

HEAVENLY TWINNS

An adventure through the Universe by
MAX DRAYTON



THE HEAVENLY TWINS

A Science Fiction romp by

Max Drayton

There is mild language, violence and scenes of unashamed sensual and adult nature.

Cover by Phil Lewis

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THE HEAVENLY TWINS

It's a well-known phenomenon, that when a pretty girl passes by, strange things happen to a man. But if that girl should smile at the man.....whole Universes can change.

Here is a true light-hearted story of two young girls, adrift in the galaxy, with only their smiles to protect them.

PART 1 - THE COMPETITION

From where he stood, he could just see the bottom of the hatchway and the ladder that led down from it. The ugly puce shuttle craft shuddered to a halt and the Ion discharge dissipated into the warm air. Barnaby waited.

Poised behind him were a battery of remote cameras and other media recording devices. The whole planet appeared to have sent representatives to greet the celebrity arrivals. As the hatch cranked slowly upwards, he heard increased noise, as motors whirred and circuit boards hummed into life. He felt the media-machines closing in on him, invading his space. He tried to hold them back with just a wave of his hand.

He smoothed his hair back and adjusted his tight-fitting jacket. As a last-minute idea, he changed its colour to light green, he thought it matched his eyes better. He lengthened the size of the collar and hoped it would highlight and frame his lean good looks. He straightened his long back and produced a smile. He should strike an imposing sight - tall, elegant and handsome. That was the effect he was looking for. Billions of sentient beings around the Universe couldn't be wrong.

The first of the honoured guests was just stepping down the ladder now.

All he could see at first were the feet. The podium on which he stood had been hastily erected, minutes before the guests were due to arrive. It had been placed a safe enough distance from the landing pad, but near enough so the guests didn't have far to walk in the open air. The covering above him was hanging too low, making him bend down to see out across the short distance to the parked ship. 'Never trust an android to do a man's job,' he muttered.

The feet looked shoeless until he realised the new arrival was wearing almost invisible boots. He could just make out the shimmer of the see-through material, but his attention was on the feet themselves. They were exquisite. The delicate structure of bone and muscle, the tendons and sinew. As she stepped down....more like *glided* down..... the ladder, her calves undulated in the sunlight. The curve of the muscle and the blending

into the foot caused his mouth to hang open. This was sheer muscle, sinew and flesh perfection. This girl MUST be some model. Her legs MUST be insured for billions. It was probably the most stunning sight he'd seen in real life. Her knees now dropped into view.

He could kiss them. He wanted to kiss them. They moved like well-oiled machinery, like tigers on ice. The proportion exactly right, a sculptor could not improve on the shape of those knees - the thighs followed. By now he knew he was dribbling. The slow, tantalising, downward movement of this most perfect being enthralled him. Was it happening in slow motion, or did this woman KNOW how to move!

As the thighs sank into view he found himself stooping. Craning his neck to get a complete view of this vision before him. He was convinced she was naked, as no sign of clothing covered her so far. As her hips came into view, there was a subtle blurring of detail and he could now see, she was not naked. But he couldn't clearly see what she wore either. A leg dipped on to the next rung and the other followed. She was waist deep in his vision now.

Her waist was small and flowed like a smooth range of hills from her perfect hips. The swell reversed and started to climb up towards her chest. They just kept on swelling. She was facing him, and he could see her breasts would reach him long before her head would. They were magnificent!

He was totally immobile now. Frozen in a stoop, which allowed him to see the Goddess before him, but stopped him doing anything else, even blinking. The chest swooped majestically towards the neck. Long and delicate, sweeping into the woman's head and face. His breath stopped. If he died on the spot it was worth it. She had the most beautiful face he had EVER seen in his life. Her mouth formed the most perfect of cupid lips. Softened and smoothed into a shape that made him return to his thoughts about kissing. Her nose had the cutest of uplifts at the end, enough to be there, but not too much to distract from those eyes!

Bright, bright, bright blue and deep as a lagoon. White as snow and flawless as milk. They looked straight at him, then through him, and on to infinity.

His final image was that of golden hair, flowing from all over her head. Moving with an independence and grace of its own. As she bounced gently down the steps, the hair writhed in a dance of its own. Sprawling out from her head, extending beyond her broad shoulders it seemed to hang suspended by air, catching the rays of the sun and throwing them back in a challenge for supremacy.

She stood before him, staring deep into his soul. His jaw remained slack and his eyes vacant. The overall image was too much to take in at one moment. He just stared at the vision and knew he was in heaven.

'You must be Barnaby Babyloncity.' Her voice like velvet on ice cream. Cool, strong, full of flavour and strength.

He managed to nod. 'And you must be Waynnetaaudrynellldorisellenrachael.' But no sound came from his mouth.

'I'm Waynnetaaudrynellldorisellenrachael. And this is my sister.....' she turned to wave at another figure gliding down the steps.

He tore his eyes away from the Goddess and watched, struck even dumber as another pair of feet descended the stairway. By the time the sister stood before him he was seeing double. If he thought the first was the most perfect creature he'd ever set eyes upon he was wrong. These two were almost identical. The second girl differed in the colouring of her hair. It was raven black and in an even larger style than the first woman.

'.....WendyIrenenormanancyirisedith,' she finished with a smile.

The smile did it. He'd not taken a breath for two minutes, he felt his vision blur and slipped into darkness. He fainted in front of two Goddesses. He could die now. Nothing could ever be better than this.

Barnaby awoke to a crowd looking down at him. After he focused his eyes, he began to recall his last waking moments and embarrassment hit him like a wet wooden plank. He sat up quickly, head spinning, immediately he lay back down again until the fuzziness subsided.

The faces above him looked concerned. Apart from the few who were openly smiling. Behind them he could see an explosion of blonde hair, moving behind the crowd. Embarrassment hit him again.

A sudden crash of frozen water hit his face and his eyes shot open. The shock arching his back and forcing him into a seated position. His eyes stung as he grasped. 'What the prak was that!'

Blonde hair filled his vision. Two eyes dived into his body and froze him solid. 'Only cold water. Are you all right?' The voice was velvet and screwed his insides into a neat wet ball.

'I'm fine, thank you. Are you all right? I'm soooo sorry. I must look a fool.....' but nothing came out from his mouth.

'Are you a mute?'

He shook his head and pointed to his throat. Shaking his head and trying to speak.

'Are you stupid?' Waynnetaaudrynellldorisellenrachael said, getting anxious.

Again Barnaby shook his head and pointed to his throat. Waynnetaaudrynellldorisellenrachael shook her head, puzzled by what he was trying to tell her.

Barnaby was strangling to death. He couldn't move and yet he was dying in front of the woman he loved more than any other in the Universe. Apart from one, that is – her sister. Fear overcame embarrassment and

emotional seizure. With a violent effort he jerked himself upright, stabbing down with his thumb towards the ground.

Waynnetaudrynellldorisellenrachael looked downwards and saw her apparently naked feet. With a gasp and a giggle, which made near death almost worthwhile for Barnaby, she took her foot off his jacket collar and breath flooded into his lungs again.

Waynnetaudrynellldorisellenrachael knelt beside him and held his face in her hands. 'I'm so sorry.' She planted a kiss on his cheek. He immediately fainted again.

She felt a tug on her arm and stood facing her sister. WendyIrenenormanancyirisedith pointed towards the barrage of media recorders and both girls turned in unison and smiled. Several fuses blew in the equipment and any human operators felt themselves growing weak at the knees, and a few other parts of their anatomies.

A young assistant forced her way through the barricade and stood before the two honoured guests. With a startled look at the lenses all focused on her, she tried to smile and knew instantly she was no competition for the two sisters. To start with, she was much shorter than they were, less pneumatic and certainly not as beautiful. Although, she had received a fair number of compliments in her time. She tried to hang on to that thought.

She hadn't dressed for the cameras, but her outfit was befitting an Inter-galactic welcoming committee. Her collar was tall, proud and sparkled in the early sunshine. The centrally secured flared cloak hid her more....ample hips and revealed her more shapely legs. She had to go with what she had, and she was certainly doing that.

Mellianna looked at the prostrate form of her boss and her face showed contempt. She quickly replaced the look with another. They had a job to do and she was all they had. A quick check of her notes, a grin and into the interview.

'Welcome to Earth, ladies. Have a good journey?'

The bank of media equipment surged forward for the answer. Mellianna felt her hair getting snagged and brushed the nearest recorder away. It snapped back at her and bit her hand. With a vicious swipe of her note board, she smacked it back, sending it spinning to the ground. With an angry face, she trod on it, shattering it into countless pieces.

As it died it said, 'That'll cost you.' She trod on it again.

Waynnetaudrynellldorisellenrachael said, 'Very pleasant. Thank you for asking.'

With a smile to the rest of the media representatives, Mellianna said, 'Good. Were you surprised to hear you'd won the competition?'

Waynnetaudrynellldorisellenrachael turned to her sister and pulled her nearer. The two were now in close shot and the cameras zoomed ever closer. Mellianna nearly losing her balance as the media pack pushed into her back. She was a cat's hair away from the two girls and she took a good look at their flawless faces. It disappointed Mellianna. There wasn't a blemish there. As she looked closer, no make-up, either!

'Surprised and delighted. I said to Winnie, we've won something at last. She was delighted too. And surprised.'

'Winnie, you call her Winnie. Is that your nickname for her?'

'Sort of. It's her other name, really. Mum couldn't decide between six girl's names, so she rolled them all into one – Wendy-Irene-Norma-Nancy-Iris-Edith. We took the initials of each name and it came out as Winnie.'

'So your name would be....?'

'Waynneta-Audry-Nell-Doris-Ellen-Rachael. Wander.'

'Wander and Winnie. The terrible twins.'

'What's so terrible about us?'

'Sorry. It's just a phrase.'

'Why do you think we're terrible?'

'It's a.....saying. Just a saying. I didn't mean.....'

Wander looked at her sister and scowled, 'She's calling us terrible, Winnie!'

Winnie shook her head and said quietly, 'It is just a saying, Wan. Just a saying. She doesn't mean we're terrible. Just a saying.'

'Why did she say it then, if she didn't mean it?'

Unaware of the battery of recorders a painted nail's length from her face, Winnie said, 'This is a different world, Wan. Different worlds, different people. Go with it. Don't take everything so literally.'

With a glare at Mellianna, Wander turned to the cameras and smiled. The sun was eclipsed. 'We're not terrible.'

She took a step back to get some space between her face and the automated machines. Mellianna tried to push the machines back again, stepping between the sisters and the cameras.

Another smile switched on, 'Well, welcome again to Earth. We'll be seeing more of you.....' she hesitated as she realised she could see almost all of the two women already, '...shortly. We've a special show which goes out tonight. So we'll see you both then.'

A scream came from the feet of Wander. Mellianna looked down to see Barnaby being crushed by the slow march of the sisters, herded by the media. He was being trampled underfoot. With a glare and a harsh, 'Will you back off, for prak's sake!' space was made to raise Barnaby to his feet. Supported either side by the Amazonian sisters, he was half dragged to safety.

He thought he'd died and gone to heaven.

Wander was soaking in an activ-bath in one room and Winnie sat in the huge recliner in another. As it massaged Winnie's back, Mellianna apologised for the ten-thousandth time.

The suite was luxurious, by any Universal standards. The girls had the top floor of a three-hundred-floor hotel, overlooking the Niagara Falls. They had a bedroom each and one spare where Barnaby was currently recovering. The main reception area, where Winnie reclined like a Goddess on a high cloud, contained the minimal amount of furniture. If the guest wanted more, they only had to ask. A word brought the furniture from out of the walls, ceiling, or floor. The wall to wall, ceiling to floor window overlooked one of Earth's magnificent views of the Falls. After two minutes, both girls agreed - they'd seen it.

Mellianna was explaining..... 'You'll see the top ten wonders of the Universe. We are soooo pleased to have you here.'

Winnie nodded and looked distractedly out of the window. Her eyes were closing, and she realised that she needed to sleep. She eased herself out of the recliner and Mellianna felt the pang of envy at the gracefulness and symmetry of Winnie as she moved so effortlessly towards her bedroom.

'I don't wish to be rude, Mellianna, but I'm very tired. Will you excuse me? Just a few hours' sleep, please?'

'Of course! Please, do as you please. I'll call back later. How stupid of me. Space lag. See you both later.' She eased out of the door and stood in the corridor. The absolute cathedral silence made Mellianna take a few deep breaths. This was not going well at all.

She started to move away from the door when she remembered, 'Prak. Barnaby!'

Her finger was a Dragonfly's wing away from the door chime and she hesitated. Should she disturb them again?

Winnie fell headlong on to the bed and was asleep before she stopped bouncing. She sighed and turned in her sleep. Soft dreams moved through her mind and slipped away as forgotten memories. Her smile curled and relaxed. They were pleasant dreams, and more were to follow.

Wander pressed a stud and the activ-bath began to dry her and sprayed scented oils onto her skin. The air-massage finished the job and her clothes formed around her again. This time, less translucent and an opaquer pale blue, setting off her blonde explosion of hair.

She glided into the reception room to find it empty. In puzzlement, she walked into Winnie's room and saw her sister fast asleep on top of the bed. Her clothes had automatically receded, and she was lying completely naked. A noise behind her made her turn.

Barnaby had awoken and moved out of the spare bedroom. Seeing Wander standing at the door he had moved towards her, trying to think of something to say to this vision of beauty. As he looked past her, he saw the naked form of Winnie on the bed.

It was the sound of him hitting the floor that had caught Wander's attention.

It was a struggle, but Wander managed to get Barnaby back on to the spare bed and eased the door shut on him. Mellianna looked for an outside lock, but there wasn't one. She shrugged, he was not a threat to them. Wander yawned and decided that sleep was a good idea. Returning to her own bedroom, she lay on the bed, feeling it adjust to her shape and soon fell into a light sleep.

Barnaby had been sedated, so he was not his usual bubbly self. His eyes had a glazed look as he stared at his reflection, what was happening to him? His eyes were darkened, and he felt weary. Barnaby's head of normally jet black, smooth hair was in disarray and spiky all over his head. His heartbeat was erratic, and he felt hot all the time. He was sickening for something although the medipak said he was fine. He picked up the pack and held it to his head again. After a few seconds, he looked at the readout.

'You are fine.'

He wasn't convinced, so he pulled down his lower eyelids and looked for any discolouration. He felt his pulse, and it seemed....normal. Then why was he in such a state? A tap at his door made him sit upright and try to look casual.

‘Enter.’

Mellianna put her head around the door and smiled. ‘Feeling better?’

‘Fine. I’m fine. I don’t know what all the fuss is about. What’s happening out there?’

‘We’re nearly ready for you. The twins are in Preparation and they’ll be ready by the time you get on set.’

His heart racing at the mention of the two women. ‘I’ll be right there then.’ He stood to emphasise his intention. Mellianna’s head disappeared, and he sat down again. He dropped his head into his hands and began to weep.

The Preparation Room staff were confused. ‘Have these been done?’ The junior production assistant trainee asked the question towards a pea-sized camera lens in the wall. ‘They don’t need anything on them for the cameras.’

‘They’re perfect,’ added another assistant.

‘Get them on to the set,’ a disembodied voice sounded in the room.

Winnie and Wander were escorted through a few corridors and out onto the main set. They looked up in wonder at the extravagant vista before them. They stood in a large vaulted area that was full of imitation stars.

‘It’s supposed to look like the Universe,’ an assistant helpfully explained. ‘During the show, several of the stars will grow bigger and brighter. They’ll represent all the planets you’re going to visit. I’m soooo jealous of you winning. I entered, but even if I won, I couldn’t go.’

Wander looked at her and smiled, ‘Why not? Are you ill?’

Winnie smiled too and said, ‘Because you’re part of the show?’

The assistant nodded, lowering her head. Those teeth were too perfect. They must have spent a fortune on surgery. ‘Fraid so,’ she managed. ‘Will you follow me, please?’

They moved towards the large raised dais in the middle of the star dome. Wander looked high into the ceiling and couldn’t begin to count the number of points of lights above. A lifelike rendition of the planet Earth hung at the horizon as if rising, or setting, on the stage. Directly opposite, hung the Earth’s moon. A splendid example of emotion stirring Stella beauty. The girls were obviously impressed by the set. They slowly became aware they were now the objects of attention as the silence alerted them that everyone was now watching them.

They took their places in the two silver thrones on the stage. The centre gold chair was for the host of the show. They sat and tried to relax.

‘Is this your first appearance on ISB?’ another assistant asked.

‘ISB?’ queried Wander.

‘InterStellaBroadcasting. Is this your first time?’ The assistant placed the recording devices carefully on the voluminous chest of Wander, who was watching her every move.

‘What’s that?’ Wander asked without a smile.

‘A microphone. So we can hear your voice?’ Wander accepted the explanation and watched to see if it would move around her bosom on its own. ‘Have they briefed you on the running order of the show?’ Both girls shook their heads in unison. ‘Oh, well. Just follow the lead Mr Babyloncity will give you. You’ll be fine. Just smile a lot. Okay. You’re ready.’ She moved away and disappeared somewhere past Orion.

Mellianna watched from the studio, hidden behind the curve of the set. She was anxious that Barnaby hadn’t turned up yet. There were too many cameras used on this piece, she thought. They’d be forever flicking from shot to shot, giving the viewers a headache. Where was he? She went back to the dressing room area.

Barnaby was staring into the mirror and was unaware when Mellianna entered the room. She watched the detached look on his face and knew they were in for trouble this night.

‘Barnaby?’

His eyes focused in the mirror and saw her standing there. He straightened up, smiled and said. ‘Ready when you are.’

Winnie and Wander were getting bored. They’d been sitting on these thrones for a long while and were getting uncomfortable, mainly from the growing number of people arriving to stand and stare at them.

Wander leaned over and whispered, ‘Are we freaks, or something? Why are these people staring at us?’

Winnie leaned nearer and whispered, ‘I think, on this planet, we’re considered attractive.’

Wander grimaced. ‘Well, I’ve never seen an uglier species. But then, I’ve never been off Poortantween before.’

The disembodied voices said, ‘Sorry to keep you waiting ladies. Barnaby Babyloncity is on his way.’

Wander looked at Winnie and mouthed, 'Can they hear us?' Winnie nodded. 'Prak!' Aloud, Wander said, 'Well, when I said ugly, what I meant was.....'

Barnaby hurried onto the dais and looked everywhere except straight at the sisters. He seemed flustered and ill at ease. 'Sorry to keep you, ladies. Now, are we all ready to go?' Barnaby looked into the night sky as if waiting for a divine intervention.

The voice said, 'Ready. Let's go. Start recording, we'll edit it later. Go, Barnaby.'

Wander tried to see what Barnaby was looking at as he started his introductory speech. He was looking towards the stars in the distance and she tried to see what he could see. A look of puzzlement crossed her face, and she looked at her sister, who shrugged and started to squint into the distance too.

Barnaby tried to conduct an interview without actually looking at his guests. He was painfully aware that his trousers were showing signs of excitement and his heart raced to match his libido. He was flushed and just knew the whole Universe could see exactly what he was thinking. One slight consolation to him was that the male audience were probably thinking exactly the same as him. It was the worst performance of his career and should've been his best. He couldn't wait for the first natural break when he left the dais at a crouching run.

Winnie and Wander stared as he disappeared towards the Pole Star and wondered if they were ever going to get an opportunity to speak. Mellianna looked on in horror, as her boss ran off the set, in obvious distress. She hurried to the dressing room to find Barnaby in tears.

'Barnaby? What's the matter?'

'I don't know. I just feel.....awful. I can't concentrate, I can't....do anything.'

'You're thrown by the twins, aren't you?' His nod was almost indiscernible. 'Well, pull yourself together. You've seen beautiful women before. Just remember the last Miss Universe competition. Come on, Barnaby, you're better than this.'

Barnaby was shaking his head. Mellianna sat beside him and put her arm around his shoulder. 'They're only women. Aliens, I grant you, but they look human and happen to be....a little more attractive than the norm. Just look at them as aliens and get through the next few hours. Okay?'

He nodded and wiped his nose. 'I'll try.'

She slapped him hard across his face, bringing him upright with a sudden jolt. ‘You WILL pull yourself together. This show needs you. Get out there and be yourself, not this simpering love-struck wimp. Move it!’ She shoved him out the door and hustled him onto the dais, giving the thumbs-up sign to the six producers as she sat him down.

The short sharp shock was just what Barnaby needed. His eyes unglazed and he smiled into the tiny camera in the distance. His autocue was running in front of his own eyes, projected from a minuscule unit fixed behind his ear. He ran through the script and turned with some hesitation to look directly at the blonde bombshell to his right. He held the stare and controlled the timbre in his voice.

‘Welcome to the show, Wander, how’re you enjoying it so far?’

She smiled, and Barnaby felt his heart rate soar, he fought down his natural response mechanism and tried hard to concentrate on what she was saying. It was difficult, but he was desperately hanging on as she spoke.

‘Fine, thank you. We love it here. We haven’t seen much, but those Falls! Excellent.’

‘We’re pleased that...you’re pleased. Winnie. Welcome. How does Earth compare with Poortantween?’

She saw his discomfiture and refrained from smiling. He was extremely grateful for that. She was so kind, he could kiss her. That set off a chain of fantasies that increased his heart rate even further. He held her stare and tried desperately to concentrate on what she was saying and on composing his next question.

‘I think it’s as pretty as our home world, but then, as Wander says, we haven’t seen much of it yet. Perhaps tomorrow?’

‘Sure. That would be nice. Good. Excellent. Right.’ Barnaby tried to see his notes through blurred vision and shook his head to clear it.

‘Stop!’ the disembodied voice said. ‘Barnaby. Get yourself sorted. Ten minutes everybody. Then Barnaby will be back on form.’

Barnaby slumped in his seat and looked asleep.

Wander whispered, ‘What’s wrong with him?’

Winnie smiled at her and put her hand over her recording device on her chest. ‘We’re too much for him.’

Wander shook her head and said, ‘He needs to get more Prakking.’

Winnie nodded, ‘Perhaps we should help.’ The girl’s eyes met and there was a natural unspoken understanding there.

Before he knew what was happening the two sisters were man-handling him back to the dressing room. Mellianna watched on the monitor and moved to intercept them. By the time she got to the dressing room, the door had been shut and locked. She knocked gently and then a little louder. She heard sounds from inside and her face coloured. There was no mistaking what was happening in there and she felt a flash of anger. How dare he! She knocked harder.

Five minutes later, with sore knuckles and an attitude to match, she tried again to get their attention once the noises had stopped. The door opened slowly, and Wander stood in the doorway, almost filling it. Her hair was as wild as ever.

‘Yes?’ she smiled.

‘Errr, is Barnaby there?’

Wander looked into the room and then back at Mellianna. ‘Yes. He’ll be right with you.’ The door closed slowly.

Barnaby walked back to the set in a daze. He sat down and stared ahead. Mellianna stood beside him and pushed her face into his vision.

‘What was THAT all about!’

‘It was FANTASTIC!’

‘I’m sure. But what are you doing, fraternising with...’ She looked around to see if anyone was in hearing distance, ‘...the guests?’

‘That was some fraternising, I can tell you.’

‘I know. I heard.’

The two girls arrived and took their seats. There had identical self-satisfied smiles of confidence on their faces and they grinned at Mellianna.

‘He’ll be all right now,’ they both said in unison.

Barnaby sailed through the rest of his written material. Openly flirting with his guests, they responded with smiles and giggles, endearing themselves to all the male population of the Universe that liked two legs, two arms and a head on their species of choice. The women were not so easily swayed. The sisters were Universally hated by women with two legs, two arms and one head.

The Wullen sisters spoke as well as they were able, answering unanswerable questions, such as, ‘What would you be doing if you hadn’t won this competition?’

‘What did you want to be when you were grown up?’

‘You must have been beautiful babies, because babies, look at you now.’

Barnaby Babyloncity swung a dramatic arm across the indoor galaxy and said, ‘Let’s take a look at where you’ll be going on this wondrous of wonderful trips.’

A segue of all the points of interest was scrolled across the screens of the Universe. In many a home planet cries of, ‘That’s us. I live there!’ rang out unheard by the rest.

The twins watched in awe at all the places they were going to be visiting. Their hands crept together, and they squeezed each other. A smile reached their lips and nearly threw Barnaby off his track. But his intimacy with the two women had produced a cathartic result. It had diminished his fear of their beauty. He’d experienced the ultimate in physical pleasure, his ultimate dream had come true. After that, there could be no fear, no anxiety, just an inner satisfaction. Plus, of course, the desire for more of the same.

Stars flickered and glowed as Barnaby’s hand swept across the Universe. There were too many to count. The hand came to rest in front of his face as Barnaby said, ‘And all this goes to the lucky winners of our “Must Visit” competition. Two months ago we asked all our viewers across the Universe to vote for the top ten best places to visit in the Universe before you die. Well, we had quite a response, I can tell you. In the end, we had to break it down into three sentient-being species. No offence to your hard-shell creatures out there, but the first species was affectionally named “Bugs”, the second “Human and Derivatives” and the last, “Non-human, but not bugs.”’

He leered at the camera, ‘And members of the Human and Derivatives won. So now we have the top ten places Human and Derivatives would like to visit as voted for by our viewers. Here they are.....’

Ten stars glowed, and their names appeared by each of them. ‘The top ten places to visit in the Universe. And the Wullen sisters are going to all of them as winners of our inter-galactic competition. Well done ladies!’

He applauded wildly and was joined by the ring of watchers outside of the camera’s range. It was the first time they took their eyes off the twins and did something. Wander and Winnie smiled at each other and had the same thought, ‘*When will this be over?*’

The show reached out across the ether of space and touched the worlds of countless beings. Some of who could even understand the broadcast while others who thought it a torture show. By the time it was edited and dubbed into three thousand different basic tongues, the show would be seen the Universe over. It paved the way for the journey of a lifetime for the two homely sisters from Poortantween.

Winnie was in the activ-bath and Wander sat naked on the balcony. She was half asleep and dreaming of her trip of a lifetime. She was finally beginning to look forward to it. Winnie didn't relish all the hype and hullabaloo surrounding the media interest in the competition winners, she just wanted to get on with the holiday.

Winnie was missing her family already and her mother had just called to say she'd seen the broadcast - and how ugly the people on Earth were! Although Wander agreed with her mother's sentiments, Winnie had told her not to voice them. They were guests on this planet, not invaders. Wander looked down at the Falls, there was a lot more water on this planet than her homeland. She scratched her thigh and felt the material begin to form. Winnie tapped the skin lightly, and the material receded. She had no need for clothes at the moment. She hated wearing clothes at any time. At home, no one needed clothes.

She looked at the menu again and tried to decide what she wanted to eat for the evening meal. The food was strange and confusing. She needed to discuss it with Winnie and get a little help from her enforced guardians. On that thought, she wondered how Barnaby was doing. She rose from the chair and went into the spare bedroom. He was fast asleep, naked on top of the bed. She smiled at him and felt a little sorry for the pure human race. Their second bout of sexual athletics was a little more entertaining for the girls. They were used to the men taking more of an active role, but this man was still too overwhelmed by their bodies to do anything than lie back and enjoy it. It was also difficult for the girls, there were two of them and him with only one.....

'Hello.' Winnie stood in the doorway and looked at the sleeping form on the bed. 'Still asleep? Not much stamina.'

Wander shook her head. 'None at all. Perhaps he'll get better with practice.'

'If he doesn't die with pleasure first.'

They both laughed, and Barnaby stirred in his sleep.

'At least he won't see us with so much of a mystery as before.'

'His stare was that of wonder and stupefaction. They certainly think we look odd here, don't they?'

'They look odd to us too. So....uglyyyyyy.' Both laughed again. Barnaby opened his eyes briefly, smiled and was asleep again.

They touched the door jamb, and the door closed silently. They stood on the balcony and tried to admire the view once again.

‘We’ll see the wonders of the Universe that’ll make this look pale,’ said Winnie, in a faraway voice.

‘It doesn’t look much to me anyway,’ said Wander.

Far below a crowd was gathering, looking up toward the roof of their hotel. ‘What’re they looking at?’ Wander craned her neck to look upwards. There was a short structure above her, but they were in the top suite of the building.

‘Us, I think,’ said Winnie with a wave. The crowd responded. ‘I think we’ll have to use more clothing here.’

‘Speaking of which, we should pack.’

Winnie shook her head. ‘Already done. They’ve supplied everything. I think they’ve got a clothing contract or something. For each planet, we’ll have different clothes.’

‘Great! Do we get to choose? Use our own body-bots, or there....stuff?’

Winnie shook her head. ‘Unlikely. We’ll just have to see how it goes.’

Wander leaned her back against the rail and looked at her sister. ‘Are you happy about Barnaby and Mellianna coming along with us?’

Winnie shrugged, ‘I don’t see we have a say in it. They represent the sponsor and the media company. Without them, we wouldn’t be here. We just have to turn up for photo shoots and be good girls. In the meantime, we just have to enjoy it all as best we can.’

They clasped hands and hugged each other. Their minds were in tune and their thoughts shared. Their smiles were identical, and the excitement shone from their eyes.

Barnaby turned in his sleep as he recalled the recent tumble on the bed with the fantastic Wullen sisters. He was amazed at the firmness of their young bodies, breasts you could bounce a coin off. Barnaby was not at all put off by the size, or the number of bosoms on each of the women. He’d looked at the nipples on each of the six breasts and hadn’t known where to put his face.

PART 2 - THE ICE FIELDS OF ZACARON.

Wander hated the take-off. Parts of her body wanted to be where other parts of her body already were. It seemed to her that one breast wanted to swap with one of the others. Her heart coveted the position her two livers currently occupied, while her eyeballs wanted freedom from her skull. She was pleased when the stressful part was over. Now came the boring part.

Their journey from Poortantween had been particularly boring. It had taken nearly three Earth weeks, which equated to two Poortantween weeks, and Wander had become particularly fretful.

The ship was a basic people carrier, with little in the way of luxury, or time displacement activities. The sisters had been mostly confined to their cabin, except for mealtimes, when the small dining area had shifts to feed the passengers. On several occasions, they had come close to arguing, something they rarely did.

The sisters rarely enjoyed playing games, but the endless hours of inactivity drove them to seek something to occupy their minds somehow. They had slowly become addicted to SnaggIT, a board game requiring little skill and a great deal of noisy participation. An indecisive result often saw the girls mock-fighting over who had won. Several times their rolling around the small cabin produced bruises and bumps, quickly resolved with an application of bots. It had given them hours of joyful entertainment and had bonded them even further as sisters.

Wander held the box in her lap and waited for her sister to join her for another game. She lay stretched out on the wide couch and looked around the spacious lounge they occupied as a new “family”. The walls were predominantly pink, her least favourite colour, but it wasnice. A huge front window looked out directly into space, a thing she could not bring herself to do. The feeling of falling into a bottomless pit overwhelmed her. The others loved it, but she could not even look anymore.

All the smooth, soft, curving walls blended together with the floor and ceiling, giving Wander the sensation of being back in one of her mother’s wombs. She settled back deeper into the couch, it adjusting to support her bone structure and individual fleshy padding. The lighting was low at this moment and could be adjusted by voice commands. She played for a while raising and lower it until she became bored. She was getting fidgety. “Busy legs”, her mother called it. She stood and walked around the room.

The wall-sized screen glowed in anticipation, but she ignored it. She’d never been enticed by screen entertainment, she always wanted the real thing. Wander wanted to be doing things rather than watching somebody

else do them. She ran her fingers over the velvety surface of the walls, feeling it shy away from her touch.

‘Lights, off,’ she said, and the room was in darkness. A soft glow from the floor allowed her to see where she was walking, and she moved towards the closed window. She was shaking as she said, ‘Window, open.’ The cover dissolved, and the mighty depth of space was before her. She closed her eyes quickly and then opened them slowly.

The view was breath-taking, but fearsome as well. The black backdrop was lightened by so many stars. Many bright points of lights, blurring out the rest. The suns, the moons and planets. All to see and wonder at.

She’d seen enough. ‘Window closed.’ She was feeling anxious and disturbed, but she was trying to overcome her fears. During this trip around the Universe, she’d need to overcome many of her fears and prejudices. She sat back on the couch, cradling the board game. Where was her sister?

Winnie looked in the mirror and hated her hair. She pulled and pushed at the long strands and they stayed exactly where placed. She turned around and looked at it from all directions and finally decided that the wild look had outlived its welcome. She tried smoothing it down and shortening the length. Then she pulled the strands out and let the body of hair hang down to her waist. She didn’t like that either. Far too, “young woman”!

‘Back to normal,’ she said and watched her hair writhe itself into her standard style. She nodded in satisfaction but made a mental note to discuss a new style with Wander. Where was her sister?

Barnaby opened his eyes and sighed. That was a good book, he thought. The images and words blended nicely over his cornea and the machine switched off the images as he opened his eyes. He would recommend that title to Mellianna. He sat up from his sleeper chair and stretched. Barnaby had no idea of time, or what day it was. After a week on board, he was only just beginning to get bored. He’d used the time so far, to unwind his mind. He’d been particularly stressful in the build-up to this tour. There was a great deal of work to do to make the show a success. The arrangements for the tour were becoming a nightmare, and he was grateful to Mellianna for taking much of the strain. She needed this break too.

Barnaby looked unseeing at the wall screen and the colourful images of the unknown programme. He was looking forward to this trip, even more looking forward to getting to know the Wullen twins better. He stood and reminisced again about his two experiences with these fantastic examples of womanhood. Barnaby could not keep the smile off his face and his knees went weak as he remembered the detail. A chime sounded, and he ended his reverie to open the door to his mini-suite.

Mellianna stood smiling in the corridor, he waved her in. He regretted being disturbed from his pleasant daydreams, but he was pleased to see her. She was not unattractive. But today she seemed....more feminine? When he made any comparison with the twins, he knew there was no competition. But he reminded himself that in a few short months the twins would be back on Poortantween and he would be back on Earth. He was determined to enjoy his time with them but knew in his heart it would not be a long-term relationship. In the meantime, he had a job to do and Mellianna was an important part of that job. He must remain professional and courteous to her.

What was different about her?

‘I thought we ought to double check on the arrangements for Zacaron. If you have a moment or two, Barnaby?’

He nodded and let the door close silently. ‘Of course. Make yourself comfortable, Mel. A drink?’

She instinctively looked at the timer on her finger and shook off the fantasy that there was any reality to time when in space. If you fancied eating, you ate. If you felt like a drink, you drank.

‘Are you having one?’

Barnaby thought a moment before nodding. ‘Let’s get into the mood. We’ve some Zacaronian Gin here somewhere.’ He turned to the blank wall and said, ‘Two Zacaronian Gins. Ice and Relmon.’

He turned to Mellianna and smiled. ‘Won’t be long.’

Moments later a low tone sounded from the wall and an aperture appeared. He took the frozen globes and placed them on a low table by the side where Mellianna was sitting. The large vessels swirled with the spirit liquid and the bright blue Relmon fruit added a colour clash that was both pleasing and off-putting at the same time.

He sat beside her and raised his glass. ‘Harmony.’

‘Harmony,’ she responded and took a tentative sip. The glass was cold on her lips and the spirit exuded a powerful and erotic smell. She felt her nasal passages clearing as she breathed in. The taste was at first quite bland and then it took over the mouth, a section at a time. The tip of the tongue became numb and the sides then experienced an intense sweetness, followed by a tingling sourness that changed rapidly back into sweetness again. Mellianna could feel her body almost wriggle with pleasure as the liquid moved through her bloodstream. She placed the glass carefully on the table until she was sure what the lasting effects were going to be. She didn’t want to make a fool of herself in front of her boss. That was his job.

Barnaby sipped his appreciatively and joined his glass with hers on the table. 'Bow's your yabin?' he asked, his tongue a little numb.

'Bardon?'

More slowly this time, 'How IS your cabin?'

'Vine. Tank you.'

'Good. Bery good.'

They took another sip and sat back in their recliners.

'Bice dink. Don you fink?'

'Mmmm.'

Wander was drifting into sleep, something she often did when there was nothing else to occupy her mind or body. Despite the luxurious suite, plenty of space and three companions, she still felt alone. What were the chances of that! She briefly thought about a little Ladies and Gentleman with Barnaby, but quickly dismissed it. He was too boring. She liked her men with some action in them. She turned her thoughts towards the crew. So far, she'd only met the Captain who was a female, and a First Lieutenant. A callow Human Derivative youth with lack-lustre eyes. There had to be more crew, hadn't there?

Her mind was drifting to a place far away and a long time ago. To a boy that broke her hearts. A dalliance in the afternoon led to a long and wonderful relationship that stretched on forever. She was reliving the experiences as she drifted into sleep and the smile on her face brought another to Winnie as she stood over her sister as she slept.

Winnie was bored too. Where was everyone? She revealed the window and looked out into space. She loved this view. This feeling of falling into the unknown, not knowing when you'd stop. The stars seemed unmoving, yet at the same time moving her towards them.

The trip to Earth was the first time she'd been off-world and so far she'd found the experience exhilarating and special. She knew Wander harboured more reservations about this trip than she had, but she knew Wander well enough to know she would enjoy it all - eventually. They had to make the most of it. They would probably never get the opportunity to leave Poortantween again.

The ten planets each held an exciting venue for recreation. Sentient beings from many galaxies had voted these planets as the very best in the Universe. If it was good enough for them.....

The stars looked cold and uninviting yet held a fascination, countless squillions of watchers had shared down the millenniums. The stars were there before any life stirred in the Universe and they would probably be there when all life left the Universe. That was a long way down in history and time. Right now it was important to seize the moment. Winnie was ready for that.

She turned and watched Wander sleeping. The wild blonde hair lay relaxed around her shoulders, framing the delicate bone structure favoured by the inhabitants of Poortantween. The bots had removed any vestige of clothing as Wander slept, as always, completely naked and relaxed in her own world.

Sparkling stars drew Winnie back, and she made herself comfortable, watching their imperceptible progress. Her thoughts turned to Poortantween and the people she'd left behind. Her parents had not wanted her to leave. They were fearful that two young women alone in the Universe could only come to harm. They knew their daughters' resolve and determination, but it was the deep-rooted parental urges that drove them to voice their fears and trepidations.

'Be careful,' was the cautionary warning. As if they would want to do anything else but, 'Be careful'.

'There may be men out there that will disrespect you. Use you and abuse you.....' The thought train had been too much, and their mother had not finished her sentence.

Wander had whispered aside, 'What about the men? They don't know how much we can use and abuse MEN, yet.' Winnie had forced a smile away and nodded slightly.

Their father watched his daughters and sighed. 'Your mother is only concerned about you. It's natural. When you become parents, you'll know all about it. Humour her, pacify her and don't EVER send messages back that will worry her. Understood?'

The girls had nodded, and he moved towards them for a family hug. He was proud of his girls. He held back a tear or two as he crushed his daughters for what may be the last time. A father knew there were distractions and attractions out there in the galaxy and expected it to tempt the sisters. They may never want to return. His wife knew that, and he knew it. But did the girls know it?

A headache was becoming too painful to bear. Mellianna could not raise her head and therefore could not even get medication. She lay and hoped it would get better. It didn't. An hour later and she was feeling even worse. She

was very close to vomiting and the pounding in her head was now unbearable. Difficult as it was, she had to get up and grope her way to the bathroom and find something to take. She made the bathroom, but her stomach contents refused to remain where they were supposed to. This made her headache even more excruciating. She lay on the floor and struggled to stay alive.

Sometime later Barnaby had a similar reaction and found himself sharing the floor with Mellianna. They were distantly aware of each other but were not in the mood to acknowledge each other's existence. They lay together on the floor while time slipped away. The distance they travelled growing further from Earth and nearer to Zacaron.

The ball was a mass of different colours, looking like something a child would love to chew. Winnie stood and watched through the window, with Barnaby by her side. Barnaby watched Winnie's reflection in the window, studying every curve on her body. He ached to touch her again and repeat the most exciting moments of his life, but the girls had been strangely aloof since being on the ship. He was hoping a spell of planetfall would help them change their mind towards him again. He longed for another trip to heaven.

He noticed a movement behind them and saw Mellianna watching the planet as well. He turned and smiled at her. She too had been strangely distant from him, especially since the incident with the Zacaronian Gin. They both felt very embarrassed about that. She smiled back, and he noticed how nice that smile was. It seemed genuine. Had she forgiven him? Better not push things too soon. They had to work together for the whole trip. If she got mad at him now.....

What was it about her that was different? He'd spent most of the journey thinking about it. She'd changed something about herself that made her seem moreattractive. If he couldn't figure it out, he would have to ask her, it was a puzzle that was driving him crazy.

He was also being driven crazy by what Winnie was almost wearing. He was close enough to touch her and could see the fine and delicate material that covered her most feminine areas of her body. The colouration was unusual - a red animal fur effect, with the stripes curving around her breasts and in between her legs. The material even looked like it had the texture of fur, but Barnaby knew it was all an illusion. There were no clothes on these girls, just body-bot effects.

