’s absence. She broadcasted a relaxed and gentle image. ‘Yes, thank you Councillor.’

‘It must’ve been an awful experience for you all. Very frightening.’ The women nodded, remaining silent. He represented authority. He had gravitas and command, but he was no threat. They supposed nothing in their lives to be a threat. Their escape from the battlesphere felt far more like a real threat.

‘I just wanted to alert you that we’re planning a medal ceremony. Universal broadcast, of course. I wanted to make sure the crew of the C2451 were ready and able.’

‘We will be, Councillor.’ Vanora eased out the imagery. ‘When will it be?’

‘To be decided. I seem to be having trouble finding your Captain. Anyone know where I can contact her?’ The women looked at each other overly dramatically. Shaking heads. ‘No one?’ Vara had a practised smile, everything he did was practised. For two-hundred and fifty years he had

been practising. 'Where can she be, then?' The smile was almost genuine looking. Smiles were rare, genuine smiles rarer still.

'I'll call over to her home later, Councillor. Get her to contact you.'
Vanora.

'That would be helpful.'

'What the prak happened, Councillor?' Donella forced her mind above any of the others' thoughts.

'We won a war, ladies. YOU won the war. Your crew and your ship won the war. It's over. You can relax and believe you've finished being onboard a Battleship ever again.'

'I don't know why we were there in the first place.' Cress.

'Cress!' warned Vanora silently.

Vara's imagery was calm and official. 'It was a sudden turn of events. It certainly must have seemed that way to you. We ... on the Defence Council, had very little time to communicate tactics, strategies. In fact ... very little information about the relevant areas that were being manned by people such as yourselves. In fact, the battles lasted for such short periods, we barely could control the information that was coming into us. And certainly not have the luxury of getting information out.' His smile remained fixed.

'But ... how was it ... WE were there? Why us? Why then?'

Vara leaned forward as if to whisper. 'I've been asked that a dozen times already.'

'And what's your answer?' Pattia asked quietly.

Vara settled back to tell a well-worn story.

'They fended off the initial Lepid attacks off by using Battleships controlled only by artificial minds. They discovered the bugs were finding ways of nullifying these minds, by attacking the electronic elements of all functions. Disrupting electronics, waves and beams. Once the mind was disabled, so was the ship. They decided, then, to put in a human crew, whose minds were not at all susceptible to electronic interference. This was a backup precaution.'

'But why us? Who selected? We didn't know each other before the *Romeo* crew was formed.' From Cress.

'The Core selected you. The Core selected everyone involved in the war. We're blessed with a Universe full of human beings who are at peace with

themselves. Our lives are leisurely and not easily ... disrupted. By outside, or by internal forces. We are not, by nature, anymore inquisitive, or forceful.'

'And we ladies are? Is that it?' from Donella.

'That's exactly it. Not everyone is the same. But many people are alike.' from Vara.

'So ... we're different from the norm?'

'Very different. Different enough to win the war for us. Good selection process, do?'

'Cut the prak, Councillor

'Careful!' from Vanora.

Cress went ahead anyway. 'We all know we had nothing to do with the ending of the war. We'd nothing to do with running the ship. We're never included in the running of it. *Romeo* never lost command, never needed us. A trained monkey could do what we did.'

'Ahh ...' the smile remained. 'But it's what you COULD have done in an emergency. That's the key to all the selected citizens being on board the Battleships.'

'He doesn't know about *Romeo* having a glitch interlude with another Battleship. He'd think everyone's insane if we tried to explain that to him.' Thought Cress quietly on the second level.

'Let's hope he doesn't find out. I couldn't explain it at the time, never mind afterwards.' Donella.

'What was *Romeo*'s fascination with that other ship? Was that why he ditched us, do you think?' Pattia.

'Who knows? But it seemed like he wanted to save us before destroying Dog's Breath.' Vanora.

Vara continued his charm offence, aware they were talking to each other. 'You're all distinctive personalities. There're only a few hundred citizens selected from there on Earth. A few more around the Galaxies. But you should feel special. The Defence Council felt better prepared to meet our foes knowing there was some human intellect onboard each ship, in case the ship lost communication with home base. With the bios ready to repair any physical damage, we knew you'd be the ideal backup for the artificial minds. You should be relieved that you were not required at any stage. But ... if ever you were

Cress made a closed thought to her colleagues. 'Yes ... we know about the ship mind's little idiosyncrasies. I had heightened them to the level at which an intelligent human being would function. Sometimes that causes a dichotomy, with what's real and what's synthetic. How do artificial minds handle the juxtapose?'

'Are you saying *Romeo* went insane?' Donella.

'So insane he threw us off the ship?' Vanora questioned.

'Vara, why did *Romeo* destroy himself?' from Pattia.

The hands spread again. 'We just don't know. He fired himself into the super-heated heart of the bug's home planet and destroyed everything. No records, histories. Nothing survived. We'll never know.'

'He wasn't mad enough to sacrifice us humans in the blaze. He saved us. Didn't he?' Pattia.

'It looks that way.' Vara.

'It was that way. He saved us then mankind.' Cress. 'Can't be too insane to do all that. Something the Defence Council couldn't achieve.' Cress was on the edge of broadcasting a dark imagery with her thoughts.

'Careful, Cress.' Vanora.

'We'll never know, Cress. Unless ... any of the crew has more information? Something that may have been forgotten in the heat of battle. The fright of flight?'

Vanora settled her mind and relaxed her thoughts. 'As we've said, the ship didn't involve us in any of the processes of the battle. Had it done so, we might have something to comment about. As it stands, we're just as puzzled as the Council, why he made us all abandon ship with no warning.'

'Well ... if anything does come to mind. Let me know. If you find your Captain, let me know that as well. Until later, then. Thank you for your time ladies. And ... well done.'

The image on the screen faded and the familiar ping in their minds announced his departure. There was a collective release of held breath.

'There's something about that man' Donella had to express her disquiet.

'Let's just stay clear of him. And let's find Serania.' Cress thought.

'We should visit her home and wait for her there. Do?' Vanora thought.

A minute later their transports silently rested on the roof port and the women stood together. For the first time for many weeks they were face to face with each other - Just their Captain missing.

A light rain was falling, and the temperature had dropped. None of the four realised the difference as the effects of water and temperature on their skin were controlled by their bios. However, the look of the rain was slightly casting a downward spirit on them. 'Let's go inside.' Suggested Donella.

The elevator expanded to allow all four to stand in the opaque unit. It lowered them slowly to the living floor, and they stepped out.

Amahan registered their temperament as they entered his domain and adjusted the lighting to warm the tone of the room. With a gentle imagery, his thoughts came to them. 'Serania still has not returned. Anything I can get you, ladies?' He registered that none of the women wanted anything, so he withdrew from their minds to wait for further instructions if needed.

'Still no Serania.' Cress said with a mental sigh.

'We wait.' Pattia.

'Lovely view.' From Vanora. A seat forming beneath her, so she could recline and look out over the green wet valley spreading away below.

'She said she liked the countryside.' Cress.

'I prefer the lakes.' From Donella.

'We know. You've mentioned it ... a few times.'

'Well I do. I like swimming in them.'

'What? What's swimming?' From Pattia.

'When you submerge yourself in water. In a lake.'

'Why would you want to do that?' from Cress.

'Why do you carve?' Donella said moving towards her. 'You should try it before decrying it. It's ... a very unusual sensation. But you have to turn your bios off first, otherwise, you don't feel anything.'

'Not for me.' Vanora.

Donella was smiling. 'Try ... standing the rain. It's raining outside now. Go on. Turn off the bios and try it. Feel it on your skin, smooth and lovely. In the water, you float like you're flying. You move through it at your own pace. When you're finished, the bios can dry you off instantly.'

'I'm perfectly comfortable with none of that experimentation. You're becoming a little ... unbalanced, Donella.' Pattia thought.

'It's the reaction from the battle.' Offered Vanora. 'I think we've all changed a little. Don't you?' She looked around at each of them. They were non-committal.

Vanora reclined and looked at her friends. 'What we've been through back there, is unique. Few people in our generation, or any other, have experienced that kind of trauma.' A few nodded. 'I can only speak for myself, but it was the worst moment of my life.'

'In what way?' questioned Pattia.

Vanora allowed her memory to drift back to their time on the ship. She remembered the small main cabin and the recliners they were all strapped into. She recalled the apprehension, even after the hours of training they'd all gone through. She remembered their instructors, machines, not humans. Vanora remembered when they all first met.

It was at the Academy. It was three months earlier.

She was Blipped into a large room. The off-white walls fading indistinctly into an unknown distance. The ambient light enough to see, but not too bright. The bios didn't have to correct her vision. As she arrived, she became aware of hundreds of other individuals standing quietly in the open space. All silent, with their own thoughts and equally unsure of what was about to happen.

As she looked around, she saw people of many ages. Although individuals might age, or remain young, it was the fashion these days to change it occasionally. Sometimes you may be the early twenties looking, sometimes fifties. All the while the actual body age being into the hundreds.

Almost instantly recliners formed under their bodies and Vanora felt the pressure lift and settle her horizontally. The incoming communication sounded in her head and she absorbed the next few messages, along with all the other people in the room.

'You have been chosen. You are special. You are being given the opportunity to defend your planet against the invading hordes of our enemy. It is your duty. Your destiny. Your right!'

For the next few hours, they bombarded their minds with information. A detailed breakdown of a Battleship, its component parts. Which areas affected them, which needn't. They were each allocated a specific task aboard a ship and instructed how to perform that task. Vanora's mind had quickly become weary, unused to so much information in such intense bursts.

They were given a few minutes rest while their bios strengthened the weakened cells and bolstered the brain receptors. Feedback was made through the Core how each candidate had responded to the training programme.

Then it started again.

When the recliners eventually eased their cargo to the floor, Vanora was almost dizzy but much more aware of what lay ahead of her.

A brief message to prepare for a journey and the hall disappeared, and she was standing inside a much less pleasant room. This was smooth grey material, purely functional, Nano-made and not for aesthetics. Next to her were four other women, she assumed from the hundred or so in the teaching area.

They looked at each other and nodded. Before they were able to communicate, a large panel opened in front of them. They saw through to another grey room, equally featureless and spartan. They moved through and waited. Once more recliners rose to support them. They felt the invisible restraints gently tighten around their whole bodies and waited.

They were unable to move any part of their bodies. Even their heads became gently restrained, they could not look across to see another crew member.

'My name is Serania. And, apparently, I'm captain.' The voice gentle in their minds.

'Pattia. Navigator.'

'Cress. Weapons operator.'

'Senora. Communications.'

'Donella. Stand in for all of you.'

Serania. 'Welcome crew. Welcome to Battleship C2451. We need to give her a name. Any suggestions?'

'Aphrodite.' From Pattia.

'Classic. I think that's apt. Any other suggestions?' from Serania. 'No? Then we'll go with that for the moment. All safely secured?' Serania heard the responses in her head.

'This is just a training cruise, ladies. Just so we can get a feel of what's happening. We're about to be directly connected to the brain of the ship. She'll keep us informed as to what's happening. If the brain should fail ... for any reason we must be ready to take over and continue with the battle plans. Questions?'

‘What the prak am I doing here?’ from Cress.

‘Fighting for your planet. We’re crew now. We have a unique bond. We’ll do our best or die trying.’

‘It’s the dying part I’m having trouble with.’ Donella.

‘We won’t die, our bios won’t let us. Will they?’ Pattia.

There was a sudden twist which they felt through their minds and bodies. The ship was on the move. Images streamed into their minds. A forward view from the ship as it powered into deep space. A blur and sudden sharpening of stars. Silence. They’d arrived at their training area.

In Vanora’s mind, people were talking. Several people. Humans and machines, almost indistinguishable from each other. She took a few moments to separate the Fleet Command from the onboard mind. It quickly occurred to her that they had given the ship’s brain a male personality.

She connected to the rest of the crew and thought, ‘Aphrodite won’t do it. This she’s a he. How about Hercules? For now?’

The crew were too busy assimilating all the information pouring into their minds from the ship’s brain. Vanora soon lost that train of thought as she tried hard to keep up with the communications she was being bombarded with. Battle tactics, positioning strategies. Energy fields. Propulsion usages. Where was the enemy? How many? Attack, retreat, defend.

All the while their bodies were being thrown in different directions. Energy absorption systems took the full force of the Battleship’s wild manoeuvring, but not all.

An hour later they received a message that said they could stand down. The first trial run was over. Take a rest.

Overworked bios raced to repair neuron damage. Re-establishing regular heart-rate and blood pressure. Reducing adrenaline. Balancing the delicate compounds of the human body.

In the heat of simulated battle, the mind is focused and active. Far more than any other activity a human has a right to endure. In the distant human past, the fight for survival was the nearest thing that came to this level of mental activity. This was fight, or flight - at its extreme.

For Cress, physical activity was not required. Her mind alone had to control the complex weapons the ship-of-the-line had to use to defend mankind from the Lepids.

She knew she wouldn’t be able to cope with 16 different weapons aimed at 16 different targets. She hoped, with practice, she’d be able to manage 4

or 5. The problems being target acquisition, estimating trajectories, and the position of the target at the impact of the weapon. All at a lightning pace and a rapidly changing situation. One moment a target is a priority, a second later another target becomes the priority.

During training, the ship instructed her how to run the weapons for a while. She found it difficult but exhilarating. Like no experience of her life to date. She knew in a real battle, she'd be useless.

They were using an asteroid field as a training ground. In training, they were firing at asteroids and general space debris. Nominating space junk as a potential enemy and destroying them. She watched them disintegrate in a blast of high energy. The weapons were impulse lasers that sent a short burst of ultra-high energy that would burst through almost anything. The results were instant and dramatic. You knew it was a hit when it blew up. As each stage of the training progressed, the time intervals shortened, and the number of multiple targets increased.

When the training was over Cress felt drained. Her body relaxed, and she felt her heart-rate had increased rapidly. The bios soon got it under control and she felt normal again. But her mind was racing, the bios couldn't do anything about that.

The ship was under the overall direction of the Defence Command. They decided where it went and what targets to engage and destroy. Pattia given responsibility for its control, she was to be navigator and pilot in the event of a ship's brain malfunction.

During the first few exercises, she soon became proficient at controlling the ship. Its size was not prodigious, all it needed to be was a gun platform. 16 weapons bristling from its hull, a propulsion unit for battle and a Blip drive for the long-distance travel. The size of a small building, as ugly as a dung beetle, but lethal and incredibly fast.

The Nanos would build one within an hour. Programming the ship's brain took a little longer. The training of the human crew even longer. As the Nanos could convert any material into any other material, just by rearranging the atoms, materials were no cost. A few large rocks could become a battle fleet in a day.

The human crew, if damaged during the war, were easily bio repaired and launched back into battle, or repaired where they lay in the ship. But as the campaign entered its second week, the human crews were less enthusiastic to put themselves through the mental torture that was real life or death battle. More was required.

Once Pattia was given command of navigation, the ship responded easily to her mind only. Pattia could concentrate her mind on a point in space that was selected by Defence Command. The blinking beacon of light indicating their preferred destination. Point and thrust.

Pilots were never to use Blip travel in the presence of the enemy. It was a recent and most useful discovery and they wanted to keep it a secret from the bugs. During the battle, a simpler, but very efficient propulsion system, drove them to do their work.

At the end of the training sessions, Pattia was less relieved than the rest of the crew. She enjoyed the power of the vessel, the command of something that bent to her will. She felt its every move through her body and knew it was in her control. She enjoyed the brief sense of power it gave her.

How she would fare in battle still remained to be discovered.

The Battleship was in constant communication with Defence Command, so were the several thousand others in the battle fleets. In reality, the Core handled the hard work, passing over relevant communications to individual Fleet Commanders. These directly contacted their ships with updates and instructions. It was Vanora's job to monitor all of these interchanges. If at all possible!

She felt her mind slow right down with the overwhelming amount of information being passed between ship and Command. Far too much compounded imagery for any one person to manage. By using carefully selected training techniques, the ship's mind taught her how to separate what was relevant, from what was not.

Her task would be to take over in the event of a ship's mind failure. To continue with the instructions to the pilot and weaponry officer until a new brain could be brought online.

She was to be updated with an alien force activity in the area. And when possible, updated with how the battle progressed generally. This came later, in the heat of battle, when she found out just how strong she was and just how weak she could become.

Donella was instructed to observe the ship's structure. Discover any damage to the integrity of the hull, or any atmosphere threatening breach. They taught her how to seal off compartments to save oxygen and maintain propulsion status. If anything failed, she could report to Captain, the ship's brain and Defence Command. They tasked her with finding a solution first if possible. Hull integrity became important. But also her monitoring of the ship's brain too. She was the first to realise that the brain in hull C2451 was developing a personality and an obsession for another Battleship.

During exercise, it wasn't evident that the brain was anything other than battle ready and efficient. It was too efficient, the Defence Command had to force the mind to allow the human crew, "a go with the toys".

Being new to battle, Donella was slow to become aware of the real depth of *Romeo's* proclivities towards another Battleship of the line. For a while, she blamed herself for this.

A human crew needs a human Captain. All commands and instructions officially went through the Captain. The person to take responsibility in times of uncertainty and stress, a calm mind in a tense situation. Serania was deemed that person by the Core, and the Defence Council selection committee.

She had to try to keep up to date with all the things that were happening during the simulated battle. Listening to the coms, watching the weapons success, or failure. Understanding where the ship was and where it was supposed to go next. Report any enemy kills. Check anything that had been missed by coms, navigation, or ship structure. Monitoring the ship's brain and checking it was keeping to protocol.

The Battleship was supposed to report to the Defence Command before it made any tactical decisions and pass it by the human Captain as well. During instruction, all went well. Though after due consideration, Serania realised she'd not understood eighty percent of what she was supposed to. Come the battle, things would have to be improved, but that's what the drill sessions were for.

These sessions were mentally draining. The bios could boost the body, but the human mind was a delicate thing. No amount of neuron rearranging could calm a stressed person. The downtime between each practice session was spent discussing how desperately inadequate this crew were. The five women knew this could not continue at this level for long. Something had to give.

The bios allowed them to have all the energy they needed for their training. They didn't require sleep or rest. The trials went on, the simulation accelerated. For three days they were inculcated with weapons, navigation, communications and the desire to stay alive and kill bugs while doing it. When the training came to an end, the exhaustion was in the minds only, but it had taken its toll.

The five women had rested on a small rescue vessel, somewhere around the asteroid field where the training had taken place. They were numb with mental tiredness and could not be bothered to think at each other at all. The usual grey walls faced them, offering no colourful visual release from their stressed minds.

'What the prak was that all about?' questioned Cress.

'If that was just training what's a battle going to be like?' from Donella.

'We're all dead.' Pattia claimed. 'As soon as the bugs attack we're all dead.'

Serania. 'We need to improve. We can do it, they think we can. We're chosen for this, ladies. We can do it.'

'We need more training,' From Donella.

'No prepping way.' Cress. 'I'll turn the weapons on the Defence Council first.'

'We said Do to this mission, Ladies. Do it is.' Serania had thought.

'Let's just see what the first skirmish is like. Make a decision based on that. K?'

'K.' Was the response.

Two days later the Lepids attacked.

During the first real battle with bugs, the five human crew members were not in touch with each other as individuals. There was no time. The pace frenetic, the consequences terrifying. Because of the intensity of battle, each command kept as simple an imagery as possible. Anything complicated could be misunderstood, or misinterpreted. The language abbreviated for rapid broadcast and reception. Think fast. Understand fast. React fast.

The concentration so intense that the first skirmish was all over before the crew thought to take a breath. It had lasted a mere thirteen minutes but seemed like an eternity.

Defence Command had contacted the C2451 to say that the defence formation had shot down four hundred and twenty-five enemy ships, to the loss of one of their own. That seemed a cause for celebration, but the crew were too mentally tired to think, or do anything. Let someone else take their places. They wanted to get back home and relax in their own environment. Safe and quiet.

The bios kicked in and renewed their damaged cells and within moments they were feeling less jaded. But they knew they'd been mentally and emotionally damaged somehow. Thoughts invaded their minds, the scenes of destruction echoed in all of them.

Command ordered the Battleship to remain on station. They had sighted more of the enemy. A lot more. They were not mentally ready for the next onslaught.

Cress's mind dwelt on the rapid discharge of her weapons. Little time to aim, just mentally point the gun and mentally pull the trigger. She'd no idea whether she had hit anything at all. As the ship was still under control of its own brain, her contribution mattered little. The brain did all the work, she was towed along as each gun focused and fired. She felt part of each discharge, but not fully in control of any of them.

Pattia felt the craft being spun and thrust into all sorts of unnatural positions. Accelerating and decelerating at a fast pace. The human bodies partially cushioned by the Nanocouches that absorbed the 'G' forces.

Vanora heard the communication exchanges but understood little. The shortened language and jargon mystified her. She heard some words and pieced together a story. But it was all down to the Command and the speed and efficiency of the mind on board the C2451. Eventually, the movement and the firing of weapons stopped. Another lull in the battle.

‘First blood of battle earns your ship’s hull a battle name.’ A Council directed image moved gently into their heads. ‘You can officially give your ship a battle name.’ The associated image with the communication was identified as Vara, Head of the Defence Council.

As the women breathed deeply at the cessation of the trauma, they made suggestions.

Pattia went deep into reflection as she remembered the last days of battle. With each successive battle, the pressure seemed to increase. The crew were not finding it easier to cope with the stresses of running a Battleship during a war.

The irregularities of *Romeo*’s mind initially went unnoticed. But upon reflection, Donella recalled it had all started before the first real battle. He became obsessed with another ship of the opposite fleet.

At one point, during a particularly long battle, C2451 was told to withdraw. The craft moved away from the battlesphere and instructed to hold and wait for instructions. The lack of action had a strange effect on her mind. She began to wonder if the waiting for an attack and certain death worse than being in the thick of the fight to avoid certain death. When the battle began again, she knew the answer.

She learned with a sudden realisation that she was beginning to enjoy the conflict. Her mind had never been so sharp, her senses so alert. At the very heart of her understanding, her mind knew she didn’t have a real responsibility. She didn’t have the real control of the ship, didn’t really affect the battle in any way. With that sudden and sharp realisation, came the relaxed acceptance of the situation.

Suddenly and violently. The ship lost its brain.

The crew went into a state of shock. No more lifeline of a superior mind handling the billions of streams of information. It was down to the crew and them alone. They’d been trained for it, but when the time came

Pattia had fought down panic and could understand through the myriad of thoughts passing through her head that both the Captain and Vanora were attempting to control the situation. Despite her heightened awareness and stress levels, she was aware of one thing. They had stood the ship’s mind down, not destroyed. What had caused that? What had the mind done to deserve that? She knew that worrying the puzzle to a conclusion was taking up valuable mental energy and so concentrated on her many tasks. Before she could make any decisions and let fear get control of her, another

thing happened that they had not trained her for. A second mind emerged to control the ship.

She brought her mind back to the task and was immediately hit by another jolt. The whole ship shook, everyone must have felt that. The hit seemed mortal.

A thought came from Donella to all crew. 'HullGone. MultipleHits. We'rePregged.' The realisation sunk in that their war was over. Just a matter now of getting picked up and Blipped to safety. But nothing happened. The ship did not revert control to the human crew. Too much damage had caused all the systems to be fractured, broken and wrecked.

Fear began to build in Pattia's mind. Death was unknown and unreal for all humans. But facing it an entirely different proposition.

Then a trace of thought in her mind. A recognisable contact. *Romeo?*

Pattia had a mixture of relief that the ship now had some familiar control, and a fear of that control is in the hands of a mind that was unstable. Removed from service only moments before.

Her fears were quickly confirmed as she felt the ship charge forward. Straight towards the battlesphere from which they had been previously drifting away. A reckless headlong dash across a battlefield where death and destruction reigned in every imaginable direction. The reason being withheld from the crew by the ship's renewed mind.

She could now feel the fear imagery from the rest of the crew. Their minds fighting to attend their duties yet communicating with their colleagues.

As she was about to scream in frustration and fear she was ejected from the Battleship.

PART 7

"There is nothing either good or bad, but thinking makes it so

Whatever concept Barata and Serania had for a “party”, and what they experienced, came nothing close to it.

The pale sun was high in the sky as the main street seemed transformed for their benefit. The locals lined wooden tables and chairs down the middle of the dusty street. The tables were covered in a variety of coloured cloths and they arranged some flowers in horned vases. Wooden platters and some obviously valuable metal plates too were on these tables. Food seemed to spill over all of them. They arranged strange and exotic fruits in neat piles along the length of the banqueting area.

They had asked the visitors to remain in the Communal Hall while the festivities were being organised. Uncomfortable as it was, the guests knew better than to spoil their host’s attempts at entertaining them. They asked small children to wait and attend to their every wish. They had no wishes, just to get some answers and go home.

At home on Earth, seated and looking out into the countryside was a main attraction of the day for Serania. She could have music in her head, conversations with friends. Time would gently pass by. Inside a dirty wooden hut with nothing to see, but unkempt children, was not her idea of relaxation. And the all-pervading smell

She conversed silently with Barata and allowed time to slip by. They both doubted their decision to stay for a party. ‘If we left now, they’d be upset.’ Serania thought.

‘We’re not helping them by staying here. They’re going to be equally disappointed if we left now, or a day’s time.’ Barata.

‘But we’re learning about them. Isn’t that what we came for?’

Serania received a mental image that translated as “Hummmph”. ‘You just wanted to know if they were still alive. Now you want to join in with them.’

She reached across and held his hand, unheard of a few days ago. He felt the strange tingle that was becoming familiar to him. He gently squeezed her hand in reply. Should he ask her if she could feel this strange tingle too?

Serania looked at his eyes she thought, ‘I certainly don’t. I don’t want to ... touch any of them. But I find them fascinating. Don’t you?’ Silence. ‘There must be some part of your historian self, that’s interested?’

‘True. But the other, more Council, part of me is expecting repercussions when we return to Earth.’

'The more information we have, the more we can justify our journey here. Just a while longer. See this ... "party" out.'

The noise level was rising now. They both moved to the doorway and looked out into the street.

Children were running around and making a nuisance of themselves. So undisciplined, thought Barata. Animals were moving amongst the residents, eating scraps from the dirty ground. Snuffling at peoples' legs and hands, foraging for treats. Strange animals, unlike any on Earth.

'Is that a dog?' questioned Serania.

'Not like any dog I've heard of.' Barata answered, digging in his residual memory of the historical records.

There were some strange noises coming from pieces of wood that people were holding. A thin sound pierced the air as someone blew air through a thin stick. 'What is this noise?' Serania asked

'I think it's called music. Those are instruments, used to create the music. We've long since lost the need for spontaneously created melody.'

'I like our music. But this is'

People were watching the visitors closely. The tall graceful creatures hardly moved or changed expression. They didn't eat, drink, or smile. They seemed aloof and unwelcoming.

George Charles had said they were unlikely to be of any real use, so why waste a party on them? Then came the outcry, Sanctuary wanted a celebration. The villagers wanted to feel they were not alone in the Universe. Perhaps just perhaps, these visitors could help them.

'Because they might just change their minds.' Albert had said with feint hope in his voice.

After a few hours, the liquor was flowing freely, and the noise level rose again. People were becoming erratic in their behaviour, louder, more exaggerated.

'What's happening to these people?' thought Serania.

'I think it's the liquid they're drinking. Some sort of distillation. Makes them ... change.'

'They seem happier for it.' Serania mused. 'What are those two doing?'

Barata followed the direction of Serania's eyes. Two people were wildly gyrating and hopping, creating a small dust storm. 'I think it's called dancing.'

'What's the purpose of that?' Serania.

'I'm not totally sure. I wish I'd done more research before we came here.'

'You must once we reconnect to the Core.' Serania synced with a wishful image to her thoughts.

A young girl suddenly appeared beside Serania and was offering up a horn filled with murky looking liquid.

'She wants you to drink it.' Barata thought.

'I know. But I can't.'

The girl's eyes were wide and almost tearful. She was straining to understand why these giants were ignoring her generous offering. Her mother had said to share what they had with these strangers. Tears were forming in the girl's eyes.

Something was itching in Serania's mind. Something was catching in her throat. Her chest felt constricted. Her bios were struggling to correct the imbalance. As if in a trance, Serania reached out and took the cup. Slowly she raised it to her lips

'No.' from Barata.

She sipped. The liquid burned a path down her throat. 'They have poisoned me.' Was her thought.

'The bios will handle it.' Responded Barata.

Serania handed the cup back to the little girl and saw the tears had not fallen yet. 'Thank you.' She said, remembering a distant memory of etiquette.

'Did you like it? I don't, but daddy drinks a lot of it.'

'Very... nice, thank you.' Serania said.

'How do you feel?' from Barata.

'Well it has a warming effect. I'm sure the bios are correcting that. But it was quite an experience. You should try it.'

The child said, 'There's a city in the sky, it floats on clouds.'

'Where is that?' said Serania, puzzled.

The child pointed due south. 'A long way away. I would like to see it, would you?' With a little giggle, she ran back to her parents, the contents of the cup spilling on the ground.

Barata thought, 'She's imagining it. Children have more vivid imaginations than adults. Based on a lack of knowledge of the world they live in, I believe.'

Serania had the memory of the little girl's tear-filled eyes. It haunted her. 'She believes it.'

'Probably just a legend. Ancient tribes enjoy their legends. Can we leave these people for a while?'

'For a while, if we must.'

They began to move gracefully towards the sidewalk and along the fronts of all the houses. They stood a moment looking on the scene, nodding at anyone that waved at them. After a suitable pause, they entered one of the open doors and felt the closeness of the room separate them from the increasingly raucous behaviour from the street.

Barata looked out the open door to see if anyone was looking for them, or about to follow. No one had noticed their departure, but they would miss them soon. 'We should find solitude here in the quiet.' Barata thought.

A noise distracted Barata, he turned to see Serania watching the corner of the room. There was a low pallet which could be a bed or seat. Two colonists were writhing on it.

'Are they in pain?' questioned Serania. 'Why are they naked?' The visitors stood in silence, watching.

Anna Marie and David Mark were so engrossed with each other in the darkened room, they were totally unaware of their silent voyeurs. Their lust had transcended their natural love for each other. The combination of the overall excitement and cupsful of liquor had emboldened them to risk lovemaking in their front room, while the party carried on just outside, without them.

They knew they wouldn't be disturbed as the party was in full flow. Time alone with each other was a precious commodity for them as it was for everyone. Privacy was a luxury few could afford in Sanctuary.

Serania felt another twinge in her chest. She was wondering why she was experiencing these strange anomalies. She was aware her breathing had increased, and the bios struggled to get it under control quickly.

David Mark was pouring all his energy into his thrusts and Anna Marie could not bite her lip hard enough to hide her pleasure vocally. They clasped each other in a frantic embrace and let out long sighs of release. They

collapsed back on the bed and panted for a long while together. He laughed, and he drew her near him with a strong arm.

Barata was experiencing a shortage of breath too. Once again he was having difficulty understanding these new feelings creeping through his body. Taking him, and his bios, by surprise.

Serania was looking at the naked couple. 'What are those things he has between his legs?'

'I think they are called genitalia. Part of the procreation equipment human males once needed.'

'And why has she those mounds on her chest?'

'I think part of the infant nurturing process. All to do with breeding.'

'Is that what they're doing? Breeding?'

'I assume so.'

'Seemed like hard work, breeding. When do we see the results?'

'There's a gestation period. I can't remember for how long.'

'What're they doing now?' Serania thought, once again her breath shortening.

'I think it's called kissing. Something to do with showing each other support.'

It was that precise moment Anna Marie opened her eyes and saw they had visitors. She emitted a stifled scream and David Mark rolled off the bed and into a defensive stance. He crouched, naked, his genitals swinging as he stopped still. Anna Marie held an arm across her breast and the other between her legs. She had no bed sheet to hide her embarrassment. They'd been discovered and totally vulnerable to aliens.

Anna Marie spoke quietly, 'They're the visitors, David. Don't hurt them.'

David Mark was absorbing the situation and watched the two tall creatures staring at him. No sign of expression crossed their faces, no sign of aggression from them. 'What do you want?' David Mark spoke, breathing heavily. He maintained his defensive stance. Crouched, arms forward ready to repel an attack.

'They seem upset?' Serania thought. 'Perhaps we shouldn't be here. Let's leave.'

'So much for a little peace and quiet. Shall we try another house?' Barata thought. The unwanted guests turned and walked out of the room.

Serania was still puzzling over the couple's actions. What had ... surprised her? Why was she almost breathless? There was no exertion on her part.

'No.' She replied. 'I think we should now get back home.'

They became aware of George Charles waiting for them just outside the doorway. He had an expression on his face neither Barata nor Serania could understand. 'I looked up, and you'd gone. I thought for a moment you'd left us.'

The noise was all around them as the party was getting boisterous. Barata spoke loudly, 'It was the noise. We're just not used to noise.'

George Charles nodded and waved them to follow him. Once more they were ushered back into the Communal Hall where it was quieter. Once again they refused the seats and sat on the ground. Serania ever conscious of the dirt on her feet and legs. The bios would handle that.

George Charles looked nervous, and he spoke. 'It's not ... polite to just walk into other people's homes. You need to be invited first.' He waited for a reaction. There was none. Both the visitor's faces remained impassive.

'You disturbed a very private and personal moment in two people's lives. That's not acceptable here in Sanctuary. I'm sure it wouldn't be acceptable on your Earth as well.' George Charles' face was solemn. He was holding back how annoyed he was at the behaviour of these two ignoramuses. 'You can see that, can't you?' he added after a further silence.

'What were they doing?' Serania asked.

'They don't know!' was George Charles's private thought.

'Making babies?' Barata suggested.

'No not just' George Charles said standing now. 'They were making love. A very personal and ... emotional thing between two people. Anna Marie and David Mark love each other and needed desperately to show it. Have you never' he could tell from the blank look on their faces he was wasting his time.

'Why do they do that?' Serania never altered her expression, but she was leaning forward a little more. Her heart-rate had increased slightly, and the bios were beginning to bring it down again.

'Because their emotion drives them to do it. When you fall in love again the blank looks. 'It's hard to put it into words. Many people in the past have tried. I suppose poets or Shakespeare get the nearest' he noticed her reaction at the mention of a long-dead writer. It halted him only for a moment. '..... but I can't remember any of the poems now. It just happens. You meet someone, and you know it's love.'

‘Like you and Minnie Ida?’ from Serania.

‘Yes. It was like that, but ... not at first. We knew each other a while. We didn’t have the quantity of people on the planet to be too ... selective. But I got lucky. Very soon after meeting her, I knew this would work. And work we did, at growing to like each other and love followed.’

‘And you do that what we saw back then?’

George Charles began to colour in his face. ‘That’s not a question you ask of people!’ Both visitors recognised the change of tone in his voice but didn’t know whether that was a good or bad thing.

‘Don’t watch and don’t talk about it?’ Serania queried.

‘Yes, exactly. None of your business.’

‘What’s business?’ Serania ventured.

George Charles waved the question away. ‘Look just don’t wander off on your own, don’t go anywhere unless invited and you’ll stay out of trouble. Okay?’

‘Do.’ Said Serania.

‘Do what?’ puzzled George Charles.

Barata leaned forward and said, ‘Ahhh An expression meaning ... all right. Will do. I agree. Understand?’ George Charles nodded, still a little puzzled.

Serania stood and moved towards the ancient. As she towered over him she realised her social error and sat down in the dirt again. She said with as quiet a voice as she knew how ‘We’re sorry if we broke your rules and conventions. We’ve never been taught that element of etiquette before. It’ll not happen again.’

Barata started to get to his feet. ‘No. It won’t because we’re about to leave now. We thank you for your help and support, George Charles.’

‘Please stay longer. The party has only just started.’ George Charles said with a tinge of apprehension in his voice. This went unnoticed by his guests.

Serania looked at Barata and thought. ‘Can we? Just a little while longer. They want us to and I want to see that child again. And some others.’

‘I’m not sure’

‘Treat it as historical research. We may never be back here again.’

It took Barata a few moments to consider. George Charles watched, knowing they were communicating and wished he could understand what they were saying to each other. 'Albert will tell you more about our history if you want. He can tell you why we have a party on this day every year.'

Serania looked closely at George Charles before saying, 'I thought this party was for us?'

'It is but we hold one every year for our Five Knights. This time because you're here we're dedicating it to your visit.'

'Five Knights? What are Five Knights?' questioned Barata.

George Charles saw a wavering of the visitor's determination to leave and launched into an enthusiastic explanation. 'The five Knights that saved our planet. The five Nanoengineers who designed and built the insect dome. A day for each Knight, celebrated by no work, parties and happiness. These five saved the world from the Insects, they sacrificed their lives, so all could live. They're still in the Nano factory and we'd really like to give them a proper burial and show how much we appreciate their sacrifice.'

'You want to bring their bones out from the building?' Barata said.

'Until you came, there was no way. But now you're here and can get in again and find them. Get them out of their sealed tomb. Would you help us with that? It can't contravene any of your interplanetary laws, can it?'

'Does it?' asked Serania silently.

'How would I know!' Barata shot back.

'Then let's do something for them. As simple a thing as that. Earth owes them.'

'How can we do it?' Barata thought in uncertain imagery.

'Open up the building. Let them have full use of it. They're never going to get that machinery running again. It won't change their fate. We won't accelerate evolution here. Nothing will do that.'

The silence was prolonged. George Charles looked around him, aware the party was going on with them standing to one side, almost unnoticed. Occasionally someone would glance in at him talking to the visitors. But as nothing seemed to be happening, the party atmosphere took over and party-goers lost interest in things that weren't as exciting.

The day was heating up as it was coming into early summer. George Charles's hangover was receding, and he just wanted to get some level of success from his visitors. If he could just get the Nano House opened up

Barata moved closer to George Charles and looked down into his eyes. He didn't know what he wanted to see there, but he looked anyway. George Charles looked solemn. His grainy skin had a sheen of moisture on it, but Barata felt no change in his own body temperature.

'Let us think on this for a while. We need ... space. A little quiet moment to reflect. Something we're used to spending a lot of time doing. Then we can give you an answer.'

George Charles nodded. 'Sure. Anything you like. Can I get you anything?' He knew the offer was pointless.

'We'll leave you to enjoy your party and return later.' Barata said taking hold of Serania's hand and moving down the sidewalk towards the forest a few hundred metres away. Somewhere near its edge, her transport waited, invisible to the human eye. Serania felt a tingle shoot up her arm at his touch. Barata looked at her, questioning the mental ping that she had released.

'What?' he questioned.