The globe increased in size as the ship started its approach orbit and he could now see more detail. The multi-coloured patches blended into each other and became whole tracts of land tinted in separate colours.

'What's that?' Wander said from behind them, hardly daring to watch.

‘Zacaron,’ said Mellianna.

‘What’re all those pretty colours?’

‘Snow,’ answered Mellianna.

‘Snow?’ said Wander and Winnie together. ‘What’s snow?’

The landing was less violent than the take-off and Wander expressed her gratitude for that. ‘Prak!’ she said, to anyone listening.

The luggage was all packed and ready to be taken to their hotel, leaving the visitors free to disembark by foot. The ramp was long and shallow but under cover. It took them all by surprise how warm the air was, for a planet supposedly covered in snow and ice. The passageway led them into the terminal where a very provisional custom service operated. As special guests to the planet, they were soon whisked through and away to the awaiting transport. As they stepped into the large vehicle, they could see a row of recording equipment following their every move. The media machine was up and running.

Barnaby made a point of waving to the cameras and stopped to give a statement as one of the remote recording heads zoomed towards him, stopping a bird’s feather away from his mouth.

‘We’re delighted to visit this beautiful planet of Zacaron. Yes, the Wullen sisters had a very good trip. And are really looking forward to seeing the sights of the most famous winter sports planet in the Solar System. Indeed, the Universe.’

Mellianna hovered behind him and gently pushed him in the back, to get him to move away and into the car.

‘We’ll have a press conference later tomorrow and give you all the details of the visit then. I have to go now. Bye.’

The car accelerated, throwing them back into their seats, climbing into the bright pink sky. It banked to the right and they could look down over the spaceport, crowded with ships of all shapes and sizes. It was daylight and the pink sky suffused everything with a rosy glow. The ships glistened in the strong sunlight and the tarmac reflected the sun back in a reddened dazzling shine. The car banked again, and the spaceport was gone. Paler pink sky surrounded them, and they felt the vehicle accelerate rapidly. Wander felt her major organs moving again and wished this movement would soon stop.

With an almost physical lurch, they all felt the craft start its descent. Winnie looked out of the window to see the city below. The area was covered in pink snow and glistening. High on a mountain clung a city of steel and glass. It was like a crystal growing in the snow, delicate points of buildings

rising at odd angles from the ground. The birthing sun catching the sides of the glass and sparkling the reflection back. Winnie thought it was the most beautiful sight she'd ever seen.

The car dipped and glided towards the high mountain range. As it turned for a landing, they could see the whole city and marvelled at its design and charm. Except for Wander who was trying not to be ill. The landing site was an open area in the centre of the ring of crystal buildings and the craft descended to land gently on the packed snow. The whine of the engines died, and they knew they'd arrived at the first of ten of the most spectacular destinations in the Universe.

Hotel Noverna welcomed them with open arms. Primarily because of the phalanx of the Universe-wide auto media machines lined up in the lobby. The manager, Jonno Huutch, hastened over to the two guests and shook their hands profusely. A Human Derivative who could not take his eyes off Wander's triple breasts was suddenly lost for words until his more able female assistant stood in for him and finished the welcoming speech. Wander prised her hand away from his, dried it on her ultra-thin strip of pink clothing around her waist and faced the cameras again.

She had memorised the speech Barnaby had written for them and she finished with a smile. Huutch's attention was switched to the smile. He was fully entrapped in her spell.

Wander noticed his reaction idly and muttered under her breath, 'Not another one!' She saw Winnie looking at her and interpreted that look instantly. She needed to behave. Wander turned on the smile and directed the lethal weapon directly at Jonno. He melted. Straight into the carpet and the assistant led them away from the crowds and media banks. They entered a large elevator and the doors silently closed.

'One-oh-one,' the assistant whispered. The lift accelerated upwards. Wander held her stomach and lost her smile.

'Welcome, once again, to the Noverna. My name's Jossy. Call me anytime you need anything. We'll go to your suites shortly and I hope everything will be to your liking.'

The doors opened, and they walked the silent corridors to a series of gold doors. Four of them opened as if by their presence and Jossy stood and waved them into the rooms.

'Take any you wish. They're all the same. The best of what we have. I'll see you later. Have a special day at the Noverna.'

Winnie stood in awe at the room before her. It was massive and seemed to stretch forever. At the far end was a picture window that looked out over the mountains of pink snow. The whole room was softly coloured

and furnished and looked the height of luxury. There was nothing like this on Poortantween. She rested her hands on the warm soft window and stared down the slopes. Hundreds of skiers swooped their way down the runs and seemed to have a great time. It would be her turn soon and she was looking forward to it.

Mellianna couldn't believe her luck in being part of this holiday of a lifetime. She was getting the same treatment as the two people who had won the prize. She smiled as she took in the ambience of the room. By the time she'd investigated the bathroom facilities, the huge triple-size bed in the bedroom, her luggage had arrived, and hotel staff were unpacking it for her. She was in a dilemma. She'd arranged for solid currency for this planet, along with currency for all the planets they were to visit. But she was unsure how much she was supposed to tip the staff.

Her problem was solved when she offered a small wad of notes to the last of the porters before he quietly closed her bedroom door. With a polite shake of his head, he left, refusing to take the proffered tip. This brought another thought to her mind; the girls needed some spending money, and she decided to get that to them right away.

Barnaby was delighted at the respect the hotel had shown him and his entourage. It was obviously very good PR for the hotel with all the media interest. He'd meet with the manager later and see what he could get out of this deal. He looked out at the view and smiled. This was a truly inspiring place.

Wander sat in the chair and watched the huge screen along one wall of her living area. They had three days in here and it already bored her. The screen showed a rolling promo of the city, the hotel and the skiing. She was resentful and couldn't figure out why. She should have a great time, just being here. What was her problem? She tried to analyse it and she just felt.....down.

Wander knew that her personality lacked...what was it her mother said.....? "sparkle". She lacked sparkle. Winnie had the sparkle in abundance but Wander never made the grade when it came to sparkling. She watched the walls subtly change colour and thought back over the recent years - how she'd become more and more morose. She reached behind her and lifted the large pink glass and sipped at the totally transparent liquid. It was only the trickling down her throat that confirmed there was anything to drink in the glass at all. It burned briefly and a warm flush through the body quickly followed. She immediately started to relax.

A few years back, she'd watched images of her childhood and had seen a happy, laughing girl. Where had that child disappeared to? She

fought to concentrate, bend her memory back into early youth and beyond. Something had happened that had turned a happy girl into a sombre woman. She took another sip. She wanted the happy girl back.

Jonno Huutch lay on his bed and turned restlessly. Sleep was not forthcoming, neither did he seek it. It was midday and he should be hard at work, managing the most prestigious hotel in this part of the galaxy. But he was struck down by an emotion he could not control. His staff had been notified that he was taking a break and would return sometime later in the day.

Jonno got off the bed and walked into his bathroom. It was as palatial as the rest of the hotel, yet he saw only a haunted face staring back at him. His eyes were red-rimmed, and his face looked drained of colour. He wiped the mirror and yet the image remained the same. His pale blue hair swept back dramatically from his high forehead, giving him the gloss of sophistication that was the current fashion in middle-aged Human Derivatives. He was handsome in a ...sort of off-world kind of way. His bright blue eyes had a stare that few men could hold for long. Jonno was no push-over when it came to physical activity. He never backed-down in arguments and almost always got his way. He reminded himself of this as he tried to get his old mindset working again.

Jonno took a deep breath and told himself he should pull his thoughts together. He was an adult, not an adolescent kid. This was a stupid, if intense, infatuation with a guest in the hotel. He mustn't take this further and he must remain professional. Jonno squared his shoulders and took another deep breath. He would apologise to the lady.....personally.

Winnie had spent an hour in her dream suite and was becoming aware that she missed Wander. She decided to suggest they shared one of the suites. It was pointless them being alone! It was a good idea and her sister should see the practicality in it. She touched her thigh and images appeared on her skin. A sarong effect was being created that hid her nipples and crotch enough to be "decent". She walked out of her door and moved to the next and pressed the guest tone.

There was no response so Winnie pushed the *open* finger stud and walked in. She stood and looked down the length of the room and saw her sister standing near the window. Not so much near the window as up against the window. With a man thrusting his intentions on her. Winnie started to run until she realised it was Wander making the "happy" noise, and so she slowed down. Wander saw her sister enter the room and winked at her as she responded to the man's urgent attentions. He was pressing her even further up against the window where anyone outside could look up and see a good exhibition of Ladies and Gentlemen.

Winnie's face fumed, but in deference to her sister's privacy, she slowly backed out of the room. She stood in the corridor and tried to control her growing anger. How could she! She was supposed to be on her best behaviour. They hadn't been on the planet more than two hours and she was.....Winnie kicked the wall and hurt her toe. She held back the scream and waited for the bots to get there and sort it out. The pain eased, and she limped back to her room.

Barnaby sat opposite Mellianna and tried to concentrate on the job at hand. There were many detailed and complicated arrangements to be formalised during their visit to Zacaron. The list was almost complete, and they had informed everyone in the loop of the schedule and even the media had a complete list of times and venues.

Barnaby shook his head and said, 'The girls don't seem to have much free time to themselves?'

Mellianna nodded, 'Neither do we.' She looked up sharply and added, 'I mean, the support team....as such. It's a busy schedule. Has to be, to get to all ten planets in as many weeks.'

Barnaby nodded and sighed, 'Well, better give them the good news.'

Mellianna remained seated as she said, 'What do you think of the Wullen sisters?'

'In what way?' Barnaby said, heading for the door.

'In any way,' Mellianna said carefully.

Barnaby stopped and turned his stare on her. 'Nice girls. Very attractive. Good for the company profile.'

Mellianna looked at her handheld and said, 'I meant...more at a personal level?'

Barnaby's eyes narrowed, and he said quietly, 'What do you mean?'

'I mean...more, what are they really like? Are they going to become a problem? Get troublesome. Be easy to manage. That sort of thing.'

'I think they'll be great.' Barnaby looked slightly relieved. 'They seem happy enough women. Don't you agree?'

'I'm not sure. Wander seems....distracted and Winnie goes along with anything we say. I just get a feeling.....'

'What?'

‘I just think they’re going to be trouble.’

The mountain range disappeared into the mists of the horizon and looked beautiful. Even Wander looked at it for a while before becoming bored. Winnie looked at the natural wonder of nature and sighed. Her auto recording device taking images she would enjoy for years to come. She smiled at Wander, remembered she was still angry with her and snarled.

The mountains were purple and the sky a very light pink. A sun was just rising to the south. The snow was also a pale pink, looking pristine in the morning light. Barnaby and Mellianna were lined up along with the sisters as the instructor made his speech.

‘You vill be careful mit dees equipment. You vill not hurt yourself, but you vill be careful, non zee less.’

‘What IS he saying?’ asked Wander.

‘We must be careful, but it is safe.’

‘Oh. Right.’

‘All you need to do, iz...lean the way you want to go...like diz.’ He swung his hips and leant down the slope and the single large ski responded and headed down the incline.

‘What’s he doing?’ Wander pointed unnecessarily at the disappearing instructor.

‘He’s showing you how to point the ski in the direction you want to go.’

‘Oh.’

From the bottom of the slope, the instructor was shouting, ‘Zen. You lean UP ze hill and the ski follows you. Like so.’

He leant his body up the hill and the ski bit into the snow and powered him back towards his pupils. He was getting very near, and Wander tried to take a step back, but both feet were attached to the ski. She fell over.

The instructor was almost on top of them before saying, ‘To stop, you lean backwards. The ski will come to a slow stop. So.’ He stopped a rat’s tongue away from the fallen Wander. He looked down at her and smiled. ‘Vot part of “stop” did you not understand? Eh?’

‘All of it. Can you do that again? Please.’ Wander made her most charming smile and was disappointed at his reaction.

‘No. Ze lesson is over. Go enjoy.’

Wander's eyes flashed a grey, flinty colour. 'I thought you just said we couldn't get hurt on these things?'

The instructor didn't turn around as he skied away. His voice floated back to her, 'You're not hurt, madam. You won't get hurt. Follow me, everyone.' He was gone down the slope.

With a little giggle, Mellianna leant forward, and the ski accelerated after the disappearing instructor. A more cautious attempt saw Barnaby following her. Right behind him, Winnie grinned in pursuit. Wander tried to get up and found it difficult.

'Prak!' she said. 'I need to get up!' she shouted after her fellow pupils. To her surprise, the ski moved forward slightly so her legs were positioned under her body. It then gave a slight jerk which pushed her into a seated position. Another jerk and she was on her knees. A final jerk and she was standing up.

Wander smiled, 'Very impressive.' She leaned forward to ask the ski, 'Do you do tricks?' The ski moved off down the hill, almost throwing her off-balance. But a few twitches by the ski managed to right her, and she swooped down the hill after the others.

It was exhilarating. It was almost like flying. The warm breeze against her face buffeted her a little, but she found it pleasant. Her bots adjusted her skin temperature until she was comfortable and waited instructions for a clothes change. Wander considered going naked but thought it would be too much for the men in the team. So she decided on a dazzling lemon ensemble and tapped her thigh with the correct code. As she shot down the mountain, she changed from a rosy flesh colour to a bright yellow streak. Within moments she'd caught up her colleagues and swept past them.

As she passed the instructor, she turned and grinned at him. This time he had a reaction. He pointed in front of her and shouted, 'Careful. I told you to be careful!'

Wander looked forward and saw a string of trees rapidly rushing towards her. She quickly leaned back and felt the ski slowing, but it looked like it wasn't going to stop in time. She tried to lean even further backwards, but she was almost sitting on the ski now. The trees were upon her, a particularly large one directly in front of her. She closed her eyes and screamed.

Wander felt a push on her hip and opened her eyes to see the instructor by her side. He'd bumped her away from the tree and her ski was almost stopped. Another tree was in her path as the ski came to a full halt. It was already turning away from the large trunk that could have been a wall of death.

‘Thank you,’ she managed breathlessly.

‘I told you to be careful.’ He said with a knowing smile. ‘I also said, you wouldn’t get hurt, and you didn’t. Now everyone. Diz way. Diz time at a more slowly pace. Ya?’

The restaurant was full, but they allocated the four prestigious guests of the hotel a window table. They looked out at the mountains. Looking in through the window hovered a small army of media recorders.

‘This is no longer fun, Barnaby. They’ve become a joke! Are we to get ANY privacy on this trip?’ Wander said indignantly, but still smiling at the cameras.

Barnaby waved for a waiter and whispered in his ear. A few moments later the window darkened, and the cameras lost their view. The media machines slowly dispersed and waited by the restaurant door. Barnaby nodded in satisfaction and went back to what he liked doing the most, looking at the twins.

‘Enjoying yourself, so far, ladies?’ Mellianna spoke through a mouthful of local greenery.

‘Wonderful, thank you,’ Winnie said with a grin. Mellianna looked at Wander for an answer.

Wander was watching her salad move. A waiter appeared as if by magic and stared straight into Wander’s eyes. If her eyes were nipple level.

‘Is the food satisfactory, Mademoiselle?’

‘I don’t know,’ Wander said puzzled. ‘What’s this?’ she pointed to the leaf, walking across her plate.

‘Ahhh. A local delicacy. Rumminon leaf. Very tasty. Very fresh.’

‘But it’s moving!’

‘Indeed. How much fresher can you get? A good choice, Mademoiselle.’

Mellianna pushed her plate away and Wander bit carefully into the salad. Apart from a very faint squeal, it tasted all right, once it stopped moving in her mouth. Wander looked up to see Winnie giving her the “proud of you sis” look. She had done her duty, her plate joined Mellianna’s in the centre of the table. Wander drained her wine glass and looked up for more. The waiter was already pouring. It was a surprise to Wander how accurate the waiter was in pouring, as he wasn’t watching the glass.

Wander saw her sister glaring at her, ‘What?’

‘Don’t even think of it!’

Wander sullenly dismissed the waiter who looked equally disappointed. He’d one of the best views in the Universe from his restaurant window, but he only had eyes for two of the diners. Mellianna excused herself and went to the restroom, food was the last thing on her mind, after seeing it try to get away from her. Barnaby saw the look on Mellianna’s face and excused himself to make sure she was all right. He smiled at the sisters and left.

‘What the prak do you think you were doing?’

Wander was taken aback by the outburst. ‘I only asked what was on the plate!’

‘Not that! The hotel room. What the prak were you doing?’

‘I would’ve thought it was obvious. A girl’s got to have a little fun.....’

‘But with the MANAGER of the hotel! Sometimes, Wan.....’

‘So what? He’s a man, isn’t he? I’m getting really lonely out here, you know!’

‘But he’s the MANAGER of the hotel! IF the media got hold of this....They could cancel the trip!’

‘What! No!’

‘Of course. Barnaby and co. aren’t going to look too good if you go around prepping everyone you meet. What does that make you look like?’

‘Normal. What’s wrong with that? We’ve done it all our lives....’

‘On our own planet, prak for brains. When you’re on another planet, you have to be aware of other customs. Other cultures. You read the presentation material they gave us. There are codes of behaviour. Praking the brains out of every waiter and anyone with a pulse is not considered good behaviour!’

Wander looked down at the table. The leaf was walking towards her, a bite-sized piece out of its large flat wing. Wander turned her empty glass on top of it and hoped she could ignore it. Silently the waiter arrived and removed the freshest of culinary delights the restaurant had to offer. He waited just behind the two of them and that caused them stay silent. Winnie sipped at the pink water and smiled at him. His eyes lit up, and he grinned inanely back at her. She smiled again, and he returned the smile. With a flick of her head, she finally got the message through to him and he went into the kitchen.

‘Wan. I want to see the other nine planets. Don’t prep this us for us so early, right?’

Wander nodded, still looking at the pink tablecloth, now free from moving food. 'Okay. Sorry. Can't say it won't happen again, but I'll try to be more.....discreet. Just a King, or President, or someone high profile, right?'

The girls burst out laughing and drew attention from the rest of the diners. They looked embarrassed and giggled until the surrounding women looked away. The men could not tear their eyes off the girls. With horror, Winnie realised that in the heat of the moment the bots had altered their body temperatures and adjusted the imitation material covering accordingly. To the watchers, they appeared to be sitting at the table, naked. Hurriedly Winnie tapped out a code and a large elaborate cloak surrounded her. A tall collar rose from behind her head and curved around to hide her face and blushes. The glimmering white material drew the attention of the women again, but the men lost interest quickly. Wander followed her sister's lead and produced a cloak with an even taller collar. The girls giggled at their own childishness.

As they emerged from the restaurant the media machines were back in their faces. The remote voices asking the same questions and Winnie and Wander smiling out the same answers. Barnaby led the girls to a waiting car, and they climbed on board. As they settled into their seats, the girls' clothes reduced, but they tactfully remained fully covered in a silk-like pink flowing robe each.

The car lurched into the air and swooped over the pointed bits of the mountains. 'Where're we going?' asked Winnie.

Mellianna said, 'Another mountain.'

'Why?' asked Wander.

'Different coloured snow.'

'What else is different?'

'Nothing. We just thought you ought to experience different coloured snow.'

'Do we have a choice of colour?' Wander said.

Mellianna looked at Barnaby, who shrugged. 'What colour would you like?'

'Yellow,' said Wander.

'Blue,' said Winnie.

'Would green be a good compromise? Combination of both?'

The girls nodded and Mellianna went to talk to the pilot.

The craft flew over the snow-covered mountains and the passengers watched as the snow changed colour. When they found a colour they liked, the car dipped and landed on the hard-packed ice. Everyone got out.

Once again the ski guide led the way, and they drifted down through the mountains and out onto the smooth plains below. The aircar followed and picked them up at the end of their run.

They were now quite confident with the safety of the autoski, realising they were never going to fall over, or get harmed. Their bodies swaying with the rhythm of the glide, as they swung between trees and rocky outcrops. By the time they were boarding their transport back to the hotel, they were feeling exhilarated. By the time they got to their rooms, they were exhausted.

Wander had agreed to share a suite. Winnie moved in with her and they both lay in the activ-bath, as it massaged their aches and pains away. They could let the bots do it, but this was more fun. Winnie got out first and let the bots dry her instantly. She walked into her bedroom lay on the bed and was asleep before her hair relaxed around her.

Wander took her time and reflected on her day's activities and smiled at the memories. She'd really enjoyed that. She wondered what was to come tomorrow. The door chimed, and she walked towards it, remembering to create a covering before she opened the door to a grinning Jonno Huutch.

Wander's heart sank, but she smiled lightly at him and stood in the doorway. 'Can't I come in?' he smiled, using all his charm.

Wander glanced back at the closed door of Winnie's bedroom and said quietly, 'I'm sorry, no.'

He looked at the bedroom door and back to the beautiful face. 'You've someone there!'

Wander glanced back at the bedroom door and lowered her voice even more. 'I can't see you again. Honest. I mustn't. I'm already in big trouble for....you know.....'

His voice became louder, 'You have someone in there and won't see me again?'

'It's not that I don't WANT to....' Her voice almost a whisper now.

She watched his face colour up and fear touched her, and she began to realise that caution was the order of the day. She stepped back further into the room, her hand resting on the close door button and she waited for his next outburst.

'I'm the owner of this hotel and I'm renowned, not only on this planet but all over the Universe. And you say no to me, having already said yes!'

‘Well, I ...didn’t exactly say yes. All I did was.....’

‘No woman refuses, Jonno Huutch.’

His arrogance was getting to Wander. ‘This one does. Prak off.’

She touched the button, and the door slid shut and locked.

Barnaby had agreed to a media party for that evening. In the early days of planning it had seemed a sound concept for everyone to take an opportunity to unwind and really get to know each other. Now he was not so sure it was a good idea. The Wullen sisters were an unknown quantity - when it came to behaving themselves. He knew at first hand the effect they could have on the male population of a room, restaurant, or even a whole planet.

However, his brief was to maintain a high profile during the trip, promoting his broadcast company and the two winners in equal measures. They would offer the girls a promotional contract at the end of the trip, depending on the success they achieved. This could mean advertising, movies, or even recording contracts, worth a great deal of money to them. It could make them famous.

Barnaby called in to see Mellianna and sat facing the mountains as they sipped a light alcoholic drink. ‘I’m worried about tonight,’ he said quietly.

‘Why?’

‘We’ve a high-profile party tonight, as you know, with all the planet’s top people. We don’t want the girls....you know.’

Mellianna hid a smirk as she said, ‘No. I don’t know. What are you saying?’

‘They’re....unreliable.’

‘In what way?’

‘You know....’

‘Tell me.’

Barnaby stood by the window and sipped his drink. ‘I don’t think we can trust them to behave with all those important men in there. Does that make it clear?’

Mellianna smiled behind his back and joined him looking at the view. The sun was setting, the peaks descended into purple as the sky turned dark pink and the white sun blazed its last for the day. A green tinge flooded

the horizon, and the sun was quickly lost to view. Both the Earth people watched in awe at the sight.

Barnaby said quietly, 'This should be on the list of things to see in the Universe. It's beautiful.'

Mellianna rested her hand on his shoulder and stepped closer to him. 'It's certainly very romantic.'

Barnaby felt a tear start in the corner of his eye and began to trickle down his cheek. He saw this vista, and it moved him. It was indeed romantic, but it would be more complete with either of the Wullen sisters with him. He felt the hand on his shoulder and smelt the nearness of his assistant. The combination of the view, his emotional state and the nearness of a woman stirred something within him. He turned to Mellianna and saw her watching him intently.

'Mel.....'

The door chime sounded.

'Yes, Barnaby?'

'Well, I.....' The chime sounded again, this time more urgent. '...better see who that is.'

Barnaby hurried to the door and opened it. Jonno Huutch stood outside, with a weak smile on his face.

'May I have a few moments of your time, Mr Babyloncity?'

Barnaby looked at Mellianna who smiled sweetly at their guest. Barnaby turned back to Jonno with, 'Of course. Come in.'

Jonno's voice was low and transparently insincere as he said, 'I'm sorry, I didn't realise you have....company.'

'You know my assistant, Mellianna. We were just discussing the party this evening. I assume that's why you're here too?'

'Not....exactly. Can I be honest here, Mr Babyloncity?'

'Of course.'

'It's about the two ladies who are accompanying you.'

'The Wullen sisters? What about them?'

Jonno looked at Mellianna before saying, 'I wonder if we could have a more private conversation. Man to man as it were?'

Barnaby looked puzzled but thought he understood what Jonno was hinting at. He nodded and looked at Mellianna, who thought she understood too. She didn't like the idea but knew her place as an assistant.

'I've work to do. I'll call you later, Barnaby.' She smiled at Jonno until she turned her back and left the room. She would love to have stayed to hear what Jonno wanted to talk about. Perhaps Barnaby would tell her later. Then again, perhaps he wouldn't.

'Would you like a drink, Mr Huutch?'

Jonno shook his head and said, 'No thank you. I needed to sound you out about a little proposition I'm putting together.'

Barnaby nodded, 'Go ahead. I'm listening.'

'I'm in.....an unfortunate position.'

'How so?'

'I'm very attracted to one of the twins.'

Barnaby broke the silence eventually saying, 'That's very understandable. What man wouldn't be?' He tried to laugh it off as a joke, but his heart was racing.

'I want her to be my consort this evening. By that, I mean CONSORT. If you understand my meaning?'

Barnaby nodded slowly and gave the appearance he was thinking. His mind was racing. This slosh was moving in on his women. Barnaby couldn't let this happen. It would be a disaster.

'Well, I rather think that depends on her. Also, I'm afraid, there's another snag here. Both the sisters are under contract to us at FutureGames Inc. and we cannot allow any public fraternisation. I'm sorry. I don't make the rules, but I do have to enforce them.'

'This is very disappointing. I took you for a man of character and strength, Mr Babyloncity.'

Barnaby shrugged and repeated, 'I don't make the rules.'

Huutch leaned forward and Barnaby felt a moment of trepidation. 'Let me make my position clear here. Earlier today, Miss Wullen and I had an.....understanding. Based on that understanding, I made it clear to many of my influential colleagues that she would be accompanying me to the party this evening. As my SPECIAL and PERSONAL guest. I cannot now be seen to attend the party alone. Do you understand that, Mr Babyloncity?'

‘Please call me Barnaby. I understand, but these things happen. Women change their minds.....what can you do?’ Barnaby was angry. Did this weasel of a man think he had rights to the sisters? ‘May I ask which of the two sisters we are talking about here?’

‘The one called Wander. The beautiful one.’

‘Ahhh yes. Wander. The beautiful one. Yes indeed. Well, all I can say is..... I’m sorry if you were under the impression she was willing to become your....partner for the evening. But she doesn’t have that right to choose while she’s under contract to FutureGames Inc.’

It was Huutch’s turn to appear to be thinking. ‘I see. But surely you’re the one person who can...interpret your own rules and possibly bring about a change to the situation here?’

‘Well.....I don’t know that I can misinterpret the rules, exactly. Rules are rules.’

‘We are men of the world, Mr Babyloncity. Have you never had the desire for a pretty woman before?’

‘Oh yes. The same one as you, you slosh.’ The words were silent. ‘Of course, Mr Huutch.’

‘Call me Jonno.’

‘Of course, Jonno.’

‘Then you know how important these things are to the mistreated individual. I would, of course, be prepared to provide you with an incentive. I’m not without considerable financial and political influence. There are other spheres where my word is well taken. If you follow me?’

Barnaby followed him exactly and didn’t want to go there. He had to terminate this conversation as soon as possible. ‘I’m sorry, Mr Huutch. But I don’t think I can do anything to help you. I can only think you’ve misinterpreted Wander’s intentions and I know you’re man enough to accept that, in this case, you have lost in love.’

Jonno stood slowly, his face darkening and his eyes narrowing. ‘I do not lose at ANYTHING.’

‘Then perhaps when our journey is over, and the contract expires, you can renew your acquaintance with Miss Wullen and you won’t have lost at all?’

‘Mr Babyloncity. I’m offering you a considerable cash reward to ensure Wander escorts me to the party this evening. If you refuse to take this

generous offer, I'll ensure that your journey becomes most unpleasant to the point you'll wish it was over.'

Barnaby moved towards the man and looked him straight in the eye. 'Is that a threat, Mr Huutch?'

'Yes.'

'Oh!'

Winnie was looking forward to the party held in their honour. Wander wasn't so sure. The two women began to prepare themselves for the event and couldn't decide what to almost wear. They agreed on the minimalist outfit they thought they could get away with, and both settled on black as the main colour. Winnie chose a discreet animal pattern. Wander, a fine spot effect that was almost invisible unless the viewer was very close up.

For a hairstyle, they experimented and finally decided on an exaggerated version of their normal day hair. Both girls had a profusion of strands that blossomed out into a ball of dynamic tendrils, which moved on their own and waved to their audience. They would not go unnoticed that night.

Wander sat by the window and looked out over the mountains into the night. At the peak of each mountain, a light shone, a beacon shining upwards. The sky was striped with many of these lights, each a subtle colour, different from the next. She sipped her Zacaron beer, not fully appreciating the subtlety of taste. She squeezed the empty container, and it disappeared in a puff of air.

Winnie sat beside her, watching her sister's facial expressions. 'What's the matter?' Winnie asked softly.

'Nothing.'

'Something is. I know you. Squeal, girl.'

Wander stood to get another beer. 'Nothing. I'm fine.'

Winnie watched and pondered. Wander moved to the wall and reached into an alcove for the beer. She pushed the top of the container down and the beer brewed inside with a slight hissing sound. Wander put the tube to her lips and drank it down in one go.

'It's just that....I think the hotel manager may become a problem.'

'Really? You don't think prepping the man's brains out up against the window, two minutes after meeting him, has given him the wrong impression of you, do you!'

‘Don’t start that again!’

‘Start! I haven’t finished from the last time. When are you going to learn to keep your panties on, Wan? At least a visual representation of panties.’

‘Don’t you go on at me. I remember you with those four men when we went to Jooil. Don’t criticise me when you’re just as bad.’

Winnie held her tongue and took a breath. She said quietly. ‘We’re not talking about *me* here. We’re in a different place to Jooil. We’re talking about YOU. You’re always getting into trouble. Can’t you just think of someone else for a change!’ Winnie turned and ran out of the room, leaving Wander speechless.

The door hissed shut and Wander managed a quiet, ‘You ARE just as bad.’

Mellianna picked her best party outfit and tried it on. She smiled at the effect, she looked terrific. The dress clung to her body and flowed around her as she moved. The semi-static enhanced material continued to flow as she stopped moving. As the material swayed, it subtly changed colour. Mellianna checked the time and moved towards the door. She hoped Barnaby was ready, the party was due to start in an hour.

Mellianna pressed the door chime and waited. After a long time, Barnaby opened the door cautiously and waved her inside quickly.

‘What’s the matter?’ she asked, anxiously.

‘I’m not going to the party tonight. Can you take care of everything for me?’

‘What! What’s the matter?’

Barnaby moved away and sat on the recliner. ‘I’m not very well.’

‘You look well enough. A little pale that’s all. What’s the matter with you?’

‘I.....don't feel up to it tonight. Please let me stay here. You can manage? Everything’s arranged, and it should be no problem. The hotel’s hosting the party, all you have to do is keep an eye on the girls. Oh, and watch out for that sloshy manager, Huutch. As a favour. Please?’

Mellianna stared hard at him and smiled. ‘Okay. But you owe me.’ There was a look of great relief on his face and the colour began to come back. She sat beside him and said, ‘Now tell me the real reason.’

The main function room of the hotel was allocated for the special celebration party. Months of detailed planning had gone into the event, the nobility and celebrities of Zacaron and its solar systems would be attending. There were three live music ensembles, each playing an ethnic representation of their planet's music. That necessitated three special stages and sound systems. For the troupe from Kloople Minor, a new sound system had to be invented that could interpret the high-pitched notes that Human Derivatives couldn't hear. Jonno didn't want musicians performing on stage if nobody could hear a note.

Jonno stood on one of the stages and looked down the length of the room. It was very impressive. The theme of the night was the Universe, and the ceiling was covered in stars. They twinkled and glowed and some even moved across the room, from one side to the other. The walls were representing the various nebulas and star systems that had captured the imagination of sentient beings for centuries. The swirls and diaphanous images pulsed out from the walls as if they could be touched. But it was all a visual illusion.

Each table represented a planet and was decorated in that planet's colours. Even the surface was contoured as the relevant planet. Some even had moving seas, washing up against the dinner plates. The micro-climates hanging over each table would produce rain, sunshine, or other climatic conditions, to surprise and entertain the diners. Jonno smiled as he remembered the lightning being tested. Three tables had disintegrated until the engineers had turned down the power to a manageable level.

Jonno looked again at the guest list and felt anger building up when he saw the name Wullen. His grimace turned to a smile as he knew he would have his own particular style of retribution on Babyloncity and the two esteemed prize-winners. He wouldn't be beaten in this game. Nor would he lose face. Wander would be his guest for the evening. With, or without her permission. He walked to the main table and checked the settings.

The two honoured guests were seated facing the rest of the room. He would be sitting next to Wander. There were places set for Babylon and his assistant, but these had now been removed. There were two Kings and their Queens also seated at this table. And the Principle ruler of Zacaron was placed directly opposite the twins from Poortantween.

Their table was themed as Poortantween and he hoped the sisters appreciated the thought. The food served at this table being representative of their planet but sanitised for the palate of the other interplanetary folk. It had been a laborious exercise to decide on menus for all the invited guests. With over a thousand guests expected, there were over nine-hundred different meals being prepared in the sixteen kitchens of the hotel.

Admittedly, most of it being cooked by automated machines. But there was always someone on hand to check each dish before it reached the diner. The drinks for the evening were almost as complex as the menu. Over seven-hundred different drinks had been ordered and distributed to the tables.

The overall ambience of the room was subdued. Some people invited had an extra light sensitivity and had to wear special lenses to cover their eyes. For others, the room could be too dark. You couldn't please every sentient being, so why try? It looked good to him, and he was throwing the party.

He moved to the next table. This was special. Here were seated the important people that sponsored him. They owned part of the hotel and part of him. They'd made him rich and famous, now his turn to return some favours. These were the people he needed to impress the most. These were the people to whom he'd boasted his conquest over one of the Wullen twins. He'd actually told them he had conquered both the twins. Tonight he had to be seen to be on intimate terms with the women, or his reputation was in danger, maybe his life as well. You didn't mess around with these people. Their table represented a nice peaceful planet, with no extreme weather conditions. He saw the irony in that, but he didn't want them upset by clever trickery. They'd not appreciate that.

He took a last look around the room and knew it was ready. Now he needed to check on his staff.

The party had been going for two hours and the food had been an overall success. Three senior chefs were celebrating their triumph in one of the kitchens and would soon celebrate themselves to bed. The first musical set had gone down very well - if you liked classical Sullonian music. Huutch looked around the room with a professional eye.

The special table was engrossed in conversation, a bottle being passed around as they spoke. They ignored the rest of the party and carried on discussing their own business. Jonno smiled, at least they were happy. His own table was busy talking. He scowled at Mellianna who had borrowed an extra chair and had seated herself next to her precious charges. He scowled again at Wander, who'd managed to ignore him all evening. Every few minutes he would go over to her all smiles and try to start a conversation. It was all pretence; she was not interested, but he had to maintain an image of intimacy. It was getting increasingly difficult.

He looked up as the next group of musicians were tuning up their instruments. With a sudden despair, he realised they were actually playing a tune. This was the set where people were going to be encouraged to take to

the dance floor and do their wildest thing. He was going to have to get Wander to dance with him.

The table erupted in steam as the winter subterranean streams met the desert floor on the planet Poortantween. The guests sat back and laughed at the display. For a few minutes, the table was surrounded in fog and a light mist. Jonno moved quickly to Wander and gripped her wrist.

‘Just do me this one favour and I’ll leave you alone. It’s vital for my business that I’m seen to be friendly with my honoured guest. Just one dance that’s all I ask. One dance like you mean it. Please?’

‘And you’ll leave me and Winnie alone?’ He nodded. ‘You promise?’ Another nod. ‘Okay, but nothing tricky.’

From a hidden balcony near the roof, Barnaby looked down on the party through the mists of some spiral galaxy formation. He watched as the mist cleared from the Poortantween table and with a tinge of fear saw that Wander had disappeared. Barnaby searched the rest of the room and another tinge of fear as he saw Huutch holding her on the dance floor. He looked back to the table and realised that Mellianna hadn’t noticed yet. He’d told her to be particularly vigilant with Huutch and told her all about the threat. Mellianna was now equally concerned, and both had decided they may need to cut their time short on Zacaron.

Barnaby touched his wrist bracelet and saw Mellianna touch hers. ‘It’s me. Wander’s on the floor with Huutch. Watch out for trouble.’

‘They both look like they’re enjoying themselves. No need to panic.’ Mellianna said quietly.

‘I don’t trust him. Get Winnie ready to leave at a moment’s notice.’

‘What!’

He pressed the bracelet into silence and moved away from the balcony.

Wander felt the strength of the hold around her waist as they moved to the uncertain rhythm of the band. There was an intenseness in Jonno’s eyes that disturbed her.

‘Why are you pressuring us like this, Mr Huutch? You know we’re only here for a few days. A few days of skiing, media coverage and then we’re gone. What d’you want from us?’

His sneer was supposed to be a smile. He pivoted on one foot and controlled her glide across the floor. ‘You.’ There was a blank expression on her face. He smiled at the crowd and directed their movements toward his special guest’s table. ‘I want you.’

‘Don’t I have a say in this?’

‘Not tonight you don’t. You’ve put me in a very difficult position. And you owe it to me to make it right.’

‘Really?’

A strange look came into her eyes. She seemed to be half asleep or daydreaming. Huutch thought it charming and cute. He moved forward to kiss her lips as she was distracted. The pain was intense. It started in his groin and spread rapidly to his stomach and then his chest. As he sank to his knees, he thought he was seeing double. The two sisters were braced above him. He was not in a position to retaliate. As he sank further to the floor in a foetal position, the girls moved back to their table. From his position on the ground, Jonno could just make out six faces watching him in disgust. His special guests were not impressed with his performance so far.

Mellianna kept close to her charges, and they appreciated she was trying to protect them. They moved with grace through the assembled society, charming the men and creating envy in most of the women. But they were on their best behaviour now. As far as Mellianna could tell, they never put a foot wrong. Apart from the incident on the dance floor that resulted in the hotel manager being carried off, there were no incidences worth mentioning to Barnaby.

Wander had been drinking steadily throughout the evening and both Mellianna and Winnie were keeping an eye on her. The girls had agreed to a definitive time to end the evening. As the hour approached Mellianna quietly mentioned that the girls should begin saying their thank yous and goodbyes. As they worked the room, people were watching intently.

From on high, Barnaby watched every movement, every shake of the hand, and every kiss on the cheek. From a private room high in the hotel, Jonno watched his screen and followed the twins with his remote cameras and adjusted his ice pack every now and again. The anger was building up in him and he knew he could not let this rest. He touched his caller and spoke to a man who had helped him in the past, solving difficult problems he’d needed to distance himself from.

A local King was standing to one side, partly hidden by an ornate representation of a star cluster. He was alone and storing up the memory of these beautiful creatures for a fantasy to be enjoyed later. Two women watched from a nearby table, each in their own world of imagination. Wishing they could meet the twins and spend some quiet time alone with them.

As the girls waved their last farewells, the whole room seemed to be watching. Barnaby eased away from the balcony and went to meet them in their suite.

Huutch finished his call to The Mourning Man, and he sat back and felt a little more relaxed about the evening. Despite his personal embarrassment, it'd gone rather well. He watched the party breaking up and felt a pang of satisfaction. He touched his panel and found the cameras covering the elevators and corridors and waited until the Wullen sisters and their entourage reached their suites.

'Enjoy your evening, ladies. Tomorrow is going to be a different day altogether.'

Barnaby watched as the three women walked towards their doors. He smiled at them and waved.

Wander grinned and said, 'What happened to you then? You missed a great party.'

Barnaby shrugged and said, 'I feel better now than I did. I'm glad you enjoyed it.' He looked at Winnie who smiled. He felt that familiar tingle run down his body.

'It was very good. You should've been there,' she said.

'Perhaps next time. Thanks for looking after them, Mel.'

Mel smiled and had trouble focusing on his face. 'It's been a long night. I must go to bed. See you in the morning. Night.' She weaved an unsteady way to her door and fumbled with the opening panel. It eventually recognised her DNA, and she almost fell into the room.

'Will she be all right?' Winnie said.

'I think so,' answered Barnaby. 'Can I come in for a moment?' They looked at him and he could tell they were both thinking the same thing. 'I really need to tell you something. I won't be long. Please?'

Winnie opened the door and waved him in with a smile. 'Why not? You've missed the party, perhaps a nightcap?'

'That would be nice.'

He sat and sipped his drink, wincing at the sharpness of the spirit and watched as both girls drank water. He told them of his conversation with Huutch and waited for their reaction. It was quick in coming.

'Why didn't you tell us this earlier?'

'We could've avoided that slimy slosh!'

‘I’m sorry. I’m only telling you now so that you’re aware that he might be a problem. We’ve got a busy day tomorrow and we’ll be away from the hotel all day. Can I make a suggestion?’ They both nodded in unison. ‘We don’t come back here afterwards.’ He waited for a response.

‘We’re supposed to be here for three days, aren’t we?’ He nodded. Winnie continued, ‘Won’t we miss something?’

Barnaby shrugged. ‘Tomorrow we’ll do the rest of the skiing things. The third day was more sightseeing. More mountains. Some special night lights in the sky. That sort of stuff.’

Winnie was thoughtful, ‘By not coming back here, we avoid him making himself, even more, of a clown. Right?’

Barnaby nodded. ‘I would hope so, yes.’

The girls looked at each other and came to a silent agreement. Wander said, ‘Okay. Make the arrangements.’

Clouds were coming in from the South. The usual pink sky was changing to a darker, russet colour. All the clouds were tinged with a combination of the rising sun and reflected light from the purple mountains. The whole scene took on a bizarre colour effect, like a painting with a child choosing the colours.

Their aircar lifted off as dawn was breaking and both the girls were instantly asleep in their seats. Barnaby was wide awake, dreading running into Jonno Huutch. He felt a sense of relief as they left the hotel and hadn’t seen the irate manager. They would not return there, and Barnaby felt a great weight lifted from him. He looked out to the rising sun, and peace washed over him. He smiled and looked at Mellianna who was watching the same splash of nature’s wonder.

‘Romantic, isn’t it?’ she said.

He looked at the peaks tinged with the new dawn and said, ‘It certainly is.’

The car banked into a crevasse and swept up the other side. The motion stirred something within Wander and her eyes flicked open. ‘I’m going to be sick.’

The bots rushed to correct the situation and within moments she felt calmer. Barnaby watched her colour return to normal and muttered, ‘Very romantic!’

The vehicle topped the rise and below them were the frozen clouds. A slight tint of pink rippled through them and they looked too fluffy to ski on. The passengers looked out in trepidation as the car slowly settled on top of a particularly large uprising of a cloud. The car became stable, and the motors silenced.

There was not a sound until the pilot turned to his charges and said, 'Ready, everyone?'

Part of the rear of the aircar converted into a broad ski platform. The additional clothing supplied included a small nasal-fitted oxygen supply, and the skis were small and broad.

The pilot was also the instructor, and he showed the small troupe the basics of cloud skiing. 'Imagine it's all ice. Lumpy and irregular, but ice. Your skies will "melt" their way through it, so you'll have a smooth ride. They have the standard buoyancy and stability that will not let you fall. Move with confidence, leaning back to stop, forwards to goforward.' He demonstrated on the nearest cloud formation.

Mellianna looked uncertainly at Barnaby who grinned back at her. 'It's what we're here for.' He pushed forward and slid through the solid looking clouds. Winnie with a yell followed him. Mellianna and Wander were close behind. The instructor shook his head and slid into motion, trying to get ahead of them to guide the way.

They glided through the fluffy formations and began to feel the exhilaration and the uniqueness of their activity. Winnie leaned left and right, slaloming her way past Barnaby and chasing the instructor. Wander was more cautious and remained beside Mellianna for confidence. The instructor looked behind him, constantly checking they were all right. After a tiring hour of cloud skiing, the instructor glided to a standstill and waited for his pupils to catch up.

'Just ahead the clouds thin out to nothing. Air. Nothing solid to ski on.' Wander glanced nervously at Winnie, who grinned back. 'So we descend through the air for a very short distance until we hit.....ice. This is very solid and a lot faster. We'll go very quickly. Try to stick close to me and trust your skis, they'll not let you down. All right?' There was silence. 'Don't worry. You'll enjoy. Come.' He pushed off, leaning far forward and his pupils slowly followed him.

The clouds petered out gradually and before they realised it, they were skiing on thin air. The shock to Mellianna made her wobble on the ski. An arm reached out to steady her, and she looked up with gratitude into the wide eyes of Wander.

They dropped slowly towards the yellow ground below and within moments they touched gently onto solid ice. Their speed increased and

Mellianna let herself lean backwards. The grip on her hand tightened, and she felt herself accelerating forward. Wander was grinning and shouted out in glee. This seemed to trigger something inside Mellianna. This was an adventure that was what this trip was all about. You don't travel halfway across the Universe and not enjoy what it has to offer. She leant forward and whooped along with Wander.

The ice was smooth and silky, the skis slipping over its surface and they followed a gentle valley as they descended to the planet's sea level. The instructor kept his eye on his team and was delighted to see them respond to the new surface and he smiled back at them in encouragement. He leant forward and pushed them a little harder.

The valley flattened out and ahead was a blue horizon. The instructor slowed, allowing them to catch him. He continued at a slow speed as they all aligned with him. 'Ahead. You can see, water. Same thing as ice, don't worry, the ski will make the forward movement, not gravity. Enjoy. We're off.....' He crouched forward and his momentum rapidly increased. As he touched the water he began to bounce, like a skimming stone.

Several of his pupils were more cautious, but Winnie and Barnaby hit the water at a fast pace. The first few bounces nearly spilling them off the board. But the ski corrected the weight imbalance, and they soon found it easy to stand upright, despite the bouncing motion.

The water was flat and blue, the waves created by their passage disappeared into the rear horizon. They created a spray as they sang along and soon a game developed, who could most wet the person behind them. They weaved their way across the lake as the instructor kept well ahead of them. He had many years' experience of getting wet by his boisterous pupils. He slowed down as he made contact with the aircar. From a great distance away it lifted off on remote and began its journey to rendezvous with them on the far side of the lake.

The horizon darkened as the first sight of land broke the open sky. The instructor checked behind him once more and increased his speed. They could all make it to the end of their experience run safely on their own. He enjoyed this part of his job. The freedom to ski as he wished. He pushed the board to its maximum speed and swished from side to side. The edge cut into the water, sending spray high into the air. After all these years, he still felt a thrill from this sport.

The edge of the lake was on him all too soon and the aircar waited for his attention. He sped onto the bank and skidded to a halt, a rabbit's tooth away from the nose of the car. He grinned in satisfaction, pleased his skills were still sharp. He commanded the skis to release him and began to prepare the car for the next part of the journey.

Out on the lake, all four of his pupils were swaying across each other's path and having the best time. Above the sky was clear and bright. This was certainly a wonderful planet for having fun.

The aptly named "Death Descent" looked awesome from the base camp. From its starting point, high in the Huuin Mountains, it looked terrifying. A narrow gorge wound its way down the mountain, running through heavy woods and small streams. The participants stood on a narrow ski and reached dizzying speeds. Hugo Rock commanded his jacket to keep him warmer as he looked down the first scary channel. He wouldn't be trying that today. Or any day.

He sat on the terrace and sipped at his beer. It was very pleasant out here, he must do this more often. He'd watched two small parties arrive and disappear down the channel. He smiled at the word he'd used, "disappear". This was a perfect place to make people 'disappear'. He could imagine the state of the body by the time it reached the bottom – unrecognisable. But that was not his job here today. Jonno's instructions had been perfectly clear. No one to be harmed in any way.

Far below, another figure sat waiting for tourists. Flint sat on a hotel balcony and looked up the frightening tube of ice that served as the final of the Death Descent. She'd plenty of time, so she stretched back in the chair, and it adjusted to her shape. Flint closed her eyes. Rocky would notify her when they were due. He would do the business at the top. She was only a second line, anyway. Only if he failed, would she be needed. She felt herself slipping into a light sleep.

Hugo finished his beer and contemplated another. No, he decided, professionals kept a clear head. But he would like to come back here with the wife sometime. The view was truly beautiful. The purple of the distant mountains blended with the yellow and pink of the landscape and sky. It was so....idyllic.

He checked the time and looked to the sky. They were late. Their schedule had them here an hour ago. He was beginning to get anxious. He touched his wrist and spoke quietly. 'Flint?'

Flint Moses awoke from her sleep and replied, 'Rocky? What's happening?'

'Nothing. They're late.'

'Too busy enjoying their water skiing.'

'Possibly. I'll give them a while longer, then we'd better check where they are. See you later.'

‘Sure.’

She stood, stretched and looked over the balcony. The ground was a long way down. She looked back to the exit tube of the run and waited for someone to come through it. It wouldn't be her targets, Hugo would see to that.

The ski instructor had been puzzled by the last-minute change of direction from his pupils, but they were paying him and so he did what they requested. It did seem an indecent haste to leave the planet, but they were strange these off-worlders. He would miss the two girls, they were really stunning. Still, he had the afternoon to himself. Perhaps the Death Descent then?

The aircar touched down on the landing platform and the “suddenly on-leave instructor” prepared his equipment as he stood by the open door. Ready to face the most difficult run on the planet, he leaned forward on his ski. A sudden pain behind his ear made him slump to his knees. His limp body tried to topple sideways, and the ski fought to keep him upright. The intelligence of the ski demanded an answer to this peculiar problem, so it stopped and rested on the snow-covered ground. The instructor slowly collapsed onto the cold hard surface.

Hugo stood over the instructor and made sure he was unconscious. He then searched the aircar. There were no passengers. Where were they?

The instructor's vision was fogged. He shook his head and felt a pounding in his ears. It took him a moment to realise he was upside down. As his vision cleared he saw the Death Descent and realised he was hanging above the first chute entrance. The drop below him looked lethal. He panicked and tried to wriggle free. His ankles were tied together and were very painful. He spun as he tried to reach upward to untie himself. He could not bend enough to reach his feet and realised his hands were tied to the ground. He spun as his antics increased. He stopped as he saw somebody appear beside him.

The man was upside down and looked evil. A chill went through the skier's body. The man was thin featured and stood very tall, as far as he could tell, being upside down. His attacker's hair was tall and spiky, each point formed into a curved end. The eyes were almost black and lacked any emotion, the teeth, as he smiled, were perfect and white. The smile was humourless, and the voice was low and husky.

‘Where are they?’

The instructor shook his head and said, ‘Who? Where?’

The face pressed close to his and spoke slightly louder this time, 'Where are they? Have you lost them?'

'I don't know....who are you? Let me down.'

'Where are the two women?' The voice was almost inaudible and sent another chill deep into the skier's bones.

'They've gone. I took them to the spaceport. They've left. I don't know where. But they've gone. Let me down!'

Hugo seemed to consider the answer and nodded. 'Okay, so you dropped them off at the Spaceport....where did they go?'

'I don't know. Cut me down!'

'WHERE DID THEY GO?'

'I DON'T KNOW. They didn't even give me a tip!'

With a casual movement, The Mourning Man cut the wire holding the instructor vertical. The body hit the ground, breaking his neck. The corpse then slid down the chute. Rock called Flint to say she would have a visitor in a few moments and to ignore him.

The rented ship took off with a long and violent shudder. Wander clenched her teeth and tried to think of better things, better times. The others found the energy and desire to look out of the window at the receding planet. The multi-coloured ball became smaller as they watched, soon left far behind them. Gravity adjusted in the ship as they reached their journey speed. The passengers began to move around the ship.

Barnaby stayed in his suite and breathed a huge mental sigh of relief. They'd managed to get off-world without Huutch finding out, he'd dreaded a further confrontation with the maniac. He could look forward to their new planet and new adventures. As for Zacaron, it was in the past already. Next stop – Velba, the water world. He was looking forward to it, but for one small problem. He couldn't swim.

Winnie was disappointed to miss the last trip of their stay on Zacaron. She wanted to do the Death Descent. It sounded fun. Wander wasn't bothered whether they stayed or left. While Mellianna had stated flatly the Death run was not for her. They'd several weeks before their next planet-fall and they were soon settled into a shipboard routine.

Barnaby decided it was time he renewed his acquaintance with the Wullen twins and made an appointment to see them both. They welcomed him into their suite, gave him a drink and sat, waiting for him to speak. He

stuttered through the plans for the next part of the tour and made sure they were satisfied with the arrangements. They seemed very interested.

‘Underwater? It’s underwater?’ Winnie seemed surprised.

Barnaby nodded and said, ‘Yes. Not too deep, but everything is accessible from there. On that subject, I wanted to make sure you were happy with your....accommodation?’

Winnie smiled, and his heart missed a beat, then another, then.....
‘Of course we are. Thank you.’

He pulled himself together and said, ‘Are you sure you wouldn’t prefer....different company? I mean, you’re sisters, perhaps a change of company for a while?’

The twins looked at each other, knowing his direction, but not giving him the satisfaction. Wander said, ‘That’s a good idea. Winnie’s so messy. I could do with sharing with someone else.’

Barnaby’s eyes lit up. ‘Great. How about, from tomorrow evening? I’ll make some arrangements.’

Wander said, ‘You do that.’ He rose quickly and headed for the door.

Winnie smiled at her sister as she said, ‘Have you asked Mellianna is she wants to share with us? I would’ve thought she wanted a suite of her own!’

Barnaby couldn’t look back. They were mocking him. Wander said, ‘Of course, she may prefer you to share with her. What do you say?’

He closed the door quietly and hurried back to his room. The girls were laughing at his expense but soon stopped. Winnie held Wander’s stare and waited for her sister to speak. She remained silent.

Winnie said, ‘You didn’t want him in with us, did you?’

‘No! Of course not. I promised you, I’m behaving. No men for of the rest of the trip.’

‘Don’t make promises you can’t keep!’

Finding the itinerary of the contest winners was easy. It was well publicised, and many companies advertised on the back of it, using their names as sponsors and paymasters. But Huutch wanted exact timings and venues for the whole trip. That necessitated someone to make a personal visit to the head office of FutureGames Inc. on Earth.

A sombre man dressed in ordinary, if drab, clothing waited patiently at the desk while his request was processed. After an hour he was invited to take a seat or return later. The seat was uncomfortable.

After a further two hours, the seat became unbearable, and the man re-visited the desk to chase, once again, his request. This time, the junior receptionist apologised and handed him a fully detailed itinerary and smiled sweetly at him. The man thanked her and left the building. She watched him leave and returned to the inner office where her boss waited patiently for her to sit down.

‘Did he ask any questions?’ A shake of the head. ‘Did he seem satisfied with the list?’ A nod. ‘Did he check the list?’ A shake. ‘Good!’

The head office of FutureGames Inc. was on the thirtieth floor - and the three floors above it. It over-looked the swollen rivers of Manhattan and beyond. Royale O'Really looked out on the familiar view and saw nothing. His mind was elsewhere, and his body was waiting for it to return. The dark night was littered with sparkling lights from the buildings and moving vehicles over the city. Old York was as attractive as ever even though most of the businesses had moved elsewhere.

A faint humming sound slowly brought him back to reality as he said, ‘Yes?’

The wall lit up and showed the face of one of his lawyers. It was not smiling, which meant it was earning money and he was paying.

‘We have a problem.’ The face was round and fleshy, emotionless and humourless. A lot of lesses, Royale thought.

‘What now?’

‘This Round the Universe competition of yours.....how did you advertise it?’

‘As a Round the Universe competition, of course.’

‘As I understand it, you said it was a result from a vote for the top ten destinations in the Universe. Winners to go to the ten most popular places to visit. Am I right?’

‘Yes. What’s the problem?’

‘The original contract says five.’

‘Five!’

‘No more, no less. How many planets are your winners’ visiting?’

‘It was supposed to be ten!’

‘Then you’d better tell them the bad news. We can’t afford ten, we can only just afford five!’

‘What about the media? They’ll get to hear about this. It’ll make us look....cheap. Worst, they may think we’ve short-changed them! We advertised ten, we must give them ten.’

‘We don’t have the money for ten!’

‘Can’t we.....bring back the support team. That’ll halve the costs?’

‘Too late. We’ve paid for the five planets, for the contestants and our representatives. We just can’t pay for them to visit the other five. Besides, we can’t leave two young ladies alone in the Universe without a chaperone, or guards. How will THAT look?’

‘Sponsorship? What about the sponsors, they’ll chip in more money.....!’

‘We’ve bled them dry to pay for this.’ Somehow Royale could believe that of his lawyers. ‘It’s extremely expensive to cover this sort of trip you know. A year’s rental of the spaceship....that’s not cheap.....’

‘Why didn’t we find this out earlier. What went wrong?’

‘I don’t know.’ The sombre chin wobbled. ‘We’re looking into it. All I know is someone asked for an itinerary of the Wullen twin’s journey and that’s when someone discovered it was only five instead of ten.’

‘Five!’ Royale muttered incredulously. ‘Prak!’

PART 3 - VELBA - THE WATER WORLD

The time passed slowly, each minute an hour – each hour a day. They all needed some sort of distraction, but they didn't have any. The Wullen ladies began to get on each other's nerves, while Barnaby stayed in his cabin. Mellianna tried to develop a relationship with Barnaby, albeit a professional one. But he was aloof and distant for most of the journey. With a day to go, they all met to finalise the arrangements.

In a fractious and disquieting experience, they all became aware just how stressed they were. The high point was when Wander hit Barnaby. She said afterwards; she didn't mean to do it. He apologised for getting his nose in the way of her fist and she tried to kiss it better. Had they been alone, it might have worked. Barnaby quickly retired to his room and nursed his damaged nose and ego. He was not seen until planet-fall, some hours later.

In her defence, Wander was upset at her actions. 'Sorry.' Was said many times. Winnie retreated to her own suite and remained there until planet-fall, some hours later.

Mellianna was left alone, not by choice, or design. She couldn't get Barnaby to open his door, nor either of the sisters to talk to her. She shut herself in her suite and wasn't seen until planet-fall, sometime later.

The ship orbited the blue planet just the once. Its low orbit quickly declined, and the ship entered the controlled spiral that allowed its eventual landing, just outside the planet's capital Drooper. The passengers had no time to look at the orb from space and see any personal cosmic beauty. Wander braced herself for the stomach-churning experience of landing but was pleasantly surprised when the ship settled without any aerial dramatics.

As they walked down the gangplank, their first sight of Drooper was a surprise. Everywhere was water. They were on a large flat island that contained a Spaceport and nothing else. Barnaby stopped and looked at Mellianna. She shrugged and eased past him, heading for the small building ahead of her.

The opening led to a small foyer and a line of waiting footmen. The domed ceiling was a bright blue and looked like it had an unlimited depth. It was a very effective illusion, which Mellianna stood and admired. Barnaby joined her and looked upwards.

'Very romantic,' he said.

'Yes, it is,' she said softly, but Barnaby had moved on.

Winnie moved behind her and looked up too. 'Pretty,' she said, moving on towards the two footmen standing either side of an ornate opening.

Both footmen's mouths dropped open as they saw the vision walking towards them. Winnie couldn't help it, but her hips began to roll a little more than normal and there was a definite sway to her gait. She smiled and could almost see the drool coming out of their mouths. Their fascination was compounded seconds later as a second vision walked past them. They could not hide their amazement and stood looking into the room while the two women waited for them to do something. Both moved forward together and stood pressed against the walls. Neither moved until Mellianna entered and looked around her.

'What's this?'

'An elevator. I think,' said Barnaby

Mellianna looked at the two footmen and nudged one on the arm. 'Are we going up, or down?'

Automatically his arm moved and pressed a button. The doors closed silently, and the floor began to move. Wander involuntarily put her hand over her stomach. She closed her eyes for a moment, opened them again and her eyes opened wide in wonder. The walls of the lift were glass, except for the door area. All around her was the sea. Aquatic life of all shapes and sizes moved gracefully through the clear water. As they descended, the water darkened slightly and the lights in the lift went out.

Winnie instantly kept an eye on the footmen, who were still standing with vacant expressions on their faces. Nothing was going to move them for hours. She looked past them to the sea life all around them. Huge marine life forms glided up and away from them, occasionally stopping to peer through the glass into the cage. Disinterested, they moved on looking for food, or some other basic instinctive activity.

Wander's face was pressed against the window, her triple breasts flattened as she stared into the deep. This seemed to send the footmen into a deeper trance and this time drool *was* dripping off their chins. She was entranced by the beauty of the natural environment and her eyes tried to see everything at once.

As the lift slid to a gentle stop Wander said, 'Again. Can we go back up?'

The doors opened automatically. Before them was a bank of media equipment and behind that a row of the hotel staff, waiting to welcome them.

A tall elegant female stepped forward and pushed the cameras out of the way. She bowed slightly, and her headdress waved like sea urchins as she said, 'Welcome to the Hotel Droopersea. My name is Fromella and I'm at your service. Please, follow me.' With a graceful twirl, her robe billowed out and settled seductively back into place as she walked away from them.

The lower foyer was stunning. It was octagonal, and each side was made from an invisible material that made the sea outside seem like it was inside the room. They were surrounded by marine life and Wander had to be dragged along to keep up with the party. Fromella led the way at a graceful, if rapid, pace. Her own entourage guided the visiting dignitaries and tried to keep the auto-cameras of the media from encroaching on their private space.

Winnie watched in amazement as Fromella walked straight through a wall and apparently into the sea. As she followed she realised, it was a tunnel that led from one part of the hotel to another. She looked behind and could see clearly into the foyer and was pleased to see all the media machines halted at the portal. It was a very clever trick, but the wall was only an illusion. The tunnel seemed real. It was completely transparent, and they appeared to be walking through the water, with no visible separation. This was completely disorientating for the visitors. Mellianna found Barnaby's arm and clung on. He tapped her hand in reassurance but felt a little thrown by the experience.

The visitors wanted to move slowly through this alien environment, not hurry at Fromella's pace. Wander was still awestruck and moved as if in a dream. Winnie pulled on her arm and smiled at her sister's apparent absorption with the sea. She'd never seen her so interested in anything before. She pushed her to keep up with the procession.

At the end of the tunnel was another illusion doorway, and they found themselves in another octagonal room. Fromella pointed to the designations above each of the eight walls and said, 'Your suite is called "Marpin". Named after our famous fighting fish. This way please.'

Once again she walked through the wall and along another tunnel which ended in another room, this time smaller and hexagonal. Once again Fromella pointed to the names above each of the walls.

'Your rooms have been renamed for your stay with us. I trust you will find them comfortable and an experience you will never forget. Please call me if you wish for anything. Have a nice stay.'

Uncertain what to do, the troupe remained standing. Barnaby took the lead and walked through the water image into the room called "Babyloncify". It was circular and surrounded by water. An uninterrupted view of the sea encompassed the room. In the centre was a circular bed, which was slowly rotating. Blue silken covers and pillows were tastefully arranged into the shape of a fish. Comfortable looking chairs were spaced around the room and the low lighting allowed excellent views of the sea, stretching far into the distance. Fish bumped noses on the invisible glass and Barnaby smiled at the overall effect.

Winnie pushed Wander into her room, imaginatively called “Waynnetaaudrynellldorisellenrachael”. Both ladies stopped in amazement at the décor and the stunning view.

Winnie soon got over the shock and said, ‘Where’s the toilet?’

Wander was pressed against the wall, seeing far into the distance. Winnie looked around the perfectly circular room, which only offered a bed and some chairs. Where were the facilities? As she looked, she noticed a small faint sign high in the wall. It looked like it was floating in the water and seemed to move with the rhythm of the waves. It was tactfully written as “Restroom” and Winnie pushed her hand tentatively through the water and found no resistance. She followed the arm with her body and stood in another circular room which was once again surrounded by sea.

The most predominant piece of furniture in the room was the bath. It was shaped like a fish and was filling with water as Winnie entered the room. In fascination, she dipped her finger in the water and watched as the bath became invisible and the water adjusted to the temperature of her finger. Once inside this bath, the illusion of swimming in the sea would be complete. She smiled, but she’d a more urgent need and looked around for that piece of furniture she desired the most.

There was nothing obvious for Winnie to use. Her eyes focused on a large fish head that seemed to rise from the floor and was smiling. As she looked the mouth opened and hinged back to reveal a circular surface which settled into a horizontal position. Now more than desperate, Winnie took the chance that this was the function she sought and gently placed her bottom on the opening. It felt warm and soft and without further thought allowed the bodily function to begin.

Winnie’s face was a mask of relief as she waited for the pressure to ease and the desperation to diminish. With a sigh, she was about to stand and look for the next item, until she felt a draft in her nether regions. She realised that the hygienic necessity had been taken care of and she stood with a grin. The smile disappeared as she became aware she was surrounded by fish and who else! She’d just been to the toilet in a very public place.

Her surprise soon waned, and she understood that fish wouldn’t be interested in her toilet arrangements. No human, bug, or flabby alien would be in the sea looking in. Her instincts required her hands to be cleaned, so she looked around for anything that could do the job. As she turned, the fish’s mouth was closing, and a small fountain of blue water rose from the top of its head. Winnie pushed her hands into the water and felt it warm and soft to the touch. She rinsed her hands, and they were almost immediately dry. She liked this place.

Mellianna sat on her bed and watched the free show. Tears were in her eyes as she felt an emotional tour de force wash over her. She looked for a water drier and realised she had none with her. Something made her turn, and she saw a section of the bed change into a small table, rising slowly beside her. A pale blue rectangular piece of linen waited for her use and she picked up the weightless object and touched it to her eyes. They dried immediately, and she felt a cool balm seep into her skin. Her eyes felt better instantly. He returned the material to the table and watched it sink into the bed and disappear.

An almost transparent panel appeared in the water and her name glowed in one corner. The word “message” appeared and the name of Barnaby.

‘Yes?’ she said.

Barnaby’s face glowed into life and was smiling at her from the sea. ‘How d’you like your room?’

‘Wonderful. Absolutely wonderful. You?’

‘It’s amazing, isn’t it? Fancy a drink?’

She looked around and said, ‘If I could figure out where the bar was, I’d invite you over.’

‘I’ve found it. Come over when you’re ready. Suddenly everything we planned to do here, takes on a new meaning.’

The room was in virtual darkness. Small lights glowed on each table and the diners could just see each other’s faces. The water was a rich, dark blue, almost midnight and the fish could be seen only when close to the walls. Many of the creatures carried their own illuminations. Some of their bodies glowed with light and otherwise were almost transparent. Large, almost mammal looking, denizens swept past the window, glowing with the reflected light from the restaurant.

‘It’s a bugger if you don’t like fish,’ Barnaby said, reading the glowing menu on the wall.

‘It’s a good job fish can’t read,’ added Mellianna.

‘Looking at some of those creatures out there, I wouldn’t be surprised if some of them could.’

Mellianna laughed and sipped her water. With a frown, she looked at it and wondered whether fish had been in it and what they’d done in there. She dismissed it from her mind. The hotel had been first class so far.

‘Where’s Wander?’ asked Mellianna smiling at Winnie.

‘Wander wanted to eat in her room. I can’t get her out of it. She likes to be waited on.’ A thought struck. ‘By waiters.....’ Winnie left the table and hurried back to Wander’s room.

‘Just the two of us,’ commented Mellianna.

‘Are you going to say, it’s romantic?’

‘No. I was hoping *you* would.’ The statement hung in the air and Barnaby smiled.

‘It IS romantic. How could it not be? Are we all set for tomorrow? Everything arranged for our first experience jaunt?’

‘Of course. I’ve arranged everything. Done all the work,’ thought Mellianna, but just nodded. Her thoughts kept to herself.

A large fish reached the window and started to suck at it. Mellianna laughed and reached out to touch the gentle looking creature. To her surprise, her hand went through the invisible barrier and touched the soft surface of the fish. She recoiled with a gasp and Barnaby looked up quickly.

‘The wall’s not there,’ said Mellianna quietly.

‘Of course, it is. Otherwise, the water would.....’

Mellianna had pushed her hand through to the fish and was stroking it. It responded and tried to suck on her fingers. ‘I assume this is safe to do?’ she said with a smile. ‘I’ve never stroked a fish before.’

Barnaby had a faraway look in his eyes as he muttered, ‘This is some technology.’

Mellianna played with the fish until its short-term memory made it decide it had an important meeting with a coral reef somewhere. It wagged its tail in thanks and blew a kiss. With a wiggle, it receded into the murk. Barnaby watched it go and gently touched the surface with his finger. It passed through and he could feel the wetness of the water and the drop in temperature.

He smiled. ‘Where’s MY fish!’

Mellianna looked up as Wander and Winnie entered. Wander watched Barnaby wriggling his whole hand in the water and smiled.

‘How do you do that?’ She sat down, and Winnie sat next to her.

‘You stick your hand into the water. How hard can it be!’ answered Barnaby.

‘Are you all right, Wander?’ asked Mellianna seriously.

Wander nodded, ‘Fine, thanks. I was just....fascinated by the fish. What a wonder this hotel is.’

Mellianna nodded, ‘One of the wonders of the Universe. Voted number eight, actually.’

A waiter arrived and with a shaking hand placed a plate of food in front of Winnie. His eyes slid down her double cleavage and he nearly dropped the plate entirely.

Barnaby reached over and touched the fish on the plate with his finger. ‘There’s my fish. See, I can touch it too.’

The Wullen sisters couldn’t understand why Mellianna and Barnaby thought that remark was so funny.

The wine had gone to her head, Wander sat on the bed and wished it would stop spinning. It took her a while, but she realised the bed was moving and she could stop it if she wished. ‘Bed. Stop turning!’ she said softly. The bed slowed to a stop. ‘Thank you,’ Wander added unnecessarily.

Sinking back into its depths she waited until it had adjusted to her body. Her clothes receded, and she lay with her arms over her face, waiting for the hangover to recede. The bots worked at it and within moments she felt better. She slowly hauled herself up and sat in the darkness, looking out at the sea beyond her room.

There was a haunting quality to this view. It held her attention for every moment she could see it. This felt like a spiritual home for her and she knew she wouldn’t want to leave here. She lay back and watched the life move around her. Tiny creatures looked in on her and she smiled and waved at them. Large predatory animals cruised by, turned and came back for a look at her. They must be able to see in here, she thought. The sudden memory of Barnaby with his fingers in the water made her fearful. Could these large fish, with huge teeth, do the same? She sat upright at the thought. Suddenly she didn’t want to be alone.

Wander moved towards where she thought the door was and tried to walk through. A soft, but unmovable resistance told her she was in the wrong place. She looked for the signs above her head and found the one that simply said “Door”. Wander moved into the small ante-room and looked for the door with WendyIrenenormanancyirisedith above it. She pushed her hands forward as she entered and called out softly to her sister.

The two footmen standing in the corridor waiting, were stupefied. They had just seen the most beautiful woman they had ever seen in their lives,

walk through one wall and then through another. What was the most surprising thing, was she was absolutely naked. One of them fainted.

Winnie lay awake, listening to her sister gently breathing beside her. She put an arm around her and cuddled her close. She watched the floor show into the night. Equally besotted by the concept of living under the sea – more like living IN the sea. The room was in darkness and only shadows gave away the furniture in the room. She lay, watched and slowly her eyelids drooped, and she fell asleep.

Her dreams were full of swimming through clear water, she now being a mermaid and slicing through the sea and up towards the bright waving light of the surface. Winnie moved with grace and speed through the water, experiencing no resistance and no feeling of wetness, or chill. She dived again, breathing normally and shallowly. She dived towards the darker depths, deeper and deeper. Her eyes adjusting to the gloom as she dove deeper still. Blackness enveloped her and would only leave as she awoke the following morning.

Mellianna stood by her bedroom window waiting for another fish to stroke. After an hour she gave up and went to bed. They had several days here, and she would have the chance to do it again. She sighed and sank into the comfort of the moving mattress. The gentle sway sent her into sleep almost instantly. She dreamed too. Hers were of bright sunlit and green hills. It was an adventureless dream and not remembered in the morning.

Barnaby slept deeply. He'd enjoyed his meal, the conversation of his travelling companions and felt replete in every way, as he'd returned to his room. He'd worked out all the facilities and how to access them. Within a very short time he was lying on the bed and moments later he was asleep.

The morning weather was of no concern to anyone in the submarine hotel. Daylight filtered through the sea and it was lighter than at night. Other than that, the self-contained series of buildings made its own light, and the residents lived a pattern of their own choice.

The hotel tariff was never a matter of discussion. If you had to ask the price, you couldn't afford it. Despite the horrendous charges, the hotel was almost permanently booked. It was the rich, Galactic luxury-seekers that rented the rooms. Nobody dropped in because they were just passing by. The hotel was about the only recreational activity on the whole planet and it was staffed by people who were never born anywhere near that solar system. The planet boasted marine biology only, none of its indigenous inhabitants was intelligent enough to develop further than eating each other.

Conglomerates and large corporations invested in the hotel, expecting healthy returns for their money. The charges were purely geared to the profit

required. Their unspoken motto was, 'A unique experience, for a unique price.' Hotel staff were not all well paid, being chosen from a growing number of Human Derivatives that didn't have a home and would work anywhere. Having any job was a novelty for most of these people and the money was sent home to help the family. That made them a new form of a slave and their performance dictated their length of service.

The diving instructors were a special group who needed specialised training and people skills. They dealt with almost every form of carbon-based life-form and had to ensure the safety of all the sentient beings passing through their hands. With the arrival of high-profile guests, such as the Wullen sisters, the best of the best had to be pushed to the front, to take them on the swim of their lifetime. All the equipment was checked, rechecked and then someone else checked it again. Safety was paramount. If a disaster happened, the Hotel may never recover its reputation. Nothing must be allowed to go wrong.

The equipment chamber was small and circular, one of the few rooms that didn't have a sea view. All the walls were plain and coloured a light green. The alcoves ringed the centre pool and were there to allow the equipment fitting and testing. A team of six divers waited for the arrival of the prestigious guests, with eager anticipation.

A wide tunnel led into the Diving Room. The guests arrived, stopped and looked around them. The leading diver walked forward and introduced himself as Yool and welcomed them profusely.

Barnaby thanked him and said, 'What next?'

There followed an overly lengthy ritual of donning the special face-mask and testing it. They were all guided through the activities they were about to experience. Yool quietly and calmly told them what to expect and what to do in the rare event of any danger. As he spoke, the rest of the diving staff were ensuring the masks fitted and were working properly. It seemed the two sisters needed more staff each than the other two.

'Two things to remember. Don't Panic. And Don't Panic.' His pupils politely laughed at his professional joke. 'You'll be guided through the journey by our staff here. And I stress that there are NO dangerous fish out there. This is a confined area where we've eliminated the predators and the dangerous species. You'll be very, very safe. All you have to do is be aware of your breathing. Breathe normally. Sometimes, we have guests who forget to breathe. You see such beautiful sights, you stop breathing to watch. Remember to breathe.'

He tapped a small button by his chin. 'This is your emergency button in your mask. If you're in difficulty. Tap this, someone will help you very

quickly. You may talk, and we'll all hear what you say. Universal communication system. Very clever, very clear.'

Winnie grinned at Wander as she said, 'Exciting.'

Wander nodded and smiled back. They both looked at Barnaby who was looking very uncomfortable. Winnie moved to him. 'What's the matter?'

He said in a quiet voice, 'I can't swim.'

Yool said, 'That's not a problem. We have a buoyancy belt for you all. That thing you're wearing will keep you level until you want to go up or down. Anything else?'

Barnaby now felt stupid. He'd said out loud one of his worse fears and everyone heard it through the communication system. He began to blush until he felt Mellianna's comforting hand on his shoulder. She was smiling gently at him. She reached for his hand and squeezed. He responded and knew he'd a friend to look after him.

There was a silence that came from an eagerness to get into the water and see the sights. Only Barnaby hesitated. A gentle nudge from Winnie helped him move forward with the others. They approached one wall, a slightly lighter colour than the rest, Yool pushed through and disappeared. Seeing Barnaby's hesitation, Mellianna gripped his hand tighter and followed Yool. The water surrounded her. Yool was facing them, awaiting their reactions.

Mellianna felt the buoyancy and was not distracted. She'd been in space several times now and there was always a time when gravity changed from the norm. Often the ship's gravity would gradually increase or decrease, during the journey. By the time the passengers reached their destination, they'd be used to the planet's natural gravity. This gravity flux could either make you ill or allow you to have some fun. Mellianna decided this was fun. She smiled through the transparent mask at the instructor and nodded.

'You can speak, you know,' said Yool.

'Oh, yes. I'm fine. This is great!'

Barnaby still had his eyes closed and Mellianna nudged him. He opened them slowly and looked around him. He hung in the water, neither drowning nor swimming. Barnaby forced a smile.

'Okay?' asked Yool.

'Fine. Very good.'

Yool spoke slowly and clearly. 'Can the rest of you join us now, please?'

Winnie and Wander held hands and stepped through the solid looking wall into another world.

The water was pale blue, vibrant, yet very transparent. In the distance, rocky outcrops and corals were bright, colourful and clear. Yool smiled and kicked out away from the safety of the hotel platform and waggled his legs. The power pack on his back responded to his movements and increased the propulsion proportionately to the speed of his leg movements. He turned his head to see his pupils following him.

The guests swam in pairs, with Mellianna holding Barnaby's hand until he felt secure enough to be set adrift. The Wullen twins kept side by side and moved gracefully through the water. Yool slowed and stopped as he reached the first part of the reef. He hung suspended, a possum's tail above the sharp coral and waited until his team caught up with him.

'How's it feel so far?' He received the positive feedback and smiled. 'Right. From now on please be careful of this coral. It can be sharp and can cut you. Now we're going over the top and down into a large cavern. Follow me, please.'

Yool executed a graceful dive with a tuck and pike which warranted a 9.8. He disappeared over the rise of coral and his pupils quickly followed, some less elegantly in the execution of their movements to change direction. As they moved their legs, they slipped rapidly through the water, following their leader and diving into the unknown.

Wander stopped in the water as a large creature appeared in the distance. 'What the prak is that!'

'There's nothing down here that can harm you,' said Yool looking back. 'Just a Fleep. Stay quiet for a moment.' He flipped himself backwards and swam back towards Wander. The swimmers heard a high-pitched sound which seemed to come from the communication system. The large, fat-bellied Fleep changed direction and swam towards them. As it approached, they could see just how large it was. It was ten times bigger than any one of them. It had multiple flippers and hung in the water, letting Yool stroke it.

'Come on. He likes it.' Yool smiled at them and rubbed the creature with both hands.

All five of the alien creatures were soon fondling the natural resident of the deep and he was responding. Slowly turning in the water, to get every part of his skin scratched. The smiles on the faces of his charges always made Yool happy. It was rare to join creatures in their own element and be part of their world for a while. Alien cultures and physiques blending in friendship. It was time for the next part of the show.

A single low whistle sounded, and the creature responded by setting itself the right way up. All four eyes on top of its head and its broad tail now back to the horizontal position.

‘Find a flipper and hold on. We’re going for a ride,’ Yool said, demonstrating.

When the team were ready, another whistle started the creature moving. It dived rapidly, and they hung on. Mellianna needed both hands and Wander was almost thrown off until Winnie gripped her arm and helped her regain her hold on the smooth solid flesh of the sea creature. The Goliath continued the dive into the gathering gloom of the deep.

‘Don’t worry about water pressure, your buoyancy equipment is taking care of all the physical effects of this trip. You’re perfectly safe.’ The voice was calm and smooth as the descent continued.

The Fleep slowed to a stop and Yool released the unusual form of transport. ‘You can let go now, we’re here.’

‘How’re we getting back?’ asked a still nervous Barnaby.

‘We’ll get another taxi when we need one. This way.’ Yool glided into the gloom and his backpack began to glow like a beacon.

He dropped slowly until they reached the sandy bottom of the sea. All five stood on the seabed and waited. ‘Watch,’ said Yool, looking upwards.

In the darkened water there followed a display of lights never to be seen on dry land. Fish of every shape and description moved through the depths, to provide an almost choreographed performance, exceeding any firework display the watchers had ever seen before. Wander sank to her knees and watched breathlessly. Winnie watched her to make sure she was remembering to take a breath every now and again. She sat beside her, held hands and watched.

Barnaby watched in admiration and forgot all his fears of being in the water. He forgot completely he was in the water at all. He too gradually sank to the seabed and sat, facing upwards, as the creatures showed off their glowing tails and fins. Eyes as big as a camel’s head blinked and flashed at them. The fish dived and swooped amongst them, lighting the ocean floor in a disco-like radiance. With a crescendo of lights, worthy of any major firework display, the show ended leaving the audience breathless.

Barnaby said, ‘Now that WAS romantic.’

There was a long silence during which Yool looked at the faces of his team and felt the familiar thrill from others’ enjoyment. He waited until he saw the first signs of them realising where they were again and signalled for their lift to the surface. Yool bounced from the rocky surface and slowed to a

stop just above the sandy floor. He waited for the answering call and turned as he heard the moan in the distance.

Through the murk, a leviathan was approaching. The team heard it and felt it. Something big was heading for them. Each felt a thrill of fear and were only slightly reassured by Yool's smile.

'Wait until you see this beauty,' Yool said with a wide grin.