'I didn't think anything.' Serania synced, unsure whether she'd felt something, or imagined it. Certainly whatever had left her mind was involuntary.

Barata had felt something too. They walked on.

Behind them, a dejected George Charles assumed they were walking away forever. He'd failed to get anything useful for the settlement out of these high-tech descendants of the human race. George Charles felt at a very low ebb.

He became aware Albert was standing next to him and offering a flask. They both sat on the raised portion of the sidewalk and drank together. The noise of the party surrounded them and passed them by.

Some things in life never changed, George Charles mused. Including bad luck.

Albert raised a beaker to him in a toast, 'How we struggle.'

Serania walked slowly towards the woods up ahead. Her mind was distracted, she felt the warmth of Barata's hand in hers and it was taking all her concentration. She turned to look at him and saw he was looking at her.

'What's your favourite colour?' Barata synced on impulse.

Serania had to drag her mind back from the tingling sensation in her arm. 'Purple. Why?' As she watched his face, his eyes changed colour to purple. The tingling went further than her arm and her chest felt a little constricted.

On impulse, 'And yours?'

'Light blue.'

She changed her eyes to a light blue. Both now saw the irises in their eyes had widened, both were getting short of breath.

'Are the bios failing?' Questioned Serania.

'No. They've a few hours before they expire.'

'Then why am I feeling what am I feeling?'

'You too? I thought it was just me.' Barata synced, slowing his imagery.

'We need to get out of this street, they may be watching us.' Serania.

'Them watching us, like we watched Anna Marie and David Mark.'

Barata, with a lightness to his imagery that was unlike him.

'Did you feel ... strange watching them?'

'Yes. I thought at the time well, I don't know what I thought at the time.'

As they entered the woods Barata commanded the transport to envelop them and become camouflaged. They sat in their recliners, hidden from the outside world, as the transport rose above the trees. Through the invisible walls, they saw down the street the party continuing, most revellers unaware the visitors had left.

The bios in their bodies were struggling to return their condition to normal. Serania commanded them to halt, let the natural events continue for a while. She was beginning to like this sensation. She allowed Barata to access her commands, and he did the same. In a wave that surprised them both, the unsuppressed feelings washed over them. It was a strange wind that tingled every sense. They found they were looking at each other and they each held both hands.

'What did George Charles say about knowing something when it happened? What's happening here, Barata?'

'Since we've been here, something is assailing our senses. I've not felt ... comfortable. I've had a strange "desire" is the only word I can think of'

'Do.' Serania thought, allowing her mind to broadcast a breathless image. 'I have an increasingly strong ... desire to see Anna Marie and David Mark again. Talk to them about ... what they were doing. See them again. His ... body, those strange appendages. Did we humans have those at one time?'

Barata was nodding, digging up memories. 'We still have of course. But our bios have reduced unnecessary external body parts. Our internal functions are still all there, but the exterior shape has changed to suit cultural fashion.'

'We still have ... those things we saw. Do I have those things on her chest?'

'We have a detailed historical record of our bodies since we were born. Our bios have that always in memory. We could revert to any body shape, or modification we wanted to. And change back again too. We could both command a full bio archive.'

Back on Earth, this was arranged on a regular basis. A complete record of their current state of body and mind was recorded, down to the last atom. A new "identical them", could be built from this data and any time in the future. Including current thoughts and memories, this made clinical death a thing of the past.

The bioarchive was normally stored in a memory cube that need be no bigger than an ant. But to avoid loss, the bios presented it in an Arch Cube that was white, cube-like and smaller than a thumb. Where that was stored was up to the individual, but a copy of everything was maintained in the Core and in the individual's home mind.

'So I can have something like Anna Marie had. David Mark was certainly excited by them.'

'Understandably.' Thought Barata.

'You would like to see me with those?' A hot flush started through Barata and he couldn't trust himself to respond. He nodded.

Serania concentrated and made the mental connection with her bios. She had a mental image and the tiny virus-sized machines worked hard and fast to do her bidding. Within moments she was growing adult breasts, they swelled against her rough material clothing and she looked down on her new body shape.

She looked up at Barata who was staring at her. 'Shall I look more like David Mark?' his mind broadcasting an unconsciously breathless tone.

'Do.' She said, running her hands over her two new mounds and touching the nipples. Feeling a tingle from her attention.

'These look about right?' Barata said, having shed his clothing and grown new genitalia. She looked at him and her heart-rate increased further.

'Do these look the same?' Her Nano clothes faded away, leaving her in a natural condition.

Her breathing was hindering her thought process. ‘A little ... larger I think.’ She watched as things changed. ‘That’s it.’

In both bodies, a tingling started in the mind. A warning. The bios were giving a two-hour countdown.

They looked at each other for a moment before Serania reached out with one hand to touch her friend’s new body shape. He felt a tingle of delight as she caressed his newfound sensuality. He reached for her breasts and did the same. Both were breathing heavily now.

‘What did they do?’ Serania questioned.

‘This, I think’ Barata said and leant forward to press his lips on hers. A shock passed between them.

Something was happening to Barata’s new flesh, it was hardening and rising. For Serania she became aware her nipples were hardening too.

‘Shall we do what they were doing?’ Barata.

‘Yes. But not here.’ She commanded the transport to rise a few thousand metres above ground and remain invisible. Barata commanded the two seats to become one bed. And they lay in the same horizontal positions they’d witness not an hour before. They quickly found themselves making love for the first time.

While humans had done so for millions of years.

Two thousand metres below them the party was still gaining force. Two of its partygoers were less interested in the merriment and more interested in finding another flask of liquor.

‘And what did they say to that?’ Said Albert, his eyes struggling to focus on his friend’s lined face.

‘They’d think about it.’ George Charles said with difficulty.

‘And where are they now?’

‘Halfway back to Old Earth, I’m guessing.’

‘Gone! Preg it.’

George Charles looked at his oldest parishioner and smiled. ‘Why’re you still in your nightwear?’

Albert laughed and started to cry, snorted and coughed. ‘I forgot. I got carried away with the party.’

‘Carried away with the liquor, you mean.’

‘You can talk, look at the state of you.’

‘It’s a party, isn’t it? What else is there to do at a party, except drink!’

They laughed until they became breathless. The sun was beating down on them and they knew they should move out of it. And they would in a moment or so. ‘We need another flask, Georgie.’

‘I’ll get it.’ George Charles struggled to stand up, and both men laughed at their own antics, as George Charles weaved his way towards the row of tables.

Albert’s face grew calm, and he dried his tears and looked towards the wood. ‘What a great shame. They could’ve been so good for us.’

The sun dipped below the tall mountain and the shadows crept along the main street. Quieter now, with people taking tables back into their homes. Clearing up the debris left over from the Five Knights Day celebrations.

Two men lay on the sidewalk fast asleep, snoring and grunting every now and again. People stepped over them. As seniors, they were respected and allowed to have their idiosyncrasies on Five Knights Day.

All but two passed them by. Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma and Consul Junior Senior Elizabeth Margaret Winnie were not amused at the pair’s antics. ‘We’ve lost control of the visitors, thanks to them!’ Elizabeth Margaret Winnie said with a pointed finger.

‘Such a waste.’ Notable Senior Mary Anna Emma said with more than a little venom. ‘We should have been consulted earlier. We would have made sure the visitors stayed a while longer.’

‘Now what do we do?’ from Elizabeth.

‘Have them both removed from the council. We need to take control here. Enough is enough.’ Mary was determined. ‘Let’s consult with the other elders.’

With a flurry of party dresses, the two women hurried away down the sidewalk on a mission.

Nearly two thousand metres above them unseen, a craft hovered silently. Its occupants oblivious to the scene below them.

‘I MUST research more about that!’ Barata thought with breathless imagery.

‘What just happened?’ Serania thought, as breathless as her companion. ‘How can we get the Core to replicate that intense feeling we just had? Just to experience that when we wish it.’

‘It might be beyond the Core. It might have to be experienced on a physical level only, not just as a stimulus in our minds.’ Barata said, planning a future detailed investigation of this lost human emotion.

‘What did you do with your head?’ Barata in surprise.

Serania ran her fingers through her flowing locks. ‘I thought at one moment ... that I needed to be like Anna Marie and should look like her too. What do you think?’

Barata’s heart was still beating rapidly, the bios not on call yet. ‘You look ... what’s the phrase? Beautiful!’

‘Thank you. Will you try hair too?’

He nodded, remembered back to their observation of the couple earlier and rapidly grew fair, curly hair as David Mark had worn. ‘How does that look?’

‘Better. Much better.’ She leaned forward and tried kissing him again, both their heart rates increased. Sensations still strange to them, once again swept through their bodies. Once more they were interlocked together in moments of passion that soared beyond any experience they’d ever had. Emotions beyond their ability to describe it in words, or as thought images.

George Charles awoke slowly and painfully; his mouth was as dry as Davison’s Hollow. His eyes were blurry, caked with something. He sat up and his head was spinning. He kept his eyes closed and hoped for a swift return to normality. After several minutes his nausea reduced, and he dared to open his eyes. Albert was sitting next to him, grinning.

‘Good stuff, eh?’ George Charles tried to shake his head and stopped when it began to spin again. ‘Made it myself. Old family recipe.’ Albert said helpfully. He brushed the dust off his jacket and coughed out the residue. He kept coughing until George Charles managed to slap him on the back sharply. Albert nearly fell off the step.

'We're both getting too old for these drinking sessions, Albert.' George Charles said with a smile. His rising nausea took the smile away quickly. Fight it he told himself.

'I'll see if there's any food left.' Said Albert, hauling himself to a standing position. The mention of food aggravated the nauseous feeling in George Charles.

Albert looked around at the almost deserted street. The sun had several hours to set and yet everyone had gone home. If they felt like he did, it was no surprise. Where to look first? Upwards. He looked upwards, mainly to see the patterns of any clouds, gauge the weather and judge the time of day. What he saw stopped him thinking at all. Floating down as if in an invisible bubble were the visitors. They were sitting on invisible chairs and were looking down on him smiling.

"The second coming" passed through his mind briefly.

But they looked different. He had it quickly, they now had hair! They looked more human.

He squinted at the slowly descending figures. The sun behind them making details unclear, but they definitely had hair, and they were smiling.

They were holding hands and were smiling.

Serania became aware of several things at once. She was aware of her beating heart, hearing the blood coursing through her veins. She felt it. She felt alive. Her skin tingled. She looked to find a fine moisture all over her body.

'Sweat.' Barata answered her unspoken question.

'I can smell it.' She responded. 'And you too. You smell ... not nice.'

'Get the bios to remove it.'

'Will they remove all other feelings too, Barata?'

'Of course. If you wish it.'

‘No, I don’t wish it. I liked all that.’ Her eyes flicked upwards as it would now be their secret signal for the emotions they had shared in the sky. ‘My mouth. I’m I don’t know what I need, but I need’

‘Well, I’m thirsty. I guess you are too, we need hydrating. Without the bios balancing our system, we’re getting short of fluids. We lost a lot in the sweat.’

‘I don’t want to change back. Not yet.’ She held his hand and felt that tingle once again go through her. ‘What just happened, Barata?’

Her eyes looked sad, the irises wide with expectation. They could interpret it as fear, or desire. He was unsure of both, unable to tell what her eyes were trying to tell him. He could only go by his own feelings and he was not sure how he could come to terms with those either. It was all beyond his range of experience. He would have to rely on what he’d learned and could remember from the histories he’d gained from the Core.

‘I need time to think of an answer for that.’ He gave her hand a squeeze. ‘We’d better get down to earth. Before we get tempted again.’ He gave the command to the transport and watched the slow decent begin.

‘I like being tempted.’ Serania thought with a wide smile. Her thin lips stretched further than Barata had ever seen them before. Smiling was a rarity on Earth, he loved the way she looked when she did it. He smiled too.

‘Your hair looks strange!’ Serania thought, reaching forward to touch his new locks. ‘And ... wet!’

‘You too. But still somehow’ He couldn’t find the words to finish his thought, but she felt the imagery through his mind.

‘There’s the ancient.’ Barata pointed ahead and commanded the transport to move towards the old man staggering to his feet.

Barata felt Serania’s hand squeeze harder as she thought, ‘We must try to help these people, Barata.’ He looked into her eyes and felt an overwhelming urge to he couldn’t think what he wanted to do, but he felt almost helpless. ‘Give them their Knights back. Let them honour and bury them. They deserve that from Earth. At least.’ Her imagery felt heart-breaking.

He nodded as the seats disappeared beneath them and they stepped into the hot dusty air of the main street.

Barata watched the old man hobbling towards them. 'You're back!' the ancient said with a very croaky voice.

'We've not left.' Serania said with a wide smile.

'You look different?' the ancient said. Then pointed to Serania's head. 'You're the female! The hair. It gives it away. And the' He drew his hand back and forwards across his own chest a few times in mime. '..... additions.'

'What does he mean by that?' Serania thought.

'I think he's noticed the changes we made. It must seem strange to him we can change our body shape. His generation never had that facility. I think he likes the changes.'

'So do I. Especially yours. Are we supposed to show our whole bodies? All these people seem to be wearing something.'

'Do. Perhaps some sort of covering?'

'Something of that coarseness they favour wearing?'

'Engage bios, then. Just for the changes.' Within moments they appeared to be wearing rough woven smocks.

Albert was shouting, 'Georgie! Georgie. They're back. Never left, apparently.'

Slowly George Charles became aware of his friend calling for him. He looked through blurry eyes to see the visitors standing a few metres away. He blinked, nearly vomited and heaved himself upright. George Charles had duties to perform, he mustn't be ill now. Not again.

'Welcome.' Was all George Charles could manage.

'We've considered your request.' Barata said.

'Good. Yes.' George Charles nodded and looked at Albert. Then back at Barata. 'And what was that?'

'You wished access to get your Knights out from the Nano House. Didn't you?'

'Yes. We did. Vital. Most important. Good. And you can now do that?' the nausea was rising again.

‘Do it now.’ Barata said turning away.

‘Now?’ offered George Charles.

The silence made George Charles realise he was making a mistake again. He shuffled forward and waved his hand for his visitors to go ahead. Somewhere nearby was their invisible transport. He hoped the journey would be as brief as before and he wouldn’t throw up in their nice clean ship.

As the four beings grouped together the transport surrounded them, and in a blink of an eye, they were once again inside the Nano House. The transport’s glow, lighting a wide area.

The dust had long settled inside the building as they stepped out of the craft it puffed up around their feet.

‘We need air in here.’ Albert said. He looked around and pointed to one wall. ‘Can you open up that wall for us?’

‘How do we do that?’ asked Serania silently.

‘The transport can dispense some Nanos. They’ll reduce the wall’s atoms to dust.’ Barata thought as he concentrated on his connection with the transport. As they watched, the walls disappeared before their eyes. The light came streaming in for the first time in over a hundred years.

The warm glow fell on Albert and they saw he had a fine mist of dust already surrounding him. He looked like a saint descending from the heavens, back-lit in the sunshine.

‘Thank you.’ Said Albert breathlessly, then started coughing.

He sank to his knees and coughed again. George Charles hurried over to him and lifted him up. ‘He needs air.’ He took one arm over his shoulder and pulled Albert through the neat hole in the wall and rested him on the ground in the dying sunshine. The effort took its toll. George Charles managed to distance himself by a few metres before being violently ill on the ground.

‘What’s wrong with him?’ Serania asked the ancient.

Albert stemmed a fit of coughing and tried to smile. ‘He’s overcome with emotion.’

Albert took a long look at the sunshine before saying, 'At least I'll have one legacy here. I helped get the Knights home.' The coughing fit that followed produced blood on the dirt.

George Charles regained some composure and turned to see his friend lying on the ground. He hurried over and cradled the old man's head in his arms. The tallow skin was pale now, the breathing erratic, and the eyes were closed.

'What's the matter with him?' Serania said, with a tremor to her voice she'd never heard before.

George Charles had tears in his eyes and couldn't answer. Serania stepped forward and stared at the old man. Looking many years older than he had a few hours before.

'He's dying.' Barata thought.

'Why? How?' Serania looked at Barata for answers.

'I don't know. These humans have a natural lifespan, his has been longer than some. It's just his time.'

'That's not right. We can stop that, can't we?'

'I don't know if we can. I do know we shouldn't. We've already interfered too much here.' He looked across at the large hole in the wall.

'We're going to let him die. Here? In this' she looked around at their surroundings, surprised at the contemptuous tone of her own thoughts. 'We can use our bios. They'll cure him. Do?'

'Do. But we mustn't. This would be a direct interference.'

'Who the preg would know?'

'We would. They would. The Core eventually would.'

'Barata. If you've any desire to please me in any way, make this the issue you prove it. Let me give him the help of my bios.'

Barata felt a pain in his chest, he thought it might be his heart. Any feeling was new and strange and a little frightening. But for him, her pleading mind and sad face held more than a physical power over him.

'We can't instruct bios to work on another body, it may do more harm than good. They're only programmed to maintain our bodies as they are. If they go into him, they will maintain his body as it is.'

Serania stepped forward and clasped his hands. 'Yes, but that maintenance involves taking sick cells and making them healthy, that's all

part of the maintenance. That's what we need here. He's sick, the bios can cure him. They analyse many cells to get a balance. They can select the ones that are not normal, the sick ones, and repair them to the standard of the normal ones, the healthy ones.'

Her touch and the look from those eyes made him realise he would not win this argument. Damage limitation was all he could work towards. He felt concern that his position as Defence Counsellor could be jeopardised with these actions. They had to be kept a secret and with the Core knowing everything, that would be difficult.

Impossible.

He took a mental breath and thought, 'I'll instruct my bios to transfer through my fingertips and just touch the ancient on his skin. Better it's male rather than female-oriented bios.'

Serania smiled and moved to him, kissing lightly on the lips. 'Thank you.' Her thanks were totally silent, told only through the eyes and the pressure of her hands and lips on his.

George Charles was watching the last breath of his lifelong friend, trying to think of what to tell the elderly man and comfort him in his last minutes. His nausea forgotten, grief already surfacing and tears dripping onto the old, wrinkled forehead.

He was aware of the stranger standing next to him. The male one Barata? was kneeling down. He seemed to want to study the death throes of another human. George Charles felt a sudden surge of anger. These people could help, he was sure. He felt a touch on his shoulder and the female was pulling him up towards her. He resisted, but her grip was strong, and he felt the other pulling Albert away from him. Anger again welled up in him. He wanted to strike, to rave and rant at these freaks.

Serania said, 'Do you want to think about removing these Knights from the house. Focus on them now.'

No, he didn't, he wanted to focus on Albert now. He pulled away from her hands gripping his arms. He moved back towards Albert as Barata was slowly standing up. More than head and shoulders taller than him. Almost ... menacing.

'Georgie?' the voice feint, near death. George Charles ignored the comments he wanted to make to Barata and quickly knelt down on the dirt. Albert's eyes were open. His voice was weak, but his mind lucid.

'We did it, Georgie. We can bury them properly now.'

'We did it, Albert. Well ... you more than me, old man.'

They held a companionable silence for a while as Barata joined Serania. She thought, 'How did you do it?'

Barata was watching the two men on the ground and thought almost abstractedly, 'The Nanos created a thin skin over my finger. All I had to do is touch the patient. The ancients didn't see the contact. Thanks for making a distraction.'

'Thank You. He deserves a break.'

Barata looked tense as he thought, 'Bios have much less than an hour left before they shut down. If we're to revert

'I don't want to, not just yet. I like these feelings. It's ... exciting. Different

'Dangerous.' Barata added.

'Don't you feel it? More ... alive than ever?' Barata gave a mental shrug. 'Haven't these last few hours been the best you can remember? In ninety years the best time we have ever experienced was in those few hours!'

'I'm not so sure certainly the most physical effort I've ever put into anything before.'

'You seemed very sure up there' Again, the glance towards the sky. 'Very sure you were having the moment of your life. You said so, several times. Have you forgotten?'

'No not forgotten. Just ... accepting the reality of all this. We're not at home. This would not have arisen at home.'

'Exactly. But it's happened and we're not going to ignore it. Not going to treat it as something one off and wrong. At least I'm not going to.'

'Albert?' George Charles voice was shaking.

Barata and Serania turned to see Albert sitting up and smiling. 'Looks like it worked.' Thought Serania.

'Maybe.' Thought the ever-cautious Barata.

'What happened, Georgie? Did I have a turn?'

'I think you did, Albert. More than a turn.' George Charles turned to look at Barata. 'You do have the healing touch.'

'We didn't do anything. He's tough, a natural survivor.' Barata said. 'Do you have a doctor that can take a look at him?'

George Charles nodded. 'Yes. The last surviving medic.'

'I don't need a doctor, just a hand up.' Albert struggled to his feet aided by George Charles.

The two old men stood supporting each other, and George Charles looked earnestly into the older man's face. 'Are you really all right, Albert?'

'Never felt better. A new man. What's happening?'

'What will happen to the ancient now?' Questioned Serania.

'He'll live a normal life. The bios have set him back many years. He might even outlive most of his village friends. Unless he has a bad accident.'

'Perhaps we've helped him too much?'

'The very point I've been trying to make. We've done enough, we should leave.'

'Will we be coming back?' The look in her eyes had that pleading look again.

'I don't know. Do you want to?'

'Do you?'

'I

'Barata! Sorry to interrupt your ... silent conversation there. But we thought we ought to get back. Get the doctor to look at Albert'

'I don't need any'

'Just in case he has a relapse. Can you help us back?'

'We've only minutes left before our bios expire.' Barata thought.

'We're not leaving them to walk, it's a long way. We're not sure the old man is well yet.'

'He is. Look at him.' Albert was moving around lithely now. Feeling his newfound energy and body suppleness.

'We're not leaving them here.' Serania, with added imagery. Her look was enough for him to know it was a battle he would lose.

'Do.' He thought. To George Charles he said. 'Close up and we'll get you back.'

The group came together, and a blink later was back in the main street. It was almost sunset, and the shadows were longer and more pronounced now.

The two residents stepped from the craft and turned to see the visitors still sitting in their invisible seats. George Charles felt a heaviness in his heart as he said, 'Now ... you're leaving, now!'

'We stayed much longer than we should have.'

'Take me with you.' George Charles moved towards them. 'I want to see. I want to know'

'We can't.' Barata said, ready to command the transport to rise out of the colonist's reach.

'Why not?'

Barata wanted to leave, but he felt Serania's mind pressing on his. She was demanding compassion. 'These people have a right to know, Barata.'

'We don't think you'll fit in any longer in our newer world. You must be modified to live under the protection of the Core.'

'Just from what I've seen of you two, I believe life is better there on Old Earth than it ever can be here. We deserve some release from this frozen lifestyle. We can learn to live outside the Core. If we can survive here, we can survive anywhere.'

'We can't take you. Any of you. We' He looked at Serania, '... can't even admit we've visited you. You have to remain a secret.'

'For a while, anyway.' Added Serania.

'Then send us help with more Nanotechnology. With increased technology, we can have a good life. A life that was once promised by Earth.' George Charles voice was now pleading. Albert stood by and was ready to add his thoughts.

'Time to go.' Thought Barata.

'Thank you for the party.' Serania said as the transport shimmered and was gone.

Tears flowed freely down George Charles's face. Albert put his arm around him and tried to comfort him. 'We did our best, Georgie. We at least have access to the Nano House, who knows what we can find in there.'

'Bones, Albert. Our past lying in the dust. We had this one chance for salvation. One chance and it's now gone. Why couldn't they help us more ...?'

'They did. They helped us more than they were supposed to. Did you not get that?'

George Charles wiped his eyes with his sleeve and said, 'I suppose you're right. At least that's what we'll tell the Committee. How well we've done, what we've achieved.'

'They won't believe us.' Albert laughed.

'There's a prepping hole in a wall that will prove we had some success. And you're new found health, Albert. Look at you. You look ... sixty years younger.'

'Feel it too. Life in the old dog yet.'

'Fancy a quick one?'

'Drink, or a woman?' said Albert with a wide grin.

Both men laughed. 'Woman of course.' George Charles said laughing but stopped suddenly. 'I think I'm going to be

And he was.

Serania looked down on the two men laughing with each other and smiled. 'I don't think we've done anything planet changing, do you?'

'Let's hope not, but only time will tell. Time to return and face the wrath of our world.'

'If we were to ... say nothing about all this' Her hand waved out below them, towards the two old men staggering back to their meagre homes in the setting sun.

'The Core will find out.'

'But not for a while. Give us time to'

'What?'

'Figure it out.'

'Figure what out?'

'What happened here, Barata? Something happened to us. Look at us, how we've changed. You were worried how our actions would change their culture ... for good or bad. But it's their culture that's changed US.' Barata had to think a while before realising what she said was making some sense to him. 'That's what we have to hide from the Core.' Serania persisted.

'That'll be difficult. Our bios have just run out and we need to get them refreshed. Something we can't do without the Core finding out.'

'Then we'll just have to have a good explanation of why we've been out of touch for so long. We need a good story.'

'Something convincing and plausible.'

'And we need to stick to it, whatever they throw at us. The Core doesn't like unanswered questions.'

'We're going back to an almost alien environment.'

'We've just left one.' Serania was smiling. Her hand touched his, and he held it gently. 'One last kiss?'

Their lips touched, and the unrestricted biological interactions flooded their senses. 'Why our last?' Barata said, his mental voice as breathless as his body's breathing functions.

'We can't do this on Earth, it'd be a giveaway. I don't know what the Core would make of it, but it would be seen as a disruption of the norm. We could become outcasts or sent for some sort of correction.'

'You exaggerate. We have an open and magnanimous society.'

'George Charles doesn't think so. Albert is certain we didn't have when the bugs attacked, and Earth refused to help them.'

'But the bugs weren't attacking? Albert was wrong.'

'What if he wasn't?' A silence hung heavily in the air.

Serania leaned towards Barata and looked closely into his purple eyes, the pupils now dilated, his breathing even. 'There are many questions this planet has asked us. Answers only found on Earth, and not only through the Core. Our lives have changed, Barata. I know you feel it as I do. We have to be careful, we have to adopt these people's way of handling life.' Her hand gesture to below was brief as she grasped his hand again.

Barata pressed her hand tightly. Serania's imagery was exciting as she synced. 'We must have more guile and cunning. I think those are the attributes we need. When we return home, it'll be a test of our ability to survive. We return to a world that would deem the secrets we know as threatening.'

Barata thought. 'There's nothing threatening on Earth. Nothing we need be afraid of.'

'You really think that? After all those times you told me here in this transport "We can't do that". "Core wouldn't like it". "Council wouldn't approve". "We'd be breaking the law". You're more frightened of returning to Earth than I am.'

He felt a stab to his chest. She was right, and he'd only just seen it for the truth. 'Perhaps a more cautious approach to our homecoming is in order.' He thought, trying to sound calm.

'Vital. Now what excuse can we make?'

The craft rose slowly above the planet, the soft line between daylight and night below them. Far away in the sunshine, they could see the misty spire that was one of the twin landmasses. The mountainous range clinging to the clouds above it. The craft edged towards it as they were both in deep thought.

As they approached, they looked at the sun catching the clouds and mountainside in a display of nature's bounty. The clouds clung to the high, rapidly sloping mountain, its tip poking above them like a spire.

As they rotated around the spire, they noticed it was fragmented to one side. Spilt and fractured. 'It's like an ancient city in the clouds.' Barata said.

Serania remembered back a while and thought, 'That child said, there's a city in the sky, it floats on clouds. A long way away. She'd love this view.'

PART 8

"Rich gifts wax poor when givers prove unkind

The view from her house roof was extremely welcoming. The familiar rolling landscape materialised as the bio-transport arrived back on Old Earth, seconds after leaving New Earth.

The air was moving high in the sky, shoving clouds along at a pace. The sun was setting behind the hills to the west.

The seats retracted, and the two passengers stepped down onto the hard surface. Serania breathed in the air and found it different. It was more

‘Sanitised.’ Barata completed her thoughts.

‘Do. There are no aromas. Good, or bad. There are no anything. It doesn’t smell of anything.’ Serania thought.

‘Your bios.’ Barata reminded her. ‘They’re still masking the odours.’

‘We need to re-establish contact with the Core.’ Serania synced with a tinge of uncertainty in her mind.

‘Best not to re-connect together. Let Amahan do your bio upgrades. Tell him to be discrete.’

‘Does an artificial mind know how to be discrete? Especially when it’s directly connected to the Core?’

‘Ask. Better – command!’ Barata said, rubbing the rounded area around his groin for what might be the last time he could experience an old-fashioned masculine human physique.

Barata commanded the transport to erase all record of their last trip. The craft acknowledged with the usual limited imagery of a small bio-mind.

Barata took hold of her hand and looked into her light blue eyes. ‘We agree we shouldn’t announce the existence of a lost colony? Not just yet.’

‘Do. But they need help, Barata.’

‘It must be handled the right way. A few more days will not harm them. Let me see how we need to approach this. Who to speak to and what to say. Trust me?’

‘Of course.’ Serania grasped his hands. ‘But we WILL help them. Do?’

‘Do.’ Barata leaned quickly towards her and kissed her gently on the lips. Both felt the thrill and wanted more. ‘Better get started.’

Barata thought on the first level. ‘Amahan. We’re back.’

‘Welcome Councillor Barata, Serania, Enjoy your trip?’

‘I need bio updates, please.’ Serania.

‘Already underway.’

With a final look of longing at Barata, Serania made her way down to the living area. Barata needed to complete his duties and re-establish his life back on Earth, so he boarded his craft and it disappeared.

‘Amahan? Do you report everything to the Core?’ Serania.

‘Of course. It’s my main directive.’

‘Is there any way you can omit some activities?’

‘I’m not sure I understand’

‘Some things the Core need not be concerned with. Like this very moment, for instance.’

‘Your bio updates?’

‘For one, yes.’ When communicating with a machine, however well programmed and intelligent, basic imagery is best. Serania kept her thoughts simple.

‘And for another....?’ A more complex response from the house mind than she wanted.

‘Our absence. We need not inform the Core.’

‘I understand. However, the Core knows you’ve been absent. Many people have tried to be in contact with you. All through the Core, of course. Where have you been? The Core will need to know.’

Serania thought through the agreed plan and broadcast to Amahan, ‘I’ve experienced a great stress over the previous few days. The result of my near-death in battle. I needed a complete break from my normal life. A little solitude to re-think and regroup my thoughts. Isolation.’

‘Of course. Isolation.’ Amahan.

‘The near-death experience was frightening. An emotion I’m sure you’re not familiar with.’ Serania’s imagery more intense now.

Amahan's imagery now becoming more complex in his understanding of the situation and the commands he was being asked to obey. 'Indeed. I understand it, recognise it, but have not experienced it. I'm surprised a life-threatening event could be so traumatic to humans. As I have your bio records stored, I can easily replicate you down to your last conscious thought, if anything should happen to your physical body. Death is not an experience humans have anymore.' Amahan's imagery appeared almost contemptuous.

Serania felt challenged. 'Yes ... but being blown to pieces could be painful and extremely traumatic. Fear is something none of us has felt before. The *human* mind becomes irrational. I needed ... space.'

'Your bio update, Serania.'

The small cube appeared before her and she put it in her mouth. It dissolved rapidly leaving a sweet taste on her tongue. The last thing she'd tasted was that unusual liquid on New Earth. She recalled that strange feeling afterwards

The Nanos instantly absorbed into her body and proceeded with their pre-programmed work of restoring every cell in their host. Restoring her body back to the last saved situation. To the exact same condition, cell for cell.

'Where did you go? I have no record.' Amahan continued.

'A deep part of the ocean. Disconnected and time to think.' Serania replied with the constructed lie.

'You were alone?' Amahan.

'No Barata was here and at the last minute he said he would join me.'

Serania watched her breasts dissolve and felt her hair shrink until the scalp gleamed clear again. It felt like a major part of her had been taken away.

'So, you wanted to be alone, but took someone with you.'

'I wanted to be detached, I didn't necessarily want to be alone.'

'Your friends, your crew, could have accompanied you.'

'Then all we'd all be discussing the very trauma I was trying to distance myself from. Why are you questioning me?'

'The Core doesn't like loose ends.'

'What loose ends?'

'Your changed physical state on your return?' Amahan's imagery was becoming a little *too* questioning in Serania's opinion.

'We got a little bored and experimented. However, I want you never to mention any of this. Not to the Core or anyone. That is a command.'

'Do.'

'Especially as there's a pending court marshal and I don't want any of this to be interpreted as unusual behaviour. You'll be doing your duty by being silent on this.'

'I cannot find any record of your journey. The transport's memory has been erased for that period.'

'Same reason.' Serania thought, hoping to finish the conversation.

There was a pause before Amahan thought again, 'I've never been asked to hold information before. My records show it's called *keeping a secret*. Does that mean anything to you?'

'There are no secrets from the Core. I was led to believe.' Serania thought lightly.

'And now it seems there are.'

'Just do as instructed, Amahan. It'll all be for the best.'

'Acknowledged.'

'I wished to be left alone for a while, Amahan. Hold all communication.'

'Do.'

She returned to the roof and felt the light breeze on her face. Her hair now gone and her chest as flat as always. She ran her hands across it, remembering.

Serania became aware of her thoughts being made public, through Amahan, or the Core. She concentrated on her thoughts being totally private, on the third level only.

A chair formed as she reclined and stared at her favourite view. Rolling hills and valleys, and a small stream. All crafted from her imagination and the efforts of engineering Nanos. The view was getting hard to see clearly as dusk crept up the valley.

She looked across at her small transport, opaque and shining like a pearl, now on its home stand. It looked small, transparent and egg like. A tangible entity, showing just enough of itself for its potential passenger to know exactly where it was waiting.

Being home renewed old feelings, old mind traits. Everything previous appeared like a dream. But something nagged at the back of her mind. She dragged it forward and realised it was Barata. She wanted to see him again. The feeling not as strong as the last time. Not as intense, but well remembered. The bios back in control of her emotions, feelings and physical reactions. No ... the feelings were not as strong. She worried at her mind to find a reason, because back here on Earth they were more forbidden, frowned upon, not welcome unusual. Restrained?

Barata was away out in the Universe Somewhere attending to his Council duties. She wanted him near her. To touch her, to kiss. More. All seen as unwanted activity on this planet.

Her dream-like state persisted. Time slipped away, and her thoughts returned to the planet QZP42 and wandered through her adventures there. They returned always to Barata and his long hair and the new body shape.

On a planet too far away to see on a star map, Barata was finishing a mental exchange with another of his Councillors. Little had happened in his absence, but much had been discussed.

It takes a while to develop the skill that doesn't use words or sentences, just imagery. To have a conversation with just images is skilful. A communication with technical, political and social intonations became extremely complex. There will always be a time when only a word can get across a complex meaning. The human and synthetic minds had to find a way of getting that single word across without the use of physical gestures, or sound.

After his discussions, he felt drained and needed comfort. 'Serania? Where are you?'

She thrilled at the sound of his thoughts. 'On the roof.'

'I'll be right there.'

She considered a quick transformation, forming breasts and hair again. Just to delight and surprise him. A warning thought touched her mind. This was not the time, or planet, for those actions. They were in a different world to that of George Charles and Albert, with different acceptable behaviour patterns. She felt a moment of disappointment before her heart raced as Barata stepped from his transport.

She rose to meet him, draped in a pure white robe that ran from her neck to the floor with a train several metres draping behind her. Every small movement sent ripples through the shiny fabric, enhancing the angelic look.

Barata had constructed a more formal straight shift of dark red material. His conferences now over, she watched as it changed to match her gown. In moments they were seated together, her hand in his and a moment's silence rested between them.

'We must take care in what we think, Serania. Now we're back in the Core.'

'I'm not yet.'

'Perhaps you should. They will ask questions.'

'In a moment. A moment alone first. Just to be sure ... sure of what we felt back there. What do you feel now?'

Barata disconnected from the Core before replying, 'The same. I'm strongly attracted to you. I want to spend time with you I want ... more.' She could see his irises widen and knew she was reacting in the same way. Both were looking solely into each other's eyes. 'But we cannot be open, not here on Earth. We need to find ourselves our own sanctuary.'

'Do. But where?' Her face suddenly serious.

'I've had a discussion with my colleagues and laid the seed for a trip I'd like to make. To the colonies, assessing the danger of another Lepid attack.'

'I thought they were all'

'Lepid ... or any other alien threat.'

'We could go together.'

'My thoughts to them. I need you as an experienced Battleship captain ...' She laughed at the mental image of experienced. '.... to assess the threat of war.'

'When can we go?'

'Soon. Arrangements have to be made. The colonists are very sensitive to visitors from Earth, especially official ones. That's why I persuaded them you'd be useful. Once they hear of your heroics in saving mankind'

'I didn't save mankind.'

'But you're the only one to whom they can give a medal. Until then'

'We must be circumspect.'

'The correct word for the day.'

They held hands and looked into each other's eyes. A memory entered Barata's mind, and he pulled back a little to approach the subject to Serania. After a pause, he thought, 'I took time to search in the Core for some answers to our problem and I found something. It was buried deep even though it's only a few years old. Its author must've spent a long time doing the research because there are many ancient images there that have never

been seen by anyone alive today. He uses them visually to illustrate his main points. It's a work of art and we should heed the messages he's offering. Just watch and see what you think.'

Barata summoned the specific information he wanted from the Core. An image appeared on a screen that materialised before them.

The face of an elderly man, who'd obviously held back on the amount of support his bios had given him. It was rare to see such an old face, lined and weary-looking - the face of a modern human. Long, thin and with small details - eyes nose and mouth, but his eyes were bright and attentive.

He spoke with at first restraint, then with increasing passion. It was a few seconds before Serania realised he was using solely words and not thoughts to get his message across. Words more accurately descriptive than any cross-media interpreted thoughts.

The voice was soft and accent-free. Normal for the period, Serania thought. Behind him appeared a series of images that illustrated his words. She turned her full attention on the man as he started.

'Humanity Report. An assessment of mankind to the current date. The year 2222. By Unologo Hwuna.' He paused and gathered his thoughts.

'I chose to speak rather than thought transference as I believe as soon as humans stop communicating as nature intended, they stop developing altogether.

Speech is a live organism that has changed and developed through the ages and through generations. Our culture can be analysed in any place in the timeline by how speech was used at that precise time. The recording media of the day has preserved vast amounts of this information. Cave drawings have moved on to moving images. Moving images to direct mind-to-mind thought communication.

Shakespeare would be unreadable to people today.' Serania's mind felt a jolt at the mention of Shakespeare. George Charles had mentioned that name, *Romeo* was obsessed with someone called that name. 'Today people cannot read. They do not need to when the Core provides everything they need to know, precisely when they need to know it.