Barnaby almost screamed in terror as she saw his first sight of the Oiip. Its bulbous body was streaming through the water, trailing masses of bubbles in its wake, like a comet through a planet's atmosphere. It seemed to be headed directly for Barnaby. He tried to run, but the water's resistance made his movements slow and dreamlike. All his fears surfaced and crowded into his conscious thoughts. He was on the verge of panic.

Mellianna reached for him and squeezed his hand so tight it hurt him. The pain drew his attention away from the fear and he turned to see her smiling at him.

Yool saw the reaction of the two people and said quietly, 'This is a harmless mammal. You'll love her, she's soooo gentle. Have no fear, Mr Babyloncity.'

Barnaby forced himself to be still. He felt his heart trying to get out of his chest and he was breathing erratically.

'Stop it!' Mellianna shouted at him. She tried to slap his face, but the water pressure slowed it to a tap. It had the desired effect.

Barnaby realised he was making a fool of himself and shook his head. 'Sorry.'

The Oiip was suddenly amongst them and Barnaby jumped, slowly. It turned in a remarkably small space for its size and suddenly the water was full of pale blue tentacles, glowing with an inner light. Gently a tentacle wrapped itself around each of the figures on the floor and held them in a soft aquatic embrace. Barnaby froze as the creature was about to crush the life out of him. He closed his eyes and expected an agonising death. He was aware, in a detached sort of way, how calmly he was waiting for his end. Barnaby felt time slow down and expected his whole life to flash before him. Instead, he found his mind was numb. He had no conscious thoughts, nor felt fear anymore. He realised with a sudden clarity, he was probably already dead.

Wander touched the soft flesh of the creature and watched the light move away from her fingers. It rippled up the tentacle and back down again, sending a slight shock through her body. Winnie did the same, and both girls giggled. With a consideration, not often expected from a fish, the Oiip

gently removed the tentacles and stretched them out behind the bulk of her body. Slowly she opened them out, forming a translucent cone of light.

Yool moved forward and wrapped a tentacle around his waist. 'Come on. Like this,' he called to his pupils.

Mellianna pushed Barnaby forward and wrapped a tentacle around him before doing the same to herself. The twins quickly followed and giggled in delight as they were enwrapped by the soft and glowing arm of an alien fish. The Oiip seemed eager to adjust her tentacles, so they gently squeezed the girls' breasts. The women looked at each other and burst out laughing.

Winnie said, 'Are you sure this is a *she* fish?'

'Yes, of course. Why?' Yool was puzzled by their laughter.

With a slight jerk, the fish set off dragging her cargo slowly behind her. Barnaby gasped and opened his eyes. Mellianna was still smiling at him and he tried to smile back. The Oiip suddenly accelerated and Barnaby quickly closed his eyes again. The creature headed for the shallower depths, taking her charges back to the safety of dry land. On the way, she gave her own acrobatic performance, as she swooped and spun her way upwards. It was a roller coaster ride in the sea that left her passengers breathless and exhilarated at the same time. Barnaby was just breathless.

For the majority of the passengers, the ride ended too early. The Oiip slowly released her friends from her clutches and with an elaborate entwining of her tentacles she was gone. Barnaby felt immense relief as he saw the doorway back into the hotel and watched the denizen of Velba swim away. It was over, and he would never forget it. One thought puzzled him. How can you give a tip to a whale?

Deep in space, a small ship hurtled through the void. Two passengers slept as it thundered towards the far-off star system. Using two suns to sling-shot onto a new course, the speed increased, and its destination drew ever nearer.

Bursting through a complex cloud of a smaller star system, it wove its way towards the single blue globe in the distance. It slowed rapidly and swung into a fast and close orbit of the planet. The automatic ground control system brought the craft down in the tight spiral pattern and it rested gently on the landing pad, next to three other visiting ships. The ship awakened the two occupants, and they stretched the stiffness out of their muscles as they stepped onto the planet.

Hugo Rock and Flint Moses had arrived. Now they needed to find the Wullen sisters.

Wander lay on her bed watching the re-run of her adventure in the sea, being shown on the wall. She was now able to see all the team, and how they reacted, from the multi-cameras that were following them discreetly all the time. She watched the light display and the wild ride on the Oiip and couldn't stop smiling.

Wander had been completely unaware of any cameras recording their dive and was delighted they had. She realised that the media would want coverage for the news bulletins and she shouldn't be surprised. Barnaby and his company should require details of their adventures and use them to promote the competition in news bulletins. But she hadn't seen the cameras during the dive, they must be very small, or very discreet. As she watched the perfectly clear images, she realised that whatever the other wonders of the Universe were, they could not be better than this.

Wander lay back on the bed and watched the images once again. The softness of the bed and the way it arranged itself around her body made her so comfortable, she drifted off into sleep. Fantasies began to drift into her dreams and she stirred as her arousal increased and subsided. As she writhed on her bed, the images continued to flicker on the wall, showing huge marine animals transporting people like shuttles in the sea.

As she awoke, her dreams stayed with her and she sat upright and remembered. A smile came to her lips, and she knew she shouldn't break a promise. But this was something she just HAD to do.

Entering the water was more of a thrill the second time around than the first. She shivered at the experience and smiled at her guide, Zup. He was thrilled for a totally different reason. He still couldn't believe his luck.

The high-profile guest had appeared from nowhere, asking if she could be taken out for an experience swim. There were three other trainers in the restroom, but the "Goddess" had chosen HIM. With shaking hands, he'd prepared the equipment for her and with sweating palms that could hardly hold anything for trembling, started to fit her body with the belt and mask.

As his hands touched her skin, he felt an electric shock. He knew it was his imagination, but the shock was compounded as she smiled at him, seeming to move closer towards him every time he touched her. He'd never seen anyone so perfectly beautiful before and he couldn't hide that knowledge from her. His permanent smile was more an idiot's grin, and he knew he was making a fool of himself. Half of his mind knew she was playing up to his total infatuation with her, she obviously got some sort of perverse pleasure out of teasing men with her body. But he wasn't complaining. He'd rather be touching her as her plaything, than standing

watching like his colleagues, who just looked like they were dumbstruck fools.

Once outside he said, 'Where d'you like to go?'

'Somewhere near, but remote. I'd like to feel....isolated.' He nodded and pushed away towards the distant coral.

They swam slowly and glided over the top ridge of the coral, then her guide Zup led her deeper down the other side. He made sure she was still with him but dared not stare for too long at her.

He was thinking of a place that had plenty of fish and would be a good experience, when he felt a hand on his ankle, pulling him back. He stopped swimming and felt her sliding up his body, her triple breasts rippling across his skin. With a sharp intake of breath, he realised she was naked, and his face displayed his full range of thoughts on that subject.

Before he could do or say anything, her lips were locked onto his. He felt all control leave him and he now believed he was only dreaming.

The skin tight, see-through and two-way air masks allowed full use of the mouth under water. The kiss was as electric as if it was on dry land.

Her hands slid down past his waist and adept fingers began to undress him. There was no doubt what she now wanted, but some doubt if he could give it to her. Her kiss intensified, and he responded. The natural hormones in his body shocked him into life. Parts previously dormant came alive.

It was two heartbeats before both were swirling the waters into a stream of bubbles. Their love-making spiralled them into the depths, oblivious of their surroundings, or need for breath.

As they touched the sandy floor they were overcoming the water resistance by holding on to each other. They were able to get the leverage needed to increase their gratification. His heart was about to burst from the sheer exhilaration. This stunningly beautiful woman was demanding satisfaction of the most basic emotional urge. He could only have fantasised about that in the real world. This was more than just his lucky day, this was the best thing that was ever going to happen to him in his whole life.

He tried to match the urgency of this woman's desires. He gripped tight to her buttocks and breasts to maintain connection with her spiralling body. She was thrusting and gyrating, relying on him to keep them in contact with each other. Her breathing was becoming more rapid. He was aware of the physical pressure building for the both of them. He let his mind slip and gave into the pure animal delight, as the intensity of their actions sped out of control.

The sea bed became a slowly growing mass of silt, blossoming out from the frantic central core. Fish came to see what the commotion was,

sniffed and wandered away again. Her breath was rasping in his ear as he struggled to keep up with her. In a last burst of sediment, the murky waters stilled and slowly the grains of sand settled back to the sea floor. It covered the two figures, still locked together and all that could be heard was regular, if heavy, breathing.

Wander was the first to make a move, by gently pushing the almost lifeless Zup from on top of her. She floated vertically, then helped him to his feet and saw that familiar smile of a satisfied man. He started to speak, and she touched his lips into silence.

She looked around, for the first time seeing the beauty of the coral cove and the fish surrounding it. Bright yellow toothless fish swam up to her and nudged her face. She blew a kiss at them and returned her attention to her consort.

‘Ready?’ she said.

He nodded, ‘Yes. We’d better get back.’

She shook her head and said, ‘No.....are you ready?’

Once again the sea floor filled with sand particles and the water churned with mating aliens. For a long while the water swirled, more slowly and for a longer period this time. Eventually the dust settled, and the local creatures moved away, back to their more normal habitat.

From the confines of a billion tiny caverns in the coral, a small remote camera rose and sent its images back to the hotel. Its job completed, all data transmitted to the base recording equipment, it waited patiently in its holder on the wall, for the next mission.

Wander entered her suite and was surprised to see Winnie waiting for her. ‘Where HAVE you been?’

Wander felt the familiar pang of guilt and shrugged. ‘Looking around. Do you know, the whole of this hotel is made of glass or something like it? Wherever you go, you can see a different view of the seabed. Fantastic.’

‘Where’ve you been?’

‘I just told you. Looking around the hotel.’ She knew her sister didn’t believe her but had nothing to prove otherwise. ‘Why?’

‘Because you have a visitor.’

‘What shall I wear?’

At Winnie’s insistence, knowing her sister’s proclivities, she persuaded Wander to meet her visitor in the more public place of the Hotel foyer. She also demanded that she accompanied her. After too much deliberation,

Wander settled for a full flowing robe that covered everything. Winnie had insisted on modesty until they knew who the guest was. As they walked down the tunnel, Wander lagged behind slightly and instructed the bots to lower her neckline to just above the three nipples. Now she felt more like herself.

The man waiting for them in the foyer was tall and lean. Instantly Wander felt a chill, there was something she didn't like about him. Her glance at her sister told her they both felt the same. To their surprise, a woman joined the guest and the two visitors smiled as the girls entered the foyer.

Winnie lasered the female guest with her eyes. She was not as tall as the man, but equally lean and fit looking. Her eyes were dark and without emotion. The hair cropped short, showing a remarkably beautiful bone structure. Both wore white tight one-piece suits and a small white bag sat at the base of their spines.

'Wander Wullen?' the man said. Winnie shook her head and pointed to her sister. 'Ah. Pleased to meet you. My name is Roland Faheer, and this is my sister, Helenee.' Flint inclined her head in greeting and remained silent.

The girls were on edge, waiting for their guests to make the first move. 'Shall we be seated?' Rocky waved a hand towards some seats near the wall. The girls moved and sat, behind them a huge fish swirled into motion, apparently moving out of their way.

'Now. Where to begin.' Rocky crossed his legs and smiled at each of the girls in turn.

Winnie leaned forward and said, 'What do you want with us?'

'Wander, actually. I would like to make Wander an offer.'

Winnie sat back and sighed, 'Here we go again.'

'No, not that kind of offer. Well, I suppose it is, in a way.'

Winnie stood up to leave and Wander stood right behind her. 'We don't consider THOSE kinds of offers, thank you,' Winnie said harshly.

'You might wish to consider this one.' Flint spoke softly and with conviction. Both girls turned to look at her as Rocky stood up and moved carefully towards them.

Winnie looked around and noticed the reception desk was empty. She scanned the large room and realised no one was around. She moved towards the desk as Rocky started to speak.

'I represent a client that would love to experience your.....company once again. He is prepared to make a formal contract. Marriage was also mentioned.'

'Who's your client?' Wander asked as casually as she could.

'Perhaps that information can be revealed after you've shown an interest in the contract.'

Winnie had reached the desk and pressed the button for attention. She moved back towards her sister. 'My sister's already said we don't consider those sorts of arrangements. Goodbye and thank you for calling.' She turned away and joined her sister in the centre of the foyer.

'My client is rarely refused.'

'He can start to get used to it,' Wander offered.

With surprising silence and speed, Flint was beside them and staring nose to nose with Wander. 'You don't understand. He's NEVER refused.'

Wander never blinked as she said, 'You don't understand, we NEVER consider those kinds of offers.'

Flint's hand moved towards her backpack as a member of staff entered the room and moved towards the tight group in the middle. 'Did someone call?'

Winnie turned and said, 'Yes. Our guests are ready to leave. Thank you.' Without a look behind, she left the room with Wander right behind her.

A silent look passed between Rocky and his partner. Without a sound they turned and left the room, heading back towards the Spaceport.

'Would you like a room for the night sir, madam?' There was no reply. 'Perhaps lunch. We serve the best fish in the Universe.'

Both stopped in their tracks with the same thought. Rocky turned and said, 'That would be nice. We couldn't visit Drooper without sampling the local cuisine. Thank you. Book us a table in an hour, please.'

Flint moved towards the desk as the clerk began to make the reservation and said, 'We would like to send a gift to the Wullen ladies. What was their room number again?'

Barnaby watched the sisters walk out of the foyer and waited eagerly to see what the two visitors would do next. He watched the images on his bedroom wall with breath held and heard them ask for the room numbers. He reached for the communicator, but the hotel staff were up to the task. The

receptionist refused the details and asked what time they would like lunch? The two spoke no further and walked into the hotel, presumably looking for the restaurant.

Barnaby turned off the screen and thanked his suspicious nature and bribery tactics to get the staff to inform him if anyone tried to contact the Wullen sisters while they were staying in the hotel. The live feed to the foyer was a nice touch by the receptionist and he would tip the man generously before he left. Now he only had the problem of the unwanted visitors and what they'd do next. Barnaby called Mellianna and asked her to join him.

They sat and watched fish. Mellianna shook her head saying, 'What d'you suggest?'

'I don't know. But I think our dear friend Jonno Huutch is behind this.'

'With no disrespect intended, but the girls are rather....prolific in having male suitors after them. It could be anyone. Someone from their past.'

'It has to be someone who knows they're here, in Droopper.'

Mellianna laughed out loud, 'The whole Universe knows where they are. If they didn't, we wouldn't be doing our job properly.'

'You're right. It has to be Huutch though. Don't you think?'

'A strong contender. No doubt about it. But he's on Zacaron and we're here. What can he do!'

'I don't know. But he's gone through the trouble and expense to send those two here to try to get Wander back. How far is he prepared to go?'

'Let's ask them.'

'What?'

'Let's go and ask them now. Tell them she's not interested. Put the weight of FutureGames Inc. behind you and tell those two, that the girls are protected by a large corporation and they're wasting their time. They're already under contract. To us. What can we lose?'

The word, 'Our lives,' crossed Barnaby's mind.

The restaurant was almost empty, two diners looked forlorn at the far end. Barnaby headed towards them with a confident step and Mellianna right behind. The two would-be diners rose to greet him, Flint with a suspicious glint to her eye and Rock with a hand held behind his back, ready for action.

‘Good afternoon. My name’s Barnaby Babyloncity, promotional manager for FutureGames Inc. And this is my colleague, Mellianna Nordstum. I understand you have some business with our charges, the Wullen twins?’

Rock nodded, ‘Possibly.’

‘Perhaps you could inform me to the exact nature of this business?’

‘I represent my client. Any business is between him and Waynnetaudrynellldorisellenrachael Wullen.’

Barnaby smiled insincerely and said, ‘Actually she’s *my* client. I’m responsible for her. That’s to say, as long as this promotion lasts, I represent her in *any* business negotiations.’

‘My instructions are to deal with her alone.’

‘Then you do not deal with her at all. Is that understood?’

Before either of them could see what was happening, both the seated visitors were standing beside them, Mellianna felt a prickling sensation at the side of her throat. She saw the woman was holding a knife.

Hugo stood very close to Barnaby and saw the instant look of fear in his eyes. With a voice almost too low to hear he said, ‘Shall we start again, Mr Babyloncity?’

Barnaby now knew for certain that these two represented the odious Jonno Huutch. They were of the same breed, but these two looked like they could be even more aggressive and violent.

‘A good idea Mr Faheer. We should start again.’ The voice came from behind them, but neither the man nor the woman blinked an eyelid. Hope sprang in Barnaby’s mind as he tried to remain calm and stop his voice from shaking.

Barnaby turned and smiled, ‘Ah, Mr Cootherie. How nice of you to join us.’ He turned to Hugo and said, ‘This is Mr Cootherie and he’s in charge of Hotel security. I understand he wanted to have a word with about your registration in the hotel?’

The knife had disappeared from Mellianna’s throat and she took a step back away from the woman. Her breathing started again, and her heart was pounding. Barnaby held his ground and said, ‘Let *me* start again, Mr Faheer. There are no negotiations taking place with Miss Wullen, so your visit here is fruitless. Given the possible gigantic cost of the meal, I suggest you leave now and save yourself time and money. The best fish in the galaxy it may be, but it comes at a great cost.’

The frozen look stayed on Hugo's face as he made no move to leave. Barnaby looked to Flint and smiled. She remained impassive. Barnaby turned to the security manager. 'We can take that as a yes, then. Given the complex nature of your Hotel, perhaps you could escort our guests to their ship and ensure they find their way off the planet safely. I would be obliged.'

As one, Hugo and Flint turned and walked out of the room. The tall security man followed and was joined silently by several of his staff. Barnaby waved for Mellianna to follow and they hurried back to his rooms. Once there, he called reception and asked for the camera coverage of the Spaceport and the two of them watched as Rock and Moses reluctantly boarded their craft.

With slightly shaking hands Barnaby poured out two brandies and handed one to Mellianna. She drank it down in one gulp and felt the warm glow spread through her, relaxing her body and her mind. Barnaby sipped his, watched and waited. On the wall, the image showed the security staff on the platform, waiting for the ship to depart. Barnaby moved closer to the screen looking for the ship's registration and smiled at the name, *Hammer of Thor*.

They remained seated in his room for hours, slowly sipping at the brandy. At one point, Barnaby fell asleep and Mellianna had to make a determined effort to remain awake until they both knew the terrible two had left the planet. Her eyes were drooping and finally closed for a short while. Both were eventually stretched full length on the bed and fast asleep.

The light spilled from the sky and the planet went into its night time phase. Slowly Barnaby came awake and sat up with a start. On the wall, the scene still showed the Spaceport. Barnaby smiled, the *Hammer of Thor* had gone and so had the security men. He shook Mellianna awake to give her the good news.

The Drooper's reputation for seafood was Universal, in every sense. There was no need to import fish, it was right on their doorstep – in abundance. What didn't look pretty, or could perform for the crowds, they ate it. Vegetables had to be imported, so the cuisine of the planet subtly changed during the burgeoning tourist trade, and they managed to do without grown-in-the-ground produce.

Fish was the main attraction of every dish, so the chefs found a wide variety of ways to make that the key and convince the diner that they had eaten a substantial and elegant meal comprising only of....fish. The fish might be twisted and created into a variety of shapes, which disguised it from being...a fish. A spaceport tower, land-based animal, bird....etc. It could be flavoured to taste of anything...but fish.

The dish might also entertain. If the fish was still alive, it could perform tricks before it was consumed. Some more intelligent Aquarian species looked on this as an intense spiritual way of leaving one world and entering another. Others, as a way of prolonging their existence a few more minutes, in the hope their act would spare their lives from an overwhelmed and generous benefactor. There were a smaller, lower class species, that saw the whole thing as degrading and made their performances more a gesture of defiance than an art form.

Because of, and despite of, all these things, Drooper's was the Universally renowned fish restaurant. Most of this was lost on Barnaby as he only had eyes for his companions. They, in turn, thought a fish meal was...a fish meal. Tasty, but nothing to call home about.

The celebrity travellers toasted their latest interesting adventure and were content to talk about it during the meal. The atmosphere was relaxed and friendly. Their day had been a success all around. They ordered another golden bucket of wine and filled their glasses one more time. Barnaby was feeling mellow and his conversation became expansive. He praised the sisters for their full-hearted (and full-bodied) support of the competition. They tried to wave off the praise, but Barnaby was on a roll.

'It must be difficult for you to have to give interviews all day long...'

'It's hardly all day

'...I know I'd hate it. The same stupid questions.....'

'We knew it would be a media circus when we signed the contract. It hasn't been too bad,' Winnie said over the top of her litre glass.

She looked particularly stunning to Barnaby. Her sculptured body was cloaked in a bright lilac shimmering cloth that moved in the opposite direction to her body. As she twisted to the left, the material moved to the right, giving the effect that she was extraordinarily flexible in movement. It was a bizarre effect but served to arouse his desire for the girls, which he'd been trying to suppress for weeks now. Her eyes and the smile seemed to invite him towards her, so he reached for her hand, which she gently withdrew from the table.

'You're very brave girls....both of you. The way you handled those messengers from hell today...terrific.'

The twins glanced at each other as Wander said, 'You know about that?'

Mellianna laughed and said, 'Barnaby sent them packing. Tail between their legs. They won't bother you anymore.'

As one, the girls leant nearer and said, 'Tell us more.'

It was late into the evening and partly into the new day before Winnie lay on her bed and began to drift into sleep. She smiled to herself at the experiences of the day and felt she'd already enjoyed the best wonders the prize had to offer. Throughout the Universe images of her and her friends swimming with the most beautiful and remarkable animals would be seen by sentient beings in limitless numbers. The thought both thrilled and worried her. It thrilled her that she was a celebrity, albeit for only a short term. But it worried her that she was being watched, and possibly judged, by those trillions of sentient beings.

Sleep wouldn't come, so she got out of bed and sipped at some water. She sat and watched the night show of the fish, mammals and other creatures not having a collective name. They swam and danced just for her, at least it seemed that way. They looked into the window of her room and saw she was watching and did their particular party piece, just for her amusement. She found herself applauding and smiling at them. At least they knew she appreciated them.

She had time to think about the earlier visitors, she guessed who'd sent them and why. Perhaps they should've been given the chance to tell the sisters more details of the offer, and at least she'd know for sure it was the dreadful, Huutch. She pushed that to the back of her mind. They'd left the planet and that should be that. Huutch would have to learn to take no for an answer.

Dawn broke too early for the Galactic adventurers; their waking calls being answered with less than enthusiastic replies. So it was a little later than anticipated, the adventure-bound quartet was once again assembled in the Ready Room. Yool greeted them heartily and allowed his eyes to rest a little longer on the Wullen twins. They had dominated his waking dreams and some of his sleeping ones too. He'd obsessed about them since the previous day and couldn't wait to see them again.

He studied them as best he could, without appearing to stare. They were both dressed in short, thigh-length diaphanous dresses. The colours were almost indistinct from their flesh tones. They might as well have worn no clothes at all. He struggled to keep his mind on his serious job and watched as his staff began to fit the paying customers with similar equipment to the previous day. One of the staff, in particular, was overly anxious to dress Wander. She tried to avoid his eyes and soon noticed Winnie watching her. Winnie was already aware something was happening.

The instructor was a little too familiar as he strapped on the various belts, masks and ankle units to Wander. His anticipation of a return bout with the lust of his life was almost too much for him to control. He took

longer than the others to prepare his customer and eventually stood back with the others, never taking his eyes off Wander.

‘Today we’ll go Speel Racing. This is unique, like everything else in the hotel, and all you have to do is let the Speels do the work. If you’re ready?’ he walked through the wall.

They swam away from the hotel and once again felt the excitement of being as one with the ocean. Barnaby was more relaxed about swimming, now he had faced the horrific Oiip tow, he believed nothing could be worse than that. He remained close beside Mellianna, assured she knew his fears and would help him when necessary. They reached the reef and dipped over the edge, then angled away to one side. It was a long swim and took quite some time. It allowed each swimmer to become fully comfortable with their surroundings and the resistance of the water against their muscular efforts.

Yool touched the bottom and waited. As they encircled him he spoke to his racers. ‘In a moment we’ll summon the Speels and then we’ll race back to the hotel. We’ll all have a handicap, I’ll take the slowest Speel and perhaps, Mr Babyloncity, the fastest.’

A pang of fear struck Barnaby. ‘What do you mean fastest? What’s going to happen?’

‘You’ll love this. We each have a Speel and we race back to the hotel. There’s nothing in the Universe quite like this.’

‘Must I? Can’t I swim back?’

‘It’s a rare treat, few have ever experienced.’ Yool made a warbling sound and waited.

From the distance, sounds were reaching them. A ripple of energy seemed to ride towards them, along with a rumbling noise. A large dark shape gathered in the distance and suddenly they were surrounded by sleek, pure white creatures, with many fins and flippers. They boiled the water as they turned and frolicked in front of their new friends.

Yool stood amongst them as they took it in turn to nuzzle him, and he returned the affection. They clearly loved each other. Wander watched in amazement at such a wonderful relationship. She wished she might have an understanding like that. Barnaby watched in mounting anxiety at what he was expected to endure next.

For the first time cameras appeared in the water. Several were positioned around the group and Winnie realised that once more she was expected to put on a show. She waved and smiled. Yool’s heart leapt at the sight of that smile. He had taken his eyes off the Speel he was stroking, and it sideswiped him with one of its tails. It threw him backwards and he

landed on the floor. His face coloured in embarrassment and he quickly got to his feet and began to harness the racers to their steeds.

Barnaby watched as one of Yool's assistants looped a small thin harness from the Speel's tail to his wrists. The assistant asked if he was comfortable, and Barnaby reluctantly nodded.

When all were attached to their steeds, Yool produced a low hum and said, 'Here we go. Hang on.'

With a smooth swish of a tail, the Speel started to move, taking up the slack of the harness until they felt the weight of their passengers. They swam for a short distance, swerving from side to side to give the riders a feel for the journey. As if by practice alone, they were all lined up in an even row while still maintaining slow forward momentum. Excitement surged in the riders as they knew they were in for a thrilling time. At an unheard signal, all the tails thrashed at the same time and the race was on.

Barnaby screamed as he was powered along in the wake of the Speel. He began to spin as the creature surged through the water, edging away from the other competition. With a powerful thrust, the Speel pulled Barnaby level again and set off at an increased pace. Barnaby hung on in desperation, trying not to spin again.

The water foamed behind the racing creatures and the passengers could hardly see ahead of them. They saw who was behind and Wander was pleased to see her special friend of the day before and managed a small wave. Winnie noticed it too and took a good look at the man behind her, who was somehow entangled with her sister.

Mellianna was concentrating on staying straight as she felt the Speel pull her first one way and then the other. She'd started off by spinning too but had learned to spread her legs to correct it. As her fish surged ahead of the others, she began to feel the adrenaline increase. Suddenly she was aware that she might be the winner of the most exciting race of her life.

Wander was in her element, relaxed and excited at the same time. She took the time to look all around her, absorb the atmosphere and enjoy to the full the ultimate pleasure in human and animal racing. She was second over the top of the reef and her steed hurtled for the finishing line. Close behind her was Winnie, a fixed grin on her face and a determined look in her eyes.

Up ahead Mellianna saw the wall of the hotel rapidly approaching and knew the stop was going to be sudden and probably painful. She braced herself for the jerk on her wrists and even her body hitting the wall. This race was getting out of hand. Behind her Wander's steed was almost abreast of her and it was going to be a close finish.

Cameras lined the walls as the small shoal rushed toward the hotel. Two Speels raced gill to gill, with little room left to manoeuvre. At the exact same second, both reins were released by the Speels, who made a dramatic, and impossible looking, U-turn. The riders, now free in the water, glided toward the wall from the racing momentum and were slowed by the density of the water. Mellianna touched the wall with a gentle bump and Wander touched a second after her. Mellianna had won - by a mosquito's armpit hair.

Lunch was an excitable affair, with so much to discuss and adventures to be relived. Wander was at first verbose, but as the meal wore on she became withdrawn. Winnie noticed and touched her arm gently.

'What's the matter?'

Wander looked around the table to see who was listening. The others were talking amongst themselves and she lowered her voice. 'I don't want to leave here. I want to stay.'

Winnie gripped her arm and squeezed. She smiled and said, 'You know we have to go. Other places. Who knows, some better than this?'

Wander shook her head. 'There can't be anything better than this. Not for me.'

Winnie spoke softly but firmly. 'Don't start this again, Wan. We HAVE to go. You can't stay here. Perhaps you can come back after it's all over.'

Wander shook her head. 'I just can't bring myself to leave.'

Winnie looked up at Barnaby, who was now watching the two women talking quietly to each other. His eyes were furrowed, and Winnie saw he was concerned there might be a problem. She smiled at him and he instantly smiled back. She turned back to Wander.

'Okay. We'll definitely come back here before finally going home. One way or another, we'll get back here.'

'Really?'

'Yep.'

'You're not just saying.....'

'It's a promise.'

'Win.....'

'Only leave the men alone.'

'I don't know what you mean.....'

'I know.' Winnie stood up and left Wander with guilt and uncertainty. Did Winnie know about the boy in the lagoon?

The training staff went through another day of showing the paying public their unique and beautiful world. A few of the men went through the routine, their minds far away from their jobs. One man swam past a particular patch of the sandy seafloor and recalled the memories. He, for one, hoped his Goddess would return one day and they could recreate his moment of magic all over again.

Yool found he was distracted and wished for more training sessions with the two most hormonally stunning females he had ever seen. He knew it was a lost wish, but he could still dream.

Barnaby checked the time, anxious to be on their way. As much as he hated water, he'd a grudging respect for this place. He'd faced some of his worst fears and, upon reflection, he hadn't done too badly. He knew he'd be terrified to do any of the water adventures again, but at least he'd done it. In retrospect, he was pleased not to have missed the experience. In hindsight, perhaps he should've relaxed into it a little more.

But it was time to move on to the next port of call. He wasn't looking forward to the long trip, but it had to be done. They endured the obligatory last-minute interviews for the media. While they were journeying, they would process these reports and broadcast all over the Universe. By the time they reached their next destination, there would be a Galactic expectation of the new adventures, by the Universe's most popular travellers. Time to herd them together for the journey.

Mellianna's head was still swimming with pride. She couldn't believe how much winning that race had meant to her. The thrill and exhilaration of the race itself were enough to remain with her for the rest of her life. But to win it too! She wanted to do it again, recreate her success. She saw Barnaby waving her outside and knew that time was against that. It was something that would have to remain a memory, rather something that should be done again.

She moved through the transparent tunnels reminiscing and looked in renewed wonder at the creatures swimming all around her. For the last time, she pushed her hand through the invisible wall and felt a fish brush past her. She tickled it until it got bored and wiggled away. She withdrew her hand and found it dry and odourless. Barnaby was hurrying them on.

As Mellianna emerged into the daylight, for the first time in two days, she blinked. So long in the heavily subdued lighting of the undersea hotel, had made her react violently to the sunlight. Ahead of her the dark blue hull of the '*Are We There Yet?*' loomed above her. The rented craft looked sleek

and fast, but she knew they were in for weeks of boredom and depression. She patted its cool, polished side and turned to see Barnaby talking to the girls.

They grouped the media machines around the two stars of the trip and they smiled and answered the questions. Mellianna noticed that Wander was not happy to leave. Mellianna understood how delighted she'd felt since landing on this planet. This was obviously Wander's sort of lifestyle. Still, better to have sampled it, then to have missed it altogether. Maybe. She felt the same but was realistic about leaving paradise.

The interviews went on far too long and Mellianna could see Barnaby anxious to get away. She decided to help. She tapped at the hatchway, watched as the door slid open and the steps descended to the ground. Mellianna walked up the steps and stood in the hatchway and waved to Barnaby. This was his queue to cut the meeting short and hustle the girls on board. Mellianna waved at the cameras to distract them as the passengers slipped into the craft and made their way to their relative cabins and suites. The hatchway slid closed, trapping one over-eager camera and crushing it.

Once inside his cabin, Barnaby contacted the captain and asked her to get going as fast as possible. The ship was all prepared, and the engines hummed into life. The warning sirens sounded outside, and the media machines eased away from the direct blast of the take-off.

Strapped into her take-off couch, Wander felt tears forming and couldn't stop from crying. One of the best times of her life was over. What lay ahead should be exciting and enjoyable, but right now she wanted to remain on the sea-covered Velba. Her vital organs fought to remain in their normal positions, but she didn't notice the discomfort.

Yool and his team stood by the side of the Customs House and waved the ship goodbye. Barnaby breathed a sigh of relief, which was difficult because of the constriction on his chest, as the ship powered out of the atmosphere. The Universal tour was on the move again.

Royale O'Really was getting angrier by the minute. He'd just watched a wonderful report on his two competition winners, showing dramatic shots of them racing with some sort of fish, smiling faces at a restaurant, lots of conversations and lots of almost bare bosoms. The name FutureGames Inc. came up several times, and he was pleased how Barnaby Babyloncity handled the interviews. But now, he was mad.

At the very end of the item the local newscaster, a low collared, green-faced low-life biped from some obscure planet somewhere way past where civilization ceased, had made a comment. Eager to prove his prowess as a

reporter and trying to dig into the inner workings of the competition organisers, he'd discovered something he thought sinister. At least, he made it sound sinister. Calls had been coming in all day from everywhere. Questions, denials and general fudging, but still, they came.

The low-life from planet Zorg had made a fatuous statement that he thought the organisers of the Round the Universe competition had misled the public. Claiming ten best planets would be visited, but only booking five. Of course, it was true, but he didn't HAVE to mention it. Now Royale had to make it right, and they didn't have the money. He'd lied all day and now had to somehow make the lies come true. His screen beeped for his attention for the millionth time that day. With a look of startled surprise, Royale reluctantly accepted the call.

Bald E was a legend. His huge grinning face filled Royale's wall screen. A face that had been the scourge of the Western Quadrant for over thirty years and now he aimed his hypnotic stare straight at Royale O'Really.

'Roy, how ya doin?'

'Fine, E. You?'

'Looking great, aren't I?'

'Indeed you are, my friend. Better than ever.'

Bald E rubbed the top of his very high forehead and polished the bald skin on top. 'Not a grey hair anywhere.' He burst into laughter.

Royale tried to join in. 'Wish I could say the same.'

Another burst of laughter and, 'You don't look a day over ninety, Roy.'

'I am ninety!' Royale said with a slight edge to his voice.

'There you are then.'

'Nice as it is to chat with you after all this time, but what do you want, E?'

'To do you a favour, old friend. Do you a favour.'

Royale's heart sank, and he wished he hadn't accepted the call. Bald E was renowned as a smooth talker, a persuader. A twister of arguments until black was white and grey was blue. He was about to sell him something and Royale was sure he didn't want it.

'I hear you're in financial difficulties, old friend? I'm at your service.'

Royale held his face straight and leaned forward. 'I don't know what you're talking about, E.'

E's smile was broad and appeared absolutely genuine. 'Don't try to kid a kidder, friend. This competition thingy, you've prepped up. You need help. Admit it and we can move forward.'

'I still don't know what you're talking about!'

'Okay, so you're in denial. Let me tell you what I've got in mind.' His eyes twinkled, and he leaned very close to the camera until his eyes filled Royale's screen.

'If I'm right, and I usually am, you cannot fulfil your contract for the last five planet visits. Don't try to deny it. Let me finish. What you need is someone to negotiate with those planets and get you accommodation, entertainment and all that good stuff. And you need it for nothing. Isn't that true?'

Royale leant back and remained silent. E shouted in triumph, 'I knew it!'

Royale held his hand up and smiled, 'If it was true, and I'm not saying it is, what makes you think I need someone to negotiate for me?'

'Are you serious! I'm the galaxy's best negotiator and you can't bring yourself to admit it, can you?' Royale shrugged and remained silent. E leaned into the screen again, 'You need me for this and you know it. I can get you those last five planets and it won't cost you anything. Except for my fee, of course. And expenses.'

Royale tried to sound casual, 'And what would your fee be, then?'

'A straight million.'

Royale choked.

PART 4 - Esteron – The Planet of Relaxation

Waves tumbled onto the beach with an almost silent hiss. Blue sand complimented the yellow sea, giving the horizon a green tinge. Air moved idly, warm and dry on the skin. The pale lilac sky was clear of clouds and the occasional bird flopped its way lazily along the path of the beach, looking for food and toilet facilities. Palm trees hung over the beach, offering shade and hammocks for the weary sun worshipper. The beach now quiet for the time of the year, yet the few thousand customers were appreciating the ultimate in luxury sea resorts the Universe had to offer.

Sentient beings were enjoying a swim in the sea or allowing the soft waves to wash over them on the beach. The sand, as soft as a nun's habit, never stuck to the skin and provided no discomfort to those touching it. Lined up on the beach were a range of watercraft, waiting to take a customer for a sail, or a speedy ride across the small waves. The sailors and captains sun-bathed as they waited in the lazy afternoon sun. There was no rush, there never was.

Two people sat apart, appearing to relax under the palms and out of the sun. The woman sat in a hammock, one foot on the ground for emergency movements. The man sat with his back to a tree, watching the beach. Both constantly watched the sky for incoming ships. They were dressed in dark coloured shorts and short-sleeves shirts. They could be mistaken for brother and sister, but there was no brotherly love in their eyes.

Flint Moses checked the time and looked at Hugo Rock, she shrugged and looked to the sky again. The ship was late. Without a word, they both drained their drinks, housed in a large glass. Neither were alcoholic, and neither gave them any satisfaction other than to ease the thirst. They stood and walked off the beach, out onto the narrow strip of scruffy grass. Past this was a wooden walkway, and they walked across that to the far side, stepping up onto an elevated platform that housed the Custom House for the Spaceport.

It was a spaceport like no other they'd seen in their six years of working together. Consisting of a wooden shack with a large, flat, hard platform to support the ships. There were six ships on the platform, one of which was theirs. The smallest and cheapest of them all, but they were not tourists.

High in the sky, a trail appeared, slowly growing larger and clearer. The dark blue ship circled the port twice before coming to a soft landing. Its engines wound down and the Port Authorities waited for the steps to descend. Two uniformed officers boarded the ship and made the brief, but necessary customs inspection. After a very short time, they came out of the ship. Hugo and Flint moved forward to await the passengers' descent. They

stood to one side, under a large palm tree and waited. And waited. After an hour, the hatch shut. And they knew it might be a while longer before the Wullen sisters would step onto their third planet.

The journey was even worse than the previous ones. By the time the ship dropped into the planet's atmosphere, no one was talking to each other. All four passengers had remained isolated in their cabins for the past week, taking their meals in the cabin and exercising in rotation - in case they met one of their colleagues.

They greeted even the customs officers in near silence, with Barnaby talking to them and signing the relevant certificates and documents. Once they left, Barnaby spoke for the first time to his colleagues in weeks.

'They're waiting for us on the pad!'

Four pairs of eyes peered through a porthole. At the edge of the landing pad waiting for the two figures. Standing silent and still.

'Now what do we do?' queried Mellianna.

'I don't fancy facing them again,' Barnaby said quietly.

'We'll sort them out,' Wander said, keen for some action after a long period of inactivity.

'They don't seem to take no for an answer, do they?' said Winnie.

'Can't we kill them?' asked Wander.

'That'll be harder than it looks,' Winnie said quietly.

'I was joking!' said Wander.

'I wasn't,' added Winnie.

'We wait and see if they....go away,' Barnaby said.

'How did they know we'd be here?' Wander said.

Mellianna answered, 'The whole Universe knows where we are and where we're going next. Good idea, Barney. Let's just wait.'

'I don't think I can spend another minute on this old tub.' Wander sounded near to tears. 'Can't we just....you know, listen to what they have to say?'

The discussion continued.

The suns dipped below the horizon, splashing the sky with green and gold. The horizon turned purple, then into black. Night encroached on Esteron. Two figures stood by the side of the platform, waiting patiently in the gloom. The ships were lit with coloured lights, turning the dullness of smooth ship hulls, into a fairyland atmosphere.

The hatch opened and instantly the two watchers were alert. It was some time before Barnaby walked down the steps and looked directly at the skulking forms under the trees. With a wave, he motioned them over. They trotted towards the ship, eager to get to grips with their prey. From the other side of the platform, two armed police officers also moved towards the ‘*Are We There Yet?*’

Hugo stood at the bottom of the steps, stopped by the outstretched hand of Barnaby. Flint started to climb the steps when Barnaby said, ‘Stay where you are. I’ve asked the local police to keep an eye on you two. I just wanted to have a word. What do you want with us?’

Hugo looked across at the militia. Two men with large rifles stood watching with expressionless faces. They were no match for Hugo, or Flint if it came to that, but he didn’t want any high-profile problems. Not yet.

‘We’d like a private conversation with Waynnetaaudrynellidorisellenrachael Wullen. That’s all.’

‘What’s it about?’

‘It’s private. If I told you, it wouldn’t be private.’

‘Does this concern Jonno Huutch?’

A moment of silence before Hugo said, ‘He’s one of my clients, yes.’