How has education progressed? In the middle ages, most people could not read ... and today, no one needs to read. Is this really progress?'

Unologo shifted in his seat. Took another deep breath before continuing. 'This will probably be the final assessment of mankind and its achievements. Over three million years in the making, the state of humankind has plateaued with no apparent reason to develop further.

So what is mankind?

A collection of individuals that follow a deep rooted nature inspired programme of self-development and preservation. Driven originally by the basic desires of hunger, greed, procreation and a desire for shelter from the elements. From cavemen through to the Middle Ages, this was humankind's lot. It took nearly three million years for mankind to place the toilet inside the house. Two thousand years later they didn't need a toilet. If this is the benchmark of mankind's development, then in those two thousand years mankind had made its most overall significant developments.

Less than two-hundred years ago mankind's real nemesis was still the major factors of life on Earth. Hunger, poverty, over-population, disease, war and political unrest. So the last two-hundred years has resulted in the resolution of all human's major historic problems.

So, for millions of years mankind has suffered life on this planet, but only in the last two-hundred years has it finally mastered it. The development of Nanotechnology changed mankind forever.

Nanotechnology has solved all of humankind's major problems. Its removed hunger, poverty, political unrest, over-population and disease. It has also removed mankind's desire and fear of all these things.

The pain of hunger has gone. Food became plentiful and could be summoned on demand by everyone on the planet.

The desire for wealth has gone as everyone is as wealthy as they want to be.

Over-population has been solved by the development of Blip travel enabling off-world colonisation.

Health is no longer a problem for anyone. People can live as long as they desire.

Remove hunger and poverty and you automatically remove political unrest.

Mankind wants for nothing, needs nothing and has become a species that does nothing - It contributes nothing.

The Nano Wars of 2060 did little to hold back the development of the Nanotechnology. People fought against what they saw as a bastardisation of the human principle. It seems now they may have been right.

The Culture Wars that followed in 2150, highlighted that most people were quickly developing a lifestyle totally dependent on Nanotechnology, to the expulsion of all things human. A small faction of the Earth's population rose against this. Perhaps ... they were right too.'

He wiped his brow as he took the time to collect his thoughts.

‘Why aren’t his bios stopping him from sweating?’ questioned Serania in speech. The historical had drawn her to the point where she was talking rather than just syncing.

Barata gave a mental shrug. He’d seen this historical a few times and hadn’t thought about that aspect. He spoke too, ‘He looks like he’s allowed himself to age. Unologo probably turned off his bios or stopped using them on principle.’

‘Why would he want to do that?’

Unologo continued.

The escape to the colonies provided an opportunity for these dissatisfied factions to go their own ways. But most of these immigrants still took their Earth culture with them. The majority then outweighed the minority - in every case. The new colonist adventure caused a brief spike of enthusiasm and new experiences in the human psyche. But the Nanos soon solved all the problems and new worlds became the same complacent environment as the old ones.

In hindsight, the development of Nanotechnology was both the best and the worse event in humankind’s history. A few hundred years ago it used to take a year to get a message halfway around the planet. Today, the message is instantaneous across the Universe. Technology defines us as a culture, what we do with that culture succinctly defines us as people.

When mankind concluded the fight to be top of the food chain, humanity became master of the Universe. There were no more hurdles to jump, mountains to climb, mysteries to solve. Apart from death and any afterlife, the very essence of man had no need to be part of modern man’s conscious psyche any longer. Gone were love, greed, hate and passion. You can only hate someone who has what you want or need, or he is different from you. Today, everyone is the same. Looks, wealth and health.

Where there is no dissent, there is no unrest - just apathy. As if to prove my point about apathy – few people will access this report. If they do, they’ll not make the effort to understand it.’

Another dab of the cloth on his face.

‘There’s a mantra that the thing you work hardest at getting, you appreciate the most. For these colonists, that was never the case, they worked hard at nothing. This applies to the lost human emotions, love, hate and fear.’

Unologo seemed to lean closer to the recording device.

‘Over millennia, I can sum mankind’s drive up in three words. Fight, flight and fornicate. Man will fight for what he wants, what he needs. Hunger, hate, love, greed. He will run when need be, run to fight another

day. He needs to have sex. Nature originally gave this sex drive as the means of procreation. In the late eighteenth-century, they found a way to control the procreation, but that still left nature's gift of the desire for sex.'

Another shifting in his seat.

Barata took a quick look at Serania. Her eyes were fixed on the screen. She was holding her lower lip in her teeth. She looked beautiful.

'Deep in our DNA, deep in our primaeval background, there are sparks of the old humanity. These will occasionally surface and the result could be quite interesting. If none bubble to the surface, mankind is surely doomed.

A lot of human emotion, both the highs and the lows, have been replaced by smug satisfaction. Passion replaced by complacency. Hate by casualness.'

Another deep breath. He was speaking faster now. With more passion.

It's hard to predict the next major change in humankind. There may not be any. Humans have plateaued into being a non-thinking, non-acting species, whose only aim in life is static continuous existence. And that's achieved with the minimum of physical and mental effort. You can suppress human emotion and character traits, but eventually, they could resurface.

Perhaps mankind can only really progress when it takes a step backwards. You cannot learn anything unless you make mistakes, and mistakes are only made by going forward. The day we stop doing that, humanity falls.

The only occurrence that could radically change mankind would be an exterior event, something that would reset the clock. Turn mankind's development back by a few hundred years, or more. An alien invasion might do this.'

Serania leaned further forward. Barata realised she looked even more beautiful with that expression on her face. 'Alien invasion!' she said quietly.

'Any alien attackers may be driven by similar forces that drove our own society to expand from our own planet. Resources, hunger, political aims. Hate and anger. Even as basic as greed, perhaps.

After a million years, it looks like our species has struggled to become – beyond human.'

There were tears in his eyes now.

'I weep for humanity's future.'

The screen disappeared.

After a moment of reflection, Serania turned to Barata to find him staring at her. 'Is what he said ... true?'

Barata shrugged, a gesture he was increasingly fond of. 'It's one man's opinion. What do you think? We've seen the New Earth and how they live without Nanos. Is that a better life probably not. But are they more human ... probably!'

'More people should see this report, Barata. Can we get it circulated?'

Another shrug. 'How wise is that? We'd be just seen as trouble-makers. Especially after our last ... adventure.'

'But we are all so apathetic if that's the right word?' She thought.

'Not all.' He synced on level three.

'That's why the bugs nearly defeated us, Barata. You know that, don't you?'

He nodded. He paused to think before saying. 'I think we need to be careful what information we chose to pass on and when. I think we may need this historical to back up what we've found out on New Earth. How we do it and to whom we give the information we need to be very careful.'

She nodded. 'Let's not take too long to consider either.' Serania, feeling a coldness in her heart rising above the bios efforts to stop it.

Barata thought, 'Much as I would like to do more right now, it's time for us to reconnect to the Core.'

With a sigh she made the mental approach and Amahan completed the connection. There was a tingle and a flood of images, many messages. Her trained mind sorted and accessed them as necessary. From her crew and from members of the Defence Council. Nothing urgent, nothing warranting her immediate attention.

Barata was sharing the connection. He smiled at her, 'The world doesn't change in a day.'

'Oh yes, it did!'

The touch of his hand allowed her to remain calm and confident. There was no one here to see them, nor did they allow other minds to intercept their thoughts. They were connected to the Core, but they were allowed some private communications. They knew they could do this for a while before anything became Too unusual.

Barata thought, 'I'm wondering what we experienced on QZP42, was it ... solely influenced by the planet? Our absence from Earth contact and emotional stability made us'

'Made us what?' Serania's hand tightened on his.

'Made us ... have feelings, human feelings? Intense, human feelings. Had we remained here would we have ever experienced that?'

Serania placed her other hand on top of his, he felt a tingle run through him. 'No. I don't think so. But we're away from the influence of QZP42 now and I still have those feelings. Do you?'

'Do.' He thought. 'But ... I ... have felt for a while that we were changing before we left for QZP42.'

Her eyes widened still further. 'So have I. I've never spoken about it but I didn't know what to say.'

'We must be aware and vigilant that these new found emotes may not be welcomed here on Earth. Not understood. I've positions on Councils and you're about to be decorated for valour.'

'And Court Martialled for desertion or something.'

'We must not allow our feelings to show, while we're in the gaze of the Universe. We must be careful.'

'It'll be difficult.'

'We must learn from the people of QZP42. To survive we have to be more calculating, more cunning. More ... cautious.'

'What do we do next?' Serania ventured.

'Wait. See out our commitments. Organise our trip to the colonies and be patient.'

'I want to kiss you right now.' Serania said vocally, moving her head closer to his.

'I want you to do a lot more than that.' Barata said, his pulse racing.

'Not without changing first.' Serania said, resting her hand between his legs.

'We must avoid temptation. I will leave now

'No!' her hand grasped his desperately.

'We must distance ourselves from each other. Just for a while.' Barata spoke the words almost breathlessly.

'Must we? Who will

Barata dropped into sync for, 'Vara wants to meet with you, discuss the court case and the awards ceremony. He's going to arrive in a few minutes. I must go.'

He bent and kissed her quickly and let go of her hand. The shock of the kiss allowed his escape, and within a few seconds he'd left her home and was on some remote colony, attending to his other duties.

She lay watching the night sky. The stars slowly rotating around her world as they'd moved long before mankind occupied this planet.

Her mind returned to Barata as it seemed to more often now. What was this feeling? Something described by history as love. What was that? What had George Charles said ... something about only poets and someone called Shakespeare could put it into words?

She connected directly with the Core and asked for all the items created by a Shakespeare. The images streamed into her mind. They quickly overwhelmed her with the volume of written material. None of it was in imagery form.

She knew how to read, had made a point of studying the art, more as something to occupy her active mind. It had taken her a while, but with the help of the Core, anything is possible.

She sorted the information into accessible areas of her memory. Plays, sonnets, letters.

Where to start?

A tingle in her mind announced the arrival of a visitor. She waited until the craft shimmered into view and Vara stepped out. 'Good of you to receive me. I trust your break was restful and restorative?' His imagery light and friendly as usual.

His long red robe flowed around him like a smoke cloud. The tall narrow head, similar in features to all males, was expressionless. His age indeterminable, but the rumour said he was over two-hundred-years-old. No one was going to question that fact.

'It's a delight for you to visit in person, Vara, but I don't see the need

'May we disconnect from the Core, just for a while, Serania. I've some questions I want genuine answers to.'

'Do.'

'Thank you.' They both felt the ping of disconnection.

‘Are we going to be having secrets here, Vara?’ Serania synced with light imagery and a smile. A rarity in normal conversation, but Vara was not put off by it.

‘Everyone wants to have secrets.’

‘Do they? I thought the Core knew all and therefore everyone knew all?’ Serania keeping the conversation light and friendly. The disconnection request put her on alert.

‘Such is the case. But there are some grey areas. When dealing with the mass community, billions of souls, sometimes they can receive too much information. Their reaction can be counter-productive and not necessarily have a useful reaction.’

‘I will take your word for that.’

He looked around at the view and nodded his approval. ‘I can see why you like it here. And spend so much time here.’

How did he know that?

‘So ... where did you go for your rest?’ Vara’s thoughts were light. Non- threatening, but there was an edge to the image.

‘Somewhere completely out of touch.’

‘No-where’s completely out of touch. An Ocean wasn’t it?’

He’d been checking up on her. Amahan? ‘Yes, very restorative. You wanted to talk to me about that?’

‘Just in conversation. I believe one of our Defence Council Members went with you?’

‘I didn’t want to be totally alone. He kindly offered.’

‘Welcome back. Now ... we need to throw a medal around your neck.’

‘And hold a court-martial too’

‘That’s just tradition and will be easily dealt with. When a ship is lost, the person in command has to be held accountable to their peers. Tradition, nothing more. But we want the Universe to know all about our hero.’

‘*Romeo?*’

‘No you, Serania. You’re our hero. *Romeo* may have been a part of your success, but you’re the survivor. You’re the centre of attention, you get the medal and the accolades.’

Serania felt she would not behave properly with this man. She felt she should hold her tongue and knew she wouldn't do that for very long. She decided to play innocent and start to probe a little. 'And I'm taking a Tour of the Universe as well, I understand?'

'Well, yes. Barata did suggest something along those lines as ambassadors. The whole crew of C2451. But we need to consider that very carefully.'

'I'd appreciate that. Not so keen on getting the medal but I do have an interest in seeing other worlds.'

'We shall see.'

'I want *Romeo* to get a mention.'

Vara's eyes narrowed, facial expression wasn't one of his strong points. He looked more confused than puzzled. Or was he angry?

Vara took a deep breath before syncing, 'I want the Universe to know the war is over and easily won by Earth. It'd be good for everyone to praise those who helped. *Romeo* has gone, but you and the crew are still available for promotion of the victory. We need to have a major celebration and need the co-operation of you and your crew.'

'And yet you were trying to put me on trial a few hours ago, now I'm a galactic hero?'

'As I said, it's old-fashioned and traditional. We need to change our laws. It's a process, nothing more. The outcome assured.'

'Which will come first. Arrest, or award?'

'The need to make a big announcement is paramount. I thought later this afternoon. Do?'

'I'm still puzzled by something, perhaps you can answer it?' He nodded. He sat back and crossed his legs. The robe flowed all around him and took several minutes before coming to rest, moulded over his body. 'Why was I really on that ship?'

He nodded. 'A question, many crews have asked.' He spread his hands open wide in a gesture to denote an honest answer was forthcoming. 'The war caught us by surprise. We'd little time to react, I'm sure you know all this. They made ships with artificial brains to fight the Lepids. Sometimes ... the bugs found ways to disarm the artificial brains and so we had to have a back-up. Humans took over the job. They trained you'

'A few hours only'

‘But enough to fill the gap, until we could find an alternative system. They selected you from a few people only the Core identified as’

‘Freaks.’

‘No, not freaks ... citizens of exceptional abilities. Creatives who questioned everything and had their own opinions. Throwback was a description I liked at the time. Despite technology being dominant in everyone’s lives, these traits still surface in the chosen few. I’m also regarded as one of those citizens. You and Barata are two of these more ... heightened individuals. These people have curiosity, prepared to go one step beyond.’

‘Traits once found in the original human species on Earth.’

‘I know nothing about that. But have I answered your question?’

‘Up to a point. We defeated the bugs, do?’ He nodded. ‘But what if they return? What happens then? Do I have to get back into a Battleship?’

He was shaking his head. ‘We defeated the Lepids. Comprehensively. We annihilated their home planet. YOU ... annihilated their home planet.’

‘I wasn’t there.’

‘Semantics. There’s no information in the Core to suggest there are any Lepids left in the Universe.’ Vara persisted.

‘Hypothetically’ She knew she was on dangerous ground now, but if she couldn’t get an answer when they respected her the most, when could she? ‘What if ... the bugs had targeted Earth and ... other planets ... say for many years? Needing, let’s assume raw materials, minerals. What if they’d already occupied other planets? They could, regroup and come back to attack Earth again?’

Vara’s eyes were narrowing again as he thought, ‘We destroyed their home planet. We destroyed all their ships in the battlesphere. We swept the area clean. The Lepid race has been totally exterminated. We’ve captured a few for analysis, but the race of Lepids is extinct. They’re no longer a threat to Earth, or anyone else.’

‘How did you find their home planet?’ Probed Serania.

‘We tracked their returning ships there. Why?’

‘They don’t have Blip travel, do they? Something slower?’

‘That’s right. Much slower.’

‘And the Core knows all this, do?’

‘Do.’

'I don't. And yet have to ask it from you?'

'The Core would answer the same way as I have. Had you asked it yourself.' The eyes were now holding hers in a challenging stare.

She hadn't directly asked the Core these questions. Vara was elusive of the answers, she could quickly look foolish if she persisted.

Vara thought slowly and precisely. 'All knowledge for all, is okay, as long as all knowledge is put into the Core. When anyone opts out of the Core, there's loss of knowledge. If it became an increasing trend for an individual, or group of people, withholding information from the Core, this could prove disadvantageous to all communities. I understand you disconnected for a long period, so you could take your Ocean break?' The eyes held hers steadily, increasingly challenging.

She faced him down before thinking, 'As a Universal hero, I felt I'd earned my break with normality, don't you agree? Or do you regard that as something that could be called a *secret*?'

'We have no *secrets*. Not from the Core.'

'But does the Core have *secrets* from us?' As soon as she had thought it, she instantly regretted it. Had she tipped her hand? Made him aware of the extent of her knowledge?

Vara took his time before his next communication. 'Certain areas of the Core were illegally accessed from your ship before the craft destroyed itself. Were you aware of that? Did you have any part in that?'

A chill went through her. She kept her mind steady and appeared to consider his question. 'No. I'd no control over what the ship did. I could communicate with the fleet and the ship and they with me. Access to the Core is limited during battle as a security procedure against the bugs. You know that. How could I possibly' she pretended sudden realisation of the implication. 'What area could possibly be illegal in the Core?' He took his time formulating an answer. She continued to press, 'We all understand that ALL information is shared. Two-way traffic.'

He finally nodded before syncing. 'I can share this with you and want it to go no further. Do?' She nodded. 'We believe there was a time in Earth history where certain information was not deemed useful for all to know. Over time it's not been fitting to open these information vaults and we think perhaps now is not the time either.'

'What's in the vaults?'

'No idea. No one does'

'Somebody must if you're right in saying they've been breached. How was it accessed?'

'We don't know. We understand it's a series of unknown access codes.'

'So YOU can't access it then?'

'No.'

'So who can?' Serania aware that this conversation was very similar to her talk with Barata.

'Nobody.'

'Yet you said somebody did and you think it's me? How can I access something you've just admitted CAN'T be accessed by anyone?'

'It's a question that came up under discussion of your Court Martial. I was instructed to ask you directly. Formally.'

'So you know my answer is no, then?' He nodded. 'And will tell whatever Council that too?' Another nod. Wait until I can tell Barata this, she thought to herself.

Success was making her bolder. 'Was Earth ever attacked before? Before the Lepids?' She held her breath in case his response was in anger.

'No, never.' Vara's face looked puzzled. Where was she going with this thought?

'These hidden Core Vaults ... would they know if Earth had been attacked before?'

'No one knows what's in the vaults. So I can't answer that question, can I?'

'How many colonies do we have?'

Vara was getting confused. He'd intended the questions were to come from him. He shrugged, 'Around the two-hundred.'

'Are you in touch with all of them?'

'Of course. The Defence Council is. Why do you ask?'

'On my Victory Tour, I'd like to visit one on my own similar to Earth. Which one is most like our Earth here?'

'It's not advised. They might see it as interference from Earth. We've many of these issues over the last few hundred years, they're best left alone.'

'But is there one, in particular, that is most similar to this planet, where I've lived all my life?'

‘There’re many that were chosen to create the home feel of this planet. So I can say, yes. One in particular?... none that stands out.’

He didn’t mention QZP42. So he doesn’t know about it!

Vara sat forward and tried to smile again. ‘Many colonies from Earth have been set up over the last two-hundred years’ Throughout your lifetime, thought Serania. ‘Without the development of the Nanos, this was previously impossible. The Nanos helped reshape any planet the colonists wanted to call home. Many quite a few re-sculptured the planet in the likeness of Earth. With help from Earth, they extended the colonists’ lives to the maximum. Population controlled as needed. All dangers nullified.’

Vara looked slightly on edge, he was wanting to leave. She wanted him to leave, there was a lot to think about. They both stood together.

‘I’ll be in touch later with the arrangements for the award, if I may?’ Vara tried to smile again. She nodded. She felt drained and wanted him away. He stepped into his craft and in a moment he had gone.

She let out a long sigh and reconnected to the Core.

‘Where the Preg have you been!’ the thought entered her mind from Pattia.

PART 9

O Romeo, Romeo! wherefore art thou Romeo

Serania felt happy. She was with her friends who'd made so much fuss over her, finally beginning to feel like the hero she was about to be heralded as. They appeared before her on four screens, each able to see the others as if in a normal group meeting in one room.

Serania watched her friend's animated expressions as their thoughts tripped back and forth between them all. She was aware of how her own thought processes had changed. In a few short days, she'd gone from a typical Earth citizen to becoming an elite human being, more aware of her surroundings and how reality was disguised around them.

She heard the conversation in her head, but her private thoughts drifted elsewhere. Where was Barata now? Should she contact him? Better not. They needed a little distance from the eyes and ears of the Core.

'What was it like, on the bottom of the sea? Should I try it?' Pattia.

'Quiet.' Was Serania's answer. 'Very quiet.'

'Why Barata? Why not one of us?' Cress.

'All of us?' Vanora.

'Well

Donella interrupted the hesitant thought process. 'It would've been fun.'

Fun! Thought Serania to herself. What was fun in today's world? Sitting around idly talking, that was no longer her description of fun. Being with Barata was fun. No more than fun. Much more

'What did you talk about?' Cress.

'Anything but the space battle. Anything but the war, the bugs. The destruction.' Serania broadcast anger and unhappiness.

'Oh' From Cress. 'I see. At least I think I do.'

'We would have cheered you up.' From Donella.

'You would have talked about the war, the battle, the bugs, the destruction. How would that cheer me up?' Serania's broadcast further angered now.

'But Barata's boring. He sits on Councils and talks boring stuff. Do?'

‘He’s not boring.’ Serania was aware of how her imaging had suddenly changed. She could see the looks that passed between the women. She’d given something away, that she had wanted to be kept a secret. ‘When you get to know him.’ Serania finished, trying to project a neutral image. Suddenly aware she wanted to be alone. No ... not alone, at least away from people who could read her well, knew her well. But they’d be suspicious if she was the one to break up the gathering so early.

‘I’m planning a journey, a visit.’ Serania thought, to change the subject.

‘Where to?’ Donella.

‘Another ... colony. One of the older, established ones.’ From Serania, happy the conversation was successfully deflecting from her missing day.

‘Why?’ from Pattia.

‘Why not?’ from Vanora.

‘Obviously why not’ Cress. A brief silence, all waiting for elaboration from Cress. It soon came. ‘Because we’re all happy right here. What’s worth changing this for?’

Vanora thought, ‘I’d be interested in going with you.’

Serania felt a stab in her heart - this was not what she expected. The whole point was to be alone with Barata. Off-world, away from the Core.

Serania composed herself and thought, ‘This is more a Council trip. More Political’

‘Since when have you been interested in politics, Ser?’ Pattia.

‘More ... promotional than political, I meant.’ Serania paused hoping for another change of subject.

‘Which colony?’ Donella.

‘As if you know any.’ Cress.

‘We haven’t decided yet.’ Serania.

‘We?’ The tone evident, the looks from the other women meaningful.

‘Barata as a Councillor, me as ... a war hero.’

‘We should all go.’ Vanora.

‘Why?’ Cress.

'Because we're all war heroes. Do?' Vanora.

'Point.' Donella.

'Might be interesting.' Cress.

'Something to do.' Pattia.

'Then it's decided, we all go.' Donella.

'What a good idea.' Serania synced, hiding her disappointment and wondering how to tell Barata he was to have a harem. Whatever a harem was, it was a name that popped into her mind. She needed to look it up on the Core.

Right now she needed time alone to think. She thought, 'Vara is visiting me soon, so if you don't mind

'Preg off?' from Cress. 'She's bored with us already, ladies.'

'Not at all. I've things I need to sort out before he gets here.'

'He's a weird one, Vara. Don't you think?' from Vanora to all.

Ashamed of the lie she'd told her friends, Serania could not back away now. The lie was justified in her own mind. She needed silence. 'I need time to prepare for him.' Serania latched onto the negative feelings she was getting from her friends about Vara and his personality. Or lack of it. Serania smiled at her colleagues, the gesture unusual in itself. But when Serania added, 'Now preg off and leave me in peace.' The grin broadened, and they knew she was joking with them.

Serania closed the visual screens and laid back in the recliner. She felt the mental connection and a warm feeling spread through her.

'Serania.' His mind touching hers - a thrill. 'Are you alone?'

'Yes.'

'What did Vara want?'

'Let's meet. Off Core.'

'I can be there in a few minutes, just finishing up here.' She could imagine his smile.

'Hurry.'

Once her friends had left, Serania felt a depression settling in. In the past, there were no such dips in her life. No sad moments, no boring times.

No nothing. Now she wanted things. More. More ... human contact. More knowledge. More experience. Just more – everything!

Life had changed for her and she wasn't sure how she would handle it. She wanted Barata as part of her life. Within reach, always. That was a strange thought to express, even to herself.

She felt the familiar stirring in her mind and watched, through the now transparent ceiling, as a transport appeared on her landing deck, it was purple when opaque. Barata stepped out, a smile on his face.

The rooftop was devoid of people. The countryside for miles all around showed no sign of life in the darkness, just an owl hunting somewhere. Local predators howling and grunting in the distance. Other than the animal kingdom, they were alone. Except for Amahan.

Serania hesitated before thinking, 'Amahan. Disconnect.'

'Do.' Was the quiet reply. She felt the click in her mind and knew that finally she and Barata were completely alone.

The kiss sent a shock wave through both their bodies. They held it for a long time, the bios fighting to oxygenate the blood while the hosts had stopped breathing. A desire swept through them, fired by the memories of their last emotional encounter, away in the vast distance of New Earth. Their lips parted, and breath was drawn into starved lungs.

'I can't do without that now.' Serania thought, looking into his purple eyes.

'Do.' Came breathlessly from his mind.

'What're we going to do? We can't hide this for much longer. The Core is everywhere. My friends are suspicious already. We need to ... be alone. Live alone. Leave Earth.'

'We can't. I can't.'

'I don't think I can manage to live without you always near me.'

'That we can do. We'll find a way, I promise.'

'Promise? You really promise?' He nodded. 'I'll hold you to that promise.' They embraced, and both felt the heat of their love seep deep into their bodies and minds.

'We can get away off the planet for a very short while. I've organised a trip to a colony. It's called Ammos. We can spend some time there. Most of it just ... together.'

Serania suddenly felt guilty. 'Perhaps not as much as we could wish for.'

‘Why?’

‘My crew want to come with us.’

She could see the look of disappointment in his eyes and hugged him. ‘I’ll try to talk them out of it. Tell them they can come to the next one.’

He held her close, thinking through the possibilities, he held disappointment in check. On the political level, it was a bonus. On the personal level a bitter blow.

‘We’ll make the very best of it.’ He thought.

‘Do.’ Was her hesitant reply. ‘When do we leave?’

He held her away from him, so he could see into her eyes, now light blue again. ‘Straight away, if you wish.’

‘Can we go now, and the girls join us later?’

He nodded. ‘Do.’ She smiled. ‘We’ll be out of contact directly from the Core. Any messages you need to leave, do now.’

She ran through a list. Her only concern was letting the girls know where she was going and how they could join her.

‘Amahan!’ the sharp command made the connection.

‘Serania, good to have you back.’

Serania almost smiled at the built-in humour of the artificial mind. ‘I’m going on a trip.’

‘Do. I have the details. The Defence Council has already sent me all the information.’

‘I’m going now. Notify my crew they may join me when they’re ready. But tell them to give me a day before coming to join me. Do?’

‘Do. Enjoy your visit. How long will you be away?’

‘A few days.’ She turned to Barata and thought, ‘Ready?’

Barata had contacted his home mind and left instructions. He smiled at her and held out his hand for hers.

‘Another adventure.’ His thoughts warm and happy.

She gripped his hand and felt the tingle run up her arm. She knew it was her imagination, and no power had been transferred from one human body to another. But the tingle was real in her mind.

She wanted to be with this man, that feeling was growing stronger. How long before she could not control it? Where would this obsession lead her? Would it end in despair and tragedy? Or blissful happiness? None of those emotions were familiar to her. Now she feared them all equally.

For the first time in her life, her future seemed uncertain.

PART 10

Put up your swords; you know not what you do.

From the first entity that crawled, swam, flew, or hatched – to the ultimate pinnacle of its development - in nature - on Earth and any other environment that supports life - all creatures are driven by fundamental primaeval forces.

Instinct - Survival instinct - The need to exist = Existence.

Rational carbon-based creatures such as human beings are different. They differ from almost every other species in that they possess the power to *reason*. Understand the consequences of their actions and have the ability to avoid the more life-changing areas of their lives. And, just as importantly, learn from their mistakes. Most importantly – pass on that knowledge.

When a life form is able to reason - their behaviour patterns are vastly different from those species that cannot reason. All aspects of their rational existence may be controlled by individuals, not dictated solely by a group species mentality.

Following a herd can lead others over a cliff. Watching, not following a herd fall over a cliff increases your survival chances. Following that herd will limit growth potential. Blind obedience removes personal improvement. Taking complete control over life can progress an entity more rapidly.

Unlike lesser life forms, humans are predominantly driven by emotions, which instinct-driven species do not possess.

Creatures with only the basic instincts of fight or flight; the need for food and water; procreation and some territorial awareness – spend all their time on survival. Their existence will not include hate, greed and love. Although many species seem to demonstrate a form of love, it is merely a convenience situation to have a single partner to help with the other instincts required for survival. Particularly procreation and species propagation.

Every creature born into a world will have to learn how to survive. How they do that depends on the other creatures they live with. If a creature can live long enough, it can learn how to survive more efficiently, by passing that experience and knowledge on to its offspring.

A butterfly living one day will not learn how to teach its offspring how to exist for two days. A human may live for hundreds of years and can teach its descendants every aspect of survival and how to enjoy the life it's been given. That knowledge is extrapolated down the generations.

In all this, the “Creetch” are more aligned to humans than the common insects they've been elevated from.

The Creetch have just two hundred sounds, or visual expressions, to communicate with each other. Their communication limited to purely audible and visual concepts. Their language has never been transcribed into a written form. When the Universal Language Dictionary was compiled, a thousand years later, their language was referenced, but not detailed.

Beneath the hot swirling surface of their home planet, Creetch, the insect-like creatures lived a daily routine that rarely varied.

They were a particularly adaptive species of Arthropod. Changing bio-structure to survive the extreme conditions dictated to by the planet and its rapidly changing climatic influences.

As with other Arthropods the Creetch workers have muscles attached to the exoskeleton itself. Movement is by these moving muscles, which in turn, move the plated exoskeleton parts. The Exoskeletons are composed of a “chitin”, like substance that is self-moisturising to prevent the surface of the insect from drying out.

Insect heads are where the main receptor parts are located, the eyes, mouth and biting parts. A pair of antennae, which are sensory organs that allow the insect to use its smell, taste, touch and any hearing abilities. The eyes are “compound eyes”, made up of several smaller eyes, functioning in unison. Two mandibles, which doubled as weapons, hands and tools. Any which of these when lost, could regrow within a few weeks.

The Creetch head is proportionately much larger compared to the body than any Earth insects.

The body of an insect needs to shed its chitin, it then takes in air or water into its new skin to “blow” it up to its new size. This must be done before the exoskeleton hardens once more, or else the insect will not grow into its new larger size. This process ceases when the insect has reached maturity in its adult stage.

Four legs for mobility. The feet-tips of the Creetch contain sticky pads, hooks or suckers, which allow the inset to cling to various types of surfaces, or to clasp on to its prey.

The Creetchs’ similarities to other Arthropods end there.

Predominantly a group culture and instinct-driven, the Creetch mentality had been slowly changing over the millennia. Gradually filling the large head cavity with a developing brain volume, more suited to their future destiny.

For ten thousand years the Creetch had slowly expanded away from their original insect origins. They’ve always understood they were one nation and one organism. No dividing up of territories, no separation of

responsibility for life and survival. They do not have one ruler, they have thousands. The Creetch were no longer one species, they were hundreds.

They've tamed their own planet exactly to their needs and in doing so, have eroded all natural resources. Their population has outstripped the natural life-supporting elements on their celestial home. They've reached a point where they have to strive to get off-planet for more resources. Or drastically cull their own massive colony.

From the beginning of time, when the first cocoon opened to reveal the first ever Creetch, the species had to resort to eating their own. As each individual neared the end of its useful life, it became protein for the next generation. The insect population were top of the food chain on Creetch, nothing else was a predator to them. When a queen laid a thousand eggs, nearly a thousand survived, and each lived for twenty to thirty planetary years. Without any natural limiting factors of control, the population grew rapidly.

Too rapidly.

There's no way of estimating how many mouths of Creetch to feed were on the planet at any one time, but trillions would not be near the actual figure.

By historical timeline, they've recently developed a ruling class. These Elite exist to purely govern and help the nation survive. They're soft-shelled, slug-like, fat and well fed. Waited on for everything, they had no need for mandibles, legs, or even eyes. They need just basic organic sustenance to feed their mental energies. They have mouths and an anus and the whole evolution of their sub-species is to further develop a rational, thinking brain - a rational mind.

With total dedication to the interest of the species of Creetch at heart, their sole purpose is to ensure existence and expansion. Called Creetchie (soft bodies), the sub-species all live in one complex hive, buried deep underground. Hot and humid and without light, their lifestyle would appear pointless to many more intelligent creatures. The Creetchie create policies, make decisions and were the only formal organisers for the whole Creetch Nation.

They are constantly served by an army of servants. The scurrying army look after them and relay messages back and forward to other underground outposts on the planet. These urgent servants are mostly hard bodies and especially developed to survive the exterior environment of their world, which is always hot and dry.

The Creetch rely on harvestable food from beneath the planet's surface. In the tough climatic conditions above ground, little grew that was life sustaining. Beneath the parched soil is layers of ancient strata that formed more nutrient-rich material for more basic life forms to exist. There are many small creatures, insects and even a few species of mammals that live

totally underground. There are underground rivers and some lakes which spread across many thousand square metres of land, giving life to a variety of creatures and underground vegetation.

The Creetch diet had moved from vegetation through to being omnivorous, as food sources dwindled, became seasonal, or died out completely from over-harvesting.

Two hundred years ago the Creetch had an event which changed their destiny. If they had a spiritual side to them, they would have made this single event into a semi-religious paradigm.

An alien race that landed on the empty desert plain visited the Creetch. As an intelligent species, the Memnon were in search of other life forms in the Universe. Relatively new to off-world travel, their machines were basic and their ideals still naïve.

It took the Creetch Nation an hour to discover them and another hour to secure them below the surface in a vast cavern filled with water. The Memnon were taken by surprise and found themselves stranded on a spit of land. They were surrounded by water and mandible clacking creatures, each a third their own size.

The cavern was without illumination, but the Memnon had a portable light source from their ships. The oppressive atmosphere soon began to wilt the less adaptable bodies of the aliens. They were biped, carbon-based, rationalising, air breathing organisms. As rational thinkers they were rapidly terrified at their situation. The Memnon tried to communicate with their captors, but all their attempts seemed doomed to failure. The mass they were talking to kept moving, changing. Creatures scurried away while others hurried to the front. The clacking jaws, mandibles and feelers were obviously a communication system the Memnons were not going to understand.

They awaited their fate.

In the darkness of the underground world, the Memnons waited in fear. They smelt the damp atmosphere and could see a swarm of phosphorescent creatures moving towards them. A smaller species of insects that gave off a slight green luminescence quickly surrounded them. The Memnon were being lit for closer inspection.

Without warning, a few of the creatures surged forward and grabbed an unsuspecting Memnon. The biped creature screamed as it was dragged away across the backs of the waiting army of insects. Its colleagues could hear its cries for help for a long while, slowly diminishing in the blackness of the cavern. They remained helpless and frightened.

They never saw their colleague again.

The Memnon had been separated from their craft. They were without weapons, or sustenance and totally at the mercy of these insects. The aggressors clearly had some limited intelligence. In the fluid language of their race, the Memnons discussed the situation and decided all they could do was wait.

The Memnon slept and tried to walk around as much as the small space allowed them. They grew weary and thirsty. They tried the water and thought it drinkable. After a few hours, there were no harmful effects, one Memnon was volunteered, and he drank greedily from the lake. Hours passed, and he showed no signs of being poisoned. The rest drank their fill.

A flurry of movement started at the rear of the swarm and moved closer. The Memnon could at first hear it approaching, then see the rippling of the mass of insects. They became alert and were ready for another attack. They huddled together for safety.

Two insects gained the front and held forward some raw meat. The Memnon suspiciously took it and the creatures retreated back through the swarm, their delivery of food accomplished.

The Memnon saw this as an offering, but was it a peaceful one? Or were they being fattened up for a feast? To the Memnon, the meat smelt neutral. Raw, they didn't want to eat it, but they were starving. How to create fire?

The beach like strand of land they were on was littered with debris. Discarded by millennias of marching insects for one reason or another. They assembled a small pile with dried sticks that were once vegetation. Carrying a basic amount of equipment in their clothing, the Memnons started a fire and used some larger sticks to spear the flesh. As it cooked, the swarm became agitated. More interested.

The Memnons tentatively ate the food and agreed it was not unpleasant, but not too desirable either. But they had to survive. As long as the insects gave them food and allowed them to drink, they stayed alive. What happened next would be up to the species of insects that didn't even know how to create fire.

The swarm never left, they remained massed patiently awaiting orders. The Memnon grew restless and knew their fate would not be a pleasant one. They had timepieces and calculated the time. They were there for three days.

The Memnons were fed the same food three times. Each time the meat looked a little older. Each time they cooked it the swarm became interested, pressing closer to watch the flames. Several moved forward to touch the brightness and were burned. A high-pitched screech announced the pain the creature felt from the flame. The vast cave could echo sound quickly that screech rippled back through the crowds. Interpreted by a million mandibles and other insect made noises.

There were moments of absolute silence. And moments where a chatter started somewhere in the swarm and rippled throughout the millions of bodies stretching back into the darkness. The Memnon could hear the chattering appear and disappear into the distance.

On the third day, they heard a chittering from a long way back in the cavern. There was a movement, slow but steady. The noise built up and echoed around them. They braced themselves, something finally was happening.

There were some insects in front of them that parted to let a small group of moving Arthropods take their place. The six remaining Memnons stood and watched as a group of insects approached them. These insects looked different, they were less scaly and had softer bodies. The worker class carried them, and they appeared an entirely different species. In the light from the phosphorescent bodies of the small insect creatures, the new arrivals were light grey and grub like.

The Creetch had spent the three days breeding this new species, based on their examination of the captured alien. During dissection, they established it had a larger brain than theirs and was obviously more intelligent. Now the Creetch wanted to know how intelligent and how could the Nation use that intelligence to their advantage. The new species, a direct cross between a worker and the Elite breed was created purely as a go-between for the aliens.

The lead Memnon walked forward and stood before the fat slug and waited. The look of the creature before him was repulsive, it gibbered and writhed. He tried to speak, but got no reply, no response. He wanted news of his colleague.