‘Then tell him, Wander isn’t interested in him.’

‘I need to hear that from her.’

Wander poked her head out of the hatchway and shouted at Hugo, ‘Tell him I’m not interested in him. Now leave us alone.’

Hugo looked at Flint, who showed no reaction. There must have been some sort of communication between them, because they both silently turned and walked away, back towards their ship.

‘That told them!’ said Wander.

Barnaby frowned as he said, ‘So it would seem. Come on, let’s get to the hotel before they return. While we’re guarded by our police friends out there.’

Winnie's balcony was on the edge of the beach and she could walk straight into the sea. The room was large, spacious and beautiful. Diaphanous curtains billowed their pastel sheen everywhere in the light warm breeze from the sea. Winnie wriggled her toes in the sand and felt the softness of the grains. She looked into the distance and saw hundreds of twinkling lights from the fishing boats, heading out for a night's fishing. She sighed and felt herself beginning to relax.

Winnie decided that the first evening she'd spend alone. After the last, and seemingly increasingly difficult series of journeys on the '*Are We There Yet?*', she needed distance from her travelling companions and some time to herself. Her meal was sumptuous. It was brought to her room by four waiters, each helping serve her a course. They'd suggested she lay on the long, floor-based piece of furniture, while they hand-fed her each mouthful.

One of the waiters appeared particularly handsome, and she made eye contact with him as often as possible. She could see he was interested as he couldn't take his eyes off her. But neither could the other three. She was particularly aware of making a promise to herself she'd behave on this trip, but then she'd made no such promise to Wander. As the meal wore on, the men grew a little bolder and began to lose control of their awe for Winnie. By the end of the meal, it was the waiters that were eating out of HER hands.

It felt wonderful to practice Ladies and Gentlemen, with more than one man again. It was what she was used to and what she needed. They were eager, passionate and totally surprised at their good fortune to be offered sex with such an obviously desirable woman. By the time she'd satisfied the fourth, the first was ready for further action again. The night ran into day and still, she was demanding more from them. Their energies were finally spent, they managed to crawl out of her rooms with the remnants of the meal.

One of the three suns was just beginning to climb out of its bed and shining light across the strip of the horizon. Winnie sat on the sand and watched as dawn broke on another new world. She felt contented.

Barnaby was nervous the two henchmen of Huutch would return, so he asked to speak with the security people of the Hotel '*Relaxed as a Newt*'. They were helpful and aware of the high-profile nature of their special guests. A man would be placed at the entrance to their suites for the whole duration of their stay. Barnaby felt happier about that and moved on to his suite.

He was impressed by the splendour and loved the access to the beach. The smell of the sea wafted into his room as he filled his lungs with something other than recycled air. He was aware of how tense he felt from

the journey and knew that the others were too. They had two days on this paradise planet, and he'd try to do something about the problems of the cramped ship while he was here.

He'd ordered a meal to be sent to his room, and it was due soon. Meanwhile, he just needed time to unwind. He stood on the balcony and watched the night sky. Stars twinkled above, none of them he'd visited, he was sure. This place was a long way from his home. He breathed deeply and strongly. Slowly he became aware of a thought that worried at the corner of his mind. If someone was standing guard on his door, who was guarding the open beach access?

Mellianna had never appreciated the beach. For her, it was childhood memories of sand and getting wet. Windy days and rain forcing the family indoors. But right now she appreciated being there, looking out onto the calm sea and inhaling the smell of the ocean.

She'd bounced on her huge bed and found it satisfactory. Like all the others, she'd decided to eat in her room and loved the personal attention of four waiters. She had the distinct impression that the men were flirting with her. One had become rather over-familiar, and she had to reprimand him. After that, the rest seem to remember their station and remained purely as waiters.

Thinking back on it now, they were rather handsome and perhaps she'd been hasty. She tried to remember the last male relationship she had enjoyed. She couldn't remember a time, it was certainly many years ago. The hotel boasted full relaxation facilities and a with a smile she realised she'd perhaps missed an opportunity to enjoy one of the Human Derivatives main source of relaxation. There was always tomorrow.

Wander never got past the first course.

Jonno Huutch was in no mood to hear about failures. He shouted at the figure on the screen, but Hugo Rock wasn't a man to flinch.

'They wouldn't let me make them an offer, Mr Huutch. I suggest that any rational approach will be met with deaf ears.'

'Then try a more direct approach. You've had long enough, Rock. I want a result. Get her back here, now!'

'I'll do my best, sir. But we're rather...exposed on this. Any attempt at kidnapping.....'

‘Your problem, not mine. Get on with it.’ The screen went dead.

‘So we do it the hard way then?’ asked Flint.

Hugo thought before saying, ‘We’re vulnerable here. They know who we are and who we work for. It wouldn’t be long before the authorities know where Wander is. They could even be waiting for us by the time we get her back to Huutch. We must be subtler. I need to think about this. Get some rest. I’ll wake you later.’

‘You need some rest too. We’re safe in our own ship. Get some sleep.’

‘Okay. Let’s give it six hours. We’ll make a decision then.’

Mellianna was up early and swimming in the warm sea. She was surrounded by tiny fish, at one point nervous as to their intentions. But none of the other bathers seemed worried and so she relaxed into the moment. She’d been awakened for breakfast, this time just the one waiter, who appeared very wary of her. Mellianna had made him feel welcome and was delighted he wanted to feed her himself. The intimacy of the actions brought them very close together and soon they were sharing the food and eventually sharing her bed.

She’d forgotten the amount of effort it required to make love, but how much satisfaction to be gained from that effort. Her partner was very experienced and patient with her. Her every desire was catered for and she was left to rest after he quietly left with the breakfast tray. Her swim made her feel free and carefree. This planet was having an immediate effect on her.

Winnie asked for breakfast in bed and wanted the same waiters as the night before. She was delighted when her wishes were granted and enjoyed a late breakfast after the waiters had left. At least they’d given her an appetite.

Barnaby slept fitfully during the night. The open beach in front of him gave him nightmares. He had dreams of evil men entering through waving curtains, slashing and slashing at him. The curtains were in ribbons and had turned to red. He awoke with a start, convinced someone was in his room. Barnaby got out of bed and drank some water.

Barnaby thought back to the bizarre meal he’d experienced the previous evening and smiled. He’d never met such accommodating waitresses. They seemed particularly forward, and he found himself removing their hands from various parts of his body. All four seem to be of the same mind, he wasn’t in the mood. Besides, what would the hotel think? Barnaby had responsibilities and a reputation to protect. Besides,

since he'd made love with the Wullen twins, nothing would be the same, or as good. He'd requested his breakfast be left outside his door in the morning.

By the time he got out of bed, the second sun was climbing into the heavens and his breakfast had gone cold. He made the best of it and walked out onto the beach. With a sudden flush of embarrassment, he returned to his room to put on some clothes. The air now warm and fresh. He breathed deeply again. He liked this place. There was something in the air. He'd read that there was a natural narcotic in the air, that was created by a particular permutation of local flora and fauna. It was non-habit forming but had an effect on the Human Derivatives.

Barnaby saw the waves lapping the beach, changing colour as they moved. He waved at Mellianna out in the sea and saw Winnie bounce across the sand to join her. He marvelled again at the stunning beauty of that body and that face. No, last night could not even begin to come close. Attractive as the waitresses were.

Wander would not get out of bed in the morning. Neither would she let the four waiters - left over from the previous night.

For the first time in a few days, the travelling party shared the same room. They were in the private section of the hotel's Health Farm area. They were going to have a morning of extreme pampering. Barnaby was not too sure what he was in for but felt heartened by the anticipation he saw in his three women.

The four Galactic travellers were slowly overcome by the manipulation and relaxation techniques practised by the experienced staff of the hotel. Even Barnaby fell under the spell and found he was going to sleep while nubile young women massaged and rubbed his body in ways he'd never dreamed of.

All three of the women were feeling tired and gave in readily to the techniques, allowing themselves to be totally submissive to the hulking men standing over them. Mellianna found it difficult to estimate whether these men were of the same calibre of service as the waiters she'd had the pleasure of earlier in the day. She allowed her imagination to run riot and her thoughts began to look forward to a long and leisurely dinner in the room later.

At Barnaby's request, several security men guarded the rooms, and he was able to let the worry subside and fall into the main event of the moment. After the first hour, all three were almost asleep and just emitting the

occasional groan of pleasure. It seemed all too soon the session was over. It was time for the next stop on their tour of the pleasures of Esteron.

The boat felt incredibly stable. They hardly knew they were on water. There was no bobbing or swaying of the craft. No one was going to be travel sick today. It accelerated smoothly and silently out from the beach and headed towards a headland in the distance. The rocky outcrop was covered in colourful palms and trees. As they rounded the point they came across a small isolated bay. The beach was a crescent of pale blue sand and the sea at this point was a light green in colour.

The boat glided to a stop and seemed anchored to the sea. The captain and crew began to prepare a buffet lunch and Wander chose the servant she liked the look of the most. She also noticed that Winnie was doing the same. It seemed that all promises were off for the moment. The two women looked at each other and Wander knew for sure she needn't behave today.

Mellianna found herself eying up the men as well. She saw the reaction the Wullen sisters were having to the surprisingly handsome men on board and thought it safe for her to have her own fantasies too. What surprised her was how forward the girls were when it came to courtship. There wasn't any courtship. They seem to grab their man and within moments the kissing had turned to full sex. Mellianna turned away and sought out Barnaby. To her complete surprise, he was kissing one of the female sailors. She didn't know which way to turn. She went below decks and saw the captain seated. He stood as she entered and smiled at her. She smiled back and considered where she could go next. She needed to be on her own, to avoid any further embarrassment.

The captain called to her, and she turned to him. He reached out and held her, then slowly and without any resistance from her, he kissed her sweetly on the lips. She felt herself melting into his arms and the rest of the afternoon was a blur of pleasure.

The waves caressed the beach and soon people were swimming off the boat and washing up with the waves. Couples moved from the beach into the trees and the soft ground vegetation, where they coupled and enjoyed each other for the rest of the afternoon.

It was with some regret that the boat made its way back towards the hotel. The travellers disentangled themselves from their temporary lovers and sat silently on the deck as the hotel docking bay hove into sight. It was an almost silent troupe that entered the hotel and went their own ways to their suites.

They had a few hours before the next point of high adventure and all four wanted to keep to themselves. Solitude and relaxation were the prime motivation on this planet and the travellers felt they were ready for both.

Wander sat and stared out at the sea, softly changing colour as it reached into the distance. She felt a sudden sadness and slowly realised she was homesick. She missed her parents and her brother; she wanted to see them. Wander eased off the bed and went to the wall. She would call them. It would be expensive, but the holiday company would pay for it, after all, it was an all-expenses paid trip as far as the twins were concerned.

The beach was quiet as the couple walked along, idly kicking at the sand. 'The next four on the right,' said Flint, not looking up.

Hugo swung his eyes slowly toward the beachfront apartments and the low balconies running straight onto the beach. Two of the beach doors were open and provided easy access. 'Which is Wander's?'

'The last one. Are we going to get her now?'

Hugo stopped walking and sat facing the balcony. Flint sat facing him, staring out to sea. To any passing stroller, a couple having a quiet conversation on the beach. Even though they were a little overdressed for the occasion.

'We've got to get her from here to the Port and away, without fuss, or anyone trying to stop us. We've also got to do it in a way that no one can prove it was us. No. We don't get her now. We wait.'

'What for?' The question was calm and held nothing other than mild curiosity.

'We wait until they leave the planet.'

'That'll be days.' Again a low voice expressing only a slight amount of frustration.

'We'll do it in space. No one will know anything then. It'll be clean and final. We know where they're going next and we can wait for them.'

'We need to board their ship.'

'I have an idea about that.'

'We might as well leave. I feel exposed here.'

He nodded. 'Just a few more days, Flint. Just think of the bonus.'

Barnaby watched from behind the floating curtain and tried to remain hidden. He watched the couple on the beach, knowing who they were. He wanted to call the security but wanted to see what they were doing. They sat for a few minutes then got up and left. As they disappeared from view, Barnaby called security and asked for a visual patch.

He sat on his bed in an anxious state. The cameras picked the couple up as they left the beach and walked straight to the Space Port. They were in the customs hut for only a short while before boarding their very small spacecraft. An hour later they took off and Barnaby breathed a deep sigh of relief. Perhaps they'd given up for good. An alarm sounded on his screen and it served to remind him to get ready for the next part of their adventure. It was something that timing was vital, and he had to make sure they were all in place for when it happened. He was not looking forward to this part of the journey at all.

The car dropped them off at the base of a very tall tower. There was a queue of people waiting to get into the wide lift that shot up to the very top of the tower, so high it was difficult to see its summit. Barnaby craned his neck until it hurt. He was definitely not looking forward to this! The four tourists eventually reached the front of the queue and entered the transparent lift with six others. The doors closed silently, and they braced themselves for the initial acceleration.

Wander felt her stomach leave her body as the lift leapt into the sky. She closed her eyes and hoped the major organ would return quickly. It did. With a slow deceleration, the lift glided to a halt, and the exhilarated occupants stepped shakily from its transparent floor. It was though they had been fired from a cannon into the air and had no visible support to stop them from crashing back to the ground.

Winnie had whooped with delight at the experience and turned to see Barnaby with his eyes tightly shut, hanging on to Mellianna. She was watching him rather than the ground dropping away below them. Wander was....being Wander.

The guide at the top was ushering his guests into the special car, arranging them into rows of seats and eased the planet's most prestigious visitors into the front row. Barnaby groaned and pushed his way in between the twins. He forced himself to stare out at the distant horizon. The sea, smooth and colourful now, was about to change.

The carriage was egg-shaped and completely transparent. Even the rows of padded seats appeared almost invisible. The bubble held forty people, who were talking nervously and fidgeting in their seats.

Winnie wriggled in delight and leant forward to grin at her sister. Barnaby in the middle saw the smile and his stomach churned even more.

She was so beautiful, it hurt. Mellianna sat and waited in trepidation. She knew what was coming too and wasn't too sure it was 'her kind of thing'. But it was an experience not to be missed and available nowhere else in the known Universe.

The guide stood at the front of the bubble and smiled. 'Welcome everyone. Welcome to the best natural ride in the galaxy, indeed, the Universe. What you're about to experience is quite unique and we know you'll enjoy it. It'll be recorded, and a gift presentation of the show will be offered to you later. Along with a sample of the wave water and a parchment certificate, made from of seaweed.'

A broad plastic grin showing teeth that looked like they were lit from within. 'So, are you all strapped in? Not that it matters too much, this whole car is buoyancy-aided, which means it's perfectly safe. It won't tilt or turn over. You'll feel no real effects from the sea itself. But, you'll be on the wildest surf ride ever. We have one minute before it's due, so I ask you to stop eating and drinking and get ready for the ride of your life. Enjoy.'

The host gave a delicate bow and a neon flash of his teeth, as many passengers applauded him. He sat in one of the rear seats, the safety harness snaked around his body. He silently waited.

Eyes from fifty thrill-seekers were straining to see from which direction the wave would hit them. Barnaby was alarmed about how high they were from the ground. Their height above sea level gave an indication of the ultimate force of the wave.

Far away, a small island sat on top of a regular volcano. At the same time every week it would erupt, sending masses of hot material up through the core and bursting into the sky. The resultant subterranean force started a wave that burst through the narrow opening of the island's bay and hurtled across the sea. As it approached the main resort, it hit the sea shelf and a huge Tsunami rapidly built up. It tore up the narrow canyon on the South side of the island. At the end of this canyon was the tall tower, perched on top was the bubble that would ride the wave far out to sea.

From the South, they could hear a rumble in the distance. All conversation ceased. Barnaby gripped the armrests until his knuckles grew white. He pushed his back into the seat and closed his eyes firmly. He hated water, especially so much of it.

Wander looked behind and with a gasp said, 'It's coming.'

Winnie glanced around, and her mouth dropped open. 'Prak! It's big.'

Mellianna turned her head and held back a scream. The wave was thundering towards them through the narrow gorge. As she watched, it

seemed to grow taller, already higher than their vulnerable looking bubble. She faced the front, gripped the sculptured armrests, closed her eyes and prayed.

The impact was softer than everyone expected. It swept the bubble off its resting place and soared through the air, buoyed by the crest of the gigantic wave. It remained upright and stable.

Because of the lack of movement, Mellianna risked opening her eyes. The sea rushed below them at a disconcerting pace. Ahead, on the horizon, a smudge appeared, an island rushed towards them. The wave pounded over the land as if it wasn't there.

Barnaby opened his eyes and stared in horror at the sea either side of him as it flashed past. The speed was overwhelming, coupled with the height they were above the sea. Part of his mind detached and realised the exhilaration of this spectacle, the other part thought of the dire consequences of equipment failure. His hands gripped even tighter.

Wander and Winnie were grinning in delight, leaning forward to see each other. Both noticed Barnaby's distress, and each placed a hand over his. He opened his eyes and tried to smile in gratitude. As one, they kissed him on the cheeks. A thrill rushed through him, greater and more pleasurable than this ride would ever be.

'If I survive, can we do more of this later?' he asked through gritted teeth.

Winnie whispered in his ear above the roar, 'Wait and see.'

More islands appeared, lunging towards them and being swamped by the gigantic mass of water. The speed was not diminishing, and its force sensed by all. There was an audible collective gasp, as on the horizon there appeared a tall mountain range, racing at them.

'Oh, no,' groaned Barnaby. He was rewarded by Wander kissing him full on the lips. Not to be outshone, Winnie did the same. 'Can we do THAT again later?' he was smiling now.

The guide watched with a smile as he waited for the intense reaction all his guests had, as they realised the mountain was taller than the wave. They were on a collision course and felt a sense of inevitable doom. An uneasiness crept into their body language as the passengers squirmed in their seats. It delighted the Wullen sisters. The thrill of the ride animated them, and they showed no fear or apprehension at the coming disaster, and their inescapable violent death.

The mountain range looked expansive and jagged. It advanced towards them like a row of purple predator's teeth. Within moments they

were upon it and the wave showing no sign of slowing. The bubble was heading for a nasty looking mountain peak. There were screams coming from some riders and Mellianna was unsure if to join them. The mountain was soon on them and a crash was inevitable.

In a graceful motion, the bubble detached itself from the top of the wave and soared above the mountaintop. Another collective gasp slipped from the audience, giving the guide his thrill for the day. The bubble rose and slowed, allowing the wave to rush beneath them, giving a view of its truly awesome size and power.

With the bubble stationery, all fear left the riders, apart from those with vertigo. The sight below was one of destruction on a major scale. The wave struck the mountain and burst into a cloud of foam. As the mass of moisture settled, the mountains reappeared in their former glory. The wave subsided into a broiling sea and washed back the way it had come.

Tourists onboard the bubble breathed again, and animated conversations followed nervous laughter. They watched, looking down through their legs and the translucent floor, as the sea returned to normal. Nature's show was over for another day.

'That was terrific!' said Barnaby with a smile.

'See, we said you'd enjoy the ride,' Winnie said with a grin.

'Oh that, well I can take it or leave it. I was talking about being kissed.'

For the first time in many weeks, the four travellers wanted to be together. They wanted to see the movie of their latest adventure and they wanted to watch it as a group. They gathered in Mellianna's rooms and watched the wall screen anxiously as the movie began to roll.

The whole journey was seen from different perspectives. They had stationed cameras above and below the bubble and followed its progress throughout the whole wave journey. Interspersed with the stunning views of an ocean in turmoil and huge mountain ranges dashed by waves almost as tall, were images of the passenger's faces and their expressions at each turn of events during the ride.

Wander watched in awe at the ride from this new angle. Winnie watched her sister and smiled to herself. Mellianna was hunched forward absorbing the experience all over again. Barnaby was hoping he could persuade the sisters to kiss him again.

The images faded from the screen and everyone wanted to run it again, except Barnaby, he wanted other things to happen that evening. They

outvoted him, and he sat through his turgid experience once more and tried to look enthusiastic.

As the last scene faded, the twins were looking drained. Barnaby suggested they all went for dinner together. He received a strange range of excuses why everyone wanted dinner in their rooms. He had a vague suspicion but knew his hopes for a night with the twins were fading.

As they left Mellianna's suite he stopped the girls and said, 'Look. I know I keep on about it....but, we had a couple of really great nights a while ago. Can't we do that again?'

He could tell by their faces it wasn't going to happen, but they let him down gently. 'Not tonight, Barney. But you never know.....' Wander walked away to her room and closed the door with a wink.

Winnie took pity on him and held his hand. 'We've come to see you more as a friend. You wouldn't want anything to get in the way to spoil that, would you?' He shook his head as she went on, 'We don't want you turning into a Jonno Huutch, do we?' Again he shook his head. 'See you in the morning. Another exciting day planned?'

Barnaby pulled himself together and put disappointment to the back of his mind. 'Yes. Something less heart-stopping, I believe. Good night and sleep well.' The door closed softly on her smile.

Barnaby had little appetite but showed interest in the meal as two waitresses entered his room. They placed the two trays on the bed and sat down beside him. It was clear they wanted to feed him again, and he resigned himself to go with the flow. He was too emotionally drained to fight anyone's wishes that night. As the two sirens quietly seduced him, he realised he didn't care. In fact, he welcomed it.

All four met after another breakfast in their rooms, looking like they'd not slept all night. 'Something less strenuous, you said. Right?' Winnie reminded Barnaby. He nodded and pointed the way to the hotel's Health Farm area.

'This is supposed to be a day of relaxation, ladies. I think we all need it. Especially after yesterday.'

'That was terrific,' said the twins together.

'First a massage. I'm sure we can all manage that.' He strode purposefully off, in what he hoped was the right direction.

The morning was taken up with a complete re-indulgence of the special techniques of the *Hotel Relaxed as a Newt's* Health farm. It was a

much-appreciated repeat of the previous day, By the time the lunch period had arrived, none of them were awake enough to stand up and walk out.

Barnaby insisted they all ate together for lunch and the three women had little energy left to argue. They also knew they might easily be succumbed by the undoubted talents of the waiters in the hotel. That sort of activity might undo all the muscle relaxant exercises the masseurs had just spent hours completing. All the girls half-heartedly agreed.

The meal was a quiet affair with the whole team feeling tired, yet relaxed. Food was served silently and with dignity. The diners watched the waiters to see if they recognised any of them. Their more intimate moments were remembered as the service continued, but none of the waiters or waitresses were recognised. For some that was a disappointment, for others a relief.

The food was excellent and detailed in the menu that was left on the table. Winnie collected the printed wallet and added it to her growing collection of memorabilia of the trip of a lifetime. The wine was smooth and fruity and yet not too strong they couldn't drink several glasses without falling asleep. But tiredness was a problem and as the meal drew to a close, the group broke up. An early afternoon sleep was suggested before they undertook the last of the adventures the planet was to offer them during their stay.

The light breeze billowed the flimsy pale curtains and filled the room with movement and scented air. Wander lay on her back and waited for her room service. The phrase had taken on a whole new meaning to her. Her clothes had gone in readiness and she lay naked on the bed. She watched the people outside walking the beach and felt sleep creeping in on her. This place certainly had an effect on her libido. Where was the waiter?

Barnaby lay on the bed and was asleep in seconds. The morning had only made him sleepy and a little too relaxed. He wondered if he could summon the strength to enjoy the last planned event of their stay. He would see when he awoke. The breeze filled his room and the scented air drifted into his lungs. The tiny airborne particles permeated the walls of his lungs and entered the bloodstream. They coursed through his body, dispersing and finding their way to the brain stem. Here they found their own routes to the various parts of the brain where they stayed and performed their duty. The brain was unaware it was being stimulated in areas new and often forgotten.

For each guest to the planet, it was different. Many went home after a visit with the feeling of renewed sexual energy. Others with a sense of

puzzling well-being. Many thought they were younger. Many wished they were. All went home feeling different to when they arrived.

Up in the hills and mountain ranges, plants grew and distributed their pollen. The spores took to the air and floated with the breeze. Filling the planet's surface with a mild narcotic that impregnated all who breathed the air. For many Human Derivatives, the effect was a sexual stimulation. In addition, the body often reacted by slowing down its pace. Calming the visitor into a sense of well-being and making them relax even more.

As Barnaby slept, he breathed in the spores and snored them out again. His dreams were increasing and becoming more sensual in their nature. He dreamed a lot about the Wullen sisters, reliving his two experiences with them in detail and with undiminished enjoyment.

Winnie was suddenly overcome with tiredness, fell onto her bed and was asleep before her hair hit the pillow. She dreamed too. Mostly of the boy back home, who she hadn't seen for many years. She relived her exploits with the once inexperienced young man. Those dreams too were vivid, detailed and memorable.

Her tight-fitting skirt and top dissolved as she slept, leaving her in a natural state. She turned in her sleep and smiled. Her hair closed around her head for her own comfort. Her skin temperature adjusted to a comfortable degree, so she could sleep unhindered by bodily distractions. Winnie's dream reached a climax, and she writhed on the bed. With a cry of pleasure, her body relaxed in complete rest. She slept a dreamless sleep and would wake sometime later completely refreshed.

Mellianna wanted to sleep, but it eluded her. She sat and watched the waves until her eyelids drooped. They had a hypnotic effect on her and she knew sleep was not far away. Their stay here was nearing completion and soon they'd be away from the blissful calmness of this beach. She knew she would miss it. She finally slept.

Wander fell asleep and slipped deep into a dream she would not remember. The door sounded, and her summoned waiter waited for a reply. And waited, and waited, until he could wait no more. She slept on.

The boat ride was gentle and without incident. Mellianna was still trying to understand her change of personality and wondering just how her mother would view her actions of the past few days. She decided her mother was too

far away to consider at this moment and dismissed it from her mind. Enough to say, she was looking forward to her evening meal in her rooms.

Barnaby considered the water. It was flat, and that was a bonus. He knew this next excursion didn't involve him actually getting into the water and that made him feel better. They were going to an island, and it was to be a land-based adventure. The sea stretched away into infinity, changing colour as it did so. Barnaby looked around him and sighed.

The boat skimmed the surface of the ocean and smoothly breasted the slight swell. The passengers might as well be on dry land for all the movement the craft made as it flew across the sea. The pilotless craft knew where it was going and aimed unerringly towards a very small island in the distance. Eventually, it rose into the air and flew above the sea, the passengers hardly noticing this change in elevation.

The three suns shone and reflected off the sea. One yellow, one green and one pink. Each adding its own reflective qualities to the surface of the sea, rippling the colours like a deck of multi-coloured cards. The unbroken colourful surface of the water added to the dreamlike quality of the scenery for this planet. Barnaby watched in fascination as the rippling colours changed and moved as if they had a life of their own.

He found it relaxing as he had for most activities on Esteron. He found himself drifting off into another sleep although he'd slept earlier. Wasn't there something about the less you do, the less you want to? He shook himself awake and looked out of the forward view portal. In the distance, he could see another of the many islands on this ocean. As they drew nearer, he felt the craft slowing and knew they had reached their destination.

From the air, the island looked heavily wooded, with tall trees pushing up from the dense undergrowth. The shuttle angled toward a small clearing and eased down for a gentle landing, the four passengers un-strapped themselves and headed for the door.

The air smelt different here. It was more scented and made Mellianna feel light-headed. The trees were a variety of greens and browns and in some places, bright primary colours showed. Flying insects were attracted to the colourful foliage. The air was full of bright-coloured wings. As the passengers stepped down from the shuttle, they were immediately surrounded by countless moving creatures. Not too dissimilar to butterflies, but of many more shapes and colours that could be imagined on Earth.

Wander held her hands in the air and they soon covered them in colour. Light touches by gentle creatures and she was smiling, her face soon covered too. The touch of these insects on her skin made her tingle. Their tiny feet were a two-way process system. They withdrew the toxins and impurities from a Derivative's skin and deposited minuscule amounts of

hallucinogenic fluid that slowly seeped into the skin and on into the bloodstream. As she submitted her body to the creatures of this island, she felt a calmness and peacefulness radiate from her very core. Within moments all four were experiencing the same “in touch” feeling with the nature of this land.

Winnie sat by a tree and slowly slumped into a prone position. Wander looked at her sister and saw only an infinite amount of coloured winged creatures covering Winnie’s body. It was a beautiful sight. She slipped to her knees and submitted to the swarm, feeling less and less anxiety and nothing but calmness and passivity. Her heart rates slowed, and she felt an inner stillness never before experienced. Both girls slipped into a light coma.

Mellianna recoiled as the insects touched her skin. She had an inherent fear of bugs and wanted nothing to do with them. She retreated into the car and slid the door shut. The clear surface of the car became the resting place for the insects as they tried to get to her skin. A moment of fear passed as she realised she was safe inside the vehicle. Outside she could no longer see her colleagues, they were obscured by a billion wings. Mellianna took a seat and waited. A tiredness came over her once again and she decided to take a nap while her friends were enjoying the experience she wished to avoid. She slept.

Two of the suns disappeared below the horizon and the third was sinking fast. The insects dispersed to find shelter for the night. By the time dusk fell the woodlands were empty and quiet. One by one, the Human Derivatives were awakening. As they stretched and shook themselves awake they became aware that the afternoon had gone, and they’d slept through it. As they shuffled back to the aircar, they shook Mellianna awake and settled into their seats.

In silence, the car lifted and headed back to the hotel. By the time it was in the air, Barnaby and Wander were fast asleep again. His head resting on her left breast. She didn’t notice, but neither did he.

Back at the hotel, Barnaby was aware his people were overly lethargic, and he consulted the receptionist who prescribed a pill for them to take. ‘It detoxicates you,’ was all he said.

Barnaby took one and began to pack his things in one large case. As his selection of suits were piled on top of each other his head began to clear. The pill now working. He stopped packing and visited each of the rooms to ensure they all took one of the pills. The two sisters were both asleep, again. He insisted he helped Mellianna, who seemed too groggy to understand what he was saying. He forced a pill down her throat and left her. She could sort the girls out. He had to contact the Space Port.

Barnaby was getting more frustrated as their planned time of departure arrived and passed. He desperately tried to get the Wullen twins to move their beautifully formed rear ends onto the ship. He understood their complaints. They didn't want to swap this casual and relaxed atmosphere for the cramped and extremely boring, *Are We There Yet?* Neither were they relishing another opportunity to get exasperated with each other's company for the long haul to the next stop on their journey. Barnaby promised them it would be different this time.

With the help of Mellianna, they woman-handled, the girls to their waiting ship. The luggage was efficiently loaded, and the passengers settled into their accommodation. The twins had refused to take the pills offered by Barnaby, so he saw this as an opportunity to get the girls settled into the chambers quickly, before take-off.

With a knowing smile at Mellianna he said, 'When they finally shake this off, they're in for a surprise.'

She smiled back at him and said, 'I can't wait, either.'

The captain of the '*Are We There Yet?*' sat back in her couch and felt the build-up to the take-off. It had been a relaxing few days, but they were finally on their way. She could now look forward to a boring few weeks in space. Although she appreciated the necessity of contract hires, Captain Ellon resented her precious ship being used as just a taxi.

Although she regarded it as HER ship, of course, it wasn't. In as much as most sentient beings that fly cars don't own them, it wasn't HER ship to do with as she pleased. To be more technically accurate, she wasn't a SHE either. Being of the squashy variety of alien rather than a bug, or Human Derivative, Ellon could wave all nine arms and still lose the argument it was HER ship. But as far as her professionalism was concerned, the *Are We There Yet?* was HER responsibility. It was also aptly named. Or so thought the crew and passengers.

The hull climbed out from the gravity of Esteron and entered the inky darkness of near space. Automatic controls set the course and the ship sling-shot around the planet and headed off into deeper space. The ship adjusted its level of gravity and the shipboard routine began for the two-week hike across the galaxy.

Ellon returned to her quarters and slipped into the welcoming bath of gel and would remain there until needed again. It could be days or even a week. The ship was automated and the crew well trained. They could even fly without her. That was a thought that had crossed her minds several times before. The ooze adjusted its temperature, and she felt the nutrients

seep into her leathery orange skin. That felt better. She could feed and get fat now they were on their way.

The crew settled into their own routine and the two on the bridge slipped into their own tubs and felt the instant benefits of the chemicals. There was a writhing of tentacles in ecstasy until they adjusted to the slow feed of enzymes and trace elements circulated to the vital organs in their soft bodies. This trip had a special significance and the whole crew were excited. Their next stop would be their home planet.

The warning siren began softly and grew in volume as the '*Are We There Yet?*' neared the distress beacon. The crew languished in their tubs and were slow to respond. By the time the captain was called, and she had dressed for the bridge, the distressed hull was almost alongside them. Twenty pairs of eyes looked at the stricken ship. They had no choice but to stop and see if there were any survivors.

Ellon consulted their ship's manual and executed the explicit procedures for answering a distress call. The ship had to dock first, then a member of the rescuing craft had to make an examination of the stricken craft and report back. The crew member given the task of crossing to the other ship did not look pleased with the assignment. His main objection was the effort required to get the isolation suit fitted. With all those arms and protuberances, it took over an hour.

Finally suited, the sacrificial goat moved through the umbilical link between the two ships. Outside, the stars were hard motes of compressed gas, giving no light and no hope of survival. A distant sun provided enough illumination to see one ship silhouetted against the backdrop of stars, but little more. The two ships, locked in a delicate embrace, temporarily sank through the galaxy towards an unknown destination.

The hatchway opened silently and smoothly. No rush of air in, or out. The crewman paused and took one slither inside the distressed craft. The ship was in darkness and he fumbled for the lights. They flickered on and bathed the control room in a bright white glow. It was empty.

'Try the crew's quarters,' suggested Ellon.

As he shambled through the narrow passageway, he did not notice a shadow move behind him. He entered the row of cabins and searched them quickly.

'The ship's empty, Captain.'

'Come back then. We'll just have to uggh.....'

‘Have to what, ma’am?’ There was silence. ‘Captain? What must we do?’ Further silence. ‘I’ll come back then, right?’

The bridge was silent. Captain Ellon and her crew members were busy watching the end of a large weapon, currently aimed at Ellon’s primary set of eyes.

‘Where are your passenger quarters?’ The man was dark haired and looked menacing. His accomplice was smaller and obviously a female of the derivative persuasion.

Ellon didn’t hesitate to wave three tentacles down the left corridor and the uninvited female moved quickly through the entrance. The man with the gun waited for her return. Ellon weighed up her chances of survival. This was a high-jack, a highly punishable crime. These people wouldn’t want any witnesses left, indeed, it was the ship they were after. Ellon could only hope they needed a crew to pilot it. The time slipped away.

A movement from the passageway startled them all. The female reappeared and glared at her colleague.

‘They’re not here!’

The man glared at Ellon and the gun moved to within a pigeon’s beak of her eyestalk. ‘Where are they?’

Ellon knew this was the turning point. The next few moments would decide on the fate of her ship, her crew and herself.

‘They’re not on board.’

‘Why?’

‘They cancelled the contract.’

‘What!’ from the female.

‘They cancelled the contract.’

‘Why?’ from the male.

‘Because the ship’s too small and they wanted the sleep facility for long journeys, which this vessel doesn’t have. We’re going home empty.’

Royale O’Really was still unsure. He’d made the decision but wasn’t sure it was the correct one. Bald E was certainly persuasive, perhaps that was exactly what was needed right now. It was his only option, and he’d taken it. He poured a large Eoopian vodka and swallowed it in one gulp. He hit the floor instantly and was would be thankful for the temporary oblivion.

Bald E sat at his desk and steepled his fingers. This was his kind of project and he looked forward to getting stuck into it. He was waiting for confirmation of his transport and took the time to consider his plan of action. It didn't take too long, he didn't have one. E was a firm believer in a face-to-face confrontation with any problem. There was no problem he couldn't resolve by talking directly to the protagonist. He looked at the list of five planets and began to research who he needed to get face-to-face with.

Royale awoke with his screen humming for attention. The face of an accountant swam into view and it looked like the screen needed adjusting. Slowly Royale realised it was himself that needed adjusting.

'Yeth. Hat do u ant?'

'Have you got a solution to our problem yet?'

Royale tried to moisten his mouth as he said, 'Yeth.'

'Can you give me a clue, or are you going to leave us in the dark again?'

'I can gif you a cue.'

After a pause, 'And that is.....?'

'We're taking with the other planets for a motional omp-romise.'

The head on the screen nodded and said, 'But no hard cash, as yet?'

Royale shook his head and regretted it. 'We won't heed ash. Ust god will.'

'Speaking of good will...have you told Babyloncity about the change of plans yet?'

Royale stopped himself from shaking his head. 'No. No need to worry him, yet.'

PART 5 - RAPTER

The sleep chambers were being activated, and the passengers were being revived. The good ship *Not so much a prison, more a way of life* was slowing down in time to avoid crashing into the planet of Rapter. It had been two weeks in space, but it had seemed like only a few hours to the sleepers.

Barnaby woke with a raging thirst and ravenous hunger. He headed for the dining area. He was surprised to find his three women already there and eating for five. They spoke little, still trying to get their mind and body back to normal.

‘Are we there yet?’ said Wander.

‘That was our last ship,’ Quipped Winnie. Both girls laughed.

Wander grinned, ‘This is sooo much better. Good idea, Barney.’ Barnaby waved his acceptance of the compliment.

‘And...we get rid of the media gangs too.’

Barnaby shook his head, ‘They’ll be waiting for us on Rapter. We need them as much as they need us. So you prefer to travel asleep, eh?’

The twins nodded and Mellianna said, ‘Time slips past without the boredom, and us, getting on each other’s nerves. Don’t you agree?’

Barnaby nodded. ‘True. But the ship’s more.....basic.’

‘Who needs luxury when you’re asleep!’ smiled Wander.

The smile turned his insides to a jelly again and Barnaby concentrated on eating as much as he could before feeling overly full.

Wander sat back from an empty plate and said, ‘What can we expect for this place then, Barney?’

Through a mouthful of food, Barnaby said, ‘Well.....’

Mellianna continued for him. ‘A more physical challenge, ladies. Mountain climbing. Water sports....’ Barnaby grimaced. ‘...and a jungle visit. Wild animals and all that. Hope you’ve had a good sleep because from now on it’s a lot more active.’

The ‘*Are We There Yet?*’ slipped through space on its course to nowhere. The bridge was silent, and the controls waited patiently for a command to get the craft moving again. Two life-tubs swayed with warm fluids as their

occupants moved with the slight roll of the ship. Both the tubs contained fluid that shouldn't be there. The lifeblood of the crew seeped out to joining the blood that gave them life.

Ellon rolled gently on the floor as the ship turned end over end through space. The gravity unit switched off and never to be used again. Her body slipped on the slick floor as her green blood still oozed from the hole in her head.

The umbilical still flapped gently in the vacuum and the suited crewman was adrift in space, watching his life source tumble away from him into the blackness. His calls were unanswered, and his mayday signal would be heard by no one.

Apart from the now lifeless crew, the ship was untouched. No alarms were sounding, no cry for assistance sent out into the void. The ship was dying and would be dead in several years as it struck the nearest sun it was being drawn towards.

A light moved across the heavens and disappeared quickly. The *Nasty Business* accelerated towards its next destination, hoping it would be the final stop-over. Its two occupants settled down for their prolonged sleep and let the ship do the work for them. It would've been a two-week haul to Rapter and they would miss their prey by the time they got there. Instead, Hugo Rock opted for jumping onto the next planet call of Nemerises and would wait for the Wullen sisters there.

It seemed like less than a day since they'd left their last hotel, but it was two weeks and half a galaxy away. This hotel lifestyle was going to become a burden, decided Wander. But once again the sumptuousness of the room pleasantly surprised her. It gave the impression the room had no walls, ceiling or floor – everything was covered in tapestry. Strange animals and beings crawled across the scenery, following unusual lifestyles and activities that were hard to understand. The colours were bright and vibrant, and the needlework was delicate and fine. But it was not her taste, but certainly comfortable enough for the few days they'd be there.

Wander eventually found the window and pulled the heavy curtains aside and looked out. The rolling hillsides were a change from the mass of water that had been her habitat for a while, and she smiled at the sunset colouring the landscape. She sat and watched the sun set, something she would never have done at home. She appreciated the beauty of these new horizons she was being shown, and her hearts raced with the excitement of the opportunity she'd been given. Wander felt calm and relaxed and hugged her knees as she looked out on a scene of such beauty it brought tears to her eyes.

Mellianna was experiencing the same rush of emotion. It was so.....romantic. The sun had gone, but its fiery light lingered in the sky. The colours changed and went through a whole new spectrum. She watched until the night closed in around her. Her room had no lights on and the atmosphere seeped into her mood.

Her meal was half-eaten and hadn't come with the willing, handsome waiters of the hotel before. She'd no idea what she'd eaten, but it was delicious and filling. The wine was awful, but she didn't care. The sunset was the highlight of the evening for her and it would have to do. She came away from the window and the curtains folded back into their place. The room was almost too dark to see anything.