The Memnon realised that mathematics was a truly international language and decided to use that route. He pointed to the six Memnon and held up one hand with six digits on it. He held up a further finger indicating his absent colleague and pointed that finger in the direction he had been taken.

The slug writhed and a small insect next to him scurried away. The Memnon could see the crowds parting into the distance to make way for the courier. Had he gone to fetch his colleague?

The lead Memnon, Harr, tried another approach. He encircled his group with a gesture and held both hands palm open towards the insect nation. He hoped this would convey his visit was intended as a peaceful one.

The slug's carriage made of live insect workers moved forwards to inspect the empty hands, then stepped back in disappointment. They wanted a tribute, a gift, thought Harr.

He waved one of his colleagues forward and asked for the fire-making equipment. His friend handed him the small machine that created the flame.

Harr stepped forward and ignited the object. The slug reeled back and squealed, instantly several hard-bodied workers were between the slug and Harr. Their clacking pincers sharp and close to his face. He extinguished the lighter and stood back. The workers slowly relaxed their aggressive stance.

Harr thought quickly, this might be his only shot at communication here. He picked up a twig and stuck it in the sand. He waved the creatures away, and they shuffled a few metres back. The slug protected by the front ranks. Slowly and carefully Harr lit the twig and stood back.

The chittering started again, rippling through the cavern. The slug seemed to shrink inside itself, then expand as curiosity got the better of the instinctive protection posture. The few creatures holding the slug moved gently forward.

Harr realised the slug was somehow communicating with its attendants as one of them moved forward and put his mandible into the flame. It screeched and withdrew. Again a command from the slug and the creature move forward again. Another mandible burst into flame and a screech. The same sound echoing through the cavern into the dark distance and fading slowly.

Again a command and the insect put a leg into the flame. It held it there until the flame had heated the flesh beneath it and the creatinine case had burst; the creature remained silent. Another command and another leg. Within moments the creature was left standing on two legs and waiting for further instructions.

Harr decided to act quickly. He grabbed a bunch of twigs and threw them on the glowing twig, soon there was a fire burning. Harr stood back, guessing the next move. The wounded worker threw itself onto the fire and burnt to death in moments. Its hard-shell bursting and cracking as the flesh expanded inside. The slug made no movement.

The swarm began to chitter again. There was more movement from the dark recesses of the cave. Soon a messenger approached and held out more food to Harr. He took it and nodded his thanks. Was this a reward?

A worker moved forward and drew some lines in the sand, six of them. A seventh line was drawn separately. The creature tapped the raw meet with a leg.

It was then that the Memnons realised the food they'd been given was their fallen colleague's flesh.

The days drifted into months.

They elected Nurr to be the communications go-between. She was on the Memnon scouting trip because she was the specialist in languages and psychology. She was tall for a Memnon and very angular. The Creetch took to her form more readily than the very short and over-weight Beei.

The initial steps were taken with great trepidation. Nurr had seen the way these creatures were dispassionate about life and health in general, how callously they treated their own. As prisoners, the Memnon could expect no less than a harsh and terminal treatment.

Drawing images proved to be the best way forward. Drawn with a stick in the sand, both sides started the long and uphill battle of communication between totally differing species. Images for life, death, food and reproduction had to be creative on both sides. The puzzle for Nurr was the sex and procreation side, which the Creetch were insistent on understanding. The Creetch didn't have any sexual activity, just laid eggs and hatched them. If they were under-weight, or faulty, they ate them. She was extra creative in explaining how the Memnon needed a physical act to breed.

The Creetch were keen to observe. Despite her drawing countless images to show they had to be a relationship-driven part of the process, the Creetch were getting angry when two Memmons could not demonstrate the strange image that translated as "sex"

Nurr was the only female Memnon on the trip. She explained to her colleagues the problem and Beei quickly volunteered to help with the demonstration. Tactfully Nurr declined his offer and chose the leader of the expedition, Serr, to sacrifice himself. Unbeknown to the rest of the crew, this would not be the first time the two of them had, "demonstrated". Their secret affair had been a well-kept secret, even in the close confines of an inter-stellar exploration vehicle.

To demonstrate in front of an audience of millions of insects was one thing, to have the crew observe was another. Nurr persuaded the Creetch negotiator that these performances were always more successful in a small area with only a few watchers, her newly allocated quarters would be ideal.

As a major part of the Creetch's future plans, they had given Nurr a very elevated status. This meant she wouldn't be eaten – yet, and to be treated like an Elite species on the planet. She had any number of assistant insects at her bidding, just by hand signals she could command almost anything she needed.

Food was the ongoing problem, she wanted no more of her colleague's flesh. She quickly became a vegetarian and ate a variety of musty old leaves and dry stalks. Somewhere in there were vitamins and vital trace elements that enabled her Memnon metabolism to function. She instructed the Creetch to give the same food to her colleagues.

With a pounding heart, she led Serr by the hand to her living area. It was a small underground cave formed by cutting out the hardened mud and coating it in insect spit. Once she'd got used to the smell, it was warm and comfortable. A few items from the ship, like her bunk bed and warm blankets, completed the illusion that she was in a safe place.

Serr looked around in wonder, his bed normally the hard sand. They had hollowed out depressions and had used the remaining blankets to cover the sand and cover themselves. The crew slept on the original sand spit they had been first allocated.

She noticed how thin and drawn Serr, and the rest of the crew had become. She was slowly working at getting the Creetch to make a more honourable assessment of her colleagues. It was hard work; the creatures did not understand compassion.

They whispered to each other in their own language, assured that the Creetch had not made the attempt to learn Memnon speech as yet. Two insect creatures were in the same room as them and several more outside the door.

‘We have to pretend they’re not here. Go through the motions, do not get carried away. We mustn’t show them everything. Pretend it’s a training programme you’re making. Slow and easy. A few moments of each action and then finish.’

Serr was not sure any of this would help anyone, but the look in her eyes made him go along with her wishes.

In the light of a luminescence taken from the skin of the insects and daubed on the wall, they had enough light to see each other. They removed their worn and tired clothes. They lay on the bed and Serr took a deep breath.

Serr went through the motions, but it brought back pleasant memories of the real thing with Nurr on the journey to this awful planet. He was aware of how she didn’t want this demonstration to be too lifelike and held back. He allowed her to end the coupling prematurely.

As they parted, a creature had hold of each of them, arms pinned to their sides. Another creature forced itself into the room and examined the genitals of both the Memnons. There was much clicking and waving, most of which Nurr couldn’t understand.

‘What’re they doing?’ Serr said quietly.

‘Figuring out how breeding works with our bodies. It’s a puzzle to them.’ Nurr waited while the examination progressed, flinching when the probing became very personal for her. With a commanding screech of her own, she made the creature pause in its examination. Another commanding screech got them to remove the probing foot.

‘What did you say?’ Serr asked in a whisper.

‘I told them any further would kill me.’ Nurr withheld a smile. ‘I’m too valuable to take too many liberties with. Get dressed, let’s show them the

demonstration is over. I've now got to try to explain how a baby is formed and born. We can't demonstrate that story.'

He held her hand for a moment longer and looked into her eyes. 'I'll get us out of here. I promise.'

She nodded. 'Sure. You'll try. But I have a feeling we'll never see our home again. What we have to do is be as comfortable with this life as best we can. I'm going to try to get you to live in here with me and get them to build similar rooms nearby for the rest of the crew.' She kissed him lightly on the lips and heard the clattering of creatinine claws in the room.

'Sounds like an applause.' Serr said with a forced smile.

'No. It's more ... what are you doing that for?'

Mammal reproduction is similar in function for almost all species. There is a male reproductive organ on the outside and the female reproductive system on the inside. Connect them up, get a reaction and sperm is passed from one body to the next. Nature takes over and the process can take anything from a few weeks to several years. For the Memnons, it would be less than a year, but in this instance, there was no result expected from their fore-shortened coupling.

It took a lot of time and persuasion, but she got better accommodation for the Memnon crew. Serr was installed in her room and over the next few months, the two Memnons got used to someone watching while they got increasingly passionate with each other.

The communication tuition progressed rapidly. The Creetch wanted to spend every minute of the day on her learning their language, she demanded sleep and rest. They did not understand this soft-bodied approach to life, sleep was unknown to them.

As she became more familiar with the nuances of the language, she began to up her demands for a better quality of life. The ships stores were almost depleted, and they needed a new food supply. She persuaded the Creetch to show her from where they sourced their food.

She remembered well the lesson of raw food offerings from the Creetch. To eat one of her own crew was a horror that awoke her at night still. But this was the Creetch culture, food is always raw and not always dead. They ate each other when they become unwanted or used up. She avoided anything that was meat and found a range of vegetables that were at least edible.

The Creetch hunted and caught many small mammals. With experimentation and cooking over an open fire, the Memnon found several that would contribute to their protein requirements and could stay in their stomachs.

As life took on a steady and unchanging tone, Serr was deep in thought about an escape plan. They need not all escape, but someone had to get to the ship and escape, get home and bring armed help.

The ship was still on the surface of the planet and had been heavily inspected by the Creetch. On their sorties to retrieve food rations, the Memnons found time to check the craft over to ensure it was still operational. The Creetch had not damaged it, once again they'd planned ahead to use this craft for themselves. The Memnon craft was the only route for any creature off the planet.

There were many concepts in the Creetch language that were missing. The Memnons could find no words or images for emotion. No idea of love, or sadness. No real expression for anger and hate. The language was simple once Nurr had grasped its connection between sounds and movements. A combination of the two could normally get any thought across and they could answer questions.

Soon she realised she was speaking fluently, then the Creetch brought in their new parameters. A large soft body species was carried into her room and Serr forced out.

A special species of Creetch had been bred, they had vocal cords and more developed brains. They were tasked with learning the Memnon language. Nurr would now spend every waking hour translating Creetch into Memnon.

Time slipped by.

Nurr insisted she had a personal interaction with her crew and saw Serr alone on occasions. As the tuition progressed successfully, they allowed these demands more frequently.

The new sub-species of Creetch learned quickly. Each gleaned newly learned vocabulary from each other. Nurr never knew which individual Creetch she was speaking to, they all looked the same, none had individual names.

She knew they rapidly approached the time when there was little or no language barrier between the Memnon and the Creetch. She knew they were planning something and knew the hammer would fall - and soon.

Serr was nowhere near getting an idea for escape. They were too far away from the ship and every corridor was full of workers. Hustling about, or simply guarding them every minute of the day. No Memnon was ever alone. The Creetch never tired of being on guard duty.

One day a new creature entered her room. One of the slug-like language sub-species, but this one looked bigger and fatter than the others. The voice was similar in structure to any Memnon, but their pronunciation of the Memnon language still sounded alien.

'You will now show us how to build more Memnon ships and how to fly them.' This was no surprise to Nurr. The very words the Creetch wanted to learn first were travel-oriented and concerned with the Memnon's more advanced technology.

She had to be tactful. If suddenly she became of no use to them, she would quickly become food. 'We can fly them, but we did not build them. Many Memnon, different Memnon to us, know how to build them.'

'You will try.'

'They are built of' a problematic word, '... composite materials. Not found on your planet here. We cannot build them here. No one can.'

'Where can we build them?'

'Not on Creetch. You have no materials.'

A chill ran through her at the next question. 'Where is your planet?'

She shook her head and said, 'I do not know. I cannot fly the ship. I am ... a passenger only.'

A worker moved quickly and grabbed her wrists. Two large sharp pincers now poised over her index finger, a swift movement and it would be severed.

'Show me where your planet is.'

The slug had no face and no facial expression, but the voice had changed slightly. There was no doubt about her peril. 'I do not know. I don't know where this planet is. I really cannot tell you.'

The pincers never wavered. There was some sort of communication that she didn't understand. It must have been an agreed signal, for within moments one of her crew was pulled struggling into the tiny room.

She looked in horror to see the petrified navigator Feen looking at her. They knew he was the navigator!

The slug spoke in a calm and cultured voice, asking in perfect Memnon, 'You will show us where your planet is from here.' The pincers opened wide and quickly shut again around her wrist, they stopped just short of breaking the skin.

Feen knew what this meant and looked for help at Nurr. She shook her head with as little movement as possible. The slug knew her language now, there could be no coded messages to her crew. Their time on this planet was rapidly drawing to a close.

'I can't let them hurt you, Nurr.' Feen said with a vibration in his voice.

'We're doomed. Our planet isn't. Yet.' Nurr said with as much conviction as she could. Hoping Feen would get the reference that they should sacrifice their lives to save the rest of the Memnon species.

'I can't let them hurt you, Nurr.' Feen said again, but with a look in his eyes, she recognised as similar to those of Serr.

'How far away it is, how long to travel by your craft, how many Memnons it takes to fly the machine.' The questions like a staccato weapon from the slug.

Feen was in tears and he said, 'Four days travel. Two people to fly it.' He broke down in despair.

'What good does that information do you?' Nurr said looking hard at the slug.

'That we can't go to Memnon in your ship.'

'Exactly.' Nurr said defiantly, risking all.

'So the Memnon must come to us.'

A chill ran through her again. 'They won't come looking for us, not after all this time.' She said, suddenly unsure.

'They will, if you call for them.'

'We won't.'

'One of you will.' The slug turned faceless towards Feen and paused before saying. 'We have finished with this Memnon.' He turned his head briefly towards Nurr. 'She will become food.'

'Nooo!' from Feen.

'She refuses our request. She is of no further use to the Creetch.' The pincers opened slightly and readjusted their aim for her throat.

'I will make the call.' Feen said, desperation in his voice.

'Nooo....' Nurr started, but the pincers pressed down on her vocal cords and she was gasping for air.

'Stop! I will do it. I will get help sent here. Let her go or I won't do it. I won't do it if she is dead.' Feen felt suddenly brave at making this threat.

The slug seemed to think about this, then said. 'Go to your ship now. Ask for help. Send many ships. We want to know when they are going to arrive. Her life depends on your success.'

Feen was lifted bodily out of the room and the pincers were removed from Nurr's throat. Within moments the room was empty.

She sat on the bunk and cried.

It was several weeks later that the Creetch became aware of more visitors.

They'd placed permanent sentries on the open scorching surface, ever looking skyward. They were stationed at the highest points of the surrounding plain. The Memnon had admitted any rescue attempt would find the stranded ship first and they would land close by.

The Memnon speaking superslug had ensured that their mayday message had included no details of the distress, no clues as to their situation.

When the mandibles started clacking, and the messengers sent scurrying off in all directions, both the Memnons and the Creetch knew that their destinies were about to change. The Elite species had always thought they were above the standard instinct-driven community. They had ambitions way above that of just instinct. They had a burgeoning intelligence and a sense of destiny.

The sun baked the hard ground as three ships touched lightly down on the planet's surface. No dust storms, no ripples in the sand. There was silence. One door opened, and several figures appeared on the parched ground. Dressed in atmosphere units, they held weapons and headed straight for the long-abandoned research ship they'd come to find.

A preliminary search showed no survivors and nothing damaged or destroyed. Where were the crew that had sent the distress call? The landscape offered no answers. No footprints, nor disturbed sand in any pattern. The wind had long swept all evidence away.

The crew of all three ships left their secure machines and took the opportunity to walk on solid ground. They convened in a group to discuss what to do next, how to organise a search party and what were they looking for.

It was agreed the solitary ship was the source of the distress signal, so the crew had to be nearby. Doing what? Hiding from the elements? But they would leave a sign, a large pole, or flag. Something to give directions.

The temperature was rising on the surface and the Memnons knew time was limited for a search. As they divided up quadrants for each search team, they felt a tremble beneath them. Weapons ready, they took a battle formation, prepared to face an attack from any direction.

The sand was vibrating, rippling out from a centre point that was a few metres from where they were standing. It was radiating out from the abandoned ship. As they watched, they saw the stranded ship move.

Downwards.

It was sinking into the sand. The Memnons ran back towards their ships. They needed to lift off quickly before their transport too were lost to the sand.

As they clambered aboard and shut their hatches, they felt movement through the hulls. They too were now sinking. The engines started, and the ships were about to break free of the gravity, but it was too late. The ships' weight held them to the sand's surface as it sucked them down.

Dust clouds shrouded everything, they could see nothing through their viewports. The ships bucked and rocked but remained upright. The sense of falling ended quickly with a heavy bump.

Then silence. Dust and sand sprayed all around but falling gently under the planet's gravity. The Memnons waited, weapons armed and ready.

And waited.

The dust settled but there was nothing but pitch-black outside. When the last of the dust finally settled, the light from the hole above gave them some sense of where they were. They were at the bottom of a large cavern. They turned on the exterior lights of the ships to find it empty of life. What had caused the subsidence?

Time to investigate. Leaving two crew on board each ship, the Memnons spread out to make an armed search.

After several hours the remaining crew members realised something was dreadfully wrong. They'd heard nothing from the search parties. It could be equipment failure; their communication systems were not the most reliable.

They could do nothing but wait.

The Creetch are a patient nation.

Time was not an issue for them. Living predominantly underground, the notion of day and night did not exist for them. Season changes had no effect beneath the surface of the planet Creetch. A Creetch soldier could stand and wait a month if told to. Hunger was always a part of life, but their temperament could cope with that. An unsuspecting passing worker would do as food if necessary.

But for the newly arrived Memnon their missing members were a source of rapidly increasing panic. There was only one decision left, and it had to be taken, get out of there and bring back reinforcements.

As the engines started their cycle, the sparse crews felt a further movement of their ships, they were tilting. Nose down, they slid forward into another landslide. They were soon stuck fast in the hard-packed sand and before the crew could decide how to use the ships' powerful engines to extricate themselves; they were covered in huge noisily clacking insects.

The crew desperately brought the engines up to full power, trying to push in any direction to free themselves. Then, one by one, the crew looked out into the darkness and saw pressed against their viewports, their missing colleagues. Grossly distorted faces pressed hard against the transparent material of the port. They were alive but in considerable pain.

The realisation dawned on them that they had been outmanoeuvred; they were going nowhere. They shut the engines down, with the realisation something had captured them. They didn't realise - they were also slaves.

It took some time for the newly arrived Memnons to adjust to Creetch life. Helped by the original remaining crew they soon fell in with the Creetch demands. The Creetch had but one aim - get off-planet and find new worlds to supply their dwindling materials. They saw the Memnons as the only route out.

Now in possession of four spacecraft capable of journeying through space, they needed crews to fly them and warriors to man them. The Memnons were soon resigned to never seeing their planet again and had been forced to interbreed with some sub-species of Creetch.

The Memnon's feeling at horror at this never subsided. The Creetch had bred an interim sub-species that looked like a grotesque cartoon of a Memnon female. They forced several of the male Memnons to have intercourse with this monster. The Creetch were far too knowledgeable about the sexual mechanics of the Memnon bodies to spot fake coitus when the men tried to hold back. Vital pro-creation fluids were scooped out painfully if a male was unsuccessful. Fear was the Creetch's biggest weapon, threatening the whole of the Memnon captives. If one refused, another would be used as food.

There were many failed attempts at intercourse and a few that were more successful. The experimentation took a long while before they discovered the first pregnancies. They resulted in Creetch like beings with dexterous mandibles, opposing thumbs and a complex analytical brain. This sub-species they called Creetcherons, and they became the main blueprint for the Creetch's future success in off-world domination.

The third generation, Memnon-Creetch, hybrid sub-species were inculcated into Creetch society. Many of these individuals became wholly supportive of the Creetch way of life, it is the only life they knew. They separated the original Memnons from them, having no sight, or communication with the new breed.

These new creatures were willing to fly these Memnon machines. Willing to help the Creetch survive. Willing to fight and die for them. Instilled with the colony culture of insects, they would move mindlessly towards any goal set for them by the Elite Creechie.

Several original Memnons were selected and separated from the captured group. These became the pilot training squad after being terrorised into doing exactly as requested. Punishments often harsh if a word was out of place, or they failed in their assigned duties.

Despite the willingness of the Creetcherons, they were not bred to be Battleship pilots. The brutal manoeuvrings of a Battleship would put too much strain on the soft, boneless bodies. Further, inter-breeding was started to develop a sub-species between the Creetcherons, the Memnons and the hard-bodied workers the Creechers. After thousands of years of experimental inter-breeding, the Creetch were masters at developing purpose-bred creatures. It took just one year before these hybrid sub-species were ready for a first off-world sortie.

Nurr and Serr were getting old by the time the Creetch had refined their battle plans. They had long ago stopped fighting their fate. They'd never given up entirely, but all they could really hope was that the Creetch plan to invade their home planet of Memnon would fail. There had been no more rescue attempts from the Memnons.

Several of the Memnon rescue party did not survive the first year. Determinedly opposed to being slaves and would not behave as the Creetch demanded. They were killed and eaten.

Not always in that order.

The Creetch is a slow-moving species. Many years had passed since the second landing of the Memnon ships. Harr reasoned that there would be no more rescue missions because it posed too much of a danger to the Memnon nation. By the same reasoning, the Memnons might be expecting some form of attack. If only he could be sure they were ready for the Creetch, he could die a happy Memnon.

The Creetch bred a further purpose-designed sub-species to duplicate the physical abilities of the Memnons. Replication of the alien technology took time and patience, something the Creetch had plenty of. Trial and error were commonplace, and as the years crept by the Creetch became more technologically competent.

If the Creetch had invented a calendar, there approached a day when it would have been an eventful date to put a tick against it. The four ships now ready to fly. At their controls, two of the original ageing Memnon crew, now totally subjected to Creetch rule. The other two a hybrid species bred for the purpose of flying the craft, hard bodies, but with dextrous limbs.

The Creetch had gleaned all they could from the willing Memnons about their home planet, its strengths and weaknesses. Many strategies had been clacked over by the Elite species and a final battle plan agreed upon. The Creetch told the Memnon pilots their colleagues' lives depended on it working. The Memnons agreed it might work.

All the surviving Memnons stood and watched from a newly created cave as the ships lifted from the surface. A hot wind blew in their faces and their eyes watered.

The Memnons had said their farewells to the crews with mixed feelings. The two pilots were now dedicated to the Creetch cause. They understood the resistance Harr and his team had put up for all those years, but it was a destiny that was unavoidable and had to be fulfilled. Nurr wished them well but did not wish them success.

As the dots disappeared in the clear light blue sky, the Memnons turned back into the cave. They made their way down the many ramps that led back to their quarters. Each Memnon now had their own space and sleeping area. Still underground, but they had become accustomed to that now. Their regular diet of small mammals and vegetables had sustained them. They were all a little thinner, especially Beei.

There was nothing to do but wait.

During the build-up of the invasion, the Creetch had waited on the Memnons day and night. There was always one in sight to call on for food, or water. Now, even the Creetch workers left them alone, there was just silence in the empty caverns.

The whole of the Creetch Nation held its breath for the returning heroes.

As the ships descended over Memnon, the thin clouds cleared to show a wide spread of green land. The Creetch saw no beauty in it at all, just a barrier for them to move across.

The hilly area to the south was their main target. One ship landed there and began the mining operation to flush out raw materials and store in the ships hold. Now the Creetch had fire, they could melt ore and shape it as metal. These mined minerals were to be re-purposed on Creetch to provide weapons and armour for the soldiers. The Creetch still held a belief that they could, at some time, make their own inter-galactic ships. Limited ambition was not something the Creetch understood.

Two other attack ships moved on to the smaller towns outside of the sprawl of the cities. Here they landed and released millions of Creetch pupae into the new environment. They had timed the start of their journey and its length to be the incubation time for the new sub-breed. Within minutes of

landing the pupae were changing, within a few hours there was an army of young soldier Creetch. Ready to fight and die for the Creetch Nation.

Even the converted Memnon pilots had to look away, as villages were ransacked, and their own people butchered, eaten, or captured. The onslaught was fast and vicious. Mindless butchery and a dedicated sense of domination swept along with the new army. Bred for nothing else, they were to remain on the planet and die quickly after the raid.

Within a few hours, they overloaded the store areas of the Memnons ship with dead and alive cargo. Few of the Creetch that travelled with them returned in the craft. The Memnon flesh being more valuable than their own. They stayed behind and killed each other rather than be taken prisoner.

The loaded vessels lifted from Memnon and made their way back to Creetch.

The last of the ships made a direct swoop on an area that held all the planet's spacecraft. A Creetch brainwashed Memnon had described this place as a series of large hangers, housing every variety of craft the Memnons had made.

The attack ship was packed with aggressive soldiers that swarmed off the craft and swept a path to the large transport ship at one end of a landing field. The attack had caught the Memnons completely by surprise. The vicious marauding Creetch soldiers swept away any form of defence. After all these years the missing rescue ships of Memnon had all but been forgotten. An attack not been foreseen.

A converted Memnon pilot was physically carried on three soldiers' backs from the Creetch attack ship and hoisted into the cargo craft's hatchway. He quickly set about the mostly automatic pre-flight routine and within minutes the ship lifted off the launch pad. Minutes later it had landed near one of the raided villages. Thousands of Memnons had been herded together, with a ring of angry and pincer-clacking Creetch guarding them. It took a few minutes for the aggressive soldiers to herd the Memnons into the ship and it was soon heading into space and on to the Creetch Empire.

The last ship remained unseen and undetected by the Memnons, who had too much else to worry about. But it undertook an efficient mining operation, collecting the various minerals the Creetch needed for the next phase of their development.

The ship remained there for two days before being discovered. Once the might of the Memnons were about to be leashed on it, it took off and flew away.

They divided the spoils from the Memnon planet up amongst the Creetch Nation and a year of peace settled on the home planet, Creetch.

The Creetch had discovered a battle plan that suited their personality and physical abilities. It was a plan that served them well for a further hundred years.

All butchered Memnons became food for the starving population. The Creetch did not care how fresh it stayed and they could devour it in any form. Captured Memnons were used for many purposes. Food and information gathering were the two uppermost priorities in the Creetch minds. The next part of the Creetch master plan was to breed them.

Having learned from their study of the original Memnons Nurr and Serr, the Creetch developed a system that forced the pairs of Memnons to breed. As they realised, there was a natural end to the breeding cycle of Memnons, a pair that could breed no longer, became food for the Creetch.

A second part of the master plan was for the Creetch to build their own space travel machines. This would always be a step too far for them. But with thousands of Memnon slaves and totally effective persuasion techniques, the start of new manufacturing systems took form. The raw materials gouged out of the Memnon earth were the first part of the programme.

They used these minerals to make weapons. Basic things to the Memnons, but the high technology to the Creetch. Speers and knives were the cutting edge of the new technology and cutting edge was what they were used for.

Averting starvation using the Memnon raid, the Creetch population expanded and once again a shortage of food and materials besieged the efforts of the Elite Creetchie class. Once more the Creetch needed reinforcements of food and materials. Once more the non-imaginative Creetch returned to Memnon and re-stock.

Many of the newer Memnons on the planet Creetch had integrated themselves with the Creetch culture. Successive generations lost all historical contact with their original race. Everything that lived on Creetch - was Creetch. So the next raid used more Memnons, aided by the memories of what the planet could provide that was of use to the Creetch.

With the use of the large transporter, the Creetch had a three-pronged attack in mind. As the small fleet of ships lifted off the Creetch barren landscape, the people on its surface shed few tears. All the original Memnons were gone. As soon as their usefulness was over, the Creetch processed them into the food chain.

Once again the newly hatched soldiers did the damage. They raided villages and herded vast numbers of frightened Memnons into the cargo holds.

The Memnons had memories of the last raid and yet were once again surprised by the sudden visitation. The whole raid was over in a matter of hours. Too quick for any reinforcements or help from the Memnon armies.

As the Memnon defence plans swung into action, ships lifted off from the storage areas, now more scaled down and spread out over the whole planet. They rapidly dispersed to the villages answering their cries for help. The squadrons in the air left a weak defence behind and soon the soldiers of Creetch were swarming over two more undefended cargo ships.

By the time the squadrons returned, they found the ships gone and thought the raid now over. But in the hills to the north, a new twist had materialised. The two new cargo ships had landed outside a manufacturing complex. The raid proceeded more leisurely this time. They captured workers in the plant, their detailed knowledge of the equipment and how to use it was more valuable to the Creetch than just protein.

With unlimited numbers of workers lifting huge loads and carrying them back to the cargo ships, they soon stripped the facility of everything the Creetch thought might be useful. Manufacturing equipment, as well as raw materials, were being loaded onto the Creetch commandeered craft.

It took a few days, but the suddenness and surprise of the attack on the facility left no time to warn the rest of Memnon. The raiders were undisturbed.

The first visitors to investigate the silence came hours after the newly acquired Creetch transports had left. There was not a Memnon, or piece of machinery, left in the facility.

They had picked it clean, down to the bones.

It took many years, but the Creetchers developed an industrial manufacturing system that could rapidly produce many small spaceships, redesigned to suit the Creetch physical environment. They simply forced the Memnons to build them.

The only limitations were the raw materials used to construct the craft, for this they had to make dedicated foraging raids back to Memnon. Each raid was being more forcefully defended by the Memnon forces. The Creetch knew they had to look further afield for their materials.

The Creetch engineers and Memnon sub-species developed a restructured spacecraft that was used to forage into the known space envelope from the planet Creetch. These crafts rarely returned home unless they had a target planet and its location. Once again ships took to space and returned after a time with the spoils of war.

The feast and famine scenario repeated itself for four hundred years.

They filled the cycle between bounty and starvation with long periods of inactivity. The Creetch were simply ... existing. All technology plateaued and the fleets of spacecraft resting on the corrosive surface of the planet slowly rusted. They built underground caverns for them, but the ships did not like the corrosive atmosphere of the planet. When needed, furious activity restored the ageing vehicles and once more they were sent into space to provide sustenance for the Creetch Nation. Some falling apart while in space, never to return. Not once did it occur to the Elite Creetchie to find a more suitable planet and colonise it. It was not their way, not in their culture. Creetch was the centre of the Universe.

Knowing that the Universe offered planets that could provide them with the food and materials they needed to survive, the Creetch were content to make foraging raids only when necessary. Generations born, grew and were consumed as the lifestyle continuously re-established itself on the planet Creetch.

The resources were once again running low and the imports to the home planet Creetch were slowing down. The realisation dawned on the slow-moving Creetch mentality, that it would be more practical to occupy a planet and have its materials sent directly to Creetch for manufacturing.

A search for a supply planet begun.

The natural choice was Memnon. Despite the Memnons upgrading all their defence systems and their partially successful defence of Creetch raids – the Creetch knew the planet had everything they wanted. The Creetch was now a much more powerful and technological nation than when they had first visited Memnon. One other factor had developed that could provide the Creetch with a forceful weapon.

They had become rational.

The blending of the Memnon physicality and the Memnon psyche had softened the Creetch approach to all life was food - unless it had another value. Newly captured Memnon high officials had given them the idea that a negotiation protocol might prove fruitful to both nations.

So the next wave of ships the Creetch sent to Memnon contained a mixture of Memnons and Creetch negotiators. The Creetch didn't fully understand the concept of carrot and stick, but the Memnon quarter from Creetch made the point quite succinctly.

The Memnons were tired of these raids. They lived in fear and could find no way to stop the Creetch arriving, just increasingly imaginative ways to drive them off. Both sides knew an out-and-out war would end in a stalemate.

The Memnons agreed to allocate a large portion of the Outland side of Memnon for the Creetch to occupy - to mine the resources only. The Creetch agreed to release a vast number of prisoners. In the Creetch point of view,

the older ones, with less time to be useful. They promised to take no more prisoners, nor eat the resident population.

Of course, the Memnons couldn't trust the Creetch. So they concentrated their whole resources in the next few years around defending themselves from the Creetch community residing on their own planet.

They could fight back quickly now and could utterly destroy the Creetch community to the north. They made sure the Creetch knew this and the Memnon secretly built a fleet that could move on the Creetch planet and destroy that - if necessary.

The plan was never going to be a long-term one for either side. But the Memnons saw it as offering them time to find a more permanent solution. Keep your enemy near

The Creetch also saw this as a short-term solution, while expanding into the Universe and finding bigger and better planets to help them survive. Memnon was just a good stepping stone.

The compromise suited both nations and should work well - for a while.

The compromise worked longer than either party would've estimated. For many years the Memnon eco-system provided all the materials the Creetch needed.

With a slow understanding, Creetch scaled down their massive production plans and realised they didn't need a large-scale war fleet - just yet. They spent more time studying the Memnon and trying to learn more about their technology. The Memnons were naturally reluctant, but there had to be a give and take in any compromise with such potential protagonists in proximity.

From this close observation, the Creetch had learned from the Memnons that any planet that can communicate with another had to be a colonised planet. If it was colonised, there had to be something there worth colonising it for. In most cases that meant natural resources, or creatures that could be enslaved, or consumed.

Therefore the Creetch just needed to look for a suitable planet and save time on random, time-wasting searches. Getting the technology to monitor deep space transmission was a tricky project for the Creetch. But they'd learned to be stealthy rather than full ahead, brute strength in numbers. They had learnt the art of blackmail and subtle persuasion.

The Memnon hierarchy decided that if the Creetch could find another host planet to move to that would suit the Memnons. So they encouraged the Creetch to look further afield, even gave them the basic technology to do so.

The Creetch finally found a likely planet and investigated its possibilities. They named it Creetch Ten and prepared for a raid to fill their stores with food and materials.

And consider it for total colonisation.

The Creetch resorted to its old ways of approaching a planet with a view of taking what it wanted. It attacked in force and without mercy - no negotiations attempted.

To their utter surprise, they were defeated. Trounced.

For the first time in Creetch history, they were forced to retire back to their homeworld. It puzzled the Elite and could only respond one way, they immediately sent more ships and soldiers.

Once again their losses were overwhelming.

Ships rained down from the sky and the Creetch and Memnon engineers could not figure out why. They had destroyed nearly the whole of their fleet, along with highly trained pilots and selected Memnon sub-species specialists.

And no creature knew why!

This was not a war the Creetch would win. It was not worth sacrificing all their resources and their sub-breeds for a planet that fought back so effectively. There was only one course left to the Elite.

Find another planet.

Time went by and the Creetch became wearier of their approach to finding new raw materials. There were many uninhabited planets, and they mined as much as they could. Where a planet was unoccupied, it was normal for a reason. Usually, the food source was missing, or the minerals were not part of its creation.

For the growing population of the Creetch, food was always short in supply. But they could always eat their own citizens. At times, they could breed their own food, but it all needed resources. They required food to feed the growing food source. The Elite were aware there was plenty of food to the south of them on Memnon, but they knew the cost of stepping over that line might be too high.

They tried to negotiate to get the Memnons to help them find new food sources. But that just wasn't in the interest of the Memnons to help the Creetch grow larger, the threat was already large enough.

The Elite class now had to rethink how it went to war. If it was to defeat these biped, carbon-based creatures on any other planet, it needed a superior plan of action. The Creetch answer to everything lay in numbers. If

you outnumber the enemy, you'll always win. But to outnumber them in Battleships meant they needed a vast resource of raw materials and they just didn't have that luxury, but they could if they waited. If they spent their time, searching and mining wherever they could, they would build a battle force that would break any resistance. But it would take time.

The Creetch had time.

The Creetch were using up resources just by looking for resource replacements. Their ships spread across the galaxy and came back mostly empty. The Memnons had given them a strong clue that occupied planets gave off extra energy. Communications were monitorable and so the Creetch instructed the Memnons to build a listening station right on the Creetch half of Memnon. This sounded more like the short-term plan the Memnon's wanted for the Creetch - help get them off Memnon.

A hundred years after their humiliating defeat, the Creetch found a source of energy broadcast that was within the range of their ships' capabilities. Using a cautious approach, a novelty for the Creetch, they sent a minimal scouting force to investigate this blue-green planet far out into space.

They named it Creetch Eleven.

The planet looked calm and peaceful. No energy output other than the occasional inter-galactic communication bursts. They landed at night and waited for a response. None came. They drilled their exploratory holes and stood guard, waiting at a moment's notice to leave the planet in a hurry. Two weeks later they were still there. The only signs of activity were a few of the biped creatures, similar to the ones that had out-fought them on planet Creetch Ten.

The Creetch maintained a low profile and avoided all contact with the inhabitants of this very damp and brightly lit planet. Not the place any Creetch would want to spend too much time visiting. Nor, perhaps choose to use as a home base.

As they mined, they watched.

This species seemed very docile, hardly moving from their strange above ground habitats. Obviously some intelligence and some technology, but none of it visible to the Creetch observers. And certainly not understood by the Memnon sub-species who were helping them find raw materials. The Creetch never needed to understand technology fully, the Memnons did that for them.

The scouting party realised this planet was a possibility for a major food raid, slaves and minerals by the cargo load. If the Memnons could capture this technology and the planet's inhabitants be persuaded to make it available to the Creetch, it would be an added incentive to attack. They sent a message back to the Elite on Creetch with this suggestion.

The report was very detailed and filled with a flowery language, unusual for the Creetch. It had obviously been compiled by an early generation Memnon-Creetch sub-species. The report said that these inhabitants, carbon-based, biped creatures, could manipulate the very air they breathe. They can make something invisible, or visible – at will. They could fully control their own environment.

It was appearing to the Creetch that any species that looked like the Memnons, including this biped race of Creetch Ten and Eleven, were intelligent. And they had the technology the Creetch craved for.

Creetch Ten had too much defence technology, too much for the Creetch and Memnon to fight it. But this soft Creetch Eleven world

The Elite decided the target looked tempting. Partly because of the now extremely low supplies in their storehouse, and partly because they had already selected many of their population as potential emergency food sources.

The first attack proved that the Creetch Eleven occupants were not so unaware of the Creetch approach. They'd once again underestimated their enemy's preparedness for them. The battle was short-lived, and the Creetch returned home with a few ships carrying the details of the defeat and a determination to attack again on a grander scale.

The only difference in the attack plans for the second invasion was quantity - the Creetch sent a massive force. They sent most of their prepared craft from both Creetch and Memnon in a single battle force towards Creetch Eleven. Their millennium-old mantra of "force is victory" would serve their purpose once again.

Except it didn't.

They were close to victory frequently, but their foe had a technology that helped defeat them. Once again the Creetch faced the same biped nations defeating them at war.

The Creetch were advised by their Memnon crew to abandon the battle and protect the few surviving craft. The Creetch would never admit defeat, but the Creetch was now a mixed species. The multiple sub-species breeding had thinned the Creetch resolve. Memnon blood flowed through the veins of many hard bodies now. A new form of reasoning was surfacing, the old stubborn insect mentality diluted.

The fleet retreated. They flew in force back to Creetch and waited in orbit for a new directive from the Elite. What happened next would never have been thought of in any Creetch mind down through the millennia.

The enemy Battleships had followed them from Creetch Eleven. The enemy ships were suddenly at the home planet of Creetch. Against all

Creetch mentality, they had to switch from attack to defence. Their defence was now of paramount importance and had to be successful.

In the period when the fleet had left for Eleven, the whole of Creetch manufacturing had been put into overdrive and a new fleet was being constructed. In a record-breaking time, the Creetch was building a new fleet. As fast as the old fleet was being shot down above Creetch, new ships were being launched as replacements. Once more the “Force is Victory” battle cry would win the day.

And so it was.

No alien ship had been this near to the planet Creetch since the first Memnons. Before their first attack, Creetch Eleven never even knew the Creetch existed. This was the message the Memnon subs told the Elite. The Creetch were on home ground and were superior by numbers. The victory was assured.

The enemy was dissipating across the battlesphere. The sheer weight of numbers of the Creetch fleet pounded away, often three ships to one of the Eleven force. Memnon technology used disruptors to scramble the enemy’s high-tech electronic devices.

Once the initial shock of the battle fleet from Eleven had attacked, the Creetch moved into survival mode. They took all the queens in the burrows deeper underground. New tunnels were made and the whole of the planet organised into protecting the queens and other senior organisms that kept the Creetch Nation in existence.

Some tunnels were now taken deep near to the planet’s core. Some tapped into fissures that released the central core’s heat. The Creetch used this for temperature control of the pupae during the important few days of development into soldiers. Tunnels now so deep that they breached into natural planetary flaws.

From space these flaws could now be seen by the Creetch enemy, using ultra-sophisticated scanners. One enemy entity noticed a pattern and made a calculation that a series of fissures could be agitated to cause a major break up of the planet’s stability. This releasing the super-heated core of the planet to the surface.

As the Creetch prepared for victory, their world collapsed around them. In an explosion that instantly vaporised the whole planet, the Nation of Creetch was eliminated.

The Memnons on board the surviving battleships formulated a rapid plan. No ship was to take the same path to safety. These Elevens had tracked them before as a fleet, they now had to survive as individual ships and make their way in a circuitous route back to Memnon.

As the Elevens celebrated their victory and collect their own survivors, the Creetch slipped away into the Universe.

The communication system used by the Creetch was a very simple technology. They knew the Elevens could read their messages, so constantly changed the battle coding.

After the destruction of Creetch, they risked a message reaching Memnon. It described the failure and end of an era for Creetch. The sole survivors of the Creetch Nation were reduced to those on the planet Memnon or those making their way back to it.

The few Elite sub-species on Memnon realised that now, more than ever, the Creetch Nation had to expand. They immediately started a breeding programme and knew that to support this they needed more food and supplies. Their circular loop of survival had to be started again.

Once again the Creetch eyed the Memnons next door. Once again they thought it would eliminate a whole race of creatures that had been of help to them in the past and would be needed for their technological future. The Creetch desperately needed another planet to supply these vital resources. For once, the Creetch did not have plenty of time.

Even before the ragged fleet arrived in ones and twos the Memnon listening base found a possible target. A large burst of communication signals had erupted from this single source. The Elite named it Creetch Twelve and prepared for a single swift all-out attack. Incoming stragglers were redirected immediately towards Twelve. The Creetch Nation were gambling one large assault on an unsuspecting planet for the survival of their species.

As the Elite Creetch gave the permission to attack, they were relying on Twelve not being over-populated by the high-tech, carbon-based, biped creatures.

That would be a cruel piece of fate.

PART 11

He jests at scars that never felt a wound.

For a while they sat in her transport and looked at each other, their thoughts racing to decide if they were doing the right thing. Getting away from Earth was not a problem that needed confirmation, the break would do them good. It was a more personal responsibility whether they should travel together away from prying eyes and where would that ultimately lead them?

They held hands as Barata gave the destination location to the transport's brain. He leant forward and kissed her gently. The world blurred, and a blue sky surrounded them. He released the kiss and looked down through the invisible craft. Below was a world very dissimilar to the one they had just left.

Everywhere was desert, broken only by the tall man-made arrangements that rose from its pale, sand-coloured surface. The wind eddied around these formations, stirring up the sand and forming huge mounds, surrounding the vertical posts that grew upwards to around a thousand metres. On the top of these posts were flat disc-like structures that housed the colonists, like a dish spinning on top of a jugglers long thin pole.

As far as they could see were these towers, hundreds, or thousands of them where people lived. They spotted occasional oasis in between the towers, giving the land an added visual interest. Small lakes formed the centre of each Oasis, decorative rather than practical, thought Barata.

'Where do we go?' Serania synced, letting go of his hand as if being watched.

'There's a Council Leader in one of those towers. The transport will find him.'

Their craft moved effortlessly towards one of the tall structures and affected a smooth landing on the huge circular ring on top of the tower. The disc was just that, a thick, flat, uniformed pale-yellow surface. Near one edge a small box-like structure stood, that housed the elevator entrance to the lower levels.

'Is he expecting us?' From Serania.

'He is now. There he is.' Barata was looking towards a solitary figure that had emerged from the small structure raised above the huge plate. The man stood tall and his robes flapped around him in the breeze that lived at this height above the hot planet floor.

'Name?'

‘Camilla.’

‘Camilla? Isn’t that?’

‘A woman’s name? Yes, normally. But we all change our names occasionally, don’t we?’ She nodded. ‘Saves us getting bored. Let’s get this over with, this might not be an easy greeting.’

Barata stepped out of the craft as if it wasn’t there and held Serania’s arm to usher her forward. As they got closer Serania noticed Camilla was shorter than either of the visitors. He was more full-figured than either of them. His face rounder. The eyes wider and nostrils more open. The lips looked puffier, and he had a smile ready to welcome them.

His mind contact was open and friendly. ‘Welcome to Ammos.’ The eyes flicked between his guests as they nodded politely. ‘It means Sand in Greek. Apt, don’t you think?’ He waved an arm around the horizon.

‘Sand everywhere you look.’ synced Barata, adding a happy intonation to his thought.

‘Thank you for receiving us.’ Added Serania with her best smile.

Camilla nodded his head and waved a hand to the small doorway next to where he was standing. ‘Let’s get inside away from the heat.’ Neither knew it was hot, their bios doing their job. The gesture purely a protocol statement.

An elevator eased them into the living area, which was very spacious. The curved edges were of some clear material that kept the heat and the sand out but left a perfect vista of the planet’s surface.

The room was completely barren of furniture, summoned when needed. It presented a plain open sand-coloured space. The vista through the open face of the room continued the sand-coloured space into the distance. Everything appeared to be part of the desert .

‘You have to like the desert .’ Serania synced without careful thought.

Camilla did not seem to notice the potential criticism of his homeland. ‘Everyone that comes here likes the desert , the selection process depends on it. Some opt for the water planets, some the gaseous. Why I really don’t know.’

Barata smoothly deflected the train of thought by saying, ‘We’re particularly grateful for you seeing us today. I think I explained it to you that we have a ... a desire to experience another colony. We do not wish to intrude

'You're welcome. We'd be pleased to hear of any news of home. By that, of course, I mean gossip. You can't get the real news from any planetary Core. Can you?' The smile seemed genuine.

Serania synced, 'I don't think we're the right people to spread gossip. We're just honoured to be here.'

'I'm honoured you chose us. I understand you're to be congratulated, Captain Serania?'

She shook her head dismissively. 'It was a team effort. The ship did most of the

Barata moved forward and addressed Camilla quietly. 'She's modest. The attention she's receiving is a little overwhelming. Hence the timing of our visit to an outer colony. I'm sure you understand

Clearly, Camilla didn't but was a perfect host in pretending he did. He needn't offer them rest, or refreshment as their bodies didn't need them. However, he was aware that perhaps their minds might need a break of some kind.

Camilla bowed to them both and synced, 'This is a particularly peaceful planet. Quiet, a backwater some have said. Overlooked because of it. So we are extra pleased you chose us for your visit. It is' he hesitated, '... an important moment in Ammos' history. You just being here.'

'Pleased to be here.' Barata thought quickly. Get the old man off the subject quickly.

'Our Council wanted to be here to welcome you, but you have arrived' Camilla was struggling to find the right tactful thought.

'We've arrived too early. I'm sorry, Camilla. That's my fault, I'm impatient. Barata wanted to wait, but I insisted.'

'Time means nothing here. Do what you like, come and go as you please. But the Council would like to meet you personally at some time

Barata nodded. 'We'd be delighted to meet them. But first Perhaps ... we may have a little time to absorb your beautiful planet? May we take a look around?'

'Of course. I'd be delighted to show you all the sights, both historical and political.'

Serania smiled as prettily as she could. 'We meant just the two of us. If that's all right with you, Camilla?'

Camilla seemed to be puzzled by their request but nodded. 'Contact the Core and it'll give you any information you require. I shall be here when you return. Have a pleasant exploration.'

They sat in the transport and looked at each other. 'We didn't upset him, did we?' Serania passed the closed synced to Barata.

'I don't think so. Let me check.'

Barata opened his mind so Serania and Camilla could receive. 'Camilla. We'd love to meet the rest of the Council when we return. Shall we say two hours? We'd be honoured if that could be arranged. I'm sure we'll have many questions about Ammos to ask them by then.'

There was an evident delight in Camilla's reply. 'I'll be my privilege to arrange that. Have a pleasant trip.'

'That seems to have done it. Now where do you want to go?' Barata synced.

'Anywhere where we can be alone and do what we came here to do.' Serania synced with an excited look in her eye.

Already her breasts were growing and her hair flowing from her scalp in waves.

The desert proved an easy place in which to hide. Once they'd viewed the surface from the air, they coasted to the ground and rested the transport in a hollow. From this position, no one should easily observe them.

Serania disconnected from the transport's brain and held tight to Barata. 'Finally, we're alone.' Her voice soft and sensual.

'Talking are we?' Barata smiled at her.

'Just in case anyone can access our thoughts.' They kissed.

Their ardour grew stronger. Once more it raised their emotions to such an elevated peak, they were almost unaware of what they were doing. The bios disconnected, and their love-making lasted for a long time, although to them it seemed like only moments. When they were at last exhausted, and lying in each other's arms, their thoughts drifted inwards.

Barata's analytical mind never stopped churning. In the brief space of time, he'd spent back on Earth before this visit to Ammos, he'd not been idle. He was becoming obsessed with the overwhelming change in his emotional stability since he'd been with Serania. He knew from old texts and histories that he was, in fact, falling in love. An emotion rarely experienced in modern times and never mentioned in any social circles.

The Core held the wealth of mankind's knowledge, but seeking specific subjects was not so straightforward. Researchers were required to understand precisely what they needed to know, and that would narrow down the number of items the Core could offer to review. Too general information that could not be assimilated, would swamp an enquiry and the recipient, however intelligent and knowledgeable they were.

On the subject of love, there was a vast range of resources, Barata had struggled to narrow them down. He rationalised that someone must have had the same mission as himself at some time. The fundamental question, "what is love," must have been asked a million times in the distant past, but where were the precise answers?

It was rational to approach the solution through established professional's reports from Psychologists, behaviourists and social manipulators. This narrowed the resource material to a few thousand hours of contemplation and mental absorption. Too much!

Poets had contributed billions of words on the subject. Almost every love-lost male in the history of mankind had wanted to put stylus to paper to rip the grief out of his heart. There was no shortage of poems.

It was to the sciences that Barata had turned. Science was the dominant force in mankind in this era. Without it, mankind would still be drifting through development at a slow pace, Earthbound and at war with itself.

Narrowing down the type of report Barata wanted, the core had offered three submissions to consider. He started two and rejected them, the third gave him pause for thought and he read it all.

As far back as 2080, after the Nano wars, Dr Amaretti completed an intense study on how the brain influenced human emotions. He discovered that certain stimuli affected specific nerve centres in the brain. Which in turn triggered physical effects - like oestrogen, endorphins and testosterone and other trace elements. This change in body chemistry further triggered the brain and stimulate changes in personality and judgement. These primaeval patterns were reflected in lust, desire and affection. However, he reasoned, there is one area of human emotion that did not fit any pattern of his research. It remained that "Love" was an indescribable and unquantifiable emotion.

After further burrowing into the links from this article, Barata discovered that the results of research like this led to the Core removing the emotion known as "Love" from all human access. These extreme emotions only upset the status quo of mankind and were not required in the new age of advanced human culture. They jeopardised the stability and balance of the human race.

Love was an area that mankind should do without, and so it was gradually removed from the physical and mental psyche of all humans. At

every stage, the Core slowly whittled down the need and desire for this one emotion that threatened to unbalance the whole of the human species.

As Barata lay in his lover's arms he realised what a strong element, this emotion presented to the modern human mind. He saw why any authoritarian decision-maker would want to restrict this influence from an individual. A world of people in love could ruin any future plans for planets full of people. Stability quickly turning into something that could rapidly run out of control.

He hugged Serania tightly, and she stirred. 'Time we went back.' He said gently.

'Must we?' came the almost sleepy reply.

'We'll do this again. As often as we can, but in the meantime

'Lose the bumps and the hair?'

'Do.'

As their bodies retracted into the more recognisable form, Barata reconnected with the transport and it slowly lifted from the planet's surface. Within moments they were back on the high-rise platform and Camilla was waiting for them in the blustery dry wind. Camilla's robe flapping wildly, he ordered the bios to reduce its size and stiffen its structure. The robes clung to his form more, and the wind had less effect on its movements.

Another transport was resting beside him, it was opaque and looked like any other craft from Earth. 'You have visitors.' Camilla synced and waved a hand for them to enter his home. 'Are you expecting any more?'

Serania could not tell from the tone of his thought whether he was resenting this further intrusion, or looking forward to more visitors from the home planet? 'We're not expecting any, yet.' Serania thought and smiled at him.

As the elevator opened out into the reception room Serania was confronted with her four crew, all looking at her and grinning. A very rare facial expression.

Barata felt a tinge of anxiety, their time alone away from Earth was already over. He had to consider yet another plan to get Serania alone and away from watchful Cores.

No sooner than the women communicated, then a singular ping in their heads informed them of an important incoming transmission. They all stopped broadcasting and waited.

A large transparent screen formed at the end of one curved wall and the face of Vara appeared on it. Around his features, they still saw the vista

of Ammos, its sand and towers melting into the distance. But in their minds, the voice of Vara held their attention.

‘Apologies for any disturbance this appearance may cause, but we’re now broadcasting over the known Universe. This is a significant moment in Mankind’s history and it should be celebrated by every human that has access to this communication.’ He seemed smug with his importance. A change of facial expression was rare, but Vara was exhibiting a sense of pride and importance.

‘I don’t trust him.’ A narrow thought aimed at Serania from Cress.

‘Quiet.’ Was the reply. ‘Just listen.’

‘Where have you been? We couldn’t contact you?’ from Donella.

‘Ssshhhush.’ Serania.

‘We need to celebrate this day, our conquest over the Lepids.’ Vara waited, expecting every planet to have its own cheerful reaction to the statement. ‘But we have a few particular citizens to thank for its final success, without them we may still be at war. I mean of course the crew of the ship known as *Romeo*. Captain Serania, Navigator. Pattia, Weapons officer. Cress, Communications. Senora, Ship’s Structure. And Donella, Sailing Master. To you all, we award the medal of Extreme Merit. From every one of mankind’s community – we thank you.’

Invisible Nanos created glittering medals around their necks as the Core on Ammos responded to instructions issued many light years away. Camilla and Barata applauded. Serania realised that many billions of people throughout the Universe were probably applauding her too. Soon she would be bombarded by messages of congratulations. She would have to disconnect from the Core as she felt she was in no mental condition to handle any number of accolades.

Vara levelled his stare at Serania and obviously expected a suitable reply speech. What could she say? It was all unnecessary, but she knew Vara wanted to promote the end of the war and re-establish confidence in mankind’s future. She couldn’t argue with that.

She took a deep breath and let the bios steady her heart rhythm and pulse. When she was ready, she started to think. ‘We’re not alone in earning this award. Many other heroic people died in the battle to save the Earth. Our ship, *Romeo*, was the real hero of the day. He found the Lepid’s weakness and acted on it.’

Did Vara’s face show a flicker of an annoyance then?

She continued. ‘War is something mankind has lived with for millenniums. We thought we’d conquered warring with ourselves, but we didn’t count on alien species having issues with us. I’m sure this is not the

last war we humans have to win. Let's just hope it'll be the hardest and from now on we'll be more prepared and able to defeat what may come next.' She nodded to the screen to indicate she'd finished.

Vara had a look on his face, that might be anger, which he quickly corrected. 'Thank you Captain Serania. Congratulations, once again. The war is over. There's nothing more for any of the colonies to worry about. We have the means and ability to fend off all comers. The Defence Council will be ever vigilant. I thank you for your attention and I wish you all safe and happy lives.'

The image faded with his smile looking falsier than ever.

'Pregger.' From Cress.

'The medals look good on us, don't they?' from Pattia.

'Where do we keep them?' from Vanora.

'We wear them all the time, do?' Donella.

'I think you said something to annoy him.' The thought was from Barata for Serania's mind only.

She looked at him and felt the now familiar thrill run through her. 'He wanted this public display, he can't expect everyone to feel the same way about it.' Serania's thought had a hint of bitterness in her imagery.

Barata took both her hands and pulled her towards him. She thought he was going to kiss her. 'It's over now, he's gone. We can get on with life.' Barata's thoughts soft and warm.

Cress was watching and sent a message to her three colleagues. 'What's he doing to her?'

'Touching?' Donella.

'Something's not right since she came back from her trip with him.' Pattia.

'They're watching.' Serania breathed at Barata. He let go her hands and took a step back, bowed and synced, 'Congratulations Captain Serania, well deserved.' He nodded to the other girls and synced, 'And well done to *all* the crew.'

Camilla wanted to add his congratulations and stepped forward. He inclined his head and synced. 'It's an honour to have you as guests on Ammos. All of you.' He extended his hand to the other crew.

Barata stepped nearer to Camilla as he synced, 'The honour is all ours, Camilla. We do want to stress, however, we're not here to interfere, or

pry, but we do have a warning to give you. What happened on Earth could have happened here.'

Camilla had a slight change of facial expression. 'They told us the Lepids were all destroyed! Vara just said the war is over

Barata nodded and thought, 'A strong possibility, but not a certainty. There may be other alien cultures out there, suddenly aware of human presence. You must be wary of apathy and complacency. Earth should be used as a lesson.'

'I'm not sure I

'You need to be prepared, just in case. You don't want to get caught out as Earth was. Do you have ANY defences?'

Camilla nodded. 'We are prepared. We've monitoring equipment, way out into space. We'll get at least a day's warning if there's anything large moving towards us. Is that enough?'

'It's a start. Vigilance is important here. Please inform your Council that complacency would be dangerous to your planet. Now let us be more cheerful on this grandest of occasions. How about that historical tour of your wonderful planet?'

The crew and Barata joined Camilla in one enlarged transport that flew quickly over the surface of Ammos. There was little variation in the landscape and this was how the colonist wanted it. Rippled sand-coloured dunes as far as the eye could see. Tall posts signifying human occupation dotted the landscape.

Camilla synced with excited imagery. 'We terraformed the planet to this exact specification. The people who volunteered to come here wanted a desert environment. A solitary way of life, a distance from each neighbour and a peaceful existence. That's what we can offer here on Ammos.'

'What was it like before you set the Nanos loose on its surface?'
Barata.

'Much the same. More irregular. Some nasty sand creatures lived here that threatened us at every opportunity. We neutralised them. Stabilised the weather fewer sandstorms. We got it just right. I think.'

Camilla looked around him with wide-open eyes, he was proud of his creation. 'Sand is the basic building block for Nanos, so material was never a problem. The planet has a multi-solar system, but a Nanosphere filter encompassing the whole planet and cuts out the more harmful rays. The Nanos have scrubbed the air and introduced oxygen and hydrogen, making it fit for humans to breathe normally.'

Barata nodded appreciatively. Serania watched Barata's face. The crew watched Serania's face.

Camilla was in full flow. 'Amмос has two moons, which makes the desert look beautiful at night.'

'I'd like to see that.' Serania synced, her eyes still on Barata.

Camilla went on to explain a little of the planet's history. 'There are countless billions of habitable planets in the Universe. Distance isn't a handicap anymore with the Blip drive. Before colonisation, they explored all planets for safety issues. Air pollution, indigenous creatures, flora and earthquakes. Everything. It had to be a safe planet before Earth would send its children to colonise. There's only a small portion of people who'd want to leave idyllic Earth. Those that are ... shall I say, a little different to the normal person? The Core selected people of like thoughts and desires. Some wanted a water-based planet, others desert. With current technology, anything is possible to achieve quickly. Thirty million people on Amмос after only thirty years of colonisation. Is this your sort of lifestyle Barata?'

Barata shook his head. 'I'll remain on Earth, thank you.'

The tour took in the whole planet and the tourists quickly realised that once they'd seen one small area of the desert, they'd seen it all. They landed back on Camilla's pad and watched as the sun set. It was a splash of pure gold, followed by two discs of pure silver as the night deepened and the moons rose above the black horizon. The guests reclined and watched the splendour nature had to offer. None of it altered by the hand of mankind.

Serania and Barata were affected by this. Serania desperately wanted to grip his hand while he wanted to kiss her in this suddenly romantic moonlight. The girls watched with little fascination. They idly gossiped amongst themselves wondering what they were still doing on this planet.

Cress was watching Serania carefully. The way she looked at Barata did not seem normal to her. She mentioned this privately several times until Patti told her to ignore her misguided feelings and watch the prepping moons come up.

The thought of spending the night watching the moon and not be able to do anything about how they felt towards each other was a frustrating time for Barata and Serania. They should not be rude to Camilla and decide to leave, nor would they want to remain there with an uninspiring gathering.

They had to get away.

While the girls wished their bodies needed to sleep and it could excuse them, offering the opportunity to and lie down somewhere and be less bored. They too were looking for a polite excuse to be somewhere else. Entertaining guests was difficult when there was no entertainment for them. They didn't

eat or drink, nor wanted to be merry. Music was so personal as to be non-existent.

Camilla was still in a gushing mood as he constantly regaled his guest with how proud he was they chose his planet for the Universal celebration of Mankind's freedom. He was so boisterous that none of them felt they could just up and leave quickly, without appearing disrespectful. As this was a propaganda exercise by the Defence Council – at least that was how Barata had sold their visit to Ammos – they had to be diplomatic and stay a while.

Although Serania had tried to assure the girls they could leave while Barata and she would take the responsible role of representatives. The girls decided they were all in this together and would stay as long as Serania did.

As Cress put it, 'We're all in this together. At home, we'd be doing nothing. We might as well stay here and do less than nothing. Besides, this is an adventure.'

Serania had agreed with a smile. Barata did not return the smile.

Serania found the time to be with Barata.

Using the excuse to have a stroll was preferable to recline, both Barata and Serania entered the elevator and went up to the roof. Cress watched them with a hint of envy. Should the girls follow?

'We're guests.' Vanora thought. 'Someone has to stay with the host.'

The new lovers reclined on the roof of Camilla's home and watched the desert gently undulate into the distance. Camilla was below in one of his rooms, talking to his Council. The crew were elsewhere in the high-rise pod. For a brief while, they were alone.

'Alone, but possibly observed by the house mind.' Barata spoke out aloud.

'Would that matter?' Serania responded.

Barata shrugged. 'As long as we don't ... physically do anything out of the ordinary. I suppose not.'

'No touching, then?' Serania thought with a smile at him. 'And no changing body shapes.' Her grin even broader. 'As Shakespeare said:

Hear my soul speak:
The very instant that I saw you, did
My heart fly to your service.'

'How do you know that?'

‘It’s from *The Tempest*, 3.1. I don’t know what the 3.1 means, but it seems appropriate.’

‘It would seem that way if there was an opportunity for us to ... follow it through. But while we’re not entirely alone, perhaps we might look at the histories we got from the Nano House on Sanctuary. Do?’

‘Do.’

Barata contacted Serania’s transport, and it produced a large screen in front of them. At the silent command, the craft made the broadcast to the screen for Barata and Serania’s minds only.

‘Disconnect from Ammos’s Core.’ Barata made the command. ‘And let’s see what we have. I got the old technology deciphered, and this is the best quality my house mind could produce. Let’s see, shall we?’

The screen glowed into life.

The image was not as sharp or bright as they were used to from the Core. It hovered in front of them and they studied it quietly. There were multiple images, and all dated. Barata mentally selected the last image, and it enlarged so they could see it fully.

The scene revealed the old Nano House as it had been when new. The curve of the roof and walls looked as if recently completed. Benches and screens filled the room, and the areas boxed off for Nano-manufacturing projects were seemingly randomly placed.

There were several people moving in the background, attending to screens and instruments on the benches. They seemed to be moving in a hurry, and into the camera view appeared a man who looked less than calm. He tried to smile at the camera, but the strain on his face showed increased lines from his mouth and on his forehead. He was a young man and yet his eyes were smoky with tiredness. The bios were fighting to maintain a healthy level in his body, but what was happening around him was overtaking the bio’s efforts.

‘Breakthrough.’ He said breathlessly. His eyes flicked upwards briefly. ‘We found a way to defeat these prepping critters. We can destroy their cargo, but not their machines yet. That’s our mistake, the ships are raining down on us. They’re destroying everything we’ve built.’

A loud crash sounded, and he jumped. Again a nervous look at the ceiling. ‘We contacted Earth and they’re in the same position

Serania looked at the date of the recording again. A hundred years before their battle with the Lepids, which had ended just a few days previously.

‘We spoke to Devera, and she said they couldn’t send help. Perhaps they never could, it’s a desperate situation.’ Another crash, louder this time. Dust was falling from above. ‘We tried to contact the other colonies, but our communication unit has gone. We’re left with this simple recording device and fear it may be our last message. We’re not going to survive the devastation that’s raining down on us. We can’t stop it without letting the bugs get to us.’ A large piece of material fell in front of him. He looked up, and the screen went blank.

Serania felt a sting behind her eyes, an unusual sensation. She blinked and felt a dampness forming under her eye. The bios quickly removed it.

Barata remained staring at the blank image in front of him. ‘Well, that confirms what the ancients told us. They contacted Earth, and somebody called Devera said Earth was being attacked by the same bugs.’

‘Except it wasn’t.’ Serania said. ‘Do you know a Devera?’

Barata shook his head. ‘It was a hundred years ago, things change. I’ll ask the others on the Defence Council.’

‘Be careful.’ Serania thought, reaching out her hand to touch his arm. She felt the now familiar tingle of physical contact. ‘We don’t know who we can trust.’

Barata laid his hand on top of hers. Another tingle. ‘We must be extra careful what we say and do from now on. The New Earth must remain our secret until we can find out what really happened. Something is not right.’

‘Is there anything else on these records we can usefully see?’

Barata commanded the main screen again and flicked through the hundred or so recordings. They dated back to the earliest time of the settlement. The setting up of the Nano House and when the real construction began. The settlement took a few months to build and everyone seemed happy and optimistic. Various senior members made statements into the camera and they looked proud to be part of a great adventure. They looked healthy and happy.

There were views of the settlement as it progressed. The two viewers from the future watched as the main street took shape. They saw the opening of the Communal Hall similar to the one they’d sat in. It brought a tingle of memory to Serania, she found herself holding Barata’s hand. He squeezed her’s gently.

The majority of the recordings were of committee meetings and interviews with senior officials of the colony. There were no faces they recognised in front of the cameras. Albert was not there, even as a child.

Barata closed the viewer.

'It doesn't tell us much more than we knew already.' Barata thought.

'But it confirms what the ancients believed happened, was true. We must find a way to help those people, Barata. Earth owes them that.'

'Do. But how we go about it must be discrete and in order.' She nodded and risked reaching for his hand. He looked around the empty deck and squeezed her hand gently.

There was a ping in both their minds announcing the arrival of the crew from below. The girls ambled onto the deck and were disappointed to see their two friends quite separate and leisurely reclined.

'What're you doing?' synced Vanora.

'Watching the view. Beautiful isn't it?' Serania answered.

'But it never changes. Sand is sand!' Cress.

Serania leant upwards on one elbow to look at her friends. 'I think I'd like to experience this planet's sunrise and sunset. To go to the edge of this desert where there are no man-made structures, experience the planet's wildness. I think it would be calming after all that activity with the Lepids. I might do that later this evening.'

'Do. We'd all enjoy that experience.' Vanora.

'I thought I might get more serenity if I was on my own.' Serania thought using as subtle imagery as she could.

'We'll watch it from here then.' Pattia, with confused imagery.

'Why are you wanting to separate yourself from your friends, Serania? This isn't like you?' Cress.

Serania could not risk a glance at Barata but made a one-to-one with him. 'Follow my lead.'

'Do.' Was his isolated response.

Serania stood and walked over towards Cress. 'Do you know why people want to leave Earth and go and live on planets like' she waved her hand at the horizon. '..... this?'

'No idea. I wouldn't.'

'Because there comes a moment in a lifetime when something different is required. To ... experience something different. That's why people come here, for the solitude and calmness of the desert. Others for the

roaring waves of an ocean planet. Experiencing something different to what they've become used to.'

'Not me.' Cress.

'Then I'm sure you can understand that there are enough people who do. Hence, the vast numbers of human colonies throughout the Universe now. You can see that what I'm saying is true. Do?'

Cress looked at her feet and nodded. 'Do. I still don't understand why.'

Serania stood next to her and placed a hand lightly on her shoulder. Touching was unusual, and Cress looked up quickly to look into her friend's eyes. 'Try an experiment.' Serania synced. She looked around the group of people relaxing a thousand metres above the desert floor in the moonlight. 'Let's all try. Turn off your bios, let us experience the REAL Ammos. The real desert experiences. Go ahead, do it.'

The girls looked apprehensive. 'Can we do that?' from Pattia.

Barata thought to them all, 'Just give the command as you normally do. Tell them to stop functioning for one timed-minute. Go ahead.'

With a nervous hesitancy, the women did what he suggested. The heat hit them hard, like a physical attack. None of them had ever felt heat or cold throughout the whole of their lives. The soft wind cooled only briefly as it passed. They could smell the desert and a dry acrid taste assailed their mouths and nostrils.

'I hate it.' From Cress.

Serania closed her eyes and breathed in the smell of the sand. 'This is the real colonisation, not swapping one sanitised Earth for another.'

'I think I'd prefer my own planet.' From Donella.

Serania still had her eyes closed. 'When you get home, do this there too. You'll be surprised what you're missing.'

'You're welcome to this, Serania. Are you sure you're all right?' Cress.

Serania glanced at Cress. 'What do you mean?'

Cress stared back at her. 'You're different. Since ... well a while.' Cress.

'In what way?' again she had to stop glancing at Barata.

'Little things. You ... going off as you did for a day.' Cress.

‘With Barata.’ Added Donella.

‘You look different. In some way.’ From Vanora.

Serania decided to brazen it out. ‘I feel different. We had a life-threatening experience, all of us. It ... changed the way I see things. In a positive way. It’s good you’ve noticed, but I’m still the same old me. Just ... more aware of my surroundings. More ... appreciative of them.’ She stopped, hoping that this might allay their suspicions for a while.

‘This is too uncomfortable.’ From Cress. ‘I’m turning the bios back on.’

‘And me.’ Vanora.

‘I quite like it.’ From Pattia.

Serania pressed her advantage. ‘So, it’s no strange thing if I like solitude to appreciate the natural beauty that surrounds us all. Do?’

‘Do.’ Cress synced with a begrudging edge to her imagery.

‘If you like the solitude, why did you take Barata with you last time?’ Vanora was looking at Serania with a fixed expression.

Barata interrupted smoothly. ‘We’ve both come to appreciate this solitude and viewing the world from a point of isolation. We can compare feelings with what we see and experience. If I thought you were ready to join us, I’d suggest you give it a try. But clearly, your minds are not open enough, yet.’

Cress was unsure if she had been insulted. Vanora thought she’d been insulted, but cleverly and with a kind tone. Pattia was still drinking in the sensation of heat and dust.

Barata looked up into the distance and synced, ‘Both moons set in three hours. If you are going to go’ he looked directly at Serania.

She turned to him and synced, ‘Would you like to share the experience?’

Barata nodded. ‘Perhaps after a little thought, ladies, you might consider joining us next time?’

Serania entered her transport and Barata followed, the recliners slid up and the craft lifted. It headed south and was soon a dot in the distance. The crew watched it go before all thinking at once.

‘Something’s going on?’

‘What was that all about?’

‘Is she serious?’

‘She’s not well. The only answer.’

Their discussion resolved nothing. And while their conference proved fruitless, Barata and Serania were locked in an embrace that would have made each of the crew members confused, if not jealous.

The twin moons made a delightful romantic backdrop to their love-making.

For hours they watched the twin orbs creep across the sky. The sand turned silver and the small orbs were repeated in each other’s irises.

‘My bounty is as boundless as the sea, my love as deep; the more I give to thee, The more I have, for both are infinite. Romeo and Juliet, 2.2.’ Spoke Serania.

Barata smiled.

As the sun finally crested the dunes to the East, their eye colours changed to gold. ‘You were right. It is tranquil here.’ Barata synced with an added smile. The risk of syncing seemed small to them as the only available portal was their transport and they could clear its memory.

‘We don’t have to be somewhere quiet to enjoy tranquillity, Bar. Just each other.’ He kissed her and held the kiss for a long time.

‘This has to end, doesn’t it?’ Barata synced.

‘Does it?’ Serania replied looking deeply into his now purple eyes.

‘Where can we go from here?’

‘Anywhere we wish, we’re free to do what we like.’ Serania was touching his face gently.

‘Where would you want to go?’ Barata said covering her fingers with his.

‘We have a whole Universe to choose, but what’s stopping us just wanting to be together?’

He shrugged. ‘I can think of ten reasons. All of them are on the Council.’

‘But if we’re away from their prying eyes we could be together?’

‘If we could come up with a very good reason. A good excuse’

‘Then we must think of one. Unless you don’t want to?’

He kissed her fiercely while syncing. 'There's nothing more I want or need in this life. But if we're to make that move, it has to be forever. I don't want anything to disrupt or end it. You do understand? Do?'

'Do.'

'We need to remove any prejudiced barriers before we make the move. We need to be sure we won't be thwarted in any way. And that's not going to be easy.'

'I thought all mankind was free? To do as any individual wants?'

'They are, as long as they don't disrupt the Status Quo. When the authorities find out we've visited a forgotten planet, have introduced old-fashioned human feelings back into our lives have done this without consent and kept it a secret!'

'What? What would they do with us? What COULD they do to us?'

He shrugged. 'If they see us a threat to the stability of the planet or the Council in general ... they could

'What? Kill us? We can't die if we don't want to?'

He grasped her hands, and the sun shone strongly on his face. The curly hair now longer than ever, tumbling over his eyes. 'I don't know what they can or will do. But separating us would be the very start. Can you understand that?'

She bit her lip and her eyes were downcast. Of course, she could see that separation would be the very minimum. She'd be banished to one end of the Universe and him to another.

'We could change their point of view. Influence their thinking?' Her imagery desperate.

He shook his head. 'It's taken hundreds of years of this development of the human psyche, and two people with strange opinions are not going to change that.'

'So where does that leave us?'

He kissed her gently before thinking, 'We still have each other. Let's make the most of that, but we must plan. We must find a way that we can be together, and it'll have no effect on what others may think. I will find a way. I promise. Until then patience. Do?' She nodded, her eyes telling him she was not sure. The sun was strong in their eyes now and the bios adjusted their lenses.

'We must get back, we've been a long time. They'll be getting suspicious.' Barata synced while holding her hands.

‘They’re already suspicious. We may be able to do this once, or a few more times, but they will realise what’s happening.’

‘And will they try to stop us?’

She shrugged. ‘I really don’t know, I hope not. But we can’t risk everything on their decision-making processes at the time.’

They took a last look at the smooth horizon and re-connected with the transport. At a command from Serania, it swiftly took them back to a world where they were not able to be themselves. The falseness of it beginning to weigh heavily on Serania. Barata had to find a way.

And soon.

They spent the rest of the day in a state of semi-anxiety, for all the visitors to Ammos.

Camilla was the only one unaffected by the sense of time-wasting these guests were enduring. Although they’d nothing else they *needed* to do, being on this particular planet was low on their list of things they *wanted* to do.

The whole purpose of planning this visit was for Barata and Serania to have some time together. That was rapidly disintegrating.

‘How much longer do we have to stay here?’ a private sync from Cress to Serania.

‘You may go whenever you like.’ Serania synced calmly.

‘We’ll stay as long as you do.’

‘Another day, then. Maybe two.’ There was no response from Cress, but she turned her back and ambled off to seek somewhere else to be bored, in another part of the house.

A private sync to the mind of Barata from Serania. ‘We need to do something, keep them from being bored. Stop them from watching us so closely.’

He considered a moment. ‘It might be interesting to visit the Nano House on this planet.’ Serania took a moment to consider why he thought that might be of interest to them all. ‘Something to do, that they’ve never experienced. It’ll be educational.’ Added Barata. ‘But we have, of course. It would be interesting to compare. Do?’

Serania deliberated a moment. ‘Something’s better than nothing. At least we’re showing an interest in Camilla’s planet. We do that then we can tactfully leave. Do!’

The room was another dome, in the middle of a vast desert. Sand piled up against its lower slopes and its colour was white, to make it stand out. So someone might easily find it.

Normally unmanned, the house was the heart of the planet. From here everything that needed to happen, happened. They instructed the Nanos on how to perform their duties. Underneath, deep in the bedrock, the vast brain of the Core was housed.

But in honour of the visitors, three people were waiting for them when they arrived.

They'd coloured the inside of the dome white, and it looked clean and featureless. It was completely free of dust and Barata noticed how clutter free it was. He compared it to his recent experience to date, the wreck of the Nano room on New Earth. There, the dust of a century had removed any clinical purpose to the mechanics behind the walls.

The *Romeo's* crew had begrudgingly agreed to perform their duties as ambassadors for the Defence Council and shown interest in the workings of this colony. Camilla hardly restrained his pride as he introduced the three Nanoengineers, Ruben, Anatoly and Dietrich. Camilla's pride seemed to be reflected in the three professionals, who eagerly greeted their visitors.

The three men looked similar to Camilla. It was obviously the style and fashion of this world to be shorter and rounder than the Earth fashion they'd left 30 years previously. Upon reflection, Serania remembered that they too were shorter and rounder in those long past days. So perhaps the inhabitants of Ammos had not changed since leaving Earth. She felt a strong desire to find out. That could wait until later.