'Lights.' Mellianna said and slowly the room glowed with a gold ambience. The heavy tapestries closed in around her. At once comforting and yet threatening. She stretched out on the bed and tried to think calming thoughts.

So far the professional side of the trip had gone well. With regard to personalities, they'd had a few problems, but nothing they couldn't handle. As far as it personally concerned Mellianna.....she was feeling lonely. She felt the depression creep in on her, aided by the weight of the wall furniture around her. She opened the screen and placed a call to home, on far-off Earth.

Barnaby was looking again at the Spaceport. Looking for a small scruffy ship that he dreaded to see. He was slightly relieved to realise it wasn't there. He checked with customs and they claimed not to have seen it, nor were expecting it. Barnaby turned off the screen and tried to find his way out of the oppressively decorated room.

Barnaby stood on the balcony looking out into the night, seeing nothing - as there was nothing to see. He breathed deeply and realised he'd become tense again. Barnaby was concerned about the two people dogging the Wullens and worried by the call he'd just made to FutureGames's office. O'Really had been deliberately brusque with him and tried to end the call several times. He didn't seem to want to know any details of the trip and certainly none of the problems. Barnaby shook his head as if it would clear his worries away. It didn't.

Winnie covered herself in the softest of the rugs and curtains. It was hard to tell where the wall coverings ended, and the floor coverings began. She rolled over, wrapping it completely around her body. It felt warm and cosy and reminiscent of childhood bedtimes. She closed her eyes and drifted into a light sleep. Dreaming of waiters and sunny shores.

The rock face stretched high into the air. It looked daunting and threatening. The dark blue surface hid its terrifying fissures and rodent infested crevasses.

‘You want us to climb THAT!’ Wander stated to anyone who was listening.

The climbing instructor was a female Derivative and smiled patiently. ‘It isn’t as difficult as it seems. This will give you all the experience of mountain climbing, without any of the traditional risks.’

‘It still looks pregging dangerous!’ Wander still seemed unconvinced.

The instructor tapped Wander’s belt and said, ‘This is a small anti-gravity unit. It’ll stop you falling. It’ll keep you tight up against the face and allow you to pull yourself to the top. Easy. Shall I show you?’

Wander was still trying to see the top but nodded, anyway. The instructor jumped into the air and hung at the rock face. She looked down and smiled at them before using her hands to pull herself upward. After she’d felt she’d given an adequate demonstration, she glided slowly to the ground again.

‘I’ll have a go.’ Barnaby stepped to the face and jumped. His heart raced, but he felt in control. This was far better than having waves and the seas push you around. You couldn’t drown halfway up a mountain. He looked down at the figures below him. He was interested to see the twins wearing something that pretended to be climbing clothes. Long trousers and long-sleeved jackets covered their more prominent features. He looked upwards and continued to climb to the first ledge. He clambered easily onto the wide flat surface and waved at his colleagues below.

Mellianna stepped forward and took a small jump to get herself started. She found the handholds easy to manage and soon began to feel exhilarated at the climbing experience. She joined Barnaby on the ledge, breathless and smiling.

‘That was fun,’ she said, looking down and waving the twins to come up.

Winnie stepped forward and with athletic gracefulness was soon standing on the ledge. Wander had no arguments left and so copied her sister. She too was a fluid blur as she scaled the rock face and stepped onto the ledge.

‘Not so bad, was it?’ Winnie said with a smile. Wander was looking up for the next ledge.

Moments later the instructor joined them and said, 'The next resting point is a little further. Take your time and be careful. I'll watch you all from here.'

The morning wore on as they climbed higher and higher. Each section was a little more difficult than the one before, but they were soon at the very summit of the mountain, looking over the valleys either side. It was a very beautiful sight and the whole group were silent. Each reflecting the achievement they'd just made and the wonders of the countryside and its magnificence.

'This is very romantic,' Mellianna said, looking at Barnaby.

'And high,' he added.

Wander looked down over the precipice and said with a grin, 'There's only one way to go from here.'

'Actually, there's two.' The instructor said. She pressed a part of the rock and a lift door opened. 'We'll stop for lunch on the way down.'

The view was superb. The valley stretched away below them, and birds wheeled around their vantage point. Their balcony had a sheer drop but didn't spoil the enjoyment of the meal. Their instructor joined them for lunch and gave a detailed description of the history of her planet and how tourism had become the sole source of income.

'We have a surface of mountains and rolling hills and very little else. Farming is useless, the soil is too poor. Few natural inhabitants of birds and livestock, so we can't eat the local life. So we rely on you people to come and spend your money here.' She silently toasted them with her cordial.

Winnie smiled as she said, 'And we're delighted to be here.'

Mellianna asked, 'Are you native to this planet?'

Roona shook her head. 'No one is. First settlers are now the first tourist guides of the adventure playground of the Universe. Not a bad life, really.'

'Are you married?' asked Mellianna, leaning forward.

'Was. He fell from the top of this mountain. The grav-pack failed. It happens.'

'Now she tells us!' Wander said, instantly regretting it. 'Sorry. I mean about your husband.'

Roona stared at the wild-haired vision in front of her and Wander thought the instructor was going to get angry.

‘Actually, it rarely happens. Only three times since we began the adventure services, twenty years ago. Ironically, or should I say thankfully, none involved the customers.’ She smiled and sipped at her drink.

Wander said quietly, ‘Are you going to remarry? Anyone in mind?’

Roona took a long time to answer and when she did, she seemed distant as if reliving her own story over again.

‘Like everyone else on Rapter, I came from another planet. I say “came”, more like forced to. I suppose it’s not unusual to some cultures, but I was bound by a contract and came to help my parents.’

‘That sounds like slavery! Was it?’

Roona shook her head. ‘Not as you probably understand slavery, no. However, on my planet, if you got into financial trouble you could always find a way out. This planet needed populating, they needed....help. They were recruiting. Perhaps that’s the best way of putting it. They recruited me.’

‘It still sounds like slavery to me,’ said Mellianna.

‘Anyway. I’m here now and it’s my life. I don’t suppose I would change anything if I could. But marriage isn’t in my future plans.’

The table was silent before Barnaby pointed down the valley. ‘Where’s our hotel from here?’

Roona pointed to the hill range to the right. ‘Over that range there.’

‘And we go down by lift, then by car?’ Wander questioned.

‘That’s one way.’ Roona had a sly smile as she said it.

The narrow slide looked flimsy as it disappeared down the mountain.

‘Is that safe?’ queried Mellianna.

‘No one’s fallen off it yet.’ Roona said. ‘Your grav-belts will stop you from hurting yourself.’

‘If they don’t fail.’ Muttered Wander.

Roona laughed, ‘Trust me. You’ll love this. You’ll want to do it again and you don’t have the time. So enjoy the single ride while you can.’

She eased herself onto the narrow wooden slide and looked behind her. ‘Sit behind me if you will. Legs either side of the person in front of you.’ They assembled behind her and they sat like a caterpillar on the top of the slide. ‘I’m going to let go now and we’ll slide to the bottom of the mountain. Don’t worry, the grav-units will help you. Here we go!’

She eased off the brake on her grav-unit and they started to move down the chute. As they picked up speed it became more exhilarating. They whooshed down the slope, zipping past trees and outcrops of rocks. Banking round boulders and hurtling through small tunnels.

Wander threw her hair into the wind and whooped in sheer delight. Winnie followed suit. Mellianna held her eyes tight shut and held onto Barnaby’s belt in front of her. She was too terrified to scream. Barnaby felt her grip and tried not to show his own fear. But he was aware of the extreme exhilaration he was feeling, and the fear gradually receded.

As with all successful roller coasters, the slide had a quiet moment when the passengers slowed down through the prettier scenery. Here they took a deep breath, a few believing the ride was at an end. They wound slowly through mountain scenery and headed for a ridge of trees in the distance.

‘Hang on,’ said Roona and laughed.

As they edged through the trees, it appeared they had run out of land. All they could see was the sky. As the slide tipped over the precipice, they had a moment to realise they were about to plunge down a sheer drop to the valley floor below. Without exception, everyone screamed. Winnie and Wander with delight. Mellianna in abject fear and Barnaby in surprise. Roona screamed because it was part of her job.

They accelerated down the slide, the friction heating their bottoms until the pain was almost unbearable. Both the sister’s bots did their job and cooled the skin down, but for Mellianna and Barnaby, it became bearably painful. Roona was wearing special underwear that reduced friction and padded the rear area.

For those that could keep their eyes open, they could see that they were falling down the side of a mountain, parallel with a waterfall. They were falling at the same speed as the water and it looked like a time frozen moment on film.

The recorders were hovering all around the slide chute and capturing every moment of the descent. They were in the best position to see the wildness of the Wullen’s hair as gravity and wind took the large flexible styling to a new dimension. It would be another movie to add to the collection from their tour of the Universe. Something totally unique and

would give pleasure and amusement for the rest of their lives, and the lives of their children. And so on.

They felt themselves rise from the slide and feared it would lift them out and away from the slim protection of the chute. Falling to their deaths on the rocks below. But they didn't. The grav-packs ensured they kept in touch with the chute and the downward descent began to level out and the upward gradient slowed them down further. They breasted a slight rise, surrounded by trees, and slid forward towards the welcoming sight of their hotel in the valley.

As they slowed to a stop, there were collective breaths of relief.

'Can we do that again?' asked Wander and Winnie together.

The meal had just finished, and all four were feeling in a mellow mood. They'd all agreed that the new way of transport was better for them as a group. Better for morale and had made their companionship immeasurably better. At this, Barnaby's hopes were raised again, and he'd tackle the twins later for a continuation of the special relationship they'd had at the beginning of this adventure.

They'd talked without pausing throughout the delicious meal, served by formal waiters, and it clearly expected them to take the culinary experience seriously. But they talked about rock climbing and the slide home. All of which they would be willing to do again. Apart from Mellianna who had reservations about those activities but kept quiet about her fears. The conversation lopped along and carried them forward into the evening. They decided not to retire straight to bed but try to have some fun. Did the hotel have evening entertainment?

The hotel was one of the few night-spots in the area. It had been long recognised in the entertainment business that tourists like to let their hair down. In the case of the Wullen twins, liked to let their hair "out". Way out. The venue was in the hotel's basement and was a relatively small room for the number of people gathered there. Mellianna winced at the volume of the discordant music and Barnaby raised his eyebrows questioningly. The sisters pushed their way through the crowds and took to the dance floor. It was no surprise to Barnaby that the floor cleared quickly, and the ring of people just watched two magnificent examples of human womanhood gyrate their stunning bodies to a rhythm that was previously undanceable.

Barnaby looked up and saw a few of the media machines and knew they'd be watching all evening. He'd have to warn the girls and bent to whisper the same warning in Mellianna's ear. She only just understood what he was talking about. The alien being responsible for selecting the music

had responded to the new floor show and had changed the music to a more driving rhythm and had wound up the volume until ears bled.

The twins were in their element, communicating silently with each other, arms and legs swaying to the music and dancing as if they were seducing one another. Members of the crowd tried to ease their way in to join the girls but found themselves frozen out. The sisters were not ready to be sociable yet. They wanted to dance first.

Barnaby and Mellianna moved as far away from the noise as they could and sat at a table that seemed unattended. A waiter served them drinks, which was different from what they ordered. The waiter must be deaf – not surprisingly. They gave up trying to talk to each other and waited until the twins decided they'd had enough entertainment for the night. That could be a long wait.

Sometime later the music slowed, and a more intimate form of Human Derivative expression was taking place on the dance floor. Barnaby watched as a succession of brave men danced with the girls and each one fell instantly in love. It wouldn't be long, Barnaby knew, before jealousy overcame common sense and there would be a macho struggle for attention. That was the time they would have to leave. But that hadn't happened yet. He turned to see Mellianna looking at him.

'Are you having fun yet?' Barnaby asked with a smile.

Mellianna looked wistfully at the dance floor. 'I'd like to dance.'

Barnaby stood up and offered his hand, 'Would you do me the honour of accompanying me on the dance floor, my lady?'

'Thank you, kind sir. I do believe I shall.'

Stifled of practice, they tried to match the other dancers in a slow, swaying rhythm, that didn't involve a lot of footwork. Mellianna kept his temp even and helped by avoiding his feet. He slipped his arm tighter around Mellianna's waist, both for comfort and support. She nestled into his body and rested her head on his shoulder. Something changed inside Barnaby.

One melody drifted into another and slowly the dance floor was clearing. Two men grimly hung onto the two girls, not wishing for anything to stop their physical contact with the loves of their lives. A glance passed between the sisters and both knew the evening was over. They'd had their fun, but that was enough. Another look passed between them and they detached themselves from their would-be suitors and moved in on Mellianna and Barnaby.

Mellianna smiled as the girls kidnapped Barnaby from her and to her surprise she did not feel a hint of jealousy. She returned to her seat and finished her drink, watching the two women dance with the one man. She saw the look on his face and felt very sorry for him. He was only a man and fell easily for their charms. While they were a distraction to him, he could look at no other woman. She sighed and finished his drink too.

Barnaby held an arm around each waist and let his head fall on their shoulders. He felt their bodies sway in time with his and felt them pushing closer to him like a sandwich. He was content and yet dissatisfied. Now was the time to ask them again if they might resume their relationship.

Mellianna watched Barnaby begin an animated conversation with the girls and knew the evening was over. She stood up and walked over to the trio on the floor and joined them in a group hug. 'I'm going to bed, ladies and gentlemen. Good night.'

Barnaby straightened up and said, 'Then I shall escort you to your boudoir, my lady.'

'Most kind sir. Goodnight, ladies.'

'Good night.' Came as one from the twins.

Barnaby slipped an arm around Mellianna's shoulder and walked towards the door.

'They said no again, didn't they?' she said with a hidden smile.

Winnie took hold of Wander's hand and walked from the floor and straight into three men who were waiting for them.

'A last dance?' The largest of the men stood in the middle and spoke with a humourless smile.

'Yes we just did, thanks.' Wander said and moved to pass him by.

He held out an arm to stop her and said, 'I meant - with me.'

Wander considered a kick, punch, finger break, or smart remark – and dismissed them all. She easily pushed past him and walked away. Winnie started to follow, and the arm held her back again.

'How about you? Would you like to dance?'

'I just did, thanks.'

Slightly more exasperated now, 'I meant with ME!'

Winnie chose to ignore him too and tried to walk past. The hand grabbed her arm and squeezed. Winnie felt no fear and ran through her

options as did her sister. The grip was firm and would not be easily broken, neither would the situation be resolved by pure conversation.

‘Sure.’ She said with the sweetest of smiles.

Slightly taken off guard, the man eased his hold and began to move towards the dance floor. Winnie moved in the opposite direction and hastened towards the door. The man’s face clouded in anger and looked at his friends, heightening his embarrassment. He hurried after Winnie and met a wall of flesh in his way.

The door guard looked down at him and said, ‘The lady’s left the building. It’s about time you did too. Goodnight, sir.’

The three men knew they were defeated and left without a word. The doorman watched them go and sighed. He wished he could ask for the last dance with either of those outstanding women.

Winnie and Wander lay on Wander’s bed and talked into the night. Dawn was just breaking as they drifted into a sleep and on through, past breakfast. The door chimed for their attention and Barnaby’s voice came through the sound system. It took him several minutes, but he eventually got them out of bed.

They assembled for their first adventure experience of the day, with both the sister’s too tired to stand. Roona was considering cancelling the event, the twins were in no state to do anything that required concentration. The twins looked at each other and both came to the same conclusion. Judicious rubbing of their thighs resulted in their eyes clearing and an alertness in the body language as the bots went to work on their bodies. Stimulating and correcting the physical effects of lack of sleep.

‘Let’s go,’ said Winnie with a large smile.

The water run looked dangerous. Barnaby stepped back and decided he was not going to do it. Mellianna looked at the sharp descent and drew back too. The sisters linked arms with both Mellianna and Barnaby and put on their best smiles.

‘You’ve just got to give it a try.’ They said together.

The departure dock looked innocent enough. A flat wooden stage, with a step down into the floating six-man sled. The water was calm, but Barnaby knew that wouldn’t last. He knew he shouldn’t step into the flimsy looking boat, but the girls had him by an arm each and forced him onboard. They sat either side of him and grabbed hold of his hands. He couldn’t escape. Mellianna sat behind, next to Roona.

The sled was set adrift and began to glide away in the gently moving water. Barnaby held his breath and felt Wander lean over and give him a kiss on the cheek. He turned and smiled. A sudden jerk on the boat made him turn towards the front and look in horror at the stream ahead of him.

The slow-moving stream meandered through some trees and then seem to disappear over the horizon. Barnaby just knew it would be another sheer drop, and he gripped the girl's hands until they cried out in pain. As the sled bobbed its way along, Barnaby felt a surge and realised with mounting horror that it was accelerating over the water. It was racing towards the precipice and was soon launching itself into the air towards certain destruction.

The ground fell away from them and a scream came from everyone's mouth. Their sled began to drop like a stone, their bodies rising out of the seats and they felt as if they were about to be cast free of the sled altogether. The Wullen sister's eyes and mouths were wide open, while Mellianna and Barnaby had theirs both shut. Winnie looked down and saw the water far below them as they hurtled down to meet it further down the mountain.

The grav-unit kicked in as the sled descended, so it dropped onto the rapidly moving waterfall as gently as a feather, the violence of the moving water then took hold, and it became a feather in a torrent. The passengers held onto anything that was clutchable, as the sled bounced off rocks and stones and even the water. More airborne than on the surface, it raced down the winding river at breakneck speed.

Trees rushed towards them, narrow openings between huge rocks threatened to crush them as they sped along. The water took another dip, the sled accelerating again to fly through the air, free from the drag of the water. They sailed down through the mountainside to land gently once again onto the quickly moving water.

Barnaby's hands were getting sore from holding on too tight. Roona had her arm around Mellianna, which gave her a modicum reassurance of safety. She risked opening her eyes, then shut them again quickly. Up ahead was a hole in the rock and they were headed straight for it. Winnie whooped, and Wander echoed the sound. They were encased in blackness and the rushing water roar echoed around them. The stream slowed, and they were soon floating gently and slowly through the cavern.

The cavern had small lights all around the walls and along the edges of the stream. It had a gentle and fairy like appearance and was strangely calming. Wander encouraged Barnaby to open his eyes and Roona did the same with Mellianna. Barnaby was trying to get his breath back and grateful for the ride being over. He didn't take in the careful effects of the cavern, he just wanted to get back to his room and lie on something that didn't move over water.

Mellianna reached in front of her and tapped Barnaby on the shoulder. When he turned around she said, 'Romantic, isn't it?' He managed a smile and turned to the front again. Up ahead it was pitch black, and he had a premonition of what would befall them in that darkness. The lights faded behind them and the roar of the water was increasing. This sent a thrill through the sisters and fear through Mellianna and Barnaby.

True to form, the sled dipped suddenly making Barnaby cry out and Mellianna scream. The sisters screamed as well and held the note as the sled fell in free-fall to their instant deaths. They burst from the tunnel into the light and made another gentle landing on the water. The mountain stream levelled out and slowed. They were soon floating towards the flat deck and the boat slowed to a stop for them to disembark.

Barnaby was the first out and helped Mellianna onto the deck. The twins sat in the sled and spoke at the same time, 'Can we do that again?'

Roona smiled and said, 'Of course. Stay there and we'll be right away. Anyone else?'

Roona was talking to an empty deck. Babyloncity and Nordstum had gone.

Barnaby lay on his bed and sighed with contentment. The thought of just lying here on a solid base had eased the trauma of the horrific last ride. It was all getting to him. It was nice to see all these magical places in the Universe, but when it came to facing phobias and fears, suddenly he could do without it. He was aware of his duty and aware of the media coverage, but there were some things he shouldn't be expected to do. It was beyond the call of duty. With a growing depression he realised the afternoon was also going to be a testing time for him, but at least it didn't involve water.

Barnaby chose to have lunch in his room, but ate little, His stomach was still churning, and he couldn't stop his hands from shaking. He desperately wanted to stay behind that afternoon but knew his presence was expected. Barnaby closed his eyes and tried to rest.

Mellianna was also contemplating pulling out from the next event and sat in her chair, watching the lighting change down the valley. The sun was past its zenith and shadows crept across the countryside. In the distance the mountains were strongly lit, bringing gold and black to the scene.

The wall called for her attention and she said, 'On.' Winnie and Wander beamed at her and asked how she was.

'I'm fine, thank you. Did you enjoy your second run down the waterfall?'

‘Great.’ They said as one.

‘We were thinking,’ said Wander.

‘Why don’t you and Barney take a break this afternoon. We’ll love it, but I’m not sure he will.’ Winnie finished.

‘Or, you.’ Added Wander.

Mellianna was tempted.

‘Barney didn’t look too good on the ride. To do two in a day....?’ Winnie frowned.

Wander continued with, ‘If you don’t go, he won’t feel so bad. You can....look after each other. What do you say?’

What could she say!

Roona expressed concern that two of her charges had failed to show up.

‘Are they unwell? Did I do something wrong?’

‘No.’ said Winnie.

‘No.’ said Wander. ‘They’re not exactly....adventure lovers. What’re we doing now?’

Roona shook off her disappointment and said, ‘We call it, “Boarding”. Come on, this way.’

A lift shot them to the top of another mountain. The view was breathtaking. The two girls stopped and let it seep into their memories for life.

Wander said in a whisper, ‘Whenever I’m depressed or frightened ever again, I’m going to remember this view. I will never tire of this memory.’

Winnie gripped her hand tightly and watched the slowly moving clouds in the far distance and the mountain ranges beyond them. The sky was pale yellow, turning to green and then dark blue. No work of art created by a sentient being could match this backdrop. Nor would they want it to.

‘I want a 3D of this, please?’ Wander asked Roona.

‘Everyone says that. It’s included as part of your gift package. When you’re ready?’

They stood at the very edge of the mountaintop. Below them was an incalculably vast drop to the valley floor. Roona seemed unaffected by the precariousness of their eerie stance. A dog’s tooth away was the drop and

Roona appeared to think she was standing in her kitchen. Both the girls edged away from the precipice.

Roona opened a small cabinet and pulled out three wide boards. She placed them on the ground and switched on the small grav-units. In a demonstration, she stood on one of the boards and slipped her feet into a raised slot. It seemed to fold around her and extend up to her ankles.

Roona bounced up and down to get a feel for the restraints before saying, 'These will grip you and stop you falling off. The grav-unit will keep you level and stop you from descending too fast. All you need to do to change direction and speed is to shift your weight. Like this. Forward goes faster....' She leant forward and then backwards, '...and this slows you down. Bend to either side and you will go that direction. Would you like to try?'

Winnie stepped forward hesitantly and stood on the board. She giggled as the restraints formed around her feet. 'It tickles.' She grinned at her sister. 'How can I get it to go up?'

'Say UP.'

'Up.' The board rose gradually, and she instinctively leant backwards, and it slowed to a stop, hovering at Wander's head height above the rocky platform. She leant to the right, and the board tilted and began to move forward. She adjusted her weight, and it turned the other way. A slight lean forward and it picked up speed and then back and she was back where she started.

'Easy?' asked Roona.

'Easy.' Agreed Winnie. 'Go on, Wan.'

Wander repeated her sister's efforts and found she was equally competent.

Roona edged her board towards the precipice and hovered above its very edge. 'Now we go for a ride.' With the minimum of rider movement, her board tipped over the edge and sailed downwards off the edge of the mountain.

The twins looked in horror, but Winnie was the first to move and followed Roona. Wander closed her eyes briefly and edged her board forward. A moment later the ground was rushing up to meet her. Breath rushed from her three lungs and fear gripped her hearts. She was not prone to panic attacks and before her mind went into shut-down, she remembered to ease backward on the board. It slowed her descent. She saw the other two rush upwards as she overtook them. As she slowed, they drifted down from above and within moments they were flying in a nearly straight line at the same height as each other.

The wind whipped past their faces and the girl's hair billowed in the rush of air. The sensations aroused and stimulated them. Roona was grinning like a child and thoroughly enjoying her job. In an act of bravado, the Wullens edged towards each other until they could hold hands. It was a brief contact as the buffeting winds forced them apart. Roona whooped with joy and did a somersault on her board. With a twinkle in her eye, Winnie decided to do the same.

Winnie tried to work out what was needed and decided if she did a forward roll on the board, it would follow her actions. She took a deep breath, most of which was sucked away by the wind, and rolled forward. The move was passable, but she imparted a slight lateral roll. Before she knew what had happened, she was tumbling end over end and out of control.

Roona plunged after her pupil and soon was in range to grab at the board. She could only hold on for a second or two, but it was enough to halt the spinning. Winnie quickly found her feet again and was relieved to be stable.

'I shan't try that again!' she shouted at Roona. The instructor gave her a thumbs up and eased away from her. Wander edged over towards her flying companions and they maintained formation as they fell through the sky.

Roona signalled for them to slow down and they gradually decelerated until they were falling at the same speed. 'You might want to make the ride last a bit longer.' Shouted Roona. 'Take the opportunity to see the mountains from a different perspective.'

They glided through the air silently and peacefully. Winnie had never felt at peace like this before. She could see from Wander's face she was experiencing the same inner calmness as herself. Roona had her eyes closed and was in another world. This time of her own choosing.

The ground was becoming very distinct now and all three women knew their glide was nearing its end. Roona looked for the landing spot at the far end of the valley and pointed. 'We need to get over there. Race you.' She leant forward, and she flashed past the two girls. Wander did the same and Winnie followed immediately.

The pace was furious and being on a perilously small flying machine, the exhilaration was enhanced even further. Despite their rapid pace, they felt safe now and in control of their machines. Wander leant ever further forward, trying to catch the professional up front. She was gaining ground and her sister was right behind.

The end was up ahead, and sheer cliffs rose from the valley floor. A small building marked their destination, and they were now just skimming above the level valley floor. Wander leaned further forward. Roona was

aware of how close her pupils were and just how fast she needed to go. She looked for her marker and as it whizzed past, she slowly and imperceptibly eased back on her speed. She disguised it by acting like she was still leaning forward, but a subtle weight shift allowed her to look like she was trying hard but really easing off. As the building hurried towards them Wander was alongside and grinning at their instructor.

Roona pulled a face like she was still trying to win and grimaced as Wander slowly moved into the lead. It took them by surprise when Winnie eased in front of them both and made an almost perfect braking stop, to hover above the wooden landing platform at the end of the valley.

Both sisters were laughing uncontrollably and Roona laughed along with them.

‘How do we get out of these?’ Winnie said breathlessly.

‘Say “Down” and then “Release.”’ Roona said stepping off her board.

‘Again?’ said Winnie.

‘Not this time.’ said Wander.

Barnaby awoke with a start. It took him a moment to realise the ringing was not in his ears but came from the door. ‘Open.’ He said, too half-asleep to get up and open the door himself.

‘Can I come in?’ Mellianna entered cautiously.

‘Sure. Sorry, I’ve been asleep.’

‘You need some fresh air, Barnaby. I have just the thing.’

The car was open-topped and rested on the ground outside the hotel. ‘I don’t see why the girls should have fun and us not. Fancy a ride?’ Mellianna grinned at the puzzled look on Barnaby’s face.

‘Well....er....’

‘What else were you going to do?’

‘Nothing. Okay. Let’s go.’

They eased into the padded seats and Mellianna sank back into the reclined position. ‘Go.’ She said confidently. The car rose into the air and headed for the mountains.

Their progress was graceful and peaceful as they climbed high into the first mountain range and descended into the valley on the other side. The air was clear and free from other traffic and they were able to sit back, relax

and make quiet conversation. Their car banked and turned down the valley, gently banking to cover both sides of the valley's edge.

The vista of the mountains rose either side of them and their place in the cosmos looked almost insignificant.

'Romantic, isn't it?' said Barnaby.

'Yep.' She said, feeling his hand stealing into hers. She held her breath, looking out of the car at the slowly moving scenery. The moment of silence stretched on for minutes until she gently squeezed his hand to remind him she was still there. He turned to her, and she looked at him. Slowly their lips came together, and they gently kissed.

When they spoke about the ride in the future, they admitted to not recalling the rest of it. At least, not the scenery part. But for both of them, it was a ride to remember and looked on fondly to their dying days.

Their shuttle was due to leave in a few hours' time and they couldn't be late as it wouldn't wait for them. It had a schedule to maintain, and they were lucky the next stop was where they needed to go. Barnaby had been particularly pleased with his luck at finding a transport at such short notice. But felt a pang of guilt at the additional cost for the four of them. However, he deemed it necessary for the success of the project and felt he could explain that away without too much of a problem.

Barnaby was distracted and still wondering what had happened on the car ride. Suddenly Mellianna was part of his life and many of the everyday worries seemed of little importance. However, he had a job to do and he would do it to the best of his abilities. He began to herd his charges together for the journey.

They settled into their cabins quickly and all opted for the sleep period to begin immediately. As they said their farewells to each other, the twins noticed a change in their two other colleagues. There was a light in their eyes that wasn't here before. At least, not in Barnaby's. There was an unspoken look passed between the twins and they knew something was going on. At least, it would take the pressure off them from Barnaby.

They slipped into the sleep easily and gratefully. It had been a busy time having fun on this planet and the next held unknown adventures too. They needed to be fresh and ready when they arrived. Barnaby held Mellianna for a last kiss before letting her go into her cabin. It would be a three-week journey but seem like three hours. It was still too long for them to be apart.

The ship was finally prepped and lifted from the small Spaceport. It circled the planet once and headed for the black regions of space. Its next destination far away. It held mysteries that only time, and distance would resolve.

Bald E turned off the screen and punched the air in delight. 'Got ya.' He shouted to the empty room. He did his celebration dance and turned the screen back on to call Royale O'Really.

'Royale, my friend. I just got you're sixth planet. How about that? I told you, didn't I?'

Royale nodded and smiled, 'Well done. Thank you. Four more to go.'

'I'm working on it.'

'I'm pleased to hear that.'

'How's the trip going, my friend? All well so far?'

Royale took his time in answering and finally said, 'Fine.'

E realised this wasn't the case and decided to push a little harder. 'What's wrong?'

Royale shrugged and said, 'Budget. It's always budget.'

'For instance?'

'For instance...Babyloncity has rented another ship. Well, not rented....he's booked passenger tickets to the next planet. We had a perfectly good, and cheap, special rental and he cancels this, to spend more on tourist tickets. The cost is.....well, a lot.'

E smiled to himself as he said, 'So you haven't told him yet?'

Royale smiled at the screen. 'Not yet.'

'You'll have to, eventually.'

'Only when you fail.'

'IF I fail.'

'If you fail.' Royale conceded. 'Let's hope you don't.'

PART 6 – NEMERISES – DETOX PLANET

The planet lay directly ahead of the ship but couldn't be seen from space. It was black on a black background, with no light to make it stand out from the void. As the shuttle entered its orbit, it became more apparent how dark this world was. Four faces looked through the same porthole and wondered why it was one of the modern Wonders of the Universe.

The shuttle dropped through the weak atmosphere and touched down gently on a circular area of bright lights. Once landed, the lights went out, and the ship began to descend onto the planet surface on a gigantic lift. By the time the lift had reached its destination, the passengers were ready to disembark.

Mellianna and Barnaby emerged from the hatchway holding hands. This did not go unnoticed by the twins, who withheld comment. As they glanced around their new home, it looked particularly dreary and functional. There was a musty smell they could almost touch. It was a hanger and pretended to be nothing more. A door ahead offered a promise of better things ahead.

The sixty passengers and crew moved toward the door and it opened to reveal a brightly lit foyer on the other side. To the twin's surprise, a bug greeted them. The girls had seen bugs before and were only taken aback because it was so unexpected. They were not prejudiced against bugs; it was just that, so far, they'd been on predominantly Human Derivative worlds only, and now it was the bug's turn. Winnie did puzzle over this turn of events. She'd thought the selection of the best experiences in the Universe were voted for by Derivatives, so had expected them to be Derivative worlds. The Universe was full of surprises and this could be another of them.

'Welcome to Nemerises. My name is ...unpronounceable, so call me George.' He cackled at his own joke and waved several antennae at his guests. 'You'll forgive me if I don't remember who you all are by the end of your stay. You Derivatives all look the same to me.' Another outburst of laughter and crackles from his mandibles.

Wander pressed her ear and felt the small implant below it. The Universal Translator was working, but the bug's jokes weren't.

'In a moment you'll be taken to your accommodation. But for now, I would like to tell you a few things that might be helpful to your stay. I'm sure there are questions you're already asking yourselves. Well, that's normal. Perhaps I can answer them before you need to ask and if I miss any, you can ask afterwards.'

George shifted his crusty body and turned on its eight legs, to try to cover the whole assembly. It was at least as long as Wander was tall, but she found it slightly disturbing to look at for too long. She looked at her sister who returned the look of uncertainty.

‘Atmosphere. I’m sure you wondered about it. Yes, we have one.’ Another laugh. ‘But it won’t be to your liking. So we’ve built a special section that is comfortable to you Derivatives. Food? We have that as well. Ha, ha. But we also have the food you like to eat. Gravity.....you can tell, can’t you? It’s a compromise from most of your planets. Little light for some, others heavy. Don’t let it get you down. Ha, ha!’

Once more a shuffle around so everyone could see its six eye stalks. ‘Yes. You can drink the water but try our Whisky while you’re here. Not too much, we don’t want you drunk. You’ve only got two legs, unlike us. We wouldn’t want you legless. Ha ha.’ Another shuffle to a new audience bank.

‘Please feel free to make yourself at home here. We truly welcome you and perhaps we might like to visit your world at a later date. Hey, there goes the neighbourhood. Ha, ha, ha, ha.’ A few of the passengers were getting the message he needed some sort of feedback and were trying to laugh. Wander looked across to Barnaby and saw him just looking at Mellianna.

‘So, are there any questions?’ George asked snapping his claws. There was an uneasy silence. ‘Okay. If there are things you would like to know, stop any of us residents. You can’t miss us. Ha, ha. We’re quite friendly and don’t bite. So, this way please and enjoy your stay on Nemerises. *The planet of change.*’

With trepidation, the adventurers entered the long white tunnel and followed the scuttling George. There were branches to the tunnel, and all seemed to be sealed off. Eventually, they came to one that was open, and George hurried into the next tunnel. Ten minutes later they were in another large white room, devoid of any furnishings or decorations. It was so white, they couldn’t see where the ceiling started, and the walls began.

‘This will be your assembly point. As you can tell, it’s a warren down here. You’ll soon get lost if you wander around by yourselves. Please, always have a guide wherever you go. Thank you. Now, your rooms are all off this chamber and if I can point out a few points of interest.’ He waved his mandibles and pointed to imaginary places on the wall. ‘There. Ha, ha.’

Gradually a dark area appeared in the wall and an elliptical opening formed as they watched. To their surprise, a luxurious room could be seen through the opening. It would not have looked out of place in the finest of hotels. Columns formed the walls, giving a grand effect to the circular room. Chandeliers hung in profusion from the domed ceiling, casting additional soft light into every corner. The carpets were rich and dark. Paintings in gilt

frames adorned the gaps between the columns. Between some columns were rooms, all numbered in strange hieroglyphics. A piece of paper was taped over each label, with the name of the temporary occupant. Wander and Winnie found theirs next to each other. To one side was Mellianna and next to that, Barnaby.

‘She you here in an hour?’ Winnie said to Barnaby.

He answered, ‘Make it two.’ He went into his room, taking Mellianna with him.

Barnaby hardly looked at the room as he went straight towards an anti-chamber that housed a large circular bed. Dragging Mellianna with him he dived onto the counterpane and she fell on top of him. She held her face close to his and their breath was racing. Silence was between them as they looked into each other’s eyes.

‘Why did I miss it for so long?’ said Barnaby quietly.

‘Miss what?’ she asked.

‘You.’

They kissed, and that led onto an entanglement of bodies that stole away hours of their lives. Time slipped away and went unnoticed by the new lovers. Sometime later they lay exhausted and yet unfulfilled. Before they could start again, there was a chime from the still open doorway.

‘Finished?’ asked Wander. Mellianna flushed bright red and ran for the bathroom. Barnaby coloured too and covered his naked body with the counterpane.

Winnie put her head around the door and said, ‘Too late. We’ve already seen it. But I think you’d better get dressed. We don’t want to frighten the bugs.’

There was now a large group of visitors waiting in the overly decorated lobby. Barnaby was the last to enter the room.

The bug waiting patiently in an alcove realised they now had a full complement. ‘Attention, everyone. Please listen and I’ll tell you what you can expect from today. You are offered a unique opportunity and we know you’ll be surprised.’

‘So, what is it, George?’ a voice sounded from the back.

‘No, I’m not George. He’s the one with the big...mandibles. Lucky prak. Call me...Georgina. I’m a lady bug.’

‘So, what is it, Georgina?’

‘Wait and see. This way, please.’

With a scrabbling sound from her ten legs, she turned and headed through an archway and the forty intrigued guests followed. More tunnels and finally another open circular room, full of recliners. It had a low-lit quality that was more restful than the rest of the harsher lit communal rooms.

Georgina stood in the centre and began her speech, ‘Have you ever wondered what it would be like to change your gender? If you’re a man and wondered about being a woman? Would you like to try that for a day, or two? You ladies, ever wondered what being a man would be like? Now’s your chance.’ There were now puzzled looks on the faces of her audience. ‘Any volunteers?’

Wander pushed her way to the front.

‘Wan!’ hissed Winnie.

‘I’ll have a go,’ said Wander and added quietly, ‘It is safe isn’t it?’

Georgina nodded her mandibles and spoke for clarity. ‘Completely.’

‘And you CAN revert me exactly as I am now, can’t you?’

‘Completely,’ said Georgina with an elaborate wave of another mandible.

‘Go on then. Just don’t bugger it up.’

Wander awoke in her room. Winnie was seated at the bedside and Mellianna looked down with a pained expression on her face.

‘We’re not covered for this kind of experimentation!’ muttered Mellianna.

‘You feel all right, Wan?’ Winnie’s concern was on her face.

Wander took a moment to figure out how she felt. ‘Okay. I think.’ Mellianna winced at the deep voice that came from Wander’s throat. ‘How do I look?’

‘Beautiful.’ Answered Mellianna, ‘But in a totally different way.’

‘Like our brother.’ Was Winnie’s contribution.

Wander tried to sit up and failed. She made it at the second attempt, aided by the two women. ‘Can I see?’

‘Screen on,’ said Mellianna. ‘This room, only.’

The screen displayed the whole room and Wander could watch herself walking towards it. As she approached, her image grew clearer and her mouth dropped open in amazement. She had become a man.

‘Not bad. Not bad at all. I could fancy myself.’ Wander grinned, and it thrilled her to see the handsome smile. ‘Wow!’

‘Change back, Wan. Now!’

‘Wait, a minute. I wanted to know what it’d be like. I haven’t started yet. Where’re the women!’

‘Wan! Don’t go there!’

‘How about you, sweetness? Fancy some time with a real man?’ Winnie backed away, fearful her sister’s playfulness would go too far again.

Wander turned to Mellianna, ‘How about you, my pretty?’

Mellianna blushed and said, ‘Under normal circumstances, I’d be....considering it. But you’re.....Wander.’

‘Not for a while, I’m not.’ She looked at the shirt, trousers and jacket they'd given her to wear and she eased them off. She stood naked in front of the screen and muttered, ‘Not bad. Not bad at all. Very generous. But does it work?’ To Mellianna she added, ‘Changed your mind?’

‘Nearly. I must go. Have fun but be careful.’ Mellianna ran from the room and hurried to Barnaby.

‘Wan! You’re frightening me.’

‘But I’m exciting the prak out of myself. I need a woman and I need one now!’

‘Well, you can’t. You’re a....woman, really. Still a woman!’

‘I want to know what it’s like, Win.’ Wander’s voice was soft, yet urgent. She held her sister’s hands and looked into her eyes. ‘I’ll never get this chance again. What’s so wrong about it?’

‘Where do I start?’

‘With the truth. It’s a golden opportunity! Would you deny me it?’

‘Wan.....I don’t think.....’

‘I’m going to do it, anyway.’

Winnie shook her head as she said, ‘We’re on a planet of bugs. Where are you going to find a woman willing to take you on? A woman in a man’s body.’

Wander's smile was disturbing and with a sudden clarity, Winnie knew where she'd find someone.

'Then I'm coming with you. You'll only get in trouble if I don't.'

Barnaby lay on the bed with Mellianna on the bed next to him. A sheet covered each of them and they felt the machines working underneath. Mellianna turned her head to see Barnaby. 'Not exactly romantic, is it?'

He smiled, 'Not at all. I can't even hold your hand.'

'Do you think they'll push us together?'

'As long as they don't push us apart.'

'Do you think this really works?' asked Barnaby with a wry smile.

It's supposed to. The bots remove all the toxins and impurities in your body. They'll reduce your fat levels and improve your health immeasurably. What more can you ask for?'

'To be pushed nearer to you.'