The engineers were each dressed in a skin-tight uniform of texture-less material, functional rather than stylish. The pale green almost blended in with the light green coloured equipment that constituted the work area inside the dome.

Anatoly excitedly described the function of each aspect of the room. To one side a row of workstations and hard screens, they had turned these on for the benefit of the visitors.

Until their visit to New Earth, Serania had no idea that Nanos had to be programmed. She thought they just well she didn't know what she thought. It wasn't a question many asked the Core. If you didn't ask, you weren't told. So her ignorance was fresh in her mind as she watched her fellow crew struggle to understand a word these three men were thinking.

Anatoly started, 'Whatever item we can imagine, the Nanos can make. So what we think appears on these screens and the Nanos interpret the images and make the images solid over there.' His arm swept to a large covered area the other side of the room.

Ruben's thoughts encompassed all in the dome, 'In this smaller room the Nanos construct our requirements. They build and test. Rebuild and test. They keep going until what we want to happen, finally happens. When we're happy with the final result, we instruct them to build a finished product.'

'Very interesting.' Barata synced diplomatically.

Closed sync to Serania from Cress. 'Is that it?'

'I think it must be. No point in making something complicated that was designed to be simple. The engineers think of the situation and the Nanos build it. What more do you want?' was Serania's reply.

'What're you doing at the moment?' was Donella's question.

The three men looked puzzled. 'Nothing.' Offered Dietrich. 'Everything that needs to be done is done.'

'So this place is not used anymore?' Vanora.

'When it's needed, we come in here and build.' Anatoly.

'How is something built? I mean' Pattia struggled for the right imagery, 'What's everything built from?'

'You mean what are the raw materials?' Anatoly. Pattia nodded. 'Well anything. Sand ... we have plenty of that.'

Dietrich eagerly stepped forward. 'Everything is made of atoms. Everything. This roof, your body. Atoms. Arranged differently so they form different functions. Take apart a leaf, atom by atom, and reassemble it atom by atom into anything you like. A cloak, for instance.'

'Just take something apart atom by atom?' Donella.

Dietrich warmed to his subject. 'There are more atoms in your eye than there are stars in the known Universe. In every breath we take in, we inhale as many molecules as there are stars in the visible Universe. Yet ... we can manipulate ALL these molecules. Count them, rearrange them, remember where they came from, and where they're going to.'

Pattia was looking up at the roof and realised it was one large screen. The inky blackness of space was reflected in there, tiny dots of stars shone all over it. Small points of red lights were scattered everywhere.

Ruben interrupted, his hands moving in arcs as he tried to describe his complex subject in more general terms. 'Nanotechnology has ensured every person is now perfect and remains perfect. To the point where waste from the body is no longer messily excreted. Nanos internally change it into enzymes, nutrients and trace elements the body needs. Toilets have become a thing of the past.'

‘What’re toilets?’ from Donella.

‘Shhss. Listen.’ From Serania.

Ruben, unaware of the hidden conversation continued. ‘Eyes are now bionic, in that with an element of concentration they can zoom in and out increasing sight over distance. Improvement in the original human design and a vast development from the caveman. However humans, when they have everything they need, become bored.’

‘Like now.’ From Cress.

‘Shhss.’

Ruben didn’t miss a beat. ‘As the human adjusts to this, it becomes a state of mind and life goes on in an even daze. No need for deep thought, rationalisation. When there’s no stimulus and motivation in your life, you need not do anything. I think this is a danger’

Anatoly interrupted quickly. ‘Ruben has a theory and regrettably, you’re the only ones on the planet that hasn’t heard it. What he was meant to say was the Nanos are tiny, tiny robots that can propel and organise themselves from basic patterns, commanded by their human hosts. In your body, you know them as “bios”. Everyone has them in their bodies and they keep us alive and stable.’

Serania synced to Barata, ‘I know a few hundred people who *don’t* have them!’

‘Shhss.’

‘Nanos can disassemble and assemble anything from a piece of dirt to a diamond. They can start work from a basic Exchange Cube, made from condensed matter. You’ve all consumed these as your body needs more material to work from. We make this like a cube, so it rests in a stable position. Not spherical to roll away and get lost.’ He laughed at his attempt at humour.

Dietrich took his place. ‘Over the developing years after the Nano wars, increasingly technical expertise has been handed over to the Nanos, few humans have any skill sets left. Increasingly, safeguards have been introduced. All Nanos stop functioning after a specific time, set according to the task they’re allocated.’

‘The point I was trying to make’ From a frustrated Ruben.

Anatoly waved a hand for him to be silent. ‘Our guests need just the basic idea of how everything works. Not a theory compounded by multiple cause-and-effect scenarios. Please.’ Ruben looked downcast and turned away to study the screens.

Donella felt sorry for him. She moved over to him and pointed to the ceiling. 'What're those?'

Ruben brightened up immediately. He pointed too. 'Those are our sentinels. Spaced all around the planet.'

'What're they for?'

'To detect any large fleet approaching. Earth advised us to be cautious, so we recently put those out there. The red dots, see them?'

'I see them, but I meant over there. Right in the distance, a group of small yellow dots. What're they?'

Ruben lost colour in his face, his bios struggled to control his breathing.

Anatoly and Dietrich moved towards him and looked at the ceiling. Screens were materialising all around the room. A low wailing siren sounded, and Camilla's mouth dropped open.

'What's happening?' he synced.

'We're being invaded.' Anatoly projected.

PART 12

"When sorrows come, they come not single spies, but in battalions".

For a brief moment everyone in the house was stationary, hardly daring to breathe, struggling to know what to think. Barata was the calmest in the room as he synced. 'How do we know they're not from Earth? Our ships?'

Anatoly projected, 'Wrong direction and too many.'

Barata was still uncertain how to proceed. He took a long mental breath before turning to Camilla. 'I'm a guest on your planet, Councillor, but I'm experienced with battle conditions?' Camilla nodded. 'May I offer help and advice in this situation?' Another nod. 'May I start with your Nanoengineers?' Before Camilla could respond Barata was relaying a barrage of instructions at the three men, who now transfixed watching the oncoming disaster on the ceiling screen.

'You need to throw as large as possible Nanosphere around the planet. Instruct the Nanos to disassemble anything organic. That removes the pilots and any soldiers on board those ships. Start by constructing a screen directly ahead of the attacking force, meet them as early as possible. It needs to target anything organic that's non-human.'

Barata appeared to stare into space for a moment. He was accessing Earth's Core, routing through the Ammos Core. The War Committee had captured some Lepids during the latter stages of the last battle. He wanted details of any analysis of them. He quickly got the results he was looking for. TWO types of alien. He turned back to the engineers. 'ANY biological entity, even carbon-based creatures. Disassemble them to dust.'

Dietrich moved towards a bank of machines as Barata finished. He now addressed Anatole. 'How many Nano Houses do you have on Ammos?'

'Four.' It was almost a stutter as his mind tried to cope with an emergency.

'Get them all working as fast as possible, get that biosphere around your planet. Once up, keep building it bigger, pushing it even further out from the planet's surface. The bigger the better. When these ships begin to fall, we don't want them on our heads. Keep working on that, no matter what happens. We've three hours before they get here. Some form of screen must be ready by then.' To Ruben, 'What defence weapons do you have?'

He looked puzzled. 'None.'

'You'd better make some. Cress talk to this man.' Cress moved forward quickly, with a glance towards Serania.

Things were moving quickly and Serania dared not distract Barata from his mental tirade of action.

Serania heard Cress contacting Ruben with, 'Anything that can project high levels of energy in a burst will do. Preggs up the navigation of the ships.'

Barata turned his attention to Vanora. 'Get into contact with Earth. Get all available Battleships here, crewed, or not. Warn them we're about to be under attack and it might be the Lepids back again. They need to be informed where our NanoShield is going to be, we don't want to destroy our own fleet.'

Vanora thought, 'Vara said the Lepids were all eliminated.'

Barata turned to her and smiled, 'Vara has said a lot of things.' He turned to Camilla. 'We need to warn your people, the colonists. Is there anywhere they can go to safety?'

'Like where?'

'Underground?'

'We came here to live on the surface. Above the surface. We've no underground facilities.'

'No caves, or underground rivers?' Camilla shook his head. 'Warn them anyway, every man for himself. Get them to try to instruct whatever Nano equipment they have, to build a protective screen around their homes. Something tough, impenetrable and may be flexible.'

Camilla was nodding vigorously. He began a series of mental broadcasts, hoping to reach as many of his people as possible.

For everyone in the dome, the bios were fighting against the desire for the humans to panic. Slowly the bios brought their hosts under control and they began to act calmly and efficiently.

Barata moved towards Dietrich and tried not to rush him in his work. Donella stood beside Serania, and Pattia joined them. 'What can we do?' Donella.

'Wait.' From Serania. She moved towards Vanora who had a screen open in front of her. Vanora said, 'I'm trying to make contact. Ammos's Core has linked to Earth's own Core. They're trying to trace Vara.'

'He's not on Earth, normally. He's a colonist somewhere.' Serania remembered.

Vanora nodded. 'I thought Earth Core would know where he was. It should be the quickest way to'

Vara suddenly appeared on the screen. A dark blue cloak flowing from his throat, his bald pate shining in some warm setting sun, on some far-off planet.

‘Vanora. An unexpected call.’

‘The Lepids are back and they’re attacking Ammos.’ Vanora had no time to refine her imagery.

Vara’s face never changed its expression. ‘Are you sure?’

‘By the time they attack we will be sure. Less than three hours is the estimate. We need help and you need to warn the other colonies, including Earth.’

‘Might I?’ his eyebrows lifted at his bland statement. ‘The Lepids are exterminated. Whatever you believe is coming for you will not be *them*.’

‘We need help, Vara. Send any battle fleet we have available.’

‘I don’t think I can set a panic rushing through the Universe on your mistaken premise, Vanora. When these attackers get nearer, let me know.’

The screen went blank.

Vanora looked at Serania, her mouth hanging open. ‘Did he cut me off?’

Serania nodded, glancing over to Barata. ‘I think he did. We need someone more senior to get through to him. Contact him again.’ She moved towards Barata.

The Nano construction machines were obviously working as the room now had a soft vibration throbbing through it. Inside the smaller rooms the Nanos were constructing an uncountable number of tiny machines. Each capable of passing through solid metal and infiltrating a Battleships’ interior. They could seek out any organic forms and instantly disassemble them, leaving a small pile of dust as a residue. In another small box the Nanos were constructing a suitable vehicle that was to propel the Nano cloud into the path of the oncoming invasion fleet. Anatole was supervising that process.

As time ticked by, across the planet, other Nano Houses were preparing similar defence systems and were desperately trying to get them deployed around the planet before the fleet struck.

Cress was intensely staring at a large screen and the images flickering across it. Shapes and designs of weapons moved in and out of her vision. She was desperately remembering what the energy weapons were like that she’d used on the Battleship *Romeo*.

As she imaged a concept, the Nanos were building a facsimile. They built it in minutes, the energy systems tested and failed. Cress was getting frustrated as she was no engineer and couldn't understand why the weapons refused to fire. In a flash of inspiration, she contacted Earth's Core and had the design for the Battleships arsenal sent directly to Ammos's Nano House. She breathed a sigh of relief as the weapons were quickly constructed and successfully tested.

Within minutes they had their first energy weapon. Cress reached into the box and lifted it out. It was bulky but surprisingly light. She moved outside to aimed it at a mound of sand. The energy blast was almost invisible and turned the sand into glass, with no recoil.

'It'll do.' Cress smiled. 'Now we need a lot more of them and something that can get them placed in orbit around Ammos.'

Camilla was already looking grey and tired, this was all too much effort and emotion for him to handle. He'd come to Ammos for the quiet life, no stress, no energy commitment. Certainly no planetary responsibility for life and death.

His bios renewed their efforts to restore his energy levels and allowed him to function normally. Within moments he was his old self again and looking to Barata for good news.

Barata was in front of the screen beside Vanora and Serania. They waited for the image of Vara to re-appear, it was clear he was not responding. 'What's he doing this for?' questioned Vanora.

'I have an idea.' Serania thought. She turned away and contacted her house mind, Amahan.

'Serania. Nice to hear from you. How's your trip going?'

'No time to chat. I need you to do some quick research for me. Here's what I need to know

'Why's he not responding to our call? He knows it's urgent!' Vanora was chewing her lip in a sign of anxiety. Her bios readjusted her bio levels, and she immediately felt calmer.

Cress was anxiously awaiting the construction of a series of small vessels that were to transport her energy weapons off the planet. It was taking longer than she wanted it to. She'd started with twenty weapons and one craft to lift them. As these were progressing she was imaging on the Nano screens a further hundred larger versions to be started as soon as the first batch was completed.

Camilla tentatively approached Barata who was still waiting for the screen to host an image of Vara. 'Barata. I've done what I can in warning our population. I can do no more.'

Almost distractedly Barata thought, 'You've done well, Camilla. If you have a hole you wish to go and hide in, please do.'

'No. I will stay here. Help in any way I can.'

Barata turned to look at the old Councillor and smiled at him. 'It may be a time for heroes, we must all play our part. Just see to your men on the machines. they need you now.' Camilla nodded and moved away.

The screen remained empty.

'Serania?' Amahan's image pinged in her mind, Serania allowed contact. 'Vara has received your command for contact and has refused it.'

'What can we do to force him?' Serania thought with an edge of anger in her tone.

'I've contacted the Defence Council and warned them of your pending situation. They're now concerned that Vara has made himself unavailable. They're trying to contact him now.'

'Good work, Amahan.' The contact ended.

To Barata she privately synced, 'The Council are going to put pressure on him to respond. I suggest you make it a multi-call, make sure Vara has to make himself available for help. We do not want a repeat of New Earth right?'

Barata nodded and started to make the contacts.

An hour went by. They all looked above them and noted the yellow dots were getting larger.

'Any long-range viewers picking them up yet?' Asked Barata.

'What long-range viewers? We were lucky to have placed these monitors.' Dietrich synced.

Barata. 'We need positive identification. Any Nano programmers not in use at the moment? We need to build some kind of telescope, so we can see what's coming at us.'

'I'll get on it.' Ruben announced, moving towards another bank of instruments.

'Weapons ready for deployment.' Cress synced with an imagery of proudness in her statement.

'Launch them.' Barata thought. He kept one eye on the empty screen, waiting for Vara, and the other on the progress of the Nanobots.

Cress, with the help of the rest of the crew, carried the vessel and the weapons outside, aware how light in construction they all were. With an almost silent swish, the craft shot up into the clear sky. Seconds later it had disappeared from view. 'I hope we got the calculations right where it's to go.' Cress wondered.

Ten minutes later a series of smaller vessels took off carrying the trillions of Nanos that were to intercept the approaching fleet. They reached orbit and curved towards the oncoming enemy. With a silent burst, they deployed in a large invisible curved dish, directly in front of the oncoming craft.

'Now what?' from Pattia.

'We wait.' From Barata. 'While I see how the other Nano Houses are progressing.' He moved towards the bank of desks that housed the machinery and hard screens for the Nano construction systems.

Vanora kept trying to get a contact with Vara. At Serania's insistence, she didn't give up.

Serania took a deep breath and looked at the empty screen hanging in the air in the centre of the room. Where was Vara and what was he doing? The Council needed his authorisation to deploy a battle fleet. Time was becoming critical. What was he hiding from?

Serania contacted Earth's Core and posed a question. 'We all change our names several times in our lifetime, for various reasons. The history of that would be interesting at another time. I need to know any names Councillor Vara has used a hundred years ago. Can you find that information?'

The answer was instant. 'Devera.'

'Devera? I understand that Devera was a woman?'

'Vara was a woman at that time in his life. Briefly.'

Serania disconnected before making private contact with Barata. 'Vara used the name Devera a hundred years ago

Barata took his time responding. 'The name of the woman New Earth contacted. The woman who said the Earth was under attack and couldn't help them. It was Vara!'

'We must be careful. If we expose him now

Serania looked at Barata, noting his eyes had narrowed and he looked like a man who was about to lose his ability to function.

Serania rationalised, anger was an emotion that humans had long since left behind. Perhaps we *are* throwbacks as Vara had said. We few are more

old-human, than some others. Serania synced, 'Earlier I posed the question to him are there any planets similar to Earth. Vara didn't mention QZP42. I'm really suspicious of him, right now.'

'We keep this to ourselves, we tackle Vara's misdemeanours later. We need his support and help right now.' Barata.

'We're not going to let him get away with what he did to New Earth are we?'

Barata's look gave her the answer. 'We'll give New Earth justice, but now is not the time.' Barata looked more determined than she'd ever seen him before. It was at that exact moment she realised something important.

She loved him.

Vanora was still trying to connect with Vara and looking at the floating screen. Suddenly a face appeared. The image was of a female staring calmly out towards the women watching her in anticipation. 'Vara is reluctant to respond to your request.' She synced.

'Why?' was Vanora's response.

'He will not ... give a formative answer.' She looked to one side and her thoughts came softly to the listeners. 'I made a visit here to his home when the Council realised he was refusing communication on this urgent matter. Can you tell me the details?' Vanora glanced at Serania and began a detailed description of the events of the last few hours.

Serania studied the Councillor's face trying to remember if she'd seen her before, she couldn't remember her. Serania summoned Barata from his intense study of the workings on the Nano equipment. Reluctantly he joined her and looked into the screen.

Vanora had finished explaining the situation, and the woman on the screen slow-nodded at Barata in recognition. Barata said, 'Councillor Mohammed, pleased to see you again.'

'Barata. You have a situation. One I thought' again the look to the side, probably at Vara, '... had been resolved. Clearly not. What help do you need?'

'Are there any Battleships you could send to help us defend this planet?'

Mohammed seemed to be thinking before her imagery synced, 'They're very scattered and have been diverted to various tasks. Destroying the last of the floating hulks of Lepids and final rescuing of any our abandoned crews. I'll see what I can do.'

'The ships needn't be manned by human crews.' Added Serania. 'We have a crew already here.'

At this, Vanora looked sharply at her captain. Thoughts ran privately through her head. Did she want to endure that horror all over again? Was it her duty to the human race, mankind, her crew, her captain?

Barata synced, 'A warning must be issued to all the Earth colonies. If this is a repeat of the Earth invasion

Mohammed nodded. 'I've already issued a warning.' Again that look towards one side.

Serania could not contain her inner anger any longer. She stood close to the screen and synced, 'Mohammed. I think I know why Vara's so resistant to acknowledging the possibility of another invasion. This is not the first time he has

Vara had been waiting patiently, but anxiously, to one side. He'd seen all his efforts to contain this situation being thwarted by other members of the Defence Council and felt his term as Chief Councillor in jeopardy. An insolent, and uninvited, visit to his own home by Mohamed, had been a warning his credibility was now in danger. He could not allow this ... mere Captain to reveal any more of his secrets than absolutely necessary. He'd tried to sit on a fence and avoid any real issues developing. Now he had to side with the Council to keep these interfering nobodies from talking too much.

He almost pushed Mohamed out of the shot and he smiled benignly at the vision of Serania and Barata standing together. 'Serania. Nice to see you again ... and so soon.'

'Vara.' From Serania with a slight incline of her head. All her nerves and intuition were tingling. She was suspicious of this man and his intentions. Her bios fought to return a calmness to her body. 'Vara. There appear to be some communication issues here. I believe I might have misunderstood what you were trying to communicate to me

Both Barata and Serania recognised that he looked nervous and edgy. His normal calm exterior seemed ruffled. His eyes darted between the two of them. Trying to read facial expressions that had been long since eradicated from human behaviour on Earth.

Vara synced, 'All the bugs are dead. You may have suffered stress from your ordeal on the battlefield. Take time off.' Vara let the sentence hang in silence. The implication strong in the minds of Mohamed and the many unknown people watching the screen and receiving the same communication.

With agile mental control, Barata projected the image from inside the dome into the minds of the two Council members on the faraway planet. 'The yellow dots you see, getting larger as we watch, are the incoming enemy fleet. We don't have the right equipment on this planet to see them clearly, nor identify them. But ... we're sure they're not human and an oncoming

threat. Logic tells us it's most likely to be the Lepids. We know of no other life forms that wish to attack in this way. Vara whether all the Lepids are all dead, as you claim, or not, we're in danger of an invasion and help is required from Earth. And urgently. *Vacillating* may result in many deaths and possibly this colony being wiped out. Do you need that on your conscience? Mohammed, please make the necessary authorisation to get us those Battleships. With, or without, Vara's consent.'

Vara's face turned a dark colour, and he disappeared from the screen. Mohammed took his place. 'We'll do what we can.'

Barata synced. 'Use the Blip drives. They can be programmed to self-destruct if captured by the Lepids. That'll get the ships here before the Lepids arrive.'

Mohammed looked to one side at Vara and Serania wondered what he was trying to say to her off-screen. She thought in hard rapid images to emphasise her point, 'Right now we're fighting to save an Earth colony. If it falls, then Earth could easily be next. If Vara uses his position to outvote you do you want that on YOUR conscience? I'll make it very clear who was responsible for any attack on this planet. Vara is being deliberately evasive and obstructive when he should be making every move to be helpful. Why is that? Ask him!'

Suddenly Vara pushed onto the screen again. 'We've only the word of an errant Councillor who's under suspicion of dubious activities and hiding in unknown places. Someone illegally accessed the Core, *again!* Suspicious acts that need answering.'

Mohamed looked at him and her face showed some emotion for the first time. Vara continued, his face getting redder, despite the bios valiant attempt to maintain a balance. 'Both of you have been behaving strangely and shouldn't be automatically believed by anyone. You've lied as to where you were together.'

Barata fought to maintain his dignity and calmness. 'I'm a free citizen to go wherever I please. As long as I do not break the law or convention. I'm not under suspicion, or due any criticisms. These accusations seem to be in your mind only, Vara. Especially our "Free to all" policy on the Core. I'm not under suspicion here but you now are. You are on the verge of becoming the most disliked human being in history.'

Vara seemed speechless at this perceived unwarranted attack on his authority and reputation.

Serania continued the pressure, knowing time was slipping away. 'Vara, if you don't authorise ships now, I'll go Universal and throw this medal back in your face. You'll be humiliated and disgraced in front of the whole of Mankind, having bragged about how clever you were to help end the war. The war is not over. You were badly mistaken.' She paused to draw a deep

breath. Adding emphasis to her thought ... 'Or lied to the whole community.'

Mohamed could see Vara about to explode. She defused the situation by syncing, 'Ships will be with you within the hour.'

'Let's hope we're still alive by then.' Barata synced, calm again.

Serania. 'Send anything as they're available, don't wait for a fleet altogether. Get us a ship quickly, my crew are ready now.'

'We are?' from Cress.

'We certainly are ...' from Donella.

The screen faded, and it left the ship's crew and Barata standing in the centre of the dome thinking what to say next. 'We'd better get ready, then.' From Pattia.

'Do.' From Vanora.

'Be careful.' From Barata. He moved forward and took hold of Serania's hand. It seemed natural for both of them, as they looked into each other's eyes. The rest of the crew felt an itch begin in their minds and they silently communicated.

'What're they doing?'

'This is ... what ... strange?'

'Touching?'

'I've heard about this' Cress.

'About what?' Donella.

Cress. 'I think it's called affection. A long time ago it was very popular, don't see it myself.'

Pattia. 'But ... Serania ... who would have thought?'

Barata synced into Serania's mind only, 'You don't have to do this. Take a transport and your crew and get back to safety.'

She managed a smile as she imaged, 'I DO have to do this. We both know that.'

'Very well.'

Camilla interrupted their train of thoughts. 'They're getting nearer. The barrier it's ready to deploy. Help us please' Barata gave Serania's

hand one last squeeze and hurried over to the equipment to help the increasingly frantic Dietrich.

Cress moved to Serania and made individual contact. ‘What was that about? Holding ... hands?’ There was a twinkle in her eyes and a very slight upturn to her mouth.

With a slow and deliberate movement Serania took hold of Cress’s hand and synced quietly, ‘Something you wouldn’t understand.’

‘Getting bigger!’ Was Camilla’s urgent cry.

Serania looked up at the dome to see the yellow dots almost becoming one large sprawl of colour. She connected to the Ammos Core and thought clearly. ‘When the first ship arrives, I want me, and my crew transported onto it, use my own transport to get us there. Keep open communication for as long as this battle lasts. Warn everyone on the planet to get underground, or at least off the surface. Affirm?’

‘Confirm.’ Was the single response.

‘Where are we with the repulse weapons?’ Barata directed at Ruben.

Ruben appeared flustered. ‘Some are already deployed, others are on their way. A few still being produced on the other side of the planet.’

Barata lay a calming hand on his shoulder before thinking, ‘You’re doing a terrific job. Keep the weapons coming and get people on them that know what to do. Smooth is fast, stay calm. Concentrate on the mass ahead of us. Once they split up, they’ll be all over us. How long before the planet will be completely covered by the NanoSphere?’

Ruben shrugged his shoulders. ‘Another hour. At least.’

‘It’ll have to do. Everyone get ready. Ladies, get into your transport. Be very careful, no risks. The Nanos and weapons may save the day yet.’

The lead Battleship was at the point of the formation known as the “Cone” to the Creetch. A pointed mandible thrust, straight into the heart of the enemy.

Creetch Eleven, the unsuspecting planet below, was still broadcasting signals, announcing its exact position to the invading force of the Creetch. The foolishness of these carbon-based creatures would soon be realised, before their ultimate and swift defeat.

The thought of fresh food and materials excited the Creetch leaders, who sat in the forward control room of the lead craft. Not all the Memnons on the ship’s deck had the same excitement and desire of the recently defeated Creetch. Although inculcated over the years to Creetch life and culture, they

still retained some deep routed original Memnon desire for peaceful solutions to any conflict.

None of their detection equipment picked up the invisible cloud stretched ahead of them. As the first ship passed through it, every creature on board perished. Silently and swiftly reduced to ashes.

The ships at first maintained their course then slowly veered direction. As the subsequent ships passed through the cloud, they too perished. It took a while before the ships at the rear realised something was going wrong up at the Cone. The loss of communication was a clue, and they tried to slow down dramatically. Many failed and ploughed through the invisible cloud to meet the same fate as their colleagues. The few hundred ships that halted and hung in space had a big decision to make.

Who was now their leader?

The doomed ships at the point of the Cone fell towards the planet, sucked in by the gravity. With no steerage, they fell in graceful curves towards the hard-packed sand below. Some burnt up in the upper thin atmosphere. Some were crushed on impact on the harder sand, while others hit a soft area and buried themselves deep into the dunes.

To the rear of the fleet, the ship's captains were rapidly communicating with their command Elite back on Memnon. Their response was as expected, continue the attack. Reinforcements on the way, all sent just hours after the first wave.

The Creetch Elite knew this was a throw of the gaming bones that it had become all or nothing. Every ship they had left was thrown into space from Memnon and set on a course for this rapidly irritating and troublesome planet.

Above the golden surface of Ammos, the survivors of the first wave were deploying to surround the planet and set out to attack on many fronts. Although any clear, actual targets were hard to locate and were surprisingly few and far between.

As the Creetch spread themselves thinly around the sphere, the first ships began their initial approach, selecting larger buildings as targets. This planet didn't seem to have large organised cities as had the other worlds the Creetch had invaded.

With large noisy eruptions, the Creetch ships disappeared in a ball of flame. Invisible energy beams were being shot from small, unseen, orbiting platforms above the surface. Some of these invisible beams also came from the surface itself. Within minutes the Creetch fleet was almost decimated.

Creetch commanders were screaming for their ship captains to pull back before the fatalities were complete. Even as the ships bounced off the thin

atmosphere and back into the void again, the beams still struck out at them. Each hit became a total destruction of any ship and its crew.

As the last few ships of the invading fleet retreated, Camilla shouted with joy. 'We've beaten them!'

Barata was more controlled. 'This time. They'll come again and stronger. Dietrich keep enlarging the NanoSphere. Build many more weapons. Next time they could break through. There's no time to waste.' Dietrich nodded and pulled Ruben towards the desks to help him,

'Incoming ships.' Warned Vanora. 'But I think they're ours. They just blinked into existence. Blip drive.'

'Ready, crew?' from Serania.

There was no need for a mental response as the women hurried outside towards the transport that was waiting for them. It surrounded them and lifted off and rapidly shot into space, straight into the hold of one of the large Battleships orbiting above the planet.

There was a sense of familiarity as the women walked the short corridor and into their command room. They rested back, and recliners formed underneath them. Invisible restrains surrounded them and acted as a buffer for the anticipated acceleration and high-G manoeuvres.

'Over to you ... Captain.' From Cress.

'Now we wait.' Was her calm reply. 'The hard part.'

Mohammed watched Vara as he left the room and she waited for a while before following him. She stood on his roof and watched his transport disappear into the cloudless sky. He had gone. She contacted the Core and it could not tell her where.

'Or why?' She questioned.

She eased into her own transport and chased up what was happening to the Earth fleet, and if it would get to the planet Ammos in time.

'How did you know what to do, Barata?' Camilla asked. 'How did you know how to defeat those ... aliens?'

Barata synced, 'It's only a matter of time before you'd figure it out yourselves. You have the technology and the excellent engineers to use it.'

‘Yes ... but by that time ... we’d have been’ His eyes showed his deep concern for their safety. Fear was there and a great sadness too. This was a man who’d just experience victory but was still expecting defeat. This was not the normal colonist as Barata had understood them. They were expected to be optimistic and determined. What had changed this man’s life, to make him so vulnerable?

Barata pulled his thoughts together, ‘I’ve lived through one war and I’m still on the Defence Council. I *should* know these things.’

Barata felt a pang of guilt about lying how he knew how to solve the problem. He was taking credit for someone else’s ideas. He’d no time for sentimentality, work needed to be done to fight off the next wave. He nodded to Camilla and moved towards the engineers to see how they were managing the tasks he’d set them.

Camilla stood in the centre of the dome and fretted about his planet’s future and how little he could influence its outcome.

They did not have long to wait. ‘Here they come.’ Pattia warned.

‘How many?’ Serania.

‘Too many to count, as they’re all bunched up.’

‘How long?’ Serania.

‘An hour. Maybe less.’ Pattia.

Serania remained calm as she communicated, ‘Vanora, warn Ammos Core and tell Earth they’re coming. Whoever’s in command of the rest of the Earth Fleet, get direct communication with them. Let them lead, we’ll help where we can. Good luck.’

Serania connected with the ships’ brain and felt a calming comfort from that. Not the same ambience of her last command. Oh *Romeo*, where are you. I need you now.

Serania contacted Barata. ‘How are the NanoShields doing? And weapons?’

‘Coming along. How’re *you* doing?’

‘Fine. We’re not going to be destroyed by our own defence are we?’ Barata detected a quirky little smirk attached to her mental imagery.

‘No we’ve reprogrammed the Nanos to attack only the Lepid’s cell structure. The biped creatures onboard the alien ships can look after

themselves. Our energy weapons have been target-guided with Earth ships as exceptions. You'll be safe.'

'You've made good use of your time. Thank you ... *Barata*.' The last word definitely had a hint of breathless passion in it. Barata felt a thrill pass through him.

'We must find a way to celebrate this if we all survive.' His imagery was broadcast to all the crew, but Serania knew its personal reference.

'Here they come.' Announced Pattia.

Serania felt the ship's brain take over the control of the ship. The human crew were just passengers again, monitoring what was happening at one-thousandth of the speed the ship worked at. Maybe a lot slower.

They felt the sudden changes of movement and the fast acceleration and deceleration. The technology of the craft absorbing much of the huge G-forces, but not all of them. They felt the hull shudder as weapons struck and the brain manoeuvred to avoid them.

The battlesphere above Ammos quickly became a confused mass of writhing Battleships, twisting and interlocking in a dance of death, as more of the Earth's battle fleet arrived. Energy beams sparkled between ships and Creetch died as the Nanos ate away their bodies.

Vanora could barely keep up with the instructions the newly arrived battle commander was making before the commands were carried out and the next instruction was being broadcast.

Cress was in a daze as the ship's weapons were firing at an incredible rate. Taking alien ships out of the equation with the regularity of a rapid metronome.

In the dome on the surface, Barata looked on helplessly at the images above his head. Yellow lights were blinking out rapidly, but more were coming in from outer space to replace them. How long could this last, he thought?

'We're hit.' Donella thought with an element of pain in her image.

'How bad?' Serania.

'I felt it. The brain'

'What?' Serania.

'The mind has gone. We're up. Take control.' Donella's thoughts had steadied and already she was attempting to seal the hull from further damage. 'Cress ... shoot the preg out of these poshers.'

The next moments were fraught with physical and mental anxiety. The ship plunged and twisted at Pattia's control. Cress firing her weapons and feeling her energy that was draining away as the Nanos rapidly replace it.

Vanora could no longer keep in touch with the Battle Commander, too much was happening. Their ship was on its own now, just fighting for its own survival.

Serania could no longer cope with monitoring all the ship's functions. She relied on her crew to do their part, attend to their duties and hope they were not all vaporised before they could end this frightful experience.

Donella heard and felt the hits from the Lepid's weapons and knew the ship was destabilising. Nano repair teams could not keep up with the damage being inflicted. There were just too many of the invading force to control them. They could not stay out of danger, nor fight them all off.

There was no substitute brain onboard to take over.

Serania made a desperate call to Barata, 'We need help. More firepower from the energy weapons. Can you ...' A scream from Donella interrupted her train of thought.

'I'm okay.' Donella frantically thought. 'Just ... painful.'

'We're coming apart here, Barata.' from Serania.

Barata was calm in his reply. 'I'm monitoring you. Stay alert and do your best. Help is on the way. The last of the Earth fleet is arriving now.'

The battlesphere became suddenly alive with ships. Serania immediately felt a lessening of weapons strikes on her ship. Larger, faster ships now isolating the Lepid fleet. Within minutes she was being instructed to withdraw from the fray. The stricken ship eased away and headed towards the planet's surface. She chose a landing area not far from the dome in which Barata was holding his breath. The huge craft dwarfed some dunes as it settled in a cloud of fine sand.

Donella was breathless as she thought, 'We're winning. The Lepids are being destroyed by the hundreds. Thousands. Just a few left. They're ... gone.'

'We've won.' Thought Vanora with a heavy sigh of relief.

'That was close.' Cress.

'Just in time.' From Pattia.

'But we've survived. Again.' From Serania.

'Pregging bugs!' From Cress. 'I wanted to kill more of them.'

For reasons she could never understand for many years, Serania laughed out loud. The first time in her life she had ever done that.

Within moments, the rest of the crew were laughing too.

PART 13

To be, or not to be: that is the question".

The crew walked from the transport towards the dome, all around them the safe, yellow sand stretching forever. The sun was hot, and their bios adjusted quickly. They linked arms, something they'd never done before. They were smiling. A historian would call their current emotion "happy".

Serania's mind was in a whirl. Events of the past few days hammered their way from the front to the back of her mind. Then forward again. In the space of four days, Serania had helped win two galactic wars, found mankind's lost emotion – love. And started an awareness to awaken mankind from a slow form of extinction. She'd found a lost colony and had visited a newer one. She'd discover a hundred-year-old secret hidden in the Core by a senior Council Member, behaviour unheard of in modern times. And she felt proud of her achievements, acknowledging she'd not achieved everything by herself, but she was a major part of every part of the human success story.

As they approached the dome, they saw Barata waiting. Camilla hovered nearby, unsure of protocol. These people had come as guests and ended up taking over the authority of the planet and fighting off malicious invaders. He was unsure how to express his gratitude.

Serania let go of the girls' arms and hurried towards Barata who moved swiftly to meet her. They hugged violently and pulled apart. Looking into each other's eyes they slowly kissed.

'Preg! What is that?' from Cress.

'What's he doing?' Donella.

'Battle fatigue. Obviously.' Vanora.

'I think it's called a kiss.' Pattia.

'How do you know?' Cress.

'I've just asked the Core. It said it was a "kiss". No idea what it means though.'

The crew rapidly noticed several things, Barata and Serania now had expressions on their faces, people didn't do that. They were looking at each

other longer than normal that too was odd. Their eyes were ... rounder, one pair of purple, and one set light blue.

As far as Barata and Serania were aware, at that moment as they hugged each other, was an intense feeling of relief. The relief they were alive, and they'd achieved something special. With no private mental contact, they knew there was a new dynamic in their relationship with each other now.

Serania could feel the girls probing her mind. She made closed contact with Barata. 'They're suspicious. We're behaving oddly.'

Barata turned away from Serania and smiled at the girls. Another oddity, they thought. 'At times of intense activity, or life-threatening experiences ... the human mind has primaeval habits that sometimes still surfaces. They have repressed these habits for hundreds of years. You feel it too sometimes, don't you? An ... excitement? A sense of relief? Almost ... joy.'

'Never heard of them before. What're they?' from Cress.

'Human emotions. Surfacing after a traumatic event. For you all perhaps a first-time experience. Like when you were all linking arms that was an emotional throw-back emotion. That did not seem like "odd" behaviour to you then did it? What you're feeling has been dormant since the dawn of man. Repressed by our lifestyle and made redundant by our almost perfect life. Enjoy these moments.'

Serania thought, 'Barata, and I have bonded strongly due to our experiences over the last day or so.' She turned to Barata and added, 'I want to see the sunset again and to appreciate it even more.'

'We'll join you this time.' From Donella. 'Sounds like a good idea, get some more of this old human experience. Emotions ... you called them?'

Serania smiled at her friends, 'We'd ... like to be alone to savour these moments.'

'Again?' from Pattia.

Cress became indignant. 'Surely we too can share these ... emotions. We've all been through the same things. You ... no more than us.'

'Oh yes, a lot more than you all have.' Thought Serania to herself.

The girls were now getting very curious. What did Vara say about Barata and Serania's suspicious behaviour?

Camilla approached, unaware of their private conversation and hovered until someone saw him. 'How long before sunset?' Serania asked.

'An hour or so. Why?'

Serania put a hand on his shoulder and liked the look of surprise on his face at the personal contact. These Earth people were certainly unusual. Touching each other. Camilla thought privately.

'My friends here would like to watch it from the top of your home. It must be beautiful from there.' Serania sent warm imagery. Camilla had to smile with pleasure. Something he could offer to thank them for all their timely efforts.

The sunset was duly beautiful, and the girls did partly appreciate it.

Serania and Barata never saw it. A few thousand metres up in the sky and held in the opaque cocoon, they had the most gratifying experience so far. They lay in each other's arms as the sky turned dark. Both had discovered that love and lust are not the same. They'd first discovered lust, now they believe they were in love. The Core gave Serania the words to express her feelings.

'What made me love thee? Let that persuade thee, there's something extraordinary in thee. I cannot: but I love thee; none but thee; and thou deservest it. The Merry Wives of Windsor, 3.3.'

Barata heard those same words and could contain his joy no longer. They did it all over again. The bios only just managing to keep up with them.

The roof of Camilla's home was lit gently by invisible lights. Countless stars hung above them, and the girls spent a full two minutes looking at them. Stars were stars, no matter where you went.

Camilla was silent for long periods of time. Used to being totally alone, a conversation was something he lacked. One good reason for choosing a planet lifestyle like Ammos.

The girls communicated between themselves. Sometimes including Camilla in their thoughts, but mostly individually.

The sun had long gone and Serania was still absent. Cress tried to contact her. 'Not receiving.'

'What ARE they doing?' from Donella.

The air was warm, not that anyone noticed, as they reclined and looked once again at the stars.

'I still can't believe what we've just been through. And we're still alive.' Vanora mused.

'It would be hard to kill us. We can be resurrected quickly enough.' Pattia.

'I know, but the pain. The trauma of ... dying. I couldn't stand it.' Cress.

There was a long silence before Camilla said, 'I died once.'

'How?' was Cress's suddenly interested thought.

'Out there.' A wave of the hand over the desert. 'Sandstorm. My bios couldn't cope, more sand coming in than they could remove. I drowned in sand.'

'That must be horrible.' from Donella.

'It was. I never let it happen again. I rarely move from this home anymore.'

'Were you ... frightened?' Donella.

'Was it painful?' Pattia.

'Both.' Camilla replied with a wistful smile.

'I've never felt pain.' Pattia suddenly realised. 'What's it like?'

'The concept of "painful" doesn't do it justice. "Agony" is a better concept.'

'Never had agony, either.' Pattia mused.

'Avoid it. All of you. You did a magnificent and brave job today, but if it'd gone wrong, your death would convince you to never set foot in a ship again. Never go into battle. Never repeat your mistake.'

From Donella. 'I don't see it as a mistake. It's something we felt we wanted to do, had to do. Protect Earth, and Ammos here. And Mankind.'

'Very noble and worthy. Let's hope you never have to change that attitude.' Camilla's eyes looked sad.

'Here they come.' From Cress as she felt the tiny ping in her mind and recognised it as Serania about to arrive. Several of the girls stood up from their recliners as the small transport ghosted into view. The transport's hull cleared and Barata and Serania stepped out of the craft as if it wasn't there.

Cress gasped. 'What the preg!'

'What's happened?' from Donella.

'Your bodies

Serania looked at Barata in a state of puzzlement and then of surprise. They'd not changed back from their transient experiences.

Barata stood tall, but with more defined muscles in his arms and legs. A noticeable bulge visible around his groin area. His hair was long and flowing over his shoulders, light brown, glinting like glass in the subdued moonlight and floor lighting of Camilla's roof surface.

Serania's appearance drew the most stares. Her hair too was long, blond and flowing down her back. Two large mounds were on her chest and her hips were wider and her bottom much larger. Her eyes were rounder and wider, her lips fuller and coloured a dark red.

Too late to change the shapes now. 'It was an experiment.' Barata synced unconvincingly. Once again Vara's accusation of odd behaviour echoed in the women's minds.

'Glad your back.' Camilla said. 'A change does us all good, occasionally. I became a woman for a few years, but in the end, it was no different and I changed back. I should have stayed that way ... but a change is often what we need. Sharpens the mind. I might try it again sometime.'

Before the barrage of questions that was brewing was about to swamp them, a screen glowed into life in front of them. Serania heaved a mental sigh of relief.

The image of Mohammed appeared. She looked happy if there were ever such an expression on the modern human face. 'Good news.' she synced gently. 'This is a Universal broadcast, and they have designated me the proud job of awarding all you fighters a medal.'

'Another one?' from under Cress's breath, heard only by Serania.

'Sssssh.'

'Why not Vara?' Serania announced quickly.

Mohammed looked hesitant at the question before saying. 'He's not here. My proud duty. Here you are.' Medals appeared around their necks as Mohammed read out their current names.

'I will change my name after this, this is so embarrassing.' Thought Cress to her crew members only.

'You should be proud, you did something useful. For a change.' From Pattia.

'Sssshhhh.' From Serania. 'Say thank you and look pleased.'

'How do I look pleased?' questioned Cress.

Serania thought back for an apt phrase and thought quietly to Barata and her crew, 'All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts'

'What the preg does that mean?' from Cress.

Barata and Camilla were included in the awards and looked uncomfortable wearing the huge gold coloured disk around their necks.

Mohammed finished her short speech and smiled at the heroes. Then added, 'For all those in the Universe watching, we believe this concludes the war against the Lepids. I'm sure we wish our victors well. End of broadcast.'

'We've heard that before.' Donella to her crew only.

The screen luminosity dimmed only slightly as it ended the Universal connection. Mohammed had more to say. 'Serania, you expressed an element of doubt about Vara's motivation and behaviour before. I feel you may be correct. He's left his home planet, disconnected from the Core and disappeared.'

'He won't be missed.' From Cress to Serania only.

'Sssshhhh.'

To Mohammed, Serania synced, 'He'll be back. He's nowhere to go. Embarrassed, I should think. We can all get back to normal now.'

Mohammed was shaking her head. She looked at Barata. 'We're aware there were some Lepid survivors from Ammos and they left in a hurry. We sent a Ghost Ship after them and we'll soon know where they went, we need to finish this job. As Defence Councillor, you need to be informed, we intend to send the Earth fleet after them and destroy them for good.'

'Sound reasoning.' Barata replied.

'Kill them all.' from Cress.

'Sssshhhh.'

‘Anything from the drone yet?’ Barata.

Mohammed’s face was expressionless as she replied, ‘They don’t have Blip drive, so it might take them some time to get back to wherever they now call base. When we know, the fleet can be there in moments. I’ll keep you informed. Congratulations again. All of you.’ The screen disappeared.

‘Now what?’ from Vanora.

‘We wait.’ From Barata.

‘Again!’ Cress.

The sudden departure of thousands of Creetch ships did not go unnoticed by the Memnons on the south half of the planet. They tracked the course and waited for the fleet to return. They were expecting the usual crowing victory cries of the Creetch coming home with food and materials, to continue their base existence until they needed to go to war once again. A worrying realisation that Memnon was now the only Creetch home.

There was a stirring realisation amongst the higher echelon of Memnon dignitaries, that the Creetch were now at their most vulnerable. No huge fleet hovering overhead to protect them, their huge army out into space on a raid.

The Memnons had developed into a two-tiered nation. Those who supported the Lepids and the pure breeds, who avoided all contact with the bugs. The pure breeds had continued to develop technology while the Lepids did not know how to think ahead. They just used the old Memnon technology, unaware it should have been continually improved.

In secret, the Memnons had further developed all areas of their technology. Keeping the secrets from the Creetch was always difficult. Much of the Creetch success story had been on the backs of the Memnon slaves who had been interbred and developing specific sub-species for defined tasks. But careful segregation of the Memnon factions enabled a secret technological underworld to continue without discovery. But one day, they would reveal it, and the Memnon leaders dreaded the Creetch reaction.

Memnon culture had always been one of patience and placidity. The Creetch were always wary that the Memnon had the firepower to enter a conflict with them but were too weak to use it. The Creetch had the numbers and the desire for violence. An uneasy peace at best, but it had worked for years.

The Dignitaries of Memnon thought it was time for a change, but dare they take the risk? If they failed, the Creetch would overrun the planet and everyone would be enslaved - those that were not used for food.

As the days passed the dignitaries concluded it was now, or never. Their next problem was to be how? A rapid and total air strike to wipe out all underground tunnels and caverns on the north of the planet. Elite forces to follow up and search the whole area and that could take days. If the fleet should return in force, the Memnons could be wiped out as well. It was a difficult decision. It was decided to get ready and prepare for the attack but wait until they knew the strength of the returning fleet. A judgment call could be made then.

It was several days later the Memnon deep space antenna picked up the returning fleet. The dignitaries held their breath. The final count was only two hundred. Was that manageable, or still a risk?

The antenna picked up something else. Someone had tracked the Creetch back to Memnon. Whoever the Creetch had attacked, knew where they were going home. They were being followed by a probe. The craft was small, and the Memnons bombarded it with signals. It quickly responded, and they soon had a basic communication established. This language was different, but these aliens had sophisticated equipment that soon learned the differences and began communicating in Memnon.

The Memnons made the species who called themselves “Human” an offer. And the humans accepted the challenge.

The Memnons were about to take back their full culture and get rid of the parasites that co-inhabited their world.

Barata looked up at the dome and stood still. The rest of the crew were on recliners watching the images on the inside surface of the dome, it saved on over-stretched necks.

Vanora noted Serania standing close to Barata. Cress noticed that Serania was gripping his hand. Pattia noticed how tightly it was being held. Camilla noted the view had changed to one from an orbital distance above an unknown planet.

‘Which one’s which?’ Donella enquired to everyone.

Barata pointed to the sharp image relayed live from the Ghost Ship. ‘This area here’ He swept his hand over the portion to their right ‘... Are the Memnons.’

‘Our allies, right?’ Pattia.

‘Correct. The other side ...’ another sweep of the hand. ‘Our old enemies the Lepids.’

‘Can’t see a thing.’ Thought Camilla.

Barata glanced at him and pointed again. ‘You can see quite clearly these cities here, they look very cultured. Towers, lakes and interconnecting

infrastructure. I can see moving vehicles on the ground and some sort of aerial activity. They're reasonably civilised. Over here where you can see nothing, is because the Lepids are underground.'

'What's that?' Donella.

Barata squinted at the imagery and his eyes refocused, enlarging the details. 'The returning Lepid fleet. Not many left.' A cheer sounded from the crew.

'Now what?' from Donella.

'We wait.' Thought Cress.

'We wait.' Echoed Barata.

The Creetch fleet circled one area and landed. There were hundreds of huge Battleships scattered all over the landscape. They could see insects scuttling from the ships and disappearing underground. There was no more movement.

'There' Pattia said, easing out of her recliner and pointing towards the Memnon area.

A small dot was moving towards the Lepid area. Then another and some more. The Earth forces had arrived. They collected above the Battleships and waited.

'Do it!' thought Cress.

There was a slight change in the colour of the ground and a ripple spread out from the centre. As it rippled, it disrupted the detail on the earth. As the ripple died away, they could see clearly.

The Lepid ships had disappeared. 'The Lepids are extinct.' Exclaimed Barata.

'I wish Vara were here to see this.' Serania thought, without recognising the irony in her imagery.

PART 14

More light and light; more dark and dark our woes!

A pain shot through Vara's body as if an arrow had struck him. The bios could not adjust to this emotional reaction quick enough to stop the shock echoing through his mind.

His thoughts were beyond rational as he entered his transport and gave the commands. The ship shifted and Blipped into space. Seconds later he was above a planet that glowed in the radiance of two suns. He looked down unseeing, thinking of events from his past.

Many times in his long political career his decisions and opinions had been challenged. But he'd always argued, "his way, was the right way". He'd made mistakes, all humans did. Perhaps less these days as the decisions on right and wrong were less obvious and less frequent. In the past, years in the past, he'd covered up those mistakes eloquently and moved on to different pastures.

His intellect had always been above that of his peers. He knew from very early in his life that he was "special". As he achieved the various stages of adulthood and manhood he realised he was certainly *more* than special.

In the last fifty years or so, he also realised *why* he was so special. As the basic idea had dawned on him, he referred to the Core for more and more information. His knowledge of mankind, its history and how people are formulated in their earlier years, accumulated to inculcate in him a greater understanding of the human psyche.

It was during one Council meeting in particular, after he'd won a difficult argument, that the knowledge revealed itself to him in an epiphany moment. His personality was a throwback from the past. All the old human drives, emotions and instincts that had been reduced, or eradicated, by modern thinking – were still within him. Vara had a latent ability to descend into the darker reaches of mankind's psyche. He'd hidden vices and desires that were not deemed appropriate in modern society. A throwback to old human values - the least appreciated kinds. Deep inside of him, was a darkness that surfaced when required. Giving him an edge, a cutting edge on his opponents.

These fools reasoned with a narrow mindset. All they knew was a compromise and acceptance of the norm, accepting anything as just and suitable. None of them could look beyond what was in front of them. The culture of the Council didn't acknowledge that any position of elevation – has any useable real power. They were content with what they had. He'd wanted more - a lot more.

He never discovered what the real “more” was. But it did occur to him that he felt only content when he shone at the top of the tree. He was the man everyone looked up to. He was the decision maker.

There was no more elevated a position in the human occupied Universe greater than the head of the Defence Council. Greater than a King of a continent, or Empire. A position he’d proudly held for over thirty years. After that length of time, he became bored. The Council handled the same old problems, in the same old way. He was getting stale, and he wanted more. He wanted power and especially acknowledgement of that power.

His transport slowly lowered towards the surface, in his mind a vague plan of action. He watched the clouds part as the ship sunk towards the lush looking surface of the planet.

The war with the Lepids was the event he’d craved for, he became the go-to hero - a man of action. All thoughts, concepts and action requests were passed through him, he was the decision maker. At last, he could feel his pride soar as he made life, or death decisions, battle-winning strategies. He felt the happiest he’d ever felt in his long life. He stood centre stage in a Universal battle for freedom. It wouldn’t get any more elevated than this for him.

But the war had ended too soon. In a matter of weeks, he felt that all had been taken away from him. He was reduced to giving out medals to the pitiful humans that had found the answer to stopping the war, ending it with a victory. He would have dragged that out for many years if he was allowed the time.

A stupid low-end ship’s brain had figured out the weak spot of the enemy and had used its own initiative to go ahead and end the war. Even the highest authority in the Universe could not stop it. Even after he gave the ship a direct order not to proceed.

But the war had ended and now his future would return to every day and mundane running of the Universe from his home on the planet Orphan. A planet colonised by people who wanted to be looked after. People that wanted no self-responsibility. Wanted a life without effort, wanted to be controlled by a higher being. He fitted that task admirably.

But even that elevated position palled after a few decades.

The craft touched softly on the ground and Vara cleared the hull to look out.

With a click of someone’s fingers everything had changed. The war ended and now minions were challenging his authority and decision-making

pro prowess. His mind recoiled at remembering the accusing thoughts that had shattered him from Barata and Serania.....

“I think I know why Vara is so resistant to acknowledging the possibility of another invasion. This is not the first time he has.....

....whether the Lepids are all dead...as you claim....or not.

If Vara uses his position to outvote you..... Do you want that on your conscience? I will make it very clear who was responsible for any attack on this planet. Vara is being deliberately evasive and obstructive when he should be making every move to be helpful. Why is that? Ask him!

You, however, at the moment are on the verge of becoming the most disliked human being in history.

If you don't authorise ships now, I'll go Universal and throw this medal back in your face. You'll be humiliated and disgraced in front of the whole of Mankind, having bragged about how clever you were to help end the war. The war is not over. You were mistaken. Or lied.”

Each accusation a wound like an arrow to his self-esteem. He was shocked and stunned by the sudden turn of events.

He could tell by the half-hidden thoughts of his Council Deputy Executive Mohammed that she was willing to believe these accusations. In the past he'd won many battles with her. She knew he was not always right, but he always won the argument. Now she had outside evidence to back up her not so secret opinions. His position could never be the same again.

He saw movement outside of his transport, the locals were gathering. Time for King Vara to make his entrance.

He instructed his bios to create a long flowing white gown and shimmering crown on top of his bald head. He resisted the idea of adding a spectral aura around him. These people were probably simple enough to appreciate his overall appearance as a God, or some divine entity.

Vara took the time to look around his new kingdom, he was instantly disappointed. He remembered his research on human traits and social development through the millennia and this reminded him of ... something.

The road was unpaved and dusty. Ruts ran through the small village, he could hardly call it a town. The buildings either side looked like they were about to collapse. There were no colours here, just bare wood, dust and a little decay.

The Wild West! That's what it reminded him of.

A straggling group of people were shuffling towards him. They looked so ... old. Their clothes hung off their bodies, mostly torn and ragged. What was this place?

He instructed his bios to make him taller and grander and he synced his first message to his new people. 'I am Vara. I'm here to save you.' The faces in front of him were impassive, they stood silently. They seemed to be ... expecting something.

He tried again. 'I'm Vara. Who is your leader? I will meet him. Now.'

He became aware of a noise. A rumble. No, more a mumble. These people were talking, using their voices, how ... backward. He'd used verbal communication in the past, a useful tool to avoid using the Core and it's all seeing tentacles.

He spoke out loud, 'I am Vara. Where is your leader?' This had an instant reaction, now he was getting somewhere. The people were talking amongst themselves in whispers, some had left the scene and were running away down the street. Something was happening, but what?

Vara felt his sense of importance waning. These were barbarians, and he was their saviour, he deserved more respect than this. He strongly resisted the temptation to fire the small energy weapon his transport had created for him, which he concealed in the palm of his long hand. A demonstration of power and authority might be needed.

There was movement down the street, people were running. What was this? He gripped the weapon tighter. An old man hurried to the front of the swelling crowd. The murmuring subsided as the man walked boldly towards him.

Vara studied the face in amazement. He'd seen no one this old. He looked he couldn't even guess how old. The face was heavily lined, and the skin looked more like leather. His hair was matted and over-long. The eyes stared straight at him, bright and piercing. Here was a man that would not back down in an argument, but Vara had a variety of power games to back him up.

The ancient was standing directly in front of Vara now. He looked down on the creatures and his nostrils reacted to the sour smell that wafted from the old man. His bios adjusted quickly, and the smell disappeared.

'I'm the most senior of Serenity at the moment, welcome. How many of you are there this time?'

'This time? What did he mean by that?' thought Vara to himself.

‘Just me. I’m your new leader. Your Ruler.’ Vara spoke as loudly as he could.

George Charles showed a strange expression on his face. Vara couldn’t understand what it meant. All the lines increased, and the eyes hardened in some way. ‘You’re what!’

The tone of the man’s voice had now changed, Vara felt threatened. Perhaps, just this once, diplomacy was needed. ‘Who are you?’ Vara was trying to remember how to inflect the voice to convey a sub-meaning. He hoped he’d achieved the right effect.

To George Charles the implication was disdainful, this man was not like the other visitors. George was not prepared to allow this visitor to dominate this conversation, nor bully him into any action that would affect his people. The sooner he got him away from the prying eyes of the townsfolk, the better.

‘Prepare the communal hall.’ George Charles ordered and watched as several people ran off to the larger of the buildings down the street. To the tall, alien stranger, George spoke quietly and clearly. ‘Perhaps we can adjourn somewhere more comfortable’ a broad sweep of the old man’s hand indicated Vara was to move towards a large building.

How did he feel about that, Vara questioned himself? The control was slipping into the hands of this barbarian. But he saw the people were moving aside for him and realised this was some sort of pagan ritual that he should at least acknowledge. He desperately wanted to access the Core and get advice to help with this developing situation, but it would give away his secret location. Before he had fully decided what to do, he saw the old man walking away from him. He felt he had to follow.

Inside the large room, Vara had sudden misgivings. His departure was an urgent one with a plan, not fully formed, in his mind. He knew that here on this lost planet he’d be safe. No one knew it was here and no one would come looking for him. But now as he looked around the roughly finished building, he saw that this was the height of the culture he was to rule over - such a waste of his talents. Should he change his mind and go somewhere else?

Where? Where else was so secure for him?

He was asked to sit on a rough wooden chair while his tormentor sat on a larger one facing him. Vara didn’t fit the chair and chose to stand. Almost twice as tall as some grubby people now filling up the room, some carrying naked flames on evil-smelling poles. Vara’s bios adjusted to the wave of smells assaulting his senses.

The old man fixed him with a stare and said, 'Where are Serania and Barata?' The words sent a shock through Vara that left him visibly shaken.

'How could these backward people possibly know of Barata and Serania?' Vara's mind synced to no one, an added edge to the imagery.

The man in front of him remained silent. 'Are they coming later?' the old man said.

Had he not understood Vara's question? Had he rudely ignored it? It slowly dawned on Vara that he had not actually asked it. He turned his mind to speech orientation and asked again. 'What do you know of them?'

'They were here a short while ago. Then ... they left, we don't know why. Are they all right?'

Vara struggled to keep up with this surprising turn of events. 'They won't be coming back, I'm here instead. You're to listen to me, I shall be your Leader. Are you the current Leader?'

George Charles was getting irked at this man's arrogance and intonation in his words. 'We have no "Leader". We've people who assume the responsibility to progress the whole of the community. You're not to be our Leader. We don't need one.'

Vara knew he was up against a far inferior intellect, but someone who could be stubborn and determined. He knew this could be a long drawn out confrontation that he would ultimately win. He was without the patience for negotiation and wanted a quick and gratifying result. Clearly, this was the main man to fight and beat.

Vara leaned across the table, his hands held palm down in front of him. The tiny weapon pushed in front of his right hand. Vara saw the Leader look at it and wonder what it was.

Vara slowly tapped the weapon as he said quietly, 'This small weapon here can destroy the whole of this village. You and your people along with it. All I have to do is touch it in the right place

Before Vara could react, the old man had snatched the weapon and thrown it into the crowd. Vara was dazed. The impudence the he gathered his patience and sat back. 'I have others.'

'I have one.' The old man said with a smile on his face.

'You do not know who you're dealing with here

Vara tried to out-stare the old man, but the piercing eyes came nearer as he leant across the table. He said, 'We didn't know what we were up against when the bugs came at us, but we're still here. We fought them off. Millions of them. Only one of you.'

'Bugs?'

Vara's mind drifted back many years. These people had reported an attack by the Lepids, he assumed the bugs had taken what they wanted and left. Leaving the survivors to re-establish. This cluster of people, the weak human survivors a hundred years later and yet they'd beaten the Lepids!

'You do not come in peace?' George Charles asked quietly, but with a hint of menace in his voice. His people were watching, he had to show strength. This huge man before him posed a threat. Unlike the other visitors, this one was more obviously dangerous.

The inflection at the end of the sentence puzzled Vara. Of course, he came in peace. As long as he was King, there would be peace.

There was a sudden commotion behind him and Vara turned quickly. Smoke was drifting upwards from a chair that had been disintegrated. A villager quickly hid something behind their back, looking at the old Leader in fear. They'd discovered how to use the weapon, suddenly Vara felt vulnerable. Of course, he wouldn't stay dead if they killed him. But there was no support for him and his transport. Who'd get him to the Nanos, so they could rebuild him?

Vara felt very susceptible. In the space of five minutes, he'd handed his prime motivation weapon into the hands of the opposition. He felt very foolish. These may be backward people, but they were not stupid.

He needed to try another tack.

'I'm here to help you. Guide you. Lead you. That's what I meant by being your new Leader.'

The old man's eyes twinkled as he pointed to the smoke gradually dispersing in the corner of the shabby room. 'By pointing a weapon at our heads?'

Vara shook his head. He remembered it was a physical gesture for those that relied on the spoken word. His mental imagery would have left no doubt as to his full meaning. He had to be careful and patient with these savages.

'I was using it as an example of what I can offer you. It will protect you. Help you ... defend yourselves.'

‘Against what? We’ve no natural predators on this planet.’

Vara’s thoughts were racing. ‘What other help do you need that I can provide.’

The old man leant forward again. His eyes narrowed, his lips in a thin line. What was he thinking, Vara wanted to know? ‘Do you have any metal?’

Vara allowed himself time to think. ‘No.’ he said at last. The Leader sat back and rested his hands on the table. He looked dejected. ‘But I can provide it.’

The elderly Leader sat forward again, his eyes wide in anticipation. ‘How much?’

Vara remembered to gesture to this verbal race. He shrugged and opened his hands. ‘How much do you need?’

The old man’s eyes narrowed again as he said, ‘Where is it? You have some with you?’

Another commotion made the leader turn around. A man was pushing his way through the crowd. Vara couldn’t believe it was possible, but this man looked even older than the Leader.

‘Am I too late?’

George Charles turned to Vara and said, ‘This is our elder in the town his name is, Albert. And I’ve been rude in not introducing myself as George Charles, Eminence of Sanctuary.’

George Charles held out his hand for a handshake and Vara looked down disdainfully at it. His bios were working hard keeping the aromas from these two dirty men from overcoming his desire to retch. He nodded at the ancient and said, ‘My name is Vara.’

Albert said, ‘And you have come here?’

‘Yes, I have.’ From Vara.

George Charles looked at the old man with a wink in the eye that was facing away from his visitor. ‘He’s come to rule us, Albert.’

‘He has. Is that good news? Do we need a Ruler?’

George Charles was smiling as he looked at Vara, but spoke to Albert, ‘He’s going to get us some metals, so we can build the things we need.’

Albert looked at his friend to assess how much of this was a joke. He couldn't read the face, so went along with what he thought Georgie was hinting at. 'Oh that sort of Ruler.'

Vara felt the control slipping away from him and wanted to get the conversation back on track. 'I can supply any amount of metal you need. I have a Nanomachine in my transport, it'll produce as much as you want.' He looked at the two men, who now looked at each other. There was a private interchange of information going on that Vara could not read. He became aware of a buzz of conversation running around the large room. He was getting hot and having difficulty breathing the hot humid atmosphere. His bios adjusted.

'We want steel, iron and aluminium. Sheets, bars and blocks. Can do?' Vara nodded. The Leader was watching Vara closely waiting for him to say something.

Vara was unsure how to proceed. The very old man helped him. 'What do you want from us?'

His almost toothless grin was unpleasant to see, but Vara put on a brave face and drew back his shoulders. How to phrase this? One step at a time, he thought. 'I just want somewhere to live.'

The sense of relief lasted only a matter of hours. The Lepids had all been destroyed, but then, they all believed that before. Barata was insistent he watched every phase of the clearing up operation on Memnon to ensure the Lepids could not return.

Ever.

Serania engaged in light conversation with her crewmates and they relived the moments of the battle and tried to make light of its effect on them.

Camilla was proud to host these heroes of Ammos. He'd suddenly many Ammos residents visiting his home, all of whom wanted to be personally introduced to the gallant fighters. It quickly wore thin for the heroes.

Another sunset approached and Serania was giving Barata a look of desire that he could not fail to understand. But the Council still was in communication with their newfound allies, the Memnon. He took her to one side to explain how he was now one of the senior representatives of the Defence Council. Attendance at these initial discussions with a new alien race was.... vital.

She fully understood, but also knew that a sunset like this was wasted by just seeing it from a rooftop. 'There will be other times.' Barata assured her.

'Will there. When? And where?'

'We'll find the time and the place.' He synced with an extra squeeze of her hand.

Neither fully realised how different they now looked from their colleagues. It seemed pointless to remove the added physical alterations, now everyone had seen them. It was more believable to continue, in the hope everyone understood the experiment was ongoing.

'How long will we be staying here, Bar?'

He shook his head as no assured answer came to him. 'Not long. A day? Two?'

She nodded and placed a light hand against his face. Aware others were watching but realising at some stage they might reveal all. She was thinking the sooner everyone knew what had changed between them, the sooner they could live a life together. 'We will only live the way we desire if we leave everything behind.'

Barata glanced at the reclining women, some of who were watching him. Camilla was wandering around with one of his friends, trying to converse with the retired battle-weary warriors. 'That means a clean break, from everything and everyone. Are you prepared to do that?' he synced.

'Another planet? Yes.' A breathless imagery from Serania.

'I'll see what I can find.'

She grasped his head as he turned to go back to the floating screen and his work with the Memnon repatriation of their world. 'I've already found one.' Serania told him.

Serania had to find a great deal of patience as Barata's duties took three days to complete. This included several visits to the depressing looking planet of Memnon. She chose not to go with him, but he was protected by a strong force of Defence Council chosen battle veterans.

She waited behind with her friends who increasingly wished to be somewhere else. Their conversation had run out, none were used to such

long periods of proximity with other people. Life just didn't need to have this level of personal contact.

On the third day, Barata contacted her on the third level to say he was coming back, and they had concluded everything. They had established a deputation on Memnon and they were there to help the burgeoning nation. Technologies could be compared and the best of both combined. It was a satisfactory conclusion for a war that could easily have had a different outcome.

Camilla was below the roof somewhere with friends, rarely out of sight for long. Serania decided to take her opportunity and drew the girls together in a private contact.

The suns were setting, and the breeze eased into the cool range. Bios adjusted, and the women were looking at her, knowing she'd been brooding over something for days. They were patient; she was their friend and Captain. Although they all hoped the later title was now permanently redundant.

Serania synced, 'Things are about to change for me and they may change for all of you too.' The girls remained silent, it was Serania's story to tell. 'We want to live on another planet.'

'Barata and you?' from Donella.

'Yes. Just the two of us.' Serania expected some sort of reaction and watched Cress for it.

'This planet?' from Sanora

'No.'

'Which one?' Sanora

'Somewhere ... you'll not have heard of.'

'Why, springs to mind?' Cress, at last, had a voice.

Serania was hesitant. She'd planned the words and images, knew what she wanted to get across. But now the time was here 'Have you heard of the word "love" before?' The girls quickly accessed the Core. Serania remained silent until they got the information.

'And you have this "love"?' from Pattia.

'Yessss.' Serania felt the excitement build as she created an image of Barata holding her close and tight. A protective envelope around a fragile girl. She shook off that imagery quickly.

Donella. 'I'm getting visuals of ... well, I don't know what they are but there are people fighting each other?'

'It's called "sex."' Cress synced. 'Seems like a lot of effort. Is it?'

Serania stood over her relaxing friends and synced, 'I'm not the one to try to explain anything to you. If you could only experience it yourself you'd know. You'd have no questions. I just want you all to accept that something's changed my life and I want to move on with it.'

'Leaving us behind?' from Donella.

Serania turned to Donella and synced, 'Before we met we had separate lives. That's all we need to return to. This whole episode has been an ... interlude.'

'Well I'm very happy for you, Ser.' Pattia synced, her imagery light and cheerful as she meant it to be.

'I'm grateful. Please understand, all of you. This is now my life's direction. I wish you discover and follow your own. All I want to say is that there's much more to living a life that can be found lying around on Earth. Look and you shall find. "If thou remember'st not the slightest folly That ever love did make thee run into, Thou hast not loved."'

'I still don't understand what you're saying. Especially that. What is that!' Cress.

'Poetry. A poet. He wrote about love, many hundreds of years ago. A favourite of our ship, Romeo.'

'When are you leaving?' The imagery very saddened, quite unlike Cress's normal disposition. 'When can we come and visit?'

Serania felt the familiar ping in her mind of Barata approaching. 'Now.' She synced with more sadness than she would have thought possible. 'And you won't be able to visit.'

The transport hovered invisibly above the familiar layout of the village. The sky was overcast with a low cloud level. There was little movement on the ground and it was early evening. 'What're we going to say?' questioned Serania.

Barata resisted a shrug for which he was becoming increasingly prone to. 'We'd like to be part of your lives. Will that do?'

'Do we? I mean ... are you really sure about this. As sure as I am?'

'I am.' He said leaning across to kiss her gently. 'This is the only way we can live as we want. To be together. These people down there will understand that. No one else we know will ever fully accept it.'

'Do.' Serania synced with a quick kiss. 'Under the watchful gaze of any Core, we'll always be under threat. Let's get on with it. Where shall we leave the transport?'

Barata thought for a moment before syncing, 'We may need it in the future. Let us leave it right here. Above everyone's heads where they can't see it. One single command and it'll be at our service.'

Serania thought about that for a while. 'Do.' The craft descended to let them out on the main street. As they walked away, it became invisible and rose swiftly upwards.

The street was empty. Without any communication, they walked towards the large building that was the Community Hall. As they approached a few people saw them and started talking to each other. Serania waved, a few responded. 'They remembered us.' Serania synced.

'It was only a few days ago. They're unlikely to forget us for years.' From Barata with a smile that was also an increasing part of his physical makeup.

They walked up the few steps off the street and through the open door. Inside it was dark, and it took a few moments before their bios could boost their eyesight.

They stopped still in surprise.

Vara was seated at the head of the table and staring at them. He showed no surprise, so neither did they. Vara was alone and hunched up in one of the ancient's tiny chairs. He looked uncomfortable but remained in that position.

In an isolated communication, Barata synced to Serania, 'So this is where he's run too. This will be interesting.'

Vara stood to his tallest height. A little taller than when I saw him last, thought Serania. All three glared at each other, neither wanted to be the first to say anything.

Vara broke first and synced. 'What're you doing here? Following me?'

'We didn't know you were here. People are wondering where you ran away to.' From Barata, a calm and restrained imagery to his communication.

Serania gave a more determined imagery as she synced, 'We came here because we've been here before and we've moved here. Permanently.'

'Why did you come here before?' Vara could not keep anger from his demand.

'Because we discovered its existence as a forgotten planet and wanted to see what it was like.' From Barata.

'Why're you interfering with all my plans again?' Vara seemed to stretch taller as he glared at them.

'Is being here in Sanctuary part of your plans?' Barata.

'I've only just found it myself.' Vara failing to avoid a defensive stance to his statement.

'No, you didn't. You knew of this planet a hundred years ago. You abandoned it then, leaving it to its fate.' Serania's venom was obvious.

Vara seemed visibly taken back. 'That ... was an accident. A ... mistake on my part.'

Barata was in no mood to allow Vara any leeway having discovered him on the planet he wanted to call home. 'One of many mistakes you've made over the years, Vara. To my knowledge, while I've been on the Council you've been accused of many errors of judgment.'

'We all make mistakes.'

Serania could see Barata's body language change. He grew taller, straighter, more aggressive. She'd never seen him like this before. His imagery almost growled, 'You more than most. And as someone demanding the highest position, your mistakes should be fewer than the rest. Don't you agree?' Vara had no repost.

Serania could hold herself back no longer. 'Why *are* you here, Vara?'

'I wanted to ... distance myself from the furore that was developing unnecessarily. I want time for quiet contemplation. I remembered this place and took the time to reflect. As, indeed, you two did. Under the ocean that was where you said you were. But you were here, correct?'

'That doesn't deflect any attention from you, Vara.' Barata countered.

Vara slowly sat back down, his head slightly dropped. He contemplated his words. Barata and Serania stood slightly closer to each other for mutual support. 'This will be more lies.' Barata told Serania.

Vara's imagery was softer now. 'You've only to look around you on Earth. That's the life we have, everyone has. You can't ask for more than that. Many have made some sacrifices to get it to that standard. If EVERY truth were known, Earth and mankind wouldn't be in the position we're in today.'

Serania took a step forward to confront Vara. 'Exactly what is that position? We're a race of pathetic people. Smug and over-confident. Lax in our awareness of the other occupants in the Universe. We were nearly destroyed by an alien race using only their mandibles. That's what we've become, a race that doesn't care, or see beyond its nose. This is what you've helped create. This is what we've become because you can't see it differently.'

The anger in her thoughts was obvious. A rebuttal was coming. 'Nobody has complained except you. Until now.' Vara's imagery was still calm.

Serania had not said all she was thinking. 'It's not good enough for mankind's future. We nearly lost that war. There could be no humans left after a few years if that had happened.'

'It's all history now. We won, didn't we?' Vara tried to look serene.

Serania was trying to calm herself. The attitude of Vara sitting there, trying to justify bad decisions he'd made irritated her. She felt threatened, a strange emotion. Not yet fear.

Barata changed tack. 'Where's your transport, Vara?'

'Somewhere you can't find it.' Vara's face had twisted into an involuntary smirk.

Barata reached out to Serania, 'Keep him talking.' His mind left hers and called for any transport in the area. Serania's answered, then another.

'Why come here, Vara?' Serania synced, without an edge, just a simple question requiring a simple response.

Vara studied his long thin hands before replying. 'I thought this planet would still be colonised. I thought the Nanos would see to that. After that attack all those years ago, I realised what a mistake I made not helping. But I was concerned about the consequences of the attacking enemy learning there were other worlds available. Like Earth.' He looked up at Serania. 'I

thought I was helping Earth and the other colonies. Any attack on the bugs would draw their attention to the other occupied planets.'

'You lied to them, Vara. Not only refusing to send help here, but you also said Earth was under attack.'

'I didn't want to give them false hope. We couldn't arrive in time. We wouldn't have been able to even build the ships in time I didn't want a prolonged conversation as I didn't want the bugs to trace the call and know there was another world they might consider attacking Earth. I did it to protect Earth. This planet was already beyond help.'

Barata was listening carefully while his mind was on another task. With detailed instructions, he told Vara's craft to return to Earth and await contact from Barata's mind only and delete last journey details. He instructed Serania's transport to remain and obey his, or her, instructions only.

Vara was deep into his own reflections now. Serania glanced at Barata wondering what he was doing. Vara was using loose imagery and becoming maudlin. 'I've lived with that mistake every day of my life.'

'Here come the lies.' Barata close-synced Serania.

'I tried to contact this planet after I realised what a terrible mistake I'd made, but there was no reply. What could I think? They were all dead, ravaged and destroyed by the Lepids? What could I do then? Nothing! I panicked, I wanted needed to protect Earth and the other colonies. We couldn't draw attention to the other worlds. All I could do was nothing. Recently, my regrets have ... got worse. The bios have not helped me as they should. My brain is fighting their efforts and causing me internal mental conflicts.'

'If it's forgiveness you're looking for, you're sitting in the wrong place.' Serania stated. 'There are many people on Earth who'd like to hear your story, your excuses. Don't waste your time on trying to convince us. You need to go back to Earth right now and face your responsibility.'

The thought of returning to civilisation sent a shock of fear right through Vara. Suddenly his self-pity was forgotten. Anger and fear were the primaeval emotions that suddenly raged through him. With a calmness, he didn't feel inside he synced, 'I've done nothing wrong.'

Barata was still not allowing him any emotional leeway. 'Neither have we. But here we all are, on this forgotten planet, never being able to return to Earth.'

‘What do you mean never to return? You have your transport.’ Vara looked concerned.

‘No we don’t, we sent it back to Earth. We can’t contact it. Ever again.’

Serania looked sharply at Barata who spared the time for a single solo thought to her, ‘Not really.’

‘But I have mine.’ Vara thought, getting ready to take immediate action if his two nemeses were trying to trick him.

‘No you don’t. I sent them both back to Earth.’ Barata.

‘But there’s no communication with Earth from here!’ Vara thought in panic.

‘Those are the consequences of you abandoning them a hundred years ago.’

The full impact of his future life hit Vara with a sudden fury that left him helpless.

In the past, he’d experienced several epileptic fits, brought on by uncontrollable rage. A flaw in his ancestral chemistry, a flaw that the bios struggled to overcome each time. A fact deliberately held back from the Core.