There was silence for a moment. 'I wonder where the girls are?' said Mellianna almost to herself.

'Wherever they are, they'll be in trouble,' said Barnaby knowing it was probably true.

Winnie was embarrassed to be there, but Wander insisted, and the man once known as Roberto, now called Roberta, didn't mind either. The two people who had changed sex for a day were experiencing what lovemaking was like for the other sex. They seemed to be enjoying it and Winnie wished they wouldn't enjoy it quite so loudly.

It had taken an hour to find out who else had taken the sex swap and minutes later a man had been found who was now a woman. Both wanted the exact same thing and an hour later they were still at it. There wasn't even a window to look out of. If there was it would be a black landscape at night. Winnie was getting eager to be somewhere else. When were they going to finish?

The bed was stable and didn't fully reflect the amount of energy being spent on its surface. Both parties were trying every position they liked, to find the other person's point of view and how it felt. This was not going to be a short session. Winnie sidled towards the door and slipped out at the peak of one of their momentous outbursts of joy and satisfaction.

Winnie looked for Mellianna and Barnaby and found a very friendly bug who told her they were in the Detoxification section. The bug even led her to it. Winnie stood and watched the twenty or so people wrapped in sheets, just lying there being detoxed. She saw Mellianna first and moved over to her.

‘How’s it going?’ Winnie said.

Mellianna answered, ‘Fine. Where’s Wander?’

‘Oh.....she’s just coming.’

‘You should try this, Winnie. It’s painless and will be good for you.’

Winnie shook her head. ‘I’ve got my own bots that do all that stuff. Enjoy it yourself. Have fun. I’ll just....go and see where she is. See you later. Hello, Barnaby. All right?’

‘Fine. You?’

‘Great. See you later.’

‘Later.’

Winnie entered the room cautiously and took heart from the silence. As she poked her head around the corner, she saw the bed and two people almost asleep lying on top of it. Both were naked and unmoving. She crept back into the main part of the room and heard Wander’s new male voice ask quietly, ‘You sure you wouldn’t like to join us?’

Winnie shook her head and turned on the wall to watch a programme. A moment later she felt a body next to hers. She saw the reflection on the screen and knew it was Wander. Hands rested on her shoulder and she looked up and smiled. ‘How was it?’

‘Mmmm...different. Somehow not so good. But certainly different. Of course, we now need to test it the other way. So when we’ve reverted, we’re going to give it another go.’

Winnie groaned, ‘You don’t want me there for that too, do you?’

Wander kissed the top of her sister’s head, fighting her way through the mass of hair. ‘No. I just wanted you there this time because I...well, was unsure. That’s all.’

Winnie looked up at her sister’s face and said seriously, ‘Now you’ve done it. Can I have my sister back again?’

The ordeal was soon over. Mellianna and Barnaby rose from their treatment tables and looked in the mirrors provided for them. They certainly lookedhealthier. A little slimmer too? Something was working. Mellianna pressed bits of her body in an exploratory manner, Barnaby helped her out. They began to laugh.

They returned to the isolation of Mellianna's room and kissing led on to other things, eventually leading to them laying exhausted and dreamy in a state of bliss. They could have been on any planet in the Universe, but they were only aware of each other.

'I don't know what they did to us back there, but I certainly had more energy and, well....stamina, than before.' Barnaby said with a soft smile.

'Me too. Did you think that was better than before too?'

'Hummm. Give me a moment and we'll do another test run.'

Mellianna rolled over to kiss him, her face a kangaroo's eyelash away from his. 'I've been thinking.'

Barnaby's heart beat faster. This was a new relationship, was she getting serious already? His mind raced. They were having a good time together, weren't they? Why spoil it? Sure, he had no intention of having his wicked way with her then running away. But, these things....took time. Wait a minute, it was she who made a move on him. She'd been pushing from the start. All this 'It's so romantic', prak. He turned and looked at her in a different light.

'What about?' he asked as casually as he could.

'Us!' his heart beat faster. He looked at her eyes. They were very beautiful but seemed far away at that moment.

'Us?'

'Yes, us.'

'What about....US?'

'Would you say we're compatible?'

After a slight hesitation, 'Of course.'

'Sexually, I mean.'

'Of course, yes.' There was a moment's silence. 'Why?' he had to ask.

'I was just thinking.....'

'About what?'

‘Us.’

‘What about US!’

‘Have you ever thought....about.....’

‘What!’

‘What it would be like to make love to a man.’

Barnaby sat up. This was worse than he thought. ‘You’re not going to say you’re really a man, are you?’

She burst out laughing, it was a wonderful infectious laugh. He had to smile, but it hid a growing concern. ‘No, of course, I’m not. I’m all woman, sweetheart.’

‘Then what on Derimon are you talking about?’

‘Us.’

‘I think we’re back where we started again.’

She kissed him firmly on the lips and said, ‘I’ve often wondered what it would be like to make love like a man.’

A slow dawning came into his eyes and he smiled at her. ‘You want to try what Wander’s just done, don’t you?’

‘Don’t you?’

‘I hadn’t thought about it.’

‘Liar!’

‘I hadn’t! Not until Wander had a go.’

‘And now?’

‘Now what?’

‘And now....would you consider it?’

He looked at her seriously. ‘You want to don’t you?’

She gave a slight nod. ‘What a golden opportunity we have here. We’ll always wonder what it would be like if we didn’t. Okay, I’m not assuming we will necessarily have a long relationship, but we would still wonder. Wouldn’t you?’

He took his time in answering. ‘If it’s something you want to do, then I’ll go along with it.’

‘Thank you, sweetie. But had you thought about it?’

He grinned and said, ‘Yes.’

The bug was very helpful and polite and appreciated the urgency of their request. He did, however, have to go through all the reassuring factors that their change of sex was not permanent and could be as temporary as they wished. Holding hands at the ultimate decision point, both Mellianna and Barnaby said, ‘Yes’.

Once again they lay side by side under separate sheets. A bug manipulated the equipment and was quietly humming to himself. Mellianna became more excited as Barnaby became increasingly unsure.

‘I’ve got more to lose than you with this.’ He said quietly.

‘You’ll get them back.’

‘I sincerely hope so.’

The bug made a polite cough, which sounded more like a sneeze and said, ‘This procedure is very standard. We do it all the time. Everything will return to normal, I assure you.’

‘Have you had this done to you, then?’ asked Barnaby with unveiled curiosity.

‘Not this procedure, no. But we, here on Nemerises, pride ourselves on our skills in this field of work. Anatomical correction. I used to be like you, a Human Derivative, but now look at me!’

Both Mellianna and Barnaby looked open-mouthed at the hard-shelled, mandible waving creature before them. His eyes on stalks showed no emotion and the false voice box was needed to interpret the clicks and scrapes that normally served as conversation.

‘You CHOSE to look like that?’

The bug leaned close to Barnaby and tried to whisper, ‘Don’t knock it until you’ve tried it. There are a lot of advantages to being a bug, I can assure you.’

Mellianna stood by the side of the bed, softly touching her new genitalia. Wondering at the texture and weight of her new toys. Barnaby lay in the bed, still covered with a sheet, missing his familiar appendages already. He was totally unsure how this experience was going to work out.

‘You have to think like a woman now. And I have to think like a man. Okay?’ Mellianna smiled at him. It was disturbing to imagine kissing

another man as he would a woman. He studied Mellianna's face and could see clearly it was her in there somewhere. But the face was that of a man. She leant forward and kissed him gently.

The anatomical correction was not merely physical. Something had happened to his mind too. His perception now rapidly changing. That kiss really meant something. A wave of desire washed over him, and he reached for the man of his dreams and kissed him deeply.

Mellianna felt strange stirrings and was surprised at the intensity of the emotion coursing through her. It seemed her desire and mind were split into two. The lower portion became more dominant and dictated her actions. She had one overwhelming desire, and that was gratification. As if she'd been a man all her life, she took control and began to initiate the passionate part of their lovemaking.

Barnaby wanted to hold back a little, he was enjoying the all too brief foreplay and yet fascinated by what it would feel like when.....he almost screamed in delight. He watched Mellianna's eyes glaze over and the pure animal instinct now taking her over. He had the time to observe these things and yet felt the build-up within his own female body.

The movements were being increasingly exaggerated, and Barnaby tried to calm down the gyrating form on top of him. It would not slow Mellianna. Something was driving her, and it appeared more important than anything else in the Universe. Barnaby recognised the sounds and the urgency and knew the end was near for her. He tried to help and move with the rhythm and with a last and powerful push, Mellianna went limp over his body.

She was completely spent, nothing left to give on the physical, or emotional side. Barnaby noticed he hadn't even begun. He held her close and listened to her breathing slow down to normal. He would wait awhile and see if they could do it again, this time, perhaps, he could get the full experience himself – herself.

The evening meal became a rather bizarre affair. The four travellers sat at their own table and were oblivious to the buzz going around the large dining room. It seemed all the guests were dining that evening at the same time, for the room was crowded. Bugs scurried around serving dinner but were polite, courteous, and efficient.

The bizarreness came from the four at the table. Three of them were no longer of the same sex as they arrived on the planet. Winnie was distinctly thrown off balance by this and had little contribution to the conversation for the first part of the evening. A general discussion took place

examining and comparing the benefits and disadvantages of being of the opposite sex. Winnie made her excuses and left the table.

Winnie stood in the corridor and regretted this planet's lack of proper surface. She wanted to see some sky and landscape. Everything here was underground and in tunnels. It probably suited the bugs, but it wasn't for her. Winnie wanted to move on. She'd seen the planet, but it had held nothing for her at all. She was getting depressed. She wandered around until she found her room and sat in front of the screen. Winnie booked a call and waited for her mother to answer.

Mellianna was surprised at herself. She was describing the intimate details of her activities with Barnaby, the woman, and getting aroused by it all over again. Wander was in full sympathy and could detail her own experiences with her new-found friend, who she waved to occasionally across the room.

Barnaby joined in the conversation when he was allowed to. Although the conversation was male-dominated, the mindset was still that of women. He felt the confusion in his mind as the old, and more familiar male thoughts contradicted with the newer and unusual female thoughts. He watched as the two women spoke in men's tongues and saw there was a growing excitement in both of them. Wander broke first. She excused herself and went over to her new lover. A moment later they'd left the dining room. Mellianna had a look in her eye that Barnaby correctly interpreted. Moments later they were in her room and all clothing discarded.

Winnie's mother looked very well. Her wild red hair framed her beautiful face, and she had a wonderful smile.

'Are you well, my dear?' she asked.

'I'm fine, Wil. So's Wand.'

'Having a good time, dear?'

'Up until now, yes. But this place is....well, quite dull. Still, we leave tomorrow and on to better things.'

'But you're having a great time?'

'Yes. I would say so. But I miss you. We both miss you. I wish you were here.'

'So do I, dear. So do I. Would you like me to join you?'

'That would be nice, but you couldn't afford it. We'll be fine. We expected to get homesick, every now and again. You said we would!'

'I did, dear.'

‘It’s just nice to well, I just wanted to talk to you.’

‘Well, you’d better go now, dear, this call’s costing you a fortune.’

‘Oh, the company are paying, not me. Part of the deal, we can call home once in a while. But it was lovely to see you, Wil. Give my love to Wally and dad.’

‘I will do. Take care, dear. Love you.’

The face faded, and tears came to Winnie’s eyes. She lay on the bed and cried herself to sleep.

The following morning it was time for the sexes to be reversed. Winnie stood by the side of Wander and held her hand. In the same room, Mellianna and Barnaby lay covered in sheets, waiting to feel themselves again. It was a tense time, and all were feeling the strain. Despite assurances, would it all return to how it was? How stupid were they be to listen to promises from bugs?

A large beetle administered to the trio and an hour later they took the sheets away. Tears were in the eyes of Winnie as Wander stood in all her former glory. Both turned to look at their friends and smiled as they saw both Mellianna and Barnaby back to normal. They had a group hug and even the bug wanted to join in. That was another weird experience they would relate for the rest of their days.

They had a celebratory lunch, and the conversation was a little more normal. For this, Winnie was pleased. She never took her eyes off her sister’s beautiful face and gave thanks that she seemed absolutely back to normal. It was hard to tell if the other two were normal. They seemed to be involved with each other to the extent that the world seemed to rotate around them.

‘Where to next, Barney?’ Winnie asked between kisses.

Barnaby pulled himself away from Mellianna and frowned. ‘Errr...we need to leave shortly. The shuttle is waiting. Not the same one as before that had to go on somewhere else. This is another one, I’m reliably informed every bit as comfortable as the last....’

‘That’s not difficult. It was a tub.’ Wander said.

‘...But we won’t notice once we’re asleep.’

‘Then where?’ persisted Winnie.

‘Orrentor. The Party Planet. We need to have plenty of energy for that.’

‘A party. That sounds good. Can I bring a friend?’ Wander said with a mischievous grin.

Winnie whispered, ‘I think you’ve partied enough already.’

Wander leaned across and said, ‘I still have to do one more thing.’ Winnie’s puzzled look vanished when Wander added, ‘My experiment. First one way...then the other.’

They boarded the *Last One Past the Post* and settled into their sleep units, deliberately not taking too much notice of the ship. They didn’t want to know if it was any better, or worse than before, they just wanted to get to sleep and get to Orrentor.

As they said their goodbyes to each other, Winnie said, ‘And? How was it?’

Wander appeared to think for a while before saying, ‘On the whole, I prefer being a woman. It was good being a man, but slightly better as a woman.’

Both women giggled, and Winnie kissed her sister on the cheek. ‘Sleep tight.’

‘Don’t let the bugs bite.’ They both laughed out loud.

The ship’s alarm sounded and Mellianna had to break off from Barnaby’s long last kiss. They parted reluctantly, and their doors closed on each other.

The ship’s hull vibrated as the energy units prepared for lift-off. As the pressure built on the passengers, the ship shuddered up into the black sky. Wander was dreaming and would not awake for another three weeks. For once, she didn’t notice the rearranging of her internal organs. But at least they were female organs once again.

Bald E was feeling an emotion getting very close to smug. ‘Two down, three to go.’ He called Royale O’Really.

‘Roy, old friend. How are you?’

‘You sound pleased with yourself. What’s that cut on your face?’

‘Fell into a swimming pool. Old friend. A little....light headed at the time. I’ve got good news for you, old chum. We got to number seven.’

Royale's eyes widened, and a small smile formed at the corner of his mouth. 'Good. Well done. No charge, of course?'

A look of mock astonishment filled E's face. 'Of course not. That's what it's all about. As long as they get the good publicity they're happy. Look at the publicity the first five planets have had. By the way, I checked with them and their tourist trade is already up by twenty percent. How about that? Of course, I've been telling the other planets it's thirty. But who knows?'

The smile vanished from Royale's face. 'Don't forget the name of FutureGames Inc. is associated with this. I don't want you making promises I can't keep!'

'Don't worry. It's a small outlay for them, with the promise of a much bigger return. I must get on with the next now. Where are our intrepid explorers? I haven't had a chance to watch the news items recently.' He absently rubbed the cut in his chin.

O'Really said, 'On their way to Orrentor. Your first success. I hope it all goes well for them.'

'So do I.' E said with a slight shift in his eyes.

Jonno Huutch watched the programme and turned the screen off in anger. He threw his drink at the wall and missed. He picked up the container and threw it again, watching it bounce off onto the floor. His desire was rising. He'd hoped he was controlling his emotions but seeing the Wullen twins again only inflamed him. She was, without a doubt, the most beautiful creature he'd ever seen. Her sister came very close, but there was SOMETHING about Wander.

He sat in his chair and looked at the blank screen. He felt anger rise as he thought of Rock and Moses. They were inefficient. Too slow. Where were they now? Waiting at the next planet. If they failed this time, he'd put someone else onto it. As the thought struck him he decided he'd do that, anyway. He told the screen to come on and made contact with another of his more nefarious colleagues.

PART 7 - ORRENTOR – PARTY PLANET

Hugo Rock and Flint Moses knew the ship was due soon, by the gathering of the media machines. They stood in the nearby casino and watched from the window as the ship slid out of the clouds and made a gentle landing on the pad. Rock's face was unreadable, and Flint was watching him from the corner of her eye. She was getting a little concerned about his demeanour. He was becoming obsessive about these two women and fulfilling his contract. She'd need to watch him every step. The sooner they completed their assignment, the better.

As the hatch lowered the media machines crowded forward, each wanting to be the first to get a shot of the celebrities. With practised aplomb, Wander emerged first, bending her legs to dip under the low hatchway. She was almost wearing a bright red skirt and a low-cut pink top. Winnie followed, wearing an identical outfit but coloured all yellow. The yellow shrieked with her blonde hair and the dark-haired sister presented the siren look in the blaze of reds.

The interviews were similar to all the others, though the girls seemed not to mind. On camera anyway. Rocky watched stone-faced as Barnaby pushed past his charges and led them away from the media hustle. A car was waiting to take them to their hotel and Rocky watched as it lifted and headed North. Flint waited for orders.

Rocky took his time before saying, 'We wait until they're settled in. Then we go get her.'

The car touched down outside the grandest frontage Winnie had ever seen. It was twenty stories tall but shaped like some mythical animal's head. They entered through the wide-open mouth, aware of the canine teeth curving at them from every direction. The teeth glittered and looked like they were made from some precious stone. Winnie looked back and up at the inside of the mouth and saw the detail of painting that was beyond her imagination. Ahead, the tongue rose up to a staircase where a reception was waiting for them.

The welcoming party consisted of twenty or so people dressed in bizarre costumes as if in some carnival. The man at the front had the biggest and grandest costume. It was gold coloured, shaped like some sort of local animal, with a collar so high it stood as tall as the man, again. It flared at the top and had animal tails flowing down like a veil. The man's face was round and smiling. He looked jovial and his voice was high-pitched and friendly.

‘Welcome to the *Hotel Win A Lot*. I am the general manager and my name is Hooru. At your service.’ He made a graceful bow towards them, his collar nearly slapping Wander on the head. She stepped back and tried to smile.

‘Thank you. We’re looking forward to our stay here.’

The cameras were slowly surrounding the party, catching views from every angle.

‘Here at the *Hotel Win A Lot*, we are proud of our reputation for honesty. The gambling here is very fair, and you will probably win more than you lose. To get you started, the *Hotel Win A Lot* is giving you a cash barrel, so you can enjoy yourselves to the maximum. It is here.’

A gold barrel was rolled down the tongue and the words ‘Hotel Win A Lot’ were clearly visible. Two assistants placed the barrel upright and removed the screw lid. Coins flowed onto the carpet and Hooru clapped his hands with joy. The twins looked quizzically at each other and back towards Barnaby, who shrugged.

Winnie ventured, ‘Thank you. Very much.’

Hooru nodded and said, ‘Welcome to the *Hotel Win A Lot*.’

Wander turned to the cameras and waved. People were crowding the sides of the entrance way and she waved at them too. Mellianna and Barnaby joined in and the applause rose in waves. When Hooru had milked his promotional debut to the limit, he waved for the entourage to follow him as he walked up the steps and into the main part of the hotel.

As they moved under the natural arch formed by the back teeth of the foyer, they entered a wide expansive area. It appeared to be domed, highly decorated in animal artefacts and had a definitive ethnic feel, although unknown origins to the Wullen twins and the newly enamoured Mellianna and Barnaby. The floor was filled with machines and tables, offering a wide range of gambling experiences.

The media machines kept pace with the slowly moving caravan of Human Derivatives as they walked through the massive area and towards the far side. Their barrel was being rolled behind them and Hooru waved an expansive arm around the room.

‘The largest gaming room on Orrentor. And the best. The *Hotel Win A Lot* has the best of everything for its guests and is the pride of Orrentor’s tourist trade.’ He beamed at the nearest camera and pointed to the huge hastily erected sign above his head, stating the name of the hotel. ‘The Hotel Win A Lot. The best on Orrentor.’ And with a wink said, ‘Possibly the best in the Universe!’

Wander looked around at the thousands of beings gambling and wondered where they all came from. She itched to push some coins in the machine, but her arm was being pulled by Winnie, who was more anxious to get out of the limelight. Mellianna looked in awe at the sights all around and her hand slipped into Barnaby's, whose face was equally awestruck.

In the centre of the main aisle, near the far end of the gambling hall, was a circular structure with a podium. On the podium was a huge machine with a make-shift sign above it which read, 'Biggest gaming machine in the Universe – Biggest pay-out'.

Barnaby leaned to speak quietly in Mellianna's ear, 'He's milking this for all its worth. Talk about promotion

Hooru glared at his procession and with an exaggerated turn, hands high in the air he pointed both hands at Wander as if she was selected at random. As if by magic a large coin, the size of his hand, appeared in his fingers, which he gave to Wander. With a grand sweep of his arm, he invited her onto the podium. Wander smiled nervously as she glided up the six steps, her legs were the contour that had inspired men throughout history. A muscle movement that had started wars and a skin texture that had left strong men defenceless. And some women too.

The machine was semi-circular made of chrome and gold. Within its inner circular wall were a row of screens which were flashing random images, numbers and icons. In the very centre of the wall, highlighted with a huge red arrow, was a slot, made to fit the large coin Wander held out in front of her. The media banks closed in, some machines only a bat's eyebrow from her face. These were quickly eased out of the way by other machines, which didn't want their view obstructed. As the circus settled into a mutually acceptable position for all, Wander stood on the platform next to Hooru, with the Universe watching them. That realisation finally struck her, and her knees went weak. With a slow and graceful wave, Hooru invited her to put the coin in the slot. He turned and smiled to the Universe.

With a hand that was now shaking, Wander eased the coin into the slot. Lights flashed, and a siren howled as the screens went blank. Puzzlement flashed across her face as she looked at Hooru. He smiled at her and seemed to be waiting for something. Suddenly the screens were alive again, this time images flashed too quickly to see.

Hooru leant towards her and said, 'Touch any of the screens, in any order. Ten in all. Good luck.' He was so close; his wink was unseen by the cameras.

With trembling fingers, Wander touched the first screen. The images blurred and then slowed. As it stopped moving an image of a coin showed brightly. It flashed, waiting for another to join it. Wander touched the next

screen. Then the next and so on until there was one screen left. With a flair for the dramatic, she waited. The Universe held its breath.

Wander looked across the row of screens and saw four coins, three bags of gold and one stack of banknotes. 'What do I need?' she whispered with a seductive smile.

Hooru was immune to her charms and was focused on his own agenda. 'Another coin would win you the major prize.' He straightened up and raised his voice, 'But that has already been won today. You would be very lucky to win that. Twice in one day. We couldn't afford for that to happen!' He laughed a soulless bark and turned to the last screen and pointed for her to press it.

Wander looked into his eyes and saw they were fixed on the screen. Beads of sweat formed over his nose and his mouth was a thin hard line. Without looking she touched the screen. Images whirled and flashed, and she watched his reaction, for she already guessed what the screen image would be.

Lights and explosions were everywhere around her as she cringed amongst the noise. She kept watching Hooru as the screens were flashing, lights whirred, and sirens sounded. She was in the middle of a sphere of lights and colour as the Universe celebrated her win. Hooru's reaction was one of relief.

She shouted at Hooru, 'What have I won?'

He switched on a beaming smile which he turned to the cameras and shouted, 'You have won ten million credits. A fortune! Did I not say the *Hotel Win A Lot* was the best in the Universe?'

'It certainly appears to be so.' She said, too quiet for his liking. He was about to ask her to repeat for the benefit of the cameras when a small troupe of brightly dressed people arrived with a winner's gown for Wander to wear. She thought how convenient it was near to hand. She was escorted to another dais, more open to the media, and Hooru joined her as the noise and light show subdued. He waved at the surprisingly appreciative crowd and tried to quiet them for a speech.

Wander was getting increasingly apprehensive. She liked attention under normal circumstances. She accepted that she would be at the centre of attention during this trip; it being part of the promotional deal with FutureGames Inc. There was a disturbance in the crowd and people were getting trampled. This was getting out of hand. She searched the sea of faces for Barnaby and saw him and Mellianna fighting their way to the front of the crowd. Where was Winnie?

Hooru raised his hands and shouted, 'Another big-time winner at the *Hotel Win A Lot*.' The crowd cheered and Hooru turned to wave at them all. As the noise subsided, he turned to Wander and in a voice louder than necessary said, 'And what are you going to spend your fortune on?'

'Spend it on? I haven't had time to think

'Like most of our many winners here, you would like to buy a car from our Universally acclaimed showrooms. Like theseesss.....' With a wide sweep of his hands, curtains at the side of the hall opened and revealed a wide-open space full of ground and aircars. They sparkled in all their splendiferous colours. Their sleek shapes inviting a range of emotions from envy, to lust.

Wander caught Barnaby's eye and flared her eyes wide in frustration. The message was clear, 'Get me out of here.'

Hooru was sweeping the crowd again and didn't notice someone step onto the podium behind him and grab hold of Wander. She was jerked off the stage and disappeared into the crowd. By the time he noticed, she had disappeared from his view and his smile dropped.

'Where did she go?' His mind clicked into another gear and he raised his hands again, pointing to the cars. 'She couldn't wait. She's gone to choose one right away. We'll be back later to show you the model she chose.' With an exaggerated farewell wave, he stepped down from the dais.

The crowds were the perfect cover for Rocky and Flint. They moved silently through the heaving masses as the central figures were performing on the high dais. Rocky had stolen two masks which they both wore, slightly blending into the crowds as they eased their way nearer to the podium. As each second of the gambling machine scenario played out, they were getting nearer to their target.

The dénouement was approaching, and Rocky pushed his way to the front of the dais, preparing himself for the cover of the lights and sounds to make his move. As the sirens sounded, and the fireworks hissed overhead, Rocky moved onto the first step, with Flint right behind him. The crowd surged and carried them to one side. Off balance, Flint became lost in the sea and Rocky looked frantically for her to reappear. He fought his way back towards the dais and once again put one foot on the first step. Once again the crowd surged, and he got carried away.

By the time Flint surfaced, Rocky had disappeared. She too fought to get to higher ground and finish the job. The crowd were excited and jumping in some sort of ecstasy. She kept pushing and shoving until she gained the first step, the second and found room to reach the main platform as she

burst through the thong. She looked for Wander and saw the stage empty. As she searched the crowded room, she saw the general movement towards another platform further away. Flint took the time to look quickly for Rocky, but he was lost in the crowd. She looked for an easier route to the next platform and decided to circle the room, avoiding the denser part of the crowd. Decision made, Flint jumped from the platform and headed for the nearest wall.

Rocky was getting crushed until he started lashing out with his feet. People crumbled around him and he pushed them away until he could gain his feet. Using people as stepping stones, he made his way with the crowd towards the new centre of attention, a platform at the end of the hall. He searched for Flint, but she was lost in the melee.

Rocky increased his efforts and punched his way towards the platform. He saw Wander and the tall overly dressed man with her and edged around towards their rear. From the opposite direction, Flint moved rapidly forward. She knew Rocky to be out there somewhere trying to get to the target. One of them would get her, hopefully, both of them would.

A curtain now rose behind Rocky and the people in front of him turned to watch it. He was now facing them, and their instinct was to move forward to see what was happening. He fought against the flow of the crowd. His arm movements were increasingly violent, and he was delivering blows randomly, to get people out of the way. A particularly large squashy alien stood in his way and Rocky's fist sank into the outer layer of flesh and wouldn't return. He tugged and tried to get it out. A wet slap across his face released him and the disgruntled creature shoved Rocky out of his way, almost flooring him.

The podium was now in sight, but the crowd seemed to be drifting away from it as Rocky found himself at the foot of the raised platform. Above him, Wander desperately searched the crowd. She was facing the other way from him, so Rocky made his move.

Flint found her progress easier and circled behind the podium and moved in with the flow of the people pushing to see the cars. She reached the dais and saw Wander above her. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw Rocky stepping up onto the platform. There were still a few people in between them, but once on the flat level, they could combine to get Wander off the stage. She stepped up onto the first step and then jumped onto the stage.

As the two rushed together they were faced with the strange tall man in the bizarre costume. The rest of the stage was empty.

'Where's she gone!' said Rocky to no one in particular.

Winnie became aggravated as Wander was whisked away from her protection. She tried to grab her sister but found herself held back by the staff of the ridiculously dressed hotel manager. As she fell further back into the crowd, she realised Wander was not going to be allowed to get away from the hotel's promotion machine. As the crowds began to surge towards the huge gaming machine platform, Winnie allowed herself to retreat until she had some space and time to think.

At the far end of the hall stood the impressive Reception area of the hotel. Winnie moved quickly towards it, she sought out the most impressive looking staff member and sidled up to him. Winnie knew instantly he was responding to her feminine charms and flashed her eyes just the once. He thought it his imagination, but her neckline seemed to lower as he watched. The edge of three nipples could clearly be seen!

He watched rather than listened and gave this gorgeous creature all the information she wanted. She seemed particularly interested in knowing which room she was allocated and asked if he could be called upon for room service. He knew it was not his work responsibility, but the customer had to be catered for. Right?

He handed her the lock passes for all four rooms and gave her directions how to get there. Her smile was so sweet when she thanked him, he couldn't serve another customer for nearly an hour. He watched as she glided away from him, like oiled springs on velvet.

Winnie moved to the area where the lifts were and familiarised herself with how they worked. She looked around the corner as the sirens and noise filled the hotel. She could just see Wander on the stage and felt for her. Huge screens all around the hall showed the winning gamble in detail. Winnie watched and waited.

She saw them move to the second stage and realised they were now much nearer to her. She began to move closer. As the screens went up, she stood right behind the dais and could almost touch Wander. As the prak in the outfit turned away from her sister, she jumped onto the stage and pulled at Wander. Wander turned and realised it was her sister. Before she could smile or frown, she was hurried off the stage and pushed towards the lifts.

Wander became breathless, and anger began to show in her face. Winnie smiled to defuse the situation and pushed her into the lift as soon as the doors swished open. She hit the relevant floor button and the doors silently closed. Without any sense of movement, the lift began to move down. The interior looked more like a hotel lounge than a lift. It had couches and chairs and a wraparound mirror. Both girls studied their hair as the lift came to an almost imperceptible stop. The doors opened, and they hurried out. Along the elaborate corridor, lined with gaming machines, they found Wander's room number and pressed the key against the lock. The door slid

open, and they hurried inside. Winnie found the door lock and pressed it. The door slid shut. They had found sanctuary.

The two women took their time to get their breath back and looked around the room with their mouths open. Every possible space on the walls seemed filled with screens showing spinning wheels or rotating images and numbers. It was a gamblers paradise.

Winnie shouted, 'All screens off!', but nothing happened. At least they were silent. She would contact her friend on the desk to sort that out. The bed was central to the room, and the bedspread looked like it was a betting game. As Wander sat on its edge it began to move. The large wheel in its centre began to spin, and a sign showed she had bet some of her allocated money on the turn. With horror, she realised she'd lost and that any movement on the sheet could lose more money. The two girls pulled the sheet off and folded it into a corner of the room. They sat on the bed and began to laugh.

Mellianna and Barnaby had searched for the girls everywhere and decided to check into their rooms and hoped they would have done the same. To their relief, they found that Winnie had got their passes and headed for the room numbers given by the staff. Hooru had disappeared, and they took the opportunity to escape from his promotional agenda. The third door they tried was answered, and they were let into the room where two giggling women awaited them.

They all spread themselves out on couches, chair and the bed and were soon laughing at the experience as they relived it through each other's eyes. They called for room service and Winnie insisted they sent the 'nice young man' from the reception desk. Barnaby didn't ask why but he could tell from the girlish giggles from the twins, it was something naughty.

Wander looked at Barnaby and said, 'What was all that about! That prak in a suit! I felt....embarrassed is not the word.....'

Mellianna said, 'A little too over the top, in self-promotion, I thought. The first time we've had that.'

Winnie chipped in with, 'A bit strong for paying guests. Celebrities, or not.'

Barnaby shrugged and said, 'I suppose you can't blame them for trying.'

'But I don't want to have to endure more of that....prak!'

'I'll have a word, don't worry. We'll just try to....keep a low profile for a while. Stay in our rooms as much as possible.'

With a grin, Wander said, 'That'll be all right for you and Mellianna. But we're on the party planet and we want to party!'

'Wander's just won a cave full of money and we're going to have a good time.'

Barnaby frowned, 'You'd better be careful with that. I had a quiet word with the hotel staff and they seem to think that the money sounds a lot but won't buy you much on this planet. It's also only valid currency on this planet, so you have to spend it all here. But be sure you know how much is left as you go along. Otherwise, it'll be coming out of your own money. Which, I assume, you don't have a great deal off?'

Wander had a faraway look in her eye as she turned to Winnie. Both girls saw something in each other and began to smile.

Wander said, 'I think I know how to spend the money and shut up the freak at the same time. I just need to make a call first.'

Winnie and Wander fell onto the bed and could not stop laughing. They were covered in streamers and strange smelling balloons. They had no idea of the time and only a vague recollection of where they were.

In a voice that could only just make the words understandable, Wander said, 'That's what I call a night out.' But Winnie was already fast asleep. For some reason that was incredibly funny to Wander and started her laughing all over again. Wander realised she might wake her sister, so she put a hand over her mouth to stifle the noise. She knew it wasn't working, so she moved to the bathroom and closed the door behind her. She sat down and let the laughter out, in peels of raucous noise.

The evening had started slowly and with a little bit of forward planning. It became clear to Winnie that they would be the target of every media machine on the planet as they stepped out to enjoy themselves. The solution was a disguise. Using their bots and a little creativity, they left their hotel suites separately and looked like hotel waitresses. Simulating baggy clothing to disguise their pneumatics, they passed through the entrance hall, almost unnoticed, and went out into the bustling street party that was Orrentor.

Using their hotel credit system the girls started to eat, drink and get merry. Slowly shedding their waitress outfits, their voluptuous physiques soon came to the attention of the male predators and they were soon living off the party for free.

The whole city was geared for the reveller. Divided into the three basic groups of Human Derivatives, Bugs and Other, every establishment served

appropriate refreshment for the party-goers. There have only been a few necessary elements to ensure sentient beings had a good time. Alcohol, or its alien equivalent, music and good company. This applied across the Universe and down through time too. As a general tip, in all the good Universal Guidebooks - If you don't like socialising, don't go to Orrentor.

The Wullen twins liked to socialise. They liked to eat, drink and be merry – especially with men. No man was safe that evening and their reputation for having a good time went before them. The dance halls and drink markets were full of people drinking and dancing. Strange instruments accompanied unusual rhythms as body forms in all shapes and sizes contorted on into the night.

The girls attracted an entourage which grew to unmanageable proportions as the evening turned into morning. As they moved from one establishment to another, people were crowding the doorways and filling the rooms, all trying to stay in sight of the fabulous Wullen twins.

It wasn't the normal practice for the governors of the planet Orrentor to keep an open watch on the celebrations, nor to broadcast that to any of the media stations. But they were able to keep an eye on their investments and make sure the party atmosphere stayed as a party and was not going to be spoiled by some overzealous visitor. In the central control room, far away from the loud music and smell of heated alcohol, a group of security operatives began to take an interest in the growing crowd of people migrating through the streets.

By the early hours, the crowd was proving such a high profile, that it was reported up through the security command chain and eventually to the ears of Hooru. He watched from his penthouse suite and recognised the two women he'd been searching for all evening. They were his passport to fame and Universal recognition. It was time they repaid him. He chose his point carefully and sent in the troupes to ensure the visitors would be trapped in an area suitable to him. A time was set, and the countdown began. With a smile not for the squeamish, he made his way out of the hotel.

Mellianna and Barnaby walked through the hotel's main hall and was immediately recognised, drawing a small crowd. They'd anticipated this and hoped that while this happened, the girls could slip away unnoticed. All they had to do was make their presence visible, enjoy the evening as best as they could and then return to their rooms, where they would welcome the company of each other.

The place was too noisy and busy for Mellianna's taste. She abhorred the garish lack of subtlety that announced this was the party playground and everyone HAD to have a good time. For Barnaby, it was a distraction,

but not to be absorbed at any deep level. They both appreciated that while they were here, they had to see the main sights and sample the unique experience each planet had to offer. But after a few hours, they felt they'd sampled everything they wanted and from that point onwards it was simply a matter of more of the same.

Their intention of returning to the hotel for a quiet rest was not going to be easy. They now had their own entourage who wanted to be with them and enjoy the delights of Orrentor long into the night. As they tried to move from one dance hall to another bar, they were pestered to remain, offered copious amounts of refreshments and incentives. Each establishment gaining popularity and fame, just from their presence there. It became very wearing. They had to find a way out. They had a plan.

Barnaby moved out from the melee and into the backrooms where the restroom facilities were. He found a rear door and spoke quietly into this wrist and Mellianna got the message. Barnaby waited in the men's room until it grew quiet then left and headed for the back door. He pushed it open and found himself between two buildings. There were few people around, but they were not showing any interest. The door slid open behind him, making him jump. Mellianna poked her head around the corner and looked relieved at seeing him. Like children being naughty, they held each other's hands as they ran down the narrow street, back to the hotel.

Winnie and Wander were on the dance floor and entangled with five other dancers. From the side-lines, it became hard to tell where the male bodies ended, and the female bodies started. On the dance floor, it was a little easier to tell. The music was loud and had added reverb, making the whole building shudder in time with some of the heart-rates, it added sensuality. The dancers could really FEEL the music.

Those that were not on the dance floor looked around the screens and watched those that were. A large ring had formed around the central dancers. The five men and two Amazonian women dominated the attention. Few noticed the gradual build-up of media machines and the quiet infiltration of security people.

As Wander became further engrossed in her new companion she felt a movement crawling over her arm, another admirer desperate for her attention. She felt her arm being pulled and her body being dragged away from the man she was about to share clothes with. Keeping in time to the music she swayed into the new direction and into Hooru.

Hooru now wearing another elaborate outfit, even taller than the first, making his head appear halfway down his body. The collar more farcical in

its height and expanse. His smile was viper like and his eyes fixed on his prey.

‘Wander Wullen. We meet once more. I have been wondering where you were.’

Wander tried to keep her face passive as she swayed back towards her dancing partner, to find him gone. He’d been replaced by security men and she was alone on the floor, surrounded by Hooru’s people. The lights became brighter and the media machines crept in for the kill.

As if in surprise Hooru saw the media for the first time, ‘Oh, I see we have visitors. All are welcome to Orrentor, especially at the *Hotel Win A Lot*. And here we have a typical celebrity customer. Our Universe spanning, prize-winning young lady, Wander Wullen. Can you say a few words to the people of the Universe?’

His thin fingers pointed to the nearest camera as his other arm crept around her shoulder. She resisted the shudder but was not unprepared for the encounter. As she pretended to be dancing to the music which had strangely faded, she was looking for Winnie. At the back of the room, she saw a swathe of dark hair bouncing along the wall. She swirled dramatically to look at the camera.

On a billion screens around the Universe Wander’s staggering good looks filled the view. Many marriages and partnerships ended that moment when Wander became a benchmark for all Derivative women to aim for. For many men, nothing less would do in their lives. For nearly all of them, the rest of their lives would remain empty. She blew the Universe a kiss that sent shock waves around every galaxy.

‘Hello.’ Was all she needed to say.

Hooru pushed into the camera shot, keeping his narrow head very close to a face that inspired the thought, *Beauty and the Beast*. ‘As the Universe knows, you won a great deal of money at the *Hotel Win A Lot* earlier. Have you decided what you want to buy?’

Wander smiled and looked at him, briefly. She turned to the cameras and said, ‘Yes.’ In her most seductive voice. The sarcasm was lost on Hooru who was only thinking ahead to his own words.

‘Good. A car, I’m sure. But which one of the so many marvellous vehicles.’

Wander pouted up again and said seductively, ‘None.’

‘Good. And what model.....none!’

‘None.’ All coyness and femininity went as she looked directly at the camera. ‘I won a billion Orrentor credits, right?’ He could only nod. ‘And you said I could spend it on anything I wanted to. Right?’ His nod was slower in coming, but he was aware of the cameras. ‘Good. Then I’m giving it all to the Orrentor Children’s Fund. I understand they’re underfunded and short of just about everything. Including goodwill and support from local businesses. Especially hotels.’

The audience began to applaud and Hooru was lost for words. He tried to move away to consult with his advisers and left Wander on her own for one moment. That was all she needed, with an exaggerated leap she dived into the surrounding crowds. A gasp of surprise and delight rippled around the room. By the time Hooru looked for her, she’d disappeared into a sea of bodies.

Near the main door, Winnie waited as Wander wriggled her way across the floor. As she saw her sister appearing head first, she swung the door open, and they both ran from the dance hall.

Barnaby waited for his call to be answered and was pleased to see the sleepy face of Royale O'Really swim into view. ‘How’s it going, Barnaby?’

‘Fairly well. We’re having a few problems with the locals, but otherwise okay.’

‘Problems! What problems?’

‘Nothing we can’t handle. Just a little zealous on the promotion that’s all.’

Royale seemed to redden. ‘Who’s paying for this call?’

‘I am,’ said Barnaby puzzled.

‘Good. Good.’

‘On the company account.’

Royal reddened further as he began to splutter, ‘Look, Barnaby. We have a small problem here too. It’s a minor accounting problem, but it looks like it may affect your project.’

‘In what way?’

‘We may have to reduce our budget.’

‘But we can’t! We’re in the middle of nowhere here. We have to live, we have to get on ships. We have to EAT! What’s it going to look like if the trip was cancelled? You can say goodbye to further contracts for FutureGames.’

We just can't suddenly cut back. Besides, all the trips are already paid for. Especially hotels, entertainment and excursions. Aren't they? You said so before we left.'

'Look, I must go. Just be careful. Don't waste money on these calls. I'll call you.'

'When?'

'Soon.'

The screen went blank.

Following the two women was easy, even getting close to them was no problem. The problem was abducting them in such a public and crowded environment. Hugo Rock and Flint Moses had to be patient.

The Wullen entourage slid from one den of pleasure into the next, in a seamless procession. Sometimes walking in through one door and straight out the other. The ambience played an important part as to how long the girls wanted to stay in any one establishment. They were the ones making the decisions, the rest were along for the ride.

Rock and Flint were dressed in a carnival costume that hid their features and dark combat clothes. They moved with grace and speed when necessary but rarely seemed to be in the party mood. Standing out in a crowd that was in itself, already standing out. It was going to be a long evening, and they managed to snack as the time went on.

Energy reserves were important here, they had to be vigilant and ready for action at a moment's notice. The noise and movement of the crowded street was a distraction. One of them had to keep an eye on where the girls were at any time. Giving the other time to assess the layout and look for escape routes and places to help conceal them.

As the celebrity tourists moved down the party avenue, the street grew busier and the revellers more animated. A glance passed between the two hired hands and they knew they were wasting their time. They wouldn't easily be able to get one, or both, of the girls away from this crowd. They'd have to wait for the return of the sisters to the hotel. With an unspoken look, they turned and headed back to the *Win A Lot*.

The two professionals had waited outside the hotel and saw the two sisters emerge and recognised them immediately. In hindsight, they should have taken them then. It would be all over by now and they'd be on their way back to Zacaron, delivering them into Huutch's clutches. Instead, they risked another abortive attempt and risked the wrath of Huutch at their failure. He'd already threatened to pull them from the assignment and that

had never happened to Rock before. He was determined it wouldn't happen now.

They entered the hotel and began to play the gambling machines, slowly working to the back of the hall and the lifts to the rooms. The duo wanted to keep a low profile and not alert the hotel security. They went up in separate lifts and at different times, meeting outside the Wullen suites and were prepared to wait for a long time. They moved away from the doors and found comfortable seats and slumped into them. Taking it in turns, they pretended to be fast asleep or watchful for the arrival of their quarry.

Wander had recovered from her burst of laughter and came out of the bathroom to see Winnie fast asleep across the bed. Completely naked and relaxed, Winnie looked at peace. Wander smiled at her sister and looked for a suitable place where she could find some room on the bed. A noise distracted her. The door chimed, and she pulled a face. She'd no idea what time it was, but knew it was late. Or early, depending on your point of view.

They'd met many people that night and many had asked to come back with them. All were politely refused, but some could be more determined than others. She tried to ignore the chime. It persisted.

Wander whispered at the screen, that was more a shout, 'On. Door.'

The image showed two revellers leaning against each other. They were dressed in fancy masks and hats and looked ridiculous.

'Go away.' Wander addressed to the door. The chimes sounded again. 'Go....away.'

Once more the chimes sounded, it seemed louder this time. In exasperation Wander thumbed the switch, and the door slid open and both of the party-goers were suddenly inside the room. Something sticky was placed across her mouth and she couldn't speak. The bots immediately began to break down its molecular structure as she found herself being manhandled into the corridor.

The effects of the evening's celebrations were slowing down her reactions and her normal strength seemed to wane as she was forced into the corridor towards the lift. Her legs felt heavy, and she tried to slow down their progress. Both her antagonists were very strong and were almost carrying her along.

Rocky and Flint waited what seemed an agonisingly long time for the lift doors to open. As they did, they pushed the now struggling Wander into the lift. As the bots ate the last of the gag away Wander was able to open her mouth.

‘Ahhh good. You’ve saved me a journey.’ The voice was oily and smug. The neck decoration was shorter than before, but the dark eyes glinted in the narrow face in triumph. ‘You’re a very elusive lady, Wander Wullen. Perhaps now we can go to my office and talk some more?’

Rock and Flint immediately resumed the role of drunken revellers and pressed the next floor to get free. The also lift held four of Hooru’s henchmen and this was not the place for a fight. As the doors opened the frustrated “rescue” team made a hasty exit. Wander felt such relief that they’d left she couldn’t speak for a moment. Then realised she had gone from one dangerous situation into another. She slumped against the wall and slid to the floor as if unconscious.

Wander kept her eyes firmly closed and her breathing regular as she felt herself being lifted by the henchmen. She was carried for quite some way before being laid on a soft bed of some sort. Wander remained still. She couldn’t hear the sound of voices, or movement. What were they doing? Wander felt too tired to resist whatever they had in mind. Somehow she felt that Hooru wasn’t a threat, just an overzealous hotel owner with a fixation for promotion. Time slipped away, and she found herself drifting into sleep. She let herself go. It had been a long and tiring evening and she’d earned a good sleep.

Wander felt herself surfacing and knew she would awake soon. She ran through the events of the night before and smiled at some of the men and their antics that had pleased her. The latter part of the evening came to mind, and she frowned. Where was she? Slowly, and carefully, she opened her eyes. Wander was in her own hotel room. She sat up and realised she was alone. She was naked, but the bots would have done that automatically.

Hooru had returned her to her room, which meant that her ruse had worked. She’d escaped the clutches of Hooru, as he had enabled her to escape the clutches of Huutch’s men. She smiled. This time she’d been lucky. She’d better warn Winnie.

The bots cleared Winnie’s hang-over instantly. She stood by the screen and felt her mouth drop open.

‘Are you all right, Wan?’

Wander looked slightly distracted as she said, ‘I’m fine. If I was fully sober, I would’ve tried to kick them out myself. As it was, I was pretty much out of it. Lucky break Hooru turning up, eh?’

‘We’d better call Barney and perhaps Hooru too. We need his security to protect us now.’

Wander nodded, ‘I’ll call Barney now. Get packed, I think we should leave as soon as possible.’

‘If Hooru will let us!’

Barnaby sat in deep thought and waited for Mellianna to return from the bathroom. He told her the situation, and she said, ‘We must leave. Now!’

Barnaby nodded and said, ‘I agree. The problem is.....I think FutureGames hasn’t paid for our stay here.’

‘What!’

‘Well, O’Really said there was some sort of cash flow problem and now I understand what may have happened. We’re here as guests, of Hooru, not of FutureGames Inc.’

‘That would explain the over-use of promotion. But can’t we just leave?’

Barnaby shook his head. ‘I don’t know. If Hooru wants more publicity, he might put obstacles in our way.’

‘Like what?’

‘Oh, I don’t know. Demand we pay the bill, and when we can’t imprison us?’

‘That’s not good publicity.’

‘You’re right. But I still think we should try to get off here with him, rather than without him.’

‘Book transport first, Barn. Then we can arrange things from there. We need to know when we can leave the planet.’

Barnaby nodded and called for the screen.

The Rock knew it would now be too dangerous to be seen around the *Hotel Win A lot*. By now they would have alerted the hotel security to their presence and would make any attempt to get Wander almost impossible. Rock was getting angry. Flint watched the process cross his face, and she tapped him on the arm to make him aware. He nodded and tried to calm his thoughts.

‘Spaceport?’ she said. He nodded.

They made their way to the spaceport and began to research which ships and destinations were available.

Hooru was not a happy hotelier. He'd made plans that lasted for another two days, he told Barnaby so. Barnaby shrugged his shoulders and said, 'Our whole journey has been one of flexible routes and timings. Nothing is set in stone. We have a problem here which we need to avoid. It presents a danger to my charges, the Wullen sisters, and I must act on that. We have to leave. And as soon as possible.'

The smile had lost its edge, and the voice was hard as Hooru said, 'See this from my point of view. You have cost me a great deal of money. I have given you a barrel, and you have won the main gamble of the week. Apart from the hotel suites and food and all number of items.'

Barnaby Leant forward and said, 'We certainly thank you for the barrel of money. Which I understand equates to very little value off this planet. Also winning on the big machine, surely that is a matter of luck and chance?'

The oily smile reappeared and Hooru nodded. 'Of course. But many people win here at the *Hotel Win A Lot*. But you cannot belittle the expense it has cost me to host your entourage.'

'Nor can you underestimate the amount of publicity you've received across the Universe.' Hooru shrugged. Barnaby leant forward and dropped his voice, 'Of course, we could always go to another hotel. We can always ask for them to provide free accommodation and hospitality for top promotion. It wouldn't look too good if we left here because we "didn't like it."'

The oily smile faded then returned. 'Of course, we will do all we can for you. When do you want to leave?'

'There is a ship leaving in six hours.'

'Then we can arrange a sending off party for you. Would that be acceptable?'

Barnaby smiled and said, 'We'd be delighted to say a fond farewell to your hotel.'

Hooru's idea of a sending off party was a more full-blown carnival. In the party capital of the Galaxy, a carnival was always available and ready to set off. Hooru made sure it was a big and brash one. He contacted every media agency and ensured they sent representatives. Cameras and recorders were flying in from everywhere. The main street had been cleared, and the procession started only two hours after his conversation with Barnaby.

The main float was quickly redesigned and the travelling party of four were the guests of honour. Walking alongside the float was a heavy corps of

minders, to put off any attempt at kidnapping the girls. The procession made its slow, but noisy way to the Spaceport and they interviewed the girls for most of the journey. They put on a brave face, but as Barnaby had explained – it was their only quick and safe way out of there.

Mellianna and Barnaby played their part, waving to the crowds and smiling at the machines, sometimes a dog's eyelid away from their faces. Up ahead the Spaceport loomed, and Barnaby looked at Mellianna with a reassuring smile. All the preparations had been made, allowing them to walk onto the ship and take off almost immediately. Barnaby gripped her hand and she could tell the stress he was under. She tightened her grip in reassurance. It made him feel better.

Wander was enjoying herself. Out there in the crowds would be the two praks that tried to kidnap her earlier. It frustrated them and made them angry. That made her feel better. She looked around at the tight and heavy security and her smile widened. As it did, thousands of men fell in love with her. Across the Universe, billions of men fell in love with her.

Winnie watched her sister's face and knew she was all right after her experience of the night before. As she thought about it, she realised it had only been a few hours since the attempt to kidnap Wander. Things had happened very quickly. She looked behind her at the overly dressed Hooru. He was on a higher dais than the girls, taking as much credit as he could. She didn't mind, he was their passage out of there.

The carnival curved into the Spaceport and began to slow down, allowing the main float to move towards the front of the line. It ground to a halt outside of a large dark grey cruiser. The hatch was open and the gangplank down. In the hatchway, they could see the captain waving to the crowds and Barnaby knew they had made it. One last interview for the media then his public gratitude to Hooru and the *Hotel Win A Lot*, and they could be away. He watched as the girls ran up the gangplank, immaculately formed bodies rippling with muscles, stimulating male fantasies. He felt the familiar pang as he watched but reminded himself he had his own wonderful woman now.

The girls gave a final wave and disappeared into the ship. He turned to the cameras and gave his farewell speech, thoughtfully written by Hooru. The crowds applauded as he led Mellianna into the ship. Once inside he nodded to the crew who shut and sealed the hatchway.

'Let's get out of here.' Barnaby said with a sense of relief.

Their cabins were sparse and functional, but that was the norm for sleeper trips. The four settled quickly into their sleep cots and the machines did their work. They were all in hibernation before the *Have I Got Good News for You* took off.

Two people watched from the ground as the ship rose into the sky. They watched the procession turn around and head back to the city. Rocky looked at Flint and tried to smile.

‘We know where they’re going, and we can be waiting.’

Rocky nodded and said, ‘They have to change ships on Paramone before going on to Arcsaurus. And they won’t be expecting us there.’

Flint gave a small smile and turned to enter the *Nasty Business*. Rocky followed and sealed the hatchway. A short while later the ship lifted and headed into the void. On a slightly longer course than the *Have I Got Good News for You*. But the *Nasty* could put on a tidy burst of speed when necessary. The two settled down for another long sleep.

Royale O'Really looked at the items again and his face grew bright red. He could not believe the travelling expenses Babyloncity was accruing. He tried to make contact with Barnaby and was informed he was in hyper-sleep and wouldn't be woken for at least a week. Royale banged his fist on his table until it hurt. His next call was to Bald E.

The ebullient face filled the screen, and the grin matched the enthusiastic voice of its owner. Royale listened to the usual promises and gloating of successes and smiled until E had finished.

‘This is costing me too much, E. The travel costs are horrendous. What can we do about that?’

E rubbed his chin in a practised thoughtful gesture before saying, ‘Perhaps I can get us some sponsorship there. Leave it with me. On the other front, I’m having problems with Arcsaurus, so I’ll need to get out there!’

‘What will that cost!’ Royale said with genuine dismay.

‘What will it cost if I don’t?’

His face disappeared, leaving Royale with another promise and travel expenses even more than he planned for. He would have to tell Babyloncity to stop spending. And hope the tour continued without anyone knowing about the mounting debts.

PART 8 - ARCSAURUS – ZOO PLANET

The *Have I Got Good News for You* shuddered out of hyper-drive and cruised at the relatively slow pace of standard speed. It threw itself into a tight orbit around the large planet of Paramone and waited for permission to descend to the surface. The passengers awoke slowly and rose to greet their new environment and get their bodies back into shape again.

The four travellers gradually became aware of their surroundings and moved towards the dining area to get something hot and filling into their metabolisms. As the two sisters sat over a steaming cup of fluid. Mellianna entered and sat down beside them. They nodded and resumed their lethargic stance as Barnaby entered. The four slowly awakened and began to converse. It was meaningless and trite, but at least they were beginning to feel alive.

It was several hours before they needed to disembark the *News for You* and they took their time. Wander was feeling particularly hung-over from the sleep and Winnie was having trouble getting her mind to work. Mellianna and Barnaby moved into the same cabin as soon as they had eaten and lay together trying to come to terms with their new awareness after hyper-sleep. The ship came slowly to life as the perpetual shuttle service ground on.

Passengers were moving down the gangplank and moving off to hotels, business appointments and various other areas of inter-galactic activity. Some were waiting for a connection and used the transit lounge to rest and wait for their ship to arrive. The signs on the screen indicated it would be a four standard-hour wait.

Barnaby erred on the cautious side. He wanted everyone to wait on the ship. He felt security would be tighter and therefore they would be safer. Their captain gave permission to remain on board as long as was necessary. The hours ground by.

The *Good News* sat on its pad and a few passengers disembarked. Rocky and Flint watched from their own ship and noted their targets were not amongst them. The onward shuttle was due soon and they would only have a short window in which to make a move. The two prepared their equipment and moved out of their ship.

As they passed a few automatic refuelling carts, they noticed some workmen having a break. They ambled over to make conversation. Two minutes later Rocky and Flint were walking towards the *Have I Got Good News for You* dressed in workmen clothes and pretending to be working on

the hull. A few short paces away rested the gangplank, down which the Wullen sister would soon have to walk. It was a waiting game and Rocky was not going to be thwarted this time.

The captain came to Wander's cabin personally to inform her that her shuttle was ready for her to board. Wander smiled sweetly, and the captain was rewarded for his consideration. He was unable to carry out his full Captain's duties until several days later.

They grouped together at the hatchway and Barnaby poked his head out and saw their ship had parked a short walk across the landing pad. It looked quiet and deserted, apart from a few maintenance men working on their ship. It was time to go.

Barnaby went first and waited until Mellianna joined him. The two of them waited as the twins eased themselves gracefully down the steps and the four moved as one towards the next ship waiting to take them to Arcsaurus. They hurried across the expanse of the flat landing field.

As they approached the ship's gangplank, Barnaby turned to see if his charges were still close to him and noticed that the twins had disappeared. Fear froze his heart. His face warned Mellianna of a problem and he turned to see the empty expanse of the pad. The girls had gone.

As the small group passed by them, Rocky and Flint waited for a heartbeat then ran to catch them up. With their hands over the girl's mouths, they dragged them to one side and round the rear of the *Have I Got Good News for You*. They were so surprised to be attacked; the sisters took a while before they realised what was happening. As they felt themselves dragged along the ground, they saw the small ship up ahead and knew they'd seen it before.

As if they were reading each other's minds, the twins began to struggle at the same time. This slowed down the progress of Rocky and Flint. It was a battle and Rocky and Flint were the professionals. Flint soon had Winnie in an arm lock and she cried out in pain. This seemed to incense her sister, who resisted the same move and turned on Rocky with a vicious kick to the groin. Rocky neatly avoided the kick and moved back in to grab Wander's arm in a vice like grip. He held it tight and began to move her forward again.

Wander struggled and despite his tightening grip on her arm, she was forcing him to slow his walking. He couldn't understand, she must be in substantial pain from his lock, but she was looking straight into his eyes and confronting him. Her bots were racing to her aid, reducing the bruising and cancelling out the pain. Needing more strength, the bots hurried to

build the muscle and within moments her arm was forcing his back the way it had come. With a smooth headbutt, she rocked the Rock and lashed out once more with her foot. It connected, and Rocky was momentarily incapacitated.

As Flint saw her partner in trouble, she felt Winnie's strength increase and realised her captive was about to get away from her. With a sharp chop to the neck with the edge of her hand, she felt Winnie slump to the ground. Now she was a dead weight and difficult to carry. Her partner was down and his captive on the move - rushing towards her!

Flint prepared to defend herself, but Wander swerved at the last moment to try to lift Winnie. Flint looked at Rocky for instructions. Rocky was in pain but trying to stand. He waved her towards the two women and Flint pulled a small handgun from her belt. She pointed it at the twins and shouted for them, to stop.

With surprising strength, Wander picked up her sister on her shoulders and began to walk quickly towards the shuttle. Running towards her were Mellianna and Barnaby. Flint fired at Wander, catching her in the calf. Wander staggered but didn't fall. She kept hurrying towards the ship. Flint fired again and saw the blood erupt from Wander's other leg. Still, the Wander carried on. Barnaby ran to position himself between Wander and Flint, closing the arc of fire. Flint looked at Rocky who was almost on his feet. He shook his head slightly and Flint retreated to help him.

Barnaby stood between the girls and the abductors and backed slowly towards the ship. He looked behind and saw Mellianna helping the awakening Winnie up the steps and Wander was hauling herself up after them. Barnaby turned and ran for the hatchway, shouting to take off as he neared the top of the gangplank.

Flint helped Rocky to his feet and hurried back towards the *Nasty*. Once inside she sealed the hatch and attended to Rocky. They heard the roar as their prey's shuttle lifted and Rocky struck the wall with his palm in frustration.

The severe features of Hugo Rock stared at Huutch from the screen. The picture quality was poor, but then Rocky was a long way, away. Jonno remained silent at the news of another failure.

'We'll get her at the next stop.'

'You said that about the last three stops!'

'Yes, but this one is less crowded, and they'll have fewer people around them. I've checked.'

‘They had FEWER people around them on the other stops. Why so confident about this one?’

‘It’s more of a safari. They’ll be out with a few guides, no one else. We’ll be waiting.’

‘This is your last chance, Rocky. Last chance! Do you understand?’

The face showed relevant humiliation before fading from the screen. Huutch called another number.

A wide-faced man filled the screen. His eyes so small they hardly reflected any light back at the lens. He was hairless and almost pure white in skin colour. He looked dead.

‘Jonno. Nice to hear from you. It’s been a long time.’

‘Dari. You’re looking Well.’

‘You too. And prosperous. Have the terrible twins praked up again?’

Jonno shook his head. ‘Nothing like that. I have a special job....I’d like you to handle. A one-off, but something more....personal.’

‘Ahhh...it’s those girls that won the trip! I saw the coverage. You didn’t come across at your best, Jonno. Never let emotion get in the way, I always say. Your heart ran away with your mouth. You don’t say those sorts of things to the media.’

‘Yes...well. Enough about that. I want one of those girls brought back here. To me. ALIVE! I want *that* understood. Okay?’

‘Understood. Alive and kicking. What has she done to you, Jonno?’

A look came into Huutch’s eyes that was not missed by Dari. ‘Nothing. At least not yet.’

‘An affair of the heart, eh? Dangerous assignments those. It will cost you.’

‘You get paid only if you succeed.’

‘Send me the details and I’ll give you my answer. Are the terrible twins still on this assignment?’

‘Not if you get the women first.’

The heat and humidity hit them as they left the shuttle. Winnie’s hair started to writhe, and it took the bots a few moments before they could get it

under control. The smell hit them next and the pungency of animals and vegetation, super-heated into an almost tangible haze.

‘It stinks.’ Was Wander’s comment.

A large car awaited them, and the remaining passengers, they were soon whisked away to a small settlement a few minutes distant. As they left the Spaceport, Barnaby searched for any other ships that looked familiar to him. There was none. But that didn’t mean that the two thugs weren’t going to be here.

The car touched down at the edge of what looked like a shanty town. Barnaby eased out of the car with dread creeping into his thoughts. Where were they? Winnie wrinkled her nose at the sight and looked at her sister, who shrugged.

Barnaby looked at Mellianna who smiled. ‘It’s a jungle world. We’re at the edge of the jungle. What do you want, ten-star hotels?’

A guide dressed in a light green costume escorted them through the narrow street where beggars pestered them for coins. Winnie gave what she had, and Wander stood behind her, trying not to let them touch her. The guide ducked into a small alleyway and hesitantly the passengers from the shuttle followed. Through a rough wooden door and intoa sumptuous ten-star hotel foyer.

The theme was the jungle and everywhere had been decorated with animal skins, stuffed heads and artefacts from around the galaxy. Wander shivered at the toothed and tusked primates that lined the walls.

‘Ask for a room without any dead animals in it, please.’ Wander asked Barnaby who was at the reception desk.

Their rooms were less devoted to the animal kingdom. The soft furnishings paid homage to animal skins from across the galaxy, but they were clearly synthetic and deemed safe by the sisters. They were high in the hotel complex and their view looked out over a Savannah. In the distance purple mountains. Between them, a flat plain with dried twisted trees. Animals wandered across this plain in herds and as solitary beasts. At night the predators would hunt, but for now, the scene was peaceful and calming.

After the trauma of their leaving Orrentor, the girls decided to share a suite. Unnoticed by them, Barnaby sighed in relief. Cost savings had been seen to be made. He and Mellianna shared a room too. Cost cut by half! What he couldn’t reduce, was the cost of the calls to home and head office. His call was to Royale who seemed particularly evasive and could only repeat that minimal money could be spent at their current venue. Barnaby was not to mention this to the ever-present media.

The other call was to Wendyhelenmaryirenenormaanna Wullen. Her two girls related the incident of their near capture and saw the eyes of their mother harden. No one attacked her girls. A determination formed in her mind and she smiled at her daughters advising them to take care. Once their beatific features had faded from the screen, Wil called in her son and told him they were going on a long journey. Her offspring needed the protection of her family.

The twin's thought the media gatherings were growing larger. There were more machines and even a few Derivatives were appearing. At their breakfast meeting, they were inundated with questions and they now had all the stock answers. The questions, remained, always the same. Surely the sentient beings throughout the Universe must be getting tired of the same questions and the same answers. The girls certainly were. They weathered the storm until Barnaby called a halt and asked for privacy while they ate their meal. The machines backed off, but the Derivatives were also hotel guests and sat down to enjoy their own exotic meals.

The foursome could see the reporters watching their every move and Wander leant over to whisper to Barnaby. 'This is getting ridiculous. I can't even pick my nose without them seeing.'

Barnaby smiled and said, 'Is that the sort of thing you want to do?'

'I might!'

Barnaby lost the smile, 'Listen. We've run into a little budget problem. For a while, we may have tohold spending.' He awaited their reaction.

'Does this mean they can postpone the trip?' asked Winnie.

'Or cancelled?' added Wander.

'I doubt it. We just have to be careful what expenses we incur. I'm sorry about this. Head office say it's temporary. What can I say?'

'You can say you're joking,' said Wander with a smile.

'You can say it's not your fault and that head office are a bunch of praks.'

'I could, couldn't I.'

They were smiling, and that made Barnaby feel a little better. He decided to tell them more.

'I had a word with the tour manager earlier and ...well, to be honest, head office hasn't paid for our stay here. They're relying on good publicity

from us and have consequently granted a free adventure tour. But that means we'll have the media more up our noses. So no picking yours, Wander. It also means that the tour operators may want us to perform for them and help promote them. I'm sorry, but that's the situation.'

'So we're still going to do the rest of the Universe trip?' asked Wander.

'I hope so. But it might be more along these lines than the freedom and relative privacy we had before.'

'I can live with that.' Wander smiled.

Barnaby looked at Winnie.

She smiled too, and it warmed him to see it. He became aware of Mellianna watching him, so he stopped looking admiringly at her lips as she answered him. 'I can live with that too. But what about the two praks that tried to kidnap us? What's being done about them, Barney?'

Barnaby threw up his hands and shook his head. 'We don't have any protection out here, other than what our hosts can offer us.' He leant forward and dropped his voice. 'If they find out we've people after us, perhaps they won't give us any hospitality. If you know what I mean?'

'So we're exposed out here?' Winnie said without any smile.

'I don't know what to suggest.' Barnaby said with a shake of his head.

They ate in silence for a while, hardly noticing what food they were consuming.

Mellianna eventually said, 'We'll just have to watch each other's backs. That's all.'

The twins looked at each other and Mellianna nor Barnaby could see what they were communicating.

Their guide was named Toolip and had skin so black that they could see few features even in the strongest light. His skin absorbed light and reflected nothing back. He had a very pleasant manner and his diction exemplary. Even with the Universal translators embedded under their ears, the tourists could understand every word of this quietly spoken man. He was very short, coming up to the shoulder of Barnaby and the neck of Mellianna. On the girls, he came up to the level of their nipples and he came up there quite often.

He arrived dressed in a very loose green smock that seemed to have a life of its own when he moved. He carried a small bag over one shoulder and waited patiently for them at the back door of the hotel. The Savannah

stretched into the distance and the twin suns were climbing high into the sky. The humidity was reducing and the tourist beginning to feel the heat. Except for the Wullen twins, whose bots were adjusting their skin temperature every second or so.

There were twelve trailblazers in Toolip's party and he counted them twice to make sure no one was missing at this early stage of the trek. He turned on a wide smile and welcomed everyone to the trail.

He waved a hand into the distance and said, 'Beyond those mountains is the jungle. That's where we'll be staying for the next few days.'

'That's a long way to walk!' said Wander quietly. But everyone heard her.

Toolip smiled and said, 'As I was about to say.....we'll be transported to the jungle in a short while and all your baggage will be carried by porters. We are a poor nation here and if you feel we have provided you with a good service, perhaps you could show your appreciation at the end of the trail. I thank you in advance.'

With a soft roar, an aerocar came around the side of the building. Its open sides covered in a large cage. Flimsy curtains flapped in the breeze as Toolip invited his guest to board their chariot to adventure. The party boarded their transport and sat on the rough wooden seats. Toolip sat near the driver and when all were seated he told the driver to start their adventure.

As the craft raced across the landscape, they flashed over trees and herds of grazing animals. Large mountains grew bigger, and the suns blazed down on them, penetrating the violently flapping flimsy protection sheets. The wind felt cool in the heat of the air and the smell of the dusty ground rose to meet them. The two sister's hair streamed behind them, flapping at their shoulders and tickling their scalps.

They gained height as they topped the mountains and began the descent over the other side. Stretched ahead of them was the canopy of the jungle. They leaned out over the side, to look down on their new home for the next few days. Toolip watched their faces, knowing that in a few days' time there would be less of them. Sometimes the ruggedness of the outdoors proved too much for these soft-centred tourists. Sometimes a quick evacuation was called for, to get them to civilisation before their fingernails were broken.

The car banked and prepared to land in a clearing by the side of a bright blue winding river. As they gently touched down, Barnaby searched for the small ship that had given them so many worries. There was nothing but greenery and the river here. Toolip moved them all into a rough leaf-roofed hut and there waited an assistant every bit as black as Toolip.

‘These are the required clothing for the journey. Please make your selection of your choice.’ He waved at the stall where the clothes were piled up. Wander and Winnie picked up a garment and rubbed their thighs with it. Slowly a material gown formed around their bodies and began to flow off their shoulders. As Toolip turned to look at them, they appeared to be wearing a very fashionable version of his clothing. A puzzled look came over his face until one of the other guests was calling for his help in pulling the gown over her head.

Mellianna and Barnaby selected two similar colours and pulled them on. The material was deceptive. To the touch, it felt normal, but when the sun touched it, the inside felt cool. They assumed the reverse would happen during the cooler nights. They admired each other in their new clothes and waited for the next part of the indoctrination.

Once everyone finished dressing, Toolip led them outside into the sparkling sunshine. The nearby branches provided some shade, and he stood in the welcome coolness as he explained what they needed to do to be safe. The trail looked a well-established one and was completely safe. Unless....anyone decided to step away from it into the jungle undergrowth, where the management would not be held responsible for their safety. The edges of the trail were protected by an invisible shield which felt soft to the touch but would guide the traveller back onto the path as necessary. Pushing too hard would result in the traveller breaking free from its protective confines and be exposed to the untamed jungle outside.

‘Our bearers have gone on ahead, so now we can follow. Please keep to the trail and if you want to ask any questions, please don’t hesitate.’ Toolip said, finishing with a grin.

‘Where are we going?’ from Wander.

‘How long will it take?’ from Winnie.

Toolip smiled again and said, ‘We must walk to our first campsite. It will take three standard hours. But....we’ll rest along the way and look at some pretty impressive scenery. This way please.’

An hour later most of the party were seated, trying to recover their energy. The heat and the humidity were taking its toll and Toolip handed out pills that would correct most of their debilitating symptoms. Winnie looked over the low bushes at the river. To one side a huge waterfall crashed into the rocks below. She longed for a swim, but the water level was way down from the ridge along which they had been walking.

‘It’s very pretty isn’t it?’ asked Winnie.

Wander looked up and nodded.

‘Very romantic.’ Added Mellianna.

‘How much further?’ said Barnaby rubbing his foot.

‘We shall be stopping very shortly at the weigh station up ahead.’ Toolip said with a smile. ‘Not far.’ He added to help.

They moved on at a steadily decreasing pace until they rounded a bend to reach a small clearing. Once again a small rough hut offered them shade and shelter. Inside it was furnished with chairs and cots and foot spas. These were seized on quickly by those with sore feet.

Mellianna stretched out on a cot and sighed in pleasure. Barnaby soaked his feet and sighed in pleasure. Toolip spoke quietly with two of his assistants as the travellers took their rest in any way they saw fit. Inside the hut, the air was cool and fragrant. The twins stood in the doorway looking down the valley. Far below them, the river wound its way through the dense jungle and both had the urge to take a dip in its cool waters.

‘Time for that later,’ said Toolip, reading their minds.

‘Can we?’ asked Wander excitedly.

Toolip nodded. ‘Indeed. We will be camping by a river. There will be swimming, boating and other water sports if you wish.’

‘How long to get there?’

‘Not far.’

The descent was easier, and the travellers were beginning to relax in each other’s company. The short break had allowed them to introduce themselves to each other. Friendships began to develop although many were alien to each other in many ways. Toolip constantly looked behind him, counting his charges and ensuring no one lagged behind or got into difficulties. He slowed the pace, not wishing to arrive too early at the camp.

They made one more rest to take on fluids and eat some dried fruits. The stall at the side of the path was manned by another of Toolip’s colleagues. Barnaby suspected he was one of the porters and one of the men in the last rest hut. He was already suspicious that there might be a much quicker and easier way to get to the first camp. But then, they were here for the complete physical jungle experience.

Onwards once again and the heat began to ebb. The light changed subtly, and they knew the suns were setting. ‘How much further to go?’ someone from the back said.

‘Not far.’ Was the answer from Toolip.

They reached a clearing and were delighted to see several tents already erected. There was the obligatory rough wooden hut at its edge and opposite ran the river. Without a second thought, the twins ran straight into the water. Their clothing strangely becoming invisible. They splashed and frolicked naked as the men stood on the bank, staring in wonder.

In the spirit of the adventure, Barnaby threw off his smock and pulled Mellianna towards the river. She just had time to get rid of her cloak before being pushed under water.

'Is it safe to swim in there?' questioned one of the men in the group. Toolip nodded. Soon all the men were in the water and some of their women followed. To keep an eye on them.

By the time the last person had dragged themselves from the river, a large fire illuminated the dark clearing. The suns had set, and the night now cool and fragrant. Carcasses were turning on wooden spits and the air filled with the smell of cooking meat. There were at least six helpers preparing the camp banquet and they were passing round horn cups, filled with wine. Once the meat was ready, the meal began in earnest.

Everyone was hungry. The trek and the efforts of the day had generated an appetite. The wine was drunk by the cupful and soon a sing-song filled the air and the camp experience was almost complete.

Some hung on into the night, while others wandered off to their tents, crawled into the comfortable cots and under covers. For most sleep came quickly and by the time the last camper had left the fireside, the air was full of snoring and crackling logs. Out in the jungle, the night creatures called to each other. Occasionally disturbing the sleeping tribe in their safe tents.

Toolip retired to his abode and lay for a while thinking through the day. His plans for the following day were in place and he was confident he could once again provide a good experience for the tourists. Sleep finally overcame him as large predators stalked the fringes of the camp. They probed but could not get past an invisible barrier. They could smell a meal but couldn't get at it. Some roared in disgust, waking some sleepers. Toolip slept soundly on.

A short distance away from the sleeping campsite two figures rested up in a tree. Dressed to blend in with the jungle foliage, they slept in hammocks slung from stout branches. One would remain awake for two hours while the other slept. The noises below did not disturb the sleeper because the other would be alert to any real danger.

The night slowly became lighter as dawn broke twice in quick succession. Two suns crept over the horizon and Rocky and Flint ate from

their meagre rations. They squatted by the river bank and watched for any traffic coming their way. Once refreshed they split up and spread out, blending into the jungle. All they could do now was wait.

The camp came slowly awake and drifted through the routine of washing in the hut and smelling the breakfast already being cooked over the newly refreshed fire. Wander was the last to poke her head from the tent and saw everyone already eating breakfast. She grunted and joined them.

Once breakfast was finished, Toolip led his team to the river's edge and walked along around its bend. There, waited a small wooden marina. Many boats gently rocked on the slight swell from the river. Canoes and paddle boats lined the bank. A few small sailing craft waited for occupancy.

'Who wants to sail, and who wants to row?' Toolip asked with a large grin.

Winnie and Wander chose to try out canoeing while Mellianna and Barnaby chose a sailboat. The helpers were on hand to provide guidance and advice. Barnaby let a small man take control of the boat as it skimmed away from the river's edge and out into the faster-moving water of the river. The boat heeled over, and they hung on as it bounced across the waves. Their grins told the helmsman they were enjoying themselves and he set the sail to make the boat go even faster.

Winnie powered across the lake, providing a perfect balance and weight displacement. Wander quickly got the hang of the canoe and chased after her. Behind them, a small flotilla was spreading out on the water as the other adventurers tried their hand at being sailors. Toolip watched from the shore and smiled. He sat and watched his people enjoying themselves and sipped at a hot drink as he watched the sun arch overhead. They would have lunch there and move on to the next campsite, two hours away.

Boats whirled across the river, swerving to miss one another and two or three developed a race as they powered down with the flow of the river, turning around an imaginary object and racing back against the tide. Toolip watched and finished his drink. He talked quietly to his colleagues, who laughed and bantered until their guests were ready to finish their antics on the water.

Toolip suddenly stood up, looking both up and down the river. Anxiety etched into his weathered features. Two boats were missing. He knew who they were and couldn't find them. A low whistle sounded from his lips and as if by magic four men stood beside him. With a quick movement of both hands, his team split and began to search the river banks to either side of the campsite. Wander and Winnie were gone.

The tree was rough on her back, but Flint was used to the hard, outdoor life. Her training as a hunter-killer covered every aspect of survival in the wild. She'd been on many planets and several times in life-threatening situations. She was more bored than frightened, more uncomfortable than unhappy.

Flint watched her stretch of the river without any lapse of concentration. A movement caught her eye, and she was instantly alert. A boat came into her vision. She triggered the alarm on her wrist and Rocky was instantly alert and watching the same boat coming towards them. Silently Flint slipped into the water and disappeared beneath the surface.

Winnie was out in front and Wander was racing up behind. She was closing the distance and Winnie put in one extra spurt to keep ahead of her competitive sister. But Wander was determined to catch her sister. Her arms pumped harder as she drove the oar deeper into the water, ever closing the gap.

As she came alongside, Winnie turned and grinned at her and said, 'Okay, let's call it a draw. We'd better get back to the camp.'

'Admit that I won then!'

'It was a draw.'

Both boats slowed in the water as they were deciding on racing back, they turned them and lined up side by side. They kept still as they looked at each other ready to start the return race.

Suddenly both their boats tipped over, spilling the girls into the water. Two heads surfaced and before the girls could react, small injections had been pushed into their necks. As both women floated to the surface, Rocky and Flint were swimming for the bank with their unconscious prizes in tow.

Once on the bank, Rocky and Flint discarded their special water equipment and prepared the anti-grav sleds they'd hidden in the trees. It took a few minutes to load the inert bodies on to the sledges and powered up the units. The sleds floated above the ground and the two antagonists began their trek back to their ship, hidden in the valley.

The small men ran through the jungle's edge. They glided like ghosts faster than the eye could follow. This was their environment, they were bred to live here. Bred to hunt and kill. High-pitched whistles sounded as communication. Toolip stood and listened, anxious he had not done his duty. His reputation and future employment hung in the balance.

A short series of whistles announced they'd found a trail. Toolip didn't hesitate and entered the jungle, pushing through the tough protective wall. He left two of his staff behind, who would ensure the visitors had their lunch and started the next part of the trek if he hadn't returned in time.

The long robe now was folded in careful layers around his body, leaving little to snag in the trees as he ran through the dense undergrowth. A whistle ahead told him they were on the trail and closing. He moved faster through the jungle. His breath began to falter and for the first time in a distinguished career, he was feeling his age. He wanted to rest and regain his breath, but he needed to be there when the prey was caught.

Toolip looked behind him and could not see any of the automated media machines and hoped they would not find their way to the capture site. This had to be kept discreet. This breach of security was dangerous to the reputation of the tour operator. It could have major ramifications to the tourist business. Another whistle, directly ahead. Toolip eased his pace and tried to get his breath back. He didn't want to arrive exhausted.

Toolip saw movement ahead and slowed to a cautious jog. He saw one of his partners up ahead who signalled to him to hold back. He eased back gratefully, sucking air into his lungs. Toolip walked forward to his colleague a short distance away. His friend stopped and Toolip did the same. A step forward, then another. A final signal and Toolip moved forward into a tiny clearing. Two sleds rested on the ground with two women apparently asleep on them. Tied to a tree were two other people, dressed in camouflage outfits and staring angrily at the three men holding small knives at their throats. They both turned to watch Toolip enter the clearing, believing he was a leader.

'Why?' was the simple question, quietly asked by Toolip.

'A contract. That's all.'

'Just the two of you?'

'Yes.' Hugo Rock answered.

Toolip looked into his eyes and knew it was the truth.

'Escape route?'

There was no point in deceit now, 'A ship. An hour that way.' A nod of the head gave a direction.

'Thank you.' Toolip said and added, 'Goodbye.'

Knives slid into their throats, Rock and Flint died moments later.

The sailboat ground to a halt on the shallow shoreline and Barnaby got out first to help Mellianna onto the bank. Both were laughing and giggling like school children. They thanked their captain and helped push the boat back into the stream, so it could be sailed back to its rightful mooring place.

They struggled on wobbly legs to the nearest wooden bench and sat gratefully on its unmoving surface. Barnaby slipped an arm over her shoulders and said, 'I like it here. Do you?'

'It's very romantic.' She said, and they both laughed.

They sat in silence watching the rest of the party come ashore and go to their tents or to other benches. They waited for their lunch to be prepared. The river flowed slowly past and the last of the boats were moved to their moorings around the bend. Barnaby felt a slow fear build in his heart.

'Where are the girls?' he said suddenly anxious.

Mellianna stood and ran to the edge of the river, looking both ways. 'I can't see them anywhere.'

Barnaby looked for Toolip and couldn't see him. He asked several of the assistants, preparing the lunch and setting up tables. None of them seemed to know where he was. Barnaby was about to panic when Toolip