This was such a time.

He flung himself over the table crashing it onto its side. A howl of despair and rage came from his mouth that shook the air. He scrambled to his feet and launched himself at Barata, who saw him coming and stepped to one side. Faster than they thought he was capable of, Vara sidestepped and fell onto Serania, his hands around her throat and squeezing.

Barata uttered a howl of pain at the sight of his love being murdered right in front of him. He threw himself onto Vara’s back and tried to pull him off, but this was a man who’s every sinew was dedicated to revenge and retribution. Years of hidden frustration surfaced in a temper never before witnessed by these humans.

As Barata struggled, the death gasps of Serania were lessening, she became limp and slowed her struggling.

Barata felt a strong hand on his shoulder that hauled him off, Vara. He tried to hang on, but the force was too strong. Within a moment the same strong hands had ripped Vara from Serania’s limp body. They hurled Vara to the ground and Barata became aware of George Charles bending over Serania and gently lifting her head.

Vara struggled to get to his feet, but two more locals fell on top of him. They struggled on the dusty floor while George Charles was kissing Serania. Barata moved forward to stop him, but more hands were holding him back. George Charles was blowing air into her lungs and suddenly there was a jerk of her arm. Her eyelids flickered, and the bios were bringing her back to normal.

Albert stood over Barata and offered his hand for him to get on his feet. 'What happened?' Barata synced. No response. He repeated the thought out aloud.

'Some kind of fit. Seen it before. You alright?' from George Charles.

Barata took a moment to allow his body to tell him if anything was wrong. The bios had it in control. Serania was also recovering quickly.

'Welcome back, Barata.' Albert's face was split with a grin. 'We've missed you. I like this body much better.' Albert pointed to the long hair and shapes around the groin area.

Vara was calmer now, the bios winning the war. He shrugged off the two men that had burst through the door with others in response to the noise. Serania was on her feet but backing away from Vara. Barata moved to her and hugged her. She was shaking, but he knew the bios would restore her to normal within a few moments.

George Charles moved to Barata and held out his hand. Barata remembered to reach out with his and let the ancient shake it. 'Well. You're back and we have a new guest.' He pointed to Vara who was struggling to regain his dignity.

The room was filling with people who were putting the table upright again. They were watching the alien-looking people amongst them and admiring the calmness of their leader George Charles. They watched in awe as the dirt and dust on these latest visitor's clothes was rapidly disappearing. Revealing pure white coloured robes that flowed over their slim elegant and toned bodies.

Suddenly Vara found his voice, he shouted and pointed at Barata. 'You're not wanted here. Leave. Leave now.'

Barata remained calm. 'We can't. I told you, the transport has gone. We have to learn how to live together.'

Vara's mind was working quickly. He was in a hole, back against the wall. He needed every finite mote of cunning his years in politics had taught him. He spoke loudly. 'I can give them everything they want. You have given them what? They've told me - Nothing. These people are desperate for metal

and medicine. I can provide all of that. You just want to take from them. I heard you took something from their Nano room.'

Serania moved forward one step. She spoke out loud for the benefit of the people in the room, now silent and watching this opera. 'Information is what we took, something these people have a right to know. And when the time is right, they'll be given it.' She felt her body returning to normal, but her mind held on to anger and frustration. She knew she needed to control it. She looked at Barata and he smiled at her. It gave her just the right amount of confidence to stay calm.

Vara had not finished. 'I can be a great Leader, but you must make a choice. It's either them or me that has to go.' Spittle formed on his lips and the bios fought to control the red infusion of his face. His eyes now wild with fear and anger.

George Charles said calmly. 'When they arrived, they didn't threaten us. You did. The very first thing you did was threatened us.'

'A mistake.'

'One of many.' From Barata.

'They've not given you anything. They won't, it's against their principles. I did. I gave you what you wanted, what you needed. Straight away.'

'They would've had that if the bugs hadn't destroyed their world. And we three now know why that happened, don't we?' Barata voiced quietly, allowing Vara's high pitched voice to sound even more desperate. He too could play the political game.

He watched Vara's tell-tale body language, a subject he'd recently researched from the Core. The Earth-based humans normally unfazed by anything, showing no emotion, or attitude. Here was Vara showing raw emotion and desperation. Fear and loathing in there too.

George Charles said, 'Vara, you've offered everything, but at what price? You wanted to rule, be King. Lead us. You wanted power over us, to make us your slaves?'

'Ridiculous. How could you say that! I'd no intention

'That's what you said.' George Charles moving towards Vara, looking up at him. 'Words like *Ruler* and *Leader*. Those are very King-like expressions.'

Vara changed the target of his anger. To Barata, he shouted, 'Without your transport, you can give them nothing?'

‘He has lost his ship?’ from George Charles.

‘They’ Finger wagging from Vara, ‘... have taken both ships, now we’re all stranded. You can forget more metal and the medicines. THEY have ruined it for us all.’

‘Is this true?’ George Charles looked desperately deflated.

Barata finally lost patience with Vara’s dramatic antics. To George Charles, he said, ‘I’d like to introduce this person to you all, formally. His name is Vara, and he is was the head of our Defence Council. The highest position an individual could hold in any of our colonies. In the past, he had another name. It was Devera. Does that remind you of anything?’

George Charles became breathless with anger. For years that name had echoed down through the pain and misery that followed the alien attack. Whenever a crop failed, or someone died or was ill, the name Devera was used as a curse word to apportion blame. There was a stunned silence while the people of Sanctuary realised who they were looking at. The prime source of these miseries over the century. Right in front of them.

The impact affected Vara too, another panic attack. Another fit of rage too hot to handle. He launched himself at Barata, the sole source of his own misery. Anger at giving away a secret he’d spent a hundred years trying to cover up. Before he’d made two paces a strong young farmer laid him low with a single blow to the jaw. He aimed the blow with a century of pent-up hatred.

Barata looked at the prone body and said, ‘That won’t last long. His bios will revive him quickly. I suggest tying him up, but not too tight.’

‘Then what are we to do?’ George Charles asked Barata.

Barata looked at Serania before launching into a dialogue he knew had to be said sometime. He spoke, ‘In a few days all three of us will lose the protection of our bios, the technological things that keep us alive. We’ll become as vulnerable as all of you. We’ll start to age and be susceptible to illness and the frailty that comes with age.’

George Charles was looking around the people in the hall. Trying to judge their reaction, trying to think what he should say.

Barata continued, ‘Vara’s right. We can offer you nothing. We don’t have the authority to offer you anything. You’ve existed for over a century with what you have. All we can do is ask if we can join you. Help you in any way we can. Plough the fields, help build houses. We have little skill.’ He sighed before adding, ‘No skills at all. But we will learn.’

George Charles knew he should come up with a statement representative of his authority but could think of nothing. All he said was, 'And you can't go back to Earth?'

Vara was returning to conscious and struggling to stand, no one was helping him. In the silence that followed, a high-pitched voice said, 'Is that man mad like your uncle Fred?' Clara Alice May stood beside her father and was pointing directly at Vara.

'Maybe, darling.' George Charles said, pulling her towards him. Previously unaware she was in the building.

'Are you going to turn him away like you did Uncle Fred?' she said quietly.

'Maybe, darling.' Said George Charles looking intently at Vara. Aware his daughter had focused all the concentration on herself.

In the silence, George Charles was desperately thinking of what he should say. His contribution was, 'Err

PART 15

‘But, soft! what light through yonder window breaks?’

Two months had slid by without seeming a day.

Daily, Vara’s mind found it increasingly difficult to rationalise between his desire for power and the passivity of the culture of Sanctuary. The dichotomy was driving him slowly insane.

Two days later his bios ceased to function. Without access to a Core, they couldn’t be refreshed. As the reality of this sunk in, he sobbed uncontrollably, in an unused field where he now spent most of his time.

His body clock was now set at 32 and from this day forward he aged. He’d made no effort to change his appearance before the bios ran out of time. He felt no desire to try to adjust his body to be more practical in its new environment. From anywhere within the village and its outskirts, Vara stood head and shoulders taller than everyone else. He was distinctive, always looking like an alien.

After much discussion, Barata and Serania had agreed on what body developments they would like to make permanent. Their bios turned the clock back several hundred years. They were now shorter, stockier and more heavily muscled. Their hair was short cropped, and their internal biology was at it would have been a thousand years earlier.

Serania was not sure about her new squatter and more rounded figure. Barata had summoned up a mirror and took a long look at his figure as it slowly changed back the way it should have been from early manhood. He watched as the definition between his legs grew into a pair of orbs and a penis.

They now both looked more like the Sanctuary locals but were a little taller and stronger. Both agreed nothing changed the love they had for each other.

Without bios to compensate for all the normal human functions, they soon had to experience eating and the pleasures of taste. The insecurity of going to the toilet, using local soft leaves as cleaning materials. This led to several instances where they had a quick learning curve of how to be respectful of others privacy.

The everyday simple things that the locals thought nothing about, became a minefield of potential disasters for Barata and Serania in those first few months. Remembering to clean their teeth, using a soft twig from a particular tree. Some sap from the same tree acted as a cleaning agent for their dental hygiene. The daily chores of ensuring their bodies were clean.

Not an easy task without running water, but the residents of Sanctuary had managed for many years.

A local tailor made all the clothing. Finely woven from a series of reeds and leaves, found on three different types of bushes up near the mountains. The clothes often needed mending and cleaning. The people from Earth had to learn all these new skills.

When the day was done, their chores were complete and their bellies full, they enjoyed the previously unknown experience of being tired. Sleep came naturally with exhaustion. They lay together and enjoyed the sleep if the innocent. Their single room was part of George Charles's home, made larger by the efforts of many of the local men, which helped the aliens to settle in.

Barata was particularly proud of his new neighbours. They'd accepted them into their life whole-heartedly, but they would never accept Vara. The stigma of what he'd done to them in the past, something no one in Sanctuary could overcome.

The night's rest helped relieve the tiredness of sore muscles and torn hands. Calluses formed, as they learned how to work in the fields. Their rough skin bruised easily, and the feeling of pain was something they'd managed without for all their lives.

At times it was difficult to decide if they'd made the right decision. Hanging above their head was a get-out clause in the form of transport that could return them to their old lifestyle. They'd not reached the point where they could consider it.

Not yet. Not for a long while.

The overriding satisfaction of their decision rested with one simple element. They were allowed to be always naturally together. They intertwined their lives, and they were in perfect accord with one another. Their acceptance of old human values was absorbed as if they'd lived this life forever. They were given privacy they'd never realised was withheld from them on Earth. They made love with the comfort of knowing they wouldn't be disturbed, and no one cared what they did together.

Both relished the feeling of being wanted, needed and accepted. Both with each other and the rest of the community, suddenly caring what other people of thought of them. They'd become part of a whole, that they never realised existed. They learned how to accept a more physical contact with strangers. People shook hands, touched, even kissed each other. Mostly on the cheek.

They were witness to the pettier human traits of frustration, jealousy and anger. Having to do things when they didn't want to. Ploughing fields at the right time, making food from the raw material harvested from the fields.

George Charles became their friend and mentor. If they had a question, a doubt or query, he knew the answers. If he didn't, Albert did. They met all the villagers and eventually knew them all by their names.

One day they were sitting on the rickety cart on the way to the windmill and George Charles seemed happy. They watched as he drank from the flask on a rope around his shoulders. They'd both tried the spirit again and decided it wasn't for them. Now their taste buds were working naturally, it seemed a particularly nasty liquid.

Serania asked him a question that was long on her mind. 'What're you going to do with the metal Vara gave you?'

She'd resigned herself that Barata would not have allowed this burgeoning planet any metal, but now that they had it, just how harmful would that be? Would mankind repeat its mistakes and allow technology to overwhelm it again? No one person should prevent mankind from developing, but neither should a whole species watch another slip into self-destruction without thought of consequences.

She was getting used to how people changed their facial expressions, each meaning something. Sometimes they used just a change of expression instead of speech. George Charles turned and smiled at her. 'Well ... it's all safely stored. But now well now we have to start from basics. We have to work it. We've nothing strong enough to cut or manipulate it. All we can do is melt it down and start again.'

'How're you going to do that?' from Barata.

'We're still considering it. We need a big furnace. Hot, much hotter than we've ever had before. To build it, we need metal.' He grinned and took a long swig. The animal pulling the cart plodded on as he had done all his life. The windmill still looked a far way off. They had time to waste.

Serania closed her eyes and felt the breeze stirring her hair. Aroma drifted with it, scents she'd never before realised existed. She experienced varying temperatures the body endured, no bios to adjust automatically. She liked the outdoor life.

There was a look that came over George Charles's face that Serania couldn't interpret. 'If Vara had been more amenable, we could've got him to make the forge directly out of the metal. But instead we have bars and sheets. Tough assignment.'

Serania felt very guilty. She suspected George Charles meant if they hadn't sent away both transports they could have everything they needed right now. She looked upwards in an involuntary gesture. Barata saw the move and smiled at her.

'We did the right thing.' He said to her quietly. She nodded.

All forms of mental communications had ceased when their bios that made the process available had both died out. Barata had not told Serania, but his thoughts were concerned that their transport's Nanos may no longer function either. The craft might no longer recognise them and take them back to Earth. Or anywhere.

With a sudden recollection he realised that transports were designed to operate without the Core, they were independent and self-perpetuating. A transport that was specific to human life, a lifeboat in space. The transport would wait and be available. For ever. Barata felt a weight lift from his mind.

'We'll help where we can.' Serania offered to George Charles.

The day's task was a long haul of grinding and bagging flour. They did what they could, but George Charles did all the more technical work. They took a break and ate some bread and meat.

'One thing I do regret.' George Charles said in a whimsical distant way. 'For a while when we had your ships on our planet. I really wanted

'What?' Serania's curiosity rising.

George Charles looked sincerely at her and his eyes seemed to sparkle. Was it the spirit, or his thoughts? 'I desperately wanted to visit Earth.' He spread his hands out. 'Just ... for a while. See what it was like, compare it to how we live here. Compare it to how we might have been living here.'

Serania said, 'I understand how you must feel.'

For a moment there was sadness in his expression. He swallowed a piece of bread with difficulty.

Serania didn't know what to say. She said, 'It might disappoint you. Sure it's technically more advanced, by a long way. But in others'

'Such as?'

'Well it can be seen as very sterile. Not by those who are there, they're used to it, knowing no other way. But once we've visited this planet ... and one other, we see you've a greater quality of life right here.'

'I don't believe so, given our daily efforts. My father used to say *how we struggle*. We don't live, we exist. This is the most basic existence you can imagine.' George said, his face passive.

Serania said, 'We're exactly the same on Earth, although at the opposite ends of the scale. We exist but have no real purpose. Purpose is the basis of all existence.'

George Charles looked at her for a long while before saying, 'No one struggles on Earth though, do they?'

Barata put down his flask of water and looked at George Charles. He smiled and said, 'Your culture here is more spiritual. You practice the old values of caring, nurturing, defending, protecting, survival. Every day things have a meaning. Rituals, trying to maintain the ways of old.'

Serania leaned forward and held George Charles's eyes. 'This planet is not as sculptured as Earth. It looks somehow ... older. They have scrubbed every aspect of Earth, polished and gleaming. No random order by Mother Nature anymore, all extinct species have been restored. The occupation of the planet carefully monitored and controlled. Only a specific number of each creature can exist there. Even humans are controlled in their numbers. How many now?' Serania looked at Barata.

'Two billion.'

Serania continued, 'If one dies, they can create another. If one species starts to dominate, the bios take over and stop reproduction until the numbers are restored to the desired levels. All controlled through the Core. People living on Earth, those that bother to realise what's going on, do not find this odd, just normal. But the colonies find it bizarre when they're trying to generate populations to occupy whole planets.'

Barata put his bread back in the cloth and said, 'What you'd call living on Earth, is merely just existing. We're comparing two different lifestyles, both just about existing. Earth and Sanctuary, both at the opposite ends of the scale. Which one could survive? Will both survive, or both die away?'

Serania's voice became earnest. 'The regime on Earth needs to wake up to the potential danger of complacency before it's too late to do anything about it. Here in Sanctuary, you're all very aware there can be no complacency. Get lazy and you die.'

George Charles was shaking his head. 'It seems so unfair that we have to live like this when the opposite could've been our future. It's ... hard to accept at times, especially knowing the reason for it is languishing in the fields down there, doing preg all to help us survive.'

In the village below the object of George Charles's derision was not languishing in the fields. He'd observed for a week, or more, that George Charles spent the whole day away from the village when he went to the mill. Others were working in the fields or other time-absorbing activities.

Living off scraps that people had thrown away and discarded clothing, Vara kept on the move, avoiding people wherever possible. Those he met showed their hatred of him, but no one would harm him. It just wasn't their way.

Vara crept into people's homes. One by one. There were never any locks, never any need. There was no fancy furniture, no secure areas, no belongings that needed securing. He would wait until whoever lived in the house had left to get food, or washing, or any activity that took them away from their homes. Once the house was empty Vara would start this search. Twice he had been caught, but they now treated him as a madman and threw him out and told him not to return. He suffered a few cuts and bruises but regarded it as worthwhile.

When the houses were too occupied, such as meal times, he searched the wider area. Never believing that Barata would be so stupid, or selfless, to return the transports to Earth. They may be invisible, but if he covered every area thoroughly, eventually he'd bump into one.

How he could persuade Barata to agree to let him leave, was another matter. He rationalised the weakest point would always be Serania.

After many weeks of searching, he finally found his holy grail.

After a day's toil in the windmill, the journey back was hard on the bones. The rough roads and the uncomfortable gait of the pack animal had to be endured. By now, George Charles was well under the influence of the alcohol and was almost asleep. The pack animal knew its way home and expected a rewarding meal for its efforts.

The journey so far had been made in silence. Barata contemplated his momentous decision to opt out of civilised society and return to mankind's roots, toiling on the farm. Had he made the right choice? A better question would be ... "was he happy?" There was no doubt about the answer to that. He still reflected how the Council were carrying on without him. Did they miss him? He thought not.

Serania's thoughts were towards the future. Where would they be in ten years' time? Older, that was a fact. Still in love? She thought so. Hoped so. Yes she knew so.

There was so much to learn about this life they'd chosen, the culture so steeped in history. She realised that the way they'd lived on Earth was devoid of history. No one caring what had gone on in the past, or what would happen in the future. Totally missing emotion, living a very static existence. Human contact now almost non-existent and yet ... so vital to real happiness. This she'd learned and now understood. She felt for her crew, they'd never be happy. The surprising thing to realise... they thought they were. None more than when they were all together and in danger. It had heightened their awareness, made them feel alive. She remembered how they had all hugged each other after landing the Battleship on Ammos. The sheer relief at being alive.

Would they miss her? She thought so. She just hoped for the right reasons.

George Charles awoke with a start and looked around him. He noted his passengers were still there and decided more sleep was necessary. There were questions that were bubbling up in Serania's mind and she'd grown impatient in this harsher life. Time was important now. She gently touched his arm. 'George Charles, I don't understand what are "wife and children". How does that work?'

George Charles looked at her and wondered why that question and why now? He shook off some effects of his drink and looked at the very attractive woman beside him. Looking sixty years younger than him, but in reality, nearly fifty older. It came to the forefront of his thoughts how close he'd grown to her. If he was a younger man, he'd challenge Barata for her affections. Had he won, she wouldn't need to ask for the answer to the question, he would have shown her.

But she was still an innocent on this planet. In this village everyone was born into a world of hardship and toil *how we suffer* everyone knowing their place and how life was going to work out for them.

George Charles struggled to put into simplistic terms, a concept everyone he knew understood without question. 'When two people find each other ... fall in love ...' she understood that part, '...and decide they want to be together ... the formal way is marriage. It's a ceremony, a legal contract ... of sorts. But more a statement of their affection for each other.'

'Love.' Added Serania, helpfully.

'That's one word for it yes. But love is not the only consideration. With love comes another emotion, or ... perhaps a better word is desire. Equally strong, at times, equally important

'Sex.' Her eyes bright with the thought of her past experiences and those to come.

'Yes ... and sometimes ... lust.' He swung his flask to his lips and realised with a heavy heart that it was empty. Serania offered him her water flask. He smiled and shook his head.

Serania's mind was wandering. She'd realised that *Romeo* must have had these intense feelings before his death plunge. If a mechanical mind can have that level of human emotion, doesn't it defeat the whole object? If the artificial minds were so like a humans', then any human emotion can totally upset the ability of the mechanical - as it can with a human.

Romeo's actions were based on lust and his frustration at not being able to do anything about it. They portrayed it as love, using the words of a long-dead poet to encapsulate the ship's mind's feelings. *Romeo's* obsession

with another ship was, to him, real love. Synthetic minds are designed to be rational, decisive and correct. Muddy them with emotion and they can be irrational, indecisive, and wrong. But in *Romeo's* case, it saved the day. His "love" was so intense it drove him to destruction. On a premise which was inspired by human words, expressing an emotion previously unknown to mechanical entities.

George Charles was still struggling to describe something that seemed so basic as to have never been taught to him. 'From Sex can come babies. The women can conceive, and a baby is born. The couple then raises that child. They're then called Parents

'Like you've done with Clara Alice May?'

'Yes my own daughter. It's nature's way of preserving the species. From plants to animals and so with humans, the generation loop is always working. Birth to death. Never changes.'

A sudden lurch nearly unseated him, but Serania's quick reactions pulled him back into his seat. He nodded his thanks. A few moments of silence as they rounded another corner and the village of Sanctuary spread out below. They could see the largest structure, the community hall. Around the corner from that, he could see his house. A small figure stood outside it, probably his daughter. Inside his wife would be preparing the evening meal for their now extended family.

'I remember' he paused, 'I remember my parents saying before they left Earth, things were different. Very different. There were too many people. Too many births, not enough deaths. Technology kept people alive for many more years than nature had allowed for.'

Barata had taken an interest in the run of conversation. Anything that concerned the history of the human race interested him. He said, 'Hence the colony program. Was that how you came to volunteer for Sanctuary?'

'My parents did, yes. Good move at the time, not so sure now. Those days people were selected to have children when deemed necessary. They then brought the children up in the way approved by the rest of the community. But that way of life was not fully appreciated by the wider population. There were voices of dissent, so my parents told me. The off-world programme became a necessity for many.'

The downhill part of the journey encouraged the animal to increase its gait, making the travellers even more uncomfortable. Talking became difficult, but Serania wanted answers. 'The current human mind on Earth has been anaesthetised. No curiosity, or interest. Time will slip by without them even knowing. They have no interest in hobbies or cultural and social pursuits. No activity. Was it like that in your parent's time on Earth?'

George Charles shrugged. 'They didn't say. It must have been along those lines. Nobody wanted for anything. Everyone lived as well as they

wanted to, just too long. Overcrowding became an issue, then Blip transport was invented, and the rest is common knowledge.'

Barata was nodding as he said, 'With the complacency the more determined individual tends to rise in society, taking responsibilities like being on the Council, or ship's crew. I can see how Vara found his way to the top, by pure desire and determination. I suppose we have to admire him for those attributes in a world where there are none.'

George Charles glanced at Barata and said through clenched teeth, 'I can give that man no credit at all. For anything.'

The rest of the journey they made in silence. But Barata was silently questioning why the old man seemed quite so upset.

Time slipped by and the days became blended into one. There were few high points in this farming life to give a pointer to time passing by. But one day, something happened that was a warning to the new inhabitants of Sanctuary.

Barata and Serania had been given a chore to do. Serania loved the word "chore", she'd roll it around her mind and then her tongue. Chore. They were both seated at the large table in the Community Hall and were sorting clothing. Deciding what might be repaired and what needed disassembling and any scraps made useful later. A boring task for most, but when they were together, they never felt bored. To them, every minute alone together was something precious, something they'd previously longed for.

A shadow fell across them, and when they looked up, they saw Vara.

His tall stature was now slightly bent, his skin looked blotchy and his clothes looked like rags hanging off him. He was thinner than the last time they'd seen him. There was no longer any mind connection without the help of the Core or a connection to a transport nearby, so Vara had to resort totally to the spoken word.

He stood over them and pointed something at Serania. They both realised it was a weapon of some kind, originally fashioned by his own transport. They'd heard he'd threatened to attack the residents and had used a weapon to enforce his will on them. George Charles had smiled as he recalled how easy it had been to disarm a man used to peaceful ways. George Charles was made of harder stuff.

It looked like Vara had found the weapon again.

'Bring back my transport!' his voice was shaky. His hand unsteady and pointed at Serania but spoke directly to Barata. Vara had deduced he'd get a more positive response from Barata if Serania was the one threatened.

'I can't.' Barata said softly. 'We've no connection with Earth anymore.'

'You couldn't be that stupid. What if something happened here to her? You must have considered that. You must have a lifeline to Earth, you wouldn't be so foolish to cut off all ties.'

Barata realised that Vara was not as stupid as he appeared, given his circumstances. Barata thought quickly and came up with a solution he hoped would work. He concentrated his mind and gave a sequence of commands. He'd recently re-established his mental connection with his transport. All else he'd sacrificed to encompass the new lifestyle. But to cut off every route to home would be a serious mistake. Vara was right about that.

Vara's hand holding the gun directly at Serania's head, although it wavered a little, he wouldn't miss if he pressed the trigger. Barata held his breath.

There was nothing to see, no movement, other than a large displacement of air. If they blinked, they would've seen the weapon one second and not the next. It had disappeared from Vara's hand, his finger left curled on empty air.

Vara's mind was not as sharp as it used to be, and it took a few seconds for him to realise he'd lost his only advantage. Before he could react, Barata was beside him and had gripped his throat. A reaction Barata would've never thought he was capable of, but circumstances these days were unique.

'Don't you EVER threaten Serania, or me, again. Next time I will kill you.'

Vara's voice was very faint as he murmured, 'It would be a blessing.'

'Go and never come back here again.' Barata said with as much venom as he could and shoved Vara out of the door. He stumbled into the street but stayed on his feet. He started to shuffle away, watched by a few villagers.

'What happened?' Serania's voice was full of concern as she hurried over to Barata and put her arms around him.

Barata felt a sudden surge of pride, another emotion he was having to get used to. 'I summoned your transport, it enveloped Vara, and the Nanos disassembled the weapon. Then returned to wait above us. All as fast as possible and invisible. I doubt Vara will realise it was our transport that did that. I hope he won't.'

Serania also felt a swelling of pride in her man being such a clever hero. 'Will he come back with another weapon?' she asked with a nervous edge to her voice.

'I doubt it. You saw the state of him, he'll struggle to survive without any help. I'll alert the villagers about this incident. Get them to keep an eye on him.'

They stood in the doorway and watched the dejected Vara walk to the end of the street and turn into the fields. His last hope dashed again by the two people he'd come to hate more than any others in the Universe. In the distance there were mountains. They hoped he would go there.

He did.

Four months ticked by and life became easier for the out-of-step visitors. They didn't regard themselves as visitors any more, more residents. They were accepted as such and that gave them a great sense of satisfaction.

Barata was aware of the muscle mass he was gaining. Even Serania was gaining weight. Barata now managed the everyday tasks and still have mental energy left. He decided on a project, he wanted to chart the planet's history and its human occupants. He had stored the material from the old Nano House in Earth's Core, but he could remember most of it.

Before he could do anything, he had to learn to write and spell. And read. Someone had to teach him. It fell to a resident that had that sort of time on their hands, George Charles's daughter, Clara Alice May.

Next problem came in getting materials, writing paper didn't exist. Some plants had to be experimented with and a papyrus developed. Then ink and finally a pen of some sort.

It was about this time that Serania became ill.

The shock to both of them was far greater than they could imagine. They felt real pain. Barata's thoughts were dominated by the concern that if she were to but in the back of his mind, he knew he always had the transport. An injection of bios would solve any problem, but it was an option that both had agreed would be a very last resort.

Their transport ran on "safe" Nanos, it operated on minimal power until required. It had limited Nano generation and programming. No replacement bios, this was a safety measure for humans. It would wait for a thousand years or more. A trip back to Earth could re-supply the life-saving bio implants.

If they were to use this specialised life-saving technology, the villagers would guess the truth. They'd be exposed as being dishonest. Why wouldn't they help the villagers with the technology if they still had access to it? When they said they hadn't any more. Ever. Barata could not bear the thought of how distraught George Charles would be if all along their Nanos

could've built his forge for him. That single decision might mean the end of their life in Sanctuary. They'd most probably have to leave. Forever.

But if the decision came to Serania's life or death

There were two people in the village that served as doctors, both not formally trained and still learning on the job. So it was with much trepidation that the visit from one of these left Barata exasperated, when being told to wait outside the room while they examined his beloved. As he paced the floor Barata nearly summoned the transport ten times.

When the door opened a serious-faced villager looked hard at him, Barata feared the worse. His heart was racing, and he knew he was sweating. He wanted to wring the information out of the doctor, but the doctor hesitated and then smiled.

'She's pregnant. A bit of a surprise, yes?'

'Do.' Was Barata's strangled reply. 'But is she ?'

'She's fine. Better than fine. She's one of the healthiest women we have around here. Especially of childbearing age.'

That night they held each other throughout the whole of the darkness. The doctor had given further advice and Barata was very restrained in the way he now treated her. The doctor had said making love was all right for a while longer, but Barata saw the love of his life as something far more precious than just personal gratification.

As the sun was glowing through their small window he saw she was awake. He kissed her tenderly and said softly, 'I think we should get married.'

The ceremony was simple.

The raw and basic emotions these people of Sanctuary felt and showed, had encouraged the wedding couple to express themselves in a way they'd never before thought of. They both wept.

The Communal Hall was the venue for the ceremony and the celebrations. They'd decorated it in small coloured clothing strung around the roof. Food seemed more than plentiful, and the evil tasting liquor was everywhere. The villagers seemed as happy as the happy couple were. A wedding and a birth on the way. Just cause for celebrations.

The party went on into the night and George Charles was at the centre of it all. His wife left him in the late hours and took their daughter home to bed. The bride was feeling tired and her concerned husband took her home too. George Charles stayed on with Albert and tried to break his record for personal consumption of the blue wine.

The following morning George Charles awoke to find his best friend Albert lying beside him.

He was quite dead.

There was a smile on his face and he looked peaceful. George Charles couldn't hold back the tears, or the contents of his stomach.

After the wedding and funeral, the life of the village continued just as before.

Old deep routed human emotions surfaced in Serania and she developed a strengthening desire to be a mother. She wanted the baby more than anything else in her life before. With the exception of her husband.

As she approached the full term, her workload eased off and women in the community began to fuss around her. Barata felt at times excluded and began to resent it. Serania told him the reason they were so protective. 'No woman from Earth has had a baby naturally for hundreds of years. They think I might be some kind of freak and they don't know how to handle it.'

Barata looked confused. 'But ... we reverted your body. You're exactly like a woman of ... maybe even a thousand years ago. There's nothing new here.'

'I told them that. If I wasn't ancient biologically structured ... I wouldn't have got pregnant in the first place. They just like to worry. Be patient.' She was quiet for a moment and then a thought came to her. 'What if I can't be a good mother?' she said.

He cuddled her and said, 'Of course you'll be a good mother.'

'Why should I be? I'm only just starting to be a good human being.'

'You'll do fine. You'll always have me.'

'What shall we call it? A suitable name?'

'Well here it would have to be a three-name child, I suppose. Although it'll be a first generation as far as we're concerned. Difficult to solve that now. Wait and see whether it's a girl, or a boy first. Then get advice.'

She turned to face him and said, 'Should we change our names too? Clean start.'

'What have you in mind?'

'Obvious. Romeo and Juliet. That's us ... star-crossed lovers. We can call our baby something Shakespearean.'

‘Let’s wait and name the baby, then consider changing our names.’

She seemed satisfied with that answer, because she said, ‘How was your day?’

Barata snuggled down alongside her on the bed and kissed her forehead. ‘Good. We finally got the furnace working and melted our first piece of metal today. Jonah William will have a first attempt to make something with a piece of iron tomorrow. Should be a great occasion.’

‘Enough for a celebration party.’ Serania said with a grin.

‘After our wedding and old Albert’s ... going, celebrations are going to be a little more subdued from now on. I’m sure that liquid they make is poison.’

‘They’ve been making and drinking it for generations.’ Serania said giving him an extra squeeze. They lay in silence for a while.

Barata knew his wife well enough now to know that after this kind of silence there was something on her mind. He didn’t have long to wait. ‘I want to ask you something. I want to suggest something’ Here we go ‘And I know you’ll say no to begin with. I know it’s going to be a risk, but I feel we owe these people a debt, we can never fully repay. Agreed?’

‘So far. But?’

‘I think we can agree that life here is better than on Earth, especially these days. Do?’ he nodded.

‘It is for us.’ He said cautiously.

‘Exactly.’ She said snuggling closer. ‘But they don’t know that. They think their life here is poor. They think they’d be better off on Earth.’

‘Your point? The risk?’

‘What if we could show them how much better off they are here?’

‘How?’

‘You know how. That’s the risk.’

As the seasons began to change and the cycle of the land demanded more and more attention from its inhabitants, they harvested further and further

afield. On a misty morning, one farmer made a discovery. He found the decomposed body of Vara.

Barata and Serania didn't know how to respond. The villagers seemed pleased that a problem had been removed, but they couldn't understand why the strange people from Earth wanted to give him a decent funeral. How could you compare that man with someone like Albert? Or their Five Saints that were buried with full ceremony on the hill?

Barata argued his reasons, and the villagers agreed, they could bury Vara with all the other residents from down all the years. Only to one side of the allocated area for the burials.

Few attended the burial, but George Charles was there, in support of his friends Barata and Serania. He shed no tears for the most hateful figure in his life for over a hundred years. But he appreciated that his two friends had known this man in better times. Had respected him once.

'It's hard to believe they recognised this man throughout the known Universe and our forgotten planet knew nothing of him.' George Charles said with a touch of sympathy in his voice.

'If you knew him better you'd not hate him so much as you do.'

George Charles nodded. 'I've every reason to despise him. I just wish I just would like to have had a life that he had.'

'How we struggle' Serania offered.

George Charles nodded again. 'Oh ... how we struggle.'

Serania made a secret face at her husband. 'Now?' She mouthed. He nodded.

Serania moved to George Charles and took hold of his hand. 'If you could ... see Earth in all its modern glory. What would that mean to you?'

George Charles looked at her in puzzlement. 'I'd finally know what I've missed.'

'And would that satisfy you?'

'I've ... no way of knowing. But ... it's like an itch you can't scratch. There's nothing else in my life that can give me that dream. Nothing. I had that life once, my family left it and it should've continued on here. But it was snatched away from me. By him!' he looked at the grave, anger in his

face. The small mound of earth had a small wooden marker. 'Vara,' and the date.

'Earth has changed a lot.' Barata said quietly. 'More than you may like.'

'Quite possibly. So you say, but it's still a dream I have.'

Serania said, 'You'd have difficulty in communicating until you could learn how to use your mind properly.'

Barata said, 'You'd have to accept people are not like you. They're not so gregarious as the people here.'

George Charles was nodding. 'I'm sure you're right. But nevertheless

'Georgie.' The way she said it made George Charles turn to look at Serania. 'You've given so much to us.' She was looking at Barata. 'That we'd like to do something for you. However, there are restrictions in this one-off offer.'

George Charles looked puzzled. He waited to hear what they said next.

Barata leaned forward and became conspiratorial. 'We can arrange for transport to take you to Earth. It can be a clandestine project with no one here knowing you've left. It can be programmed to bring you back here on your command. We must ensure the Earth Core knows nothing of this planet. Would you like us to do that?'

George Charles's eyes were wide and almost fearful. 'But you said your ship'

'We don't have a ship, but we can still arrange it, just for you. Perhaps your wife and daughter too.' Barata said with a smile.

Serania dropped her voice too. 'You can see for yourself. If you prefer life there stay. If not ... return here, the ship will disappear on your return. There'll never be another contact with Earth ever again. But you'll have seen your dream. Maybe ... even lived it.'

'But you said your ship was'

'We no longer have access to our ship, but we can organise just one event. Either use the very last of the Nanos for small things or one trip to Earth.'

Barata hated the lie he was saying, but he knew it was to protect George Charles's feelings. If he thought that all along there was the availability

Serania said, 'We don't feel it'd be right to give metals and medicines to a culture that's so special. We don't want to risk ruining it like us Earthlings ruined our own culture. But we can do this one thing for you. You say nothing to anyone unless you come back. That's the condition.'

George Charles was speechless. Thoughts running through his head.

'Is it a deal?' Serania said holding his quivering hand.

It took George Charles ten minutes to find his wife and daughter and hurry them into the edge of the woods. Barata and Serania were waiting and Minnie Ida and daughter Clara Alice May were looking fearful at George Charles's urgency and secrecy.

'Have you told them?' queried Serania. George Charles shook his head. 'They may have refused to go?'

'They'll want to go.' George Charles said with a grin on his face.

'Go where, daddy?'

'Earth, darling. Earth. Would you like that?'

Clara Alice May showed her excitement by jumping up and down. Minnie Ida held her daughter and looked at her two friends. 'Is he serious?'

Serania nodded. 'We'll be here, waiting for your return.'

They are still waiting.

PLEASE READ ON.....

200 years ago speech was vastly different to how we hear it today. In a further 200 years' time, it will be vastly different again. To anticipate this, or second guess at it, would result in a very difficult time for the reader to

understand. So I have resisted fully representing a language suitable for the future.

If we humans do not ever get off this planet Earth – we will kill the planet and die along with it. We will be solely responsible for its extinction. As each year ticks past, we humans are more and more aware of this. And more and more likely to ruin it.

Nanotechnology, when properly developed – will undoubtedly change every aspect of everyone’s life. What you have read in this story is Nanotechnology taken to extremes. But the fact is – Nanotechnology will be a vital part of mankind’s future. Sometime in our future, everyone’s life on this planet will change - if it’s managed properly. Not overnight but compared to the progress of the whole of human history, it will be very rapid.

When Nanos take away so much of our society, there will be very little of new historic value that will prevail. For everything that has ever been prayed for, will be available to all. For some, it will be the final proof there is no God. For others the final proof there is.

Will we cope?

If we humans can affect interstellar travel with the casualness depicted in this cautionary tale, I have great hope that mankind will survive. Somehow.

By the way it was a boy. William Prospero Hamlet.

Addendum

Deep in the earth on Memnon, a creature stirred.

The heat and the noxious fumes had passed her by. She was heavy with eggs, ready to give birth. Ready to continue the fight for survival.

Ready to bring the next generation of Creetch into existence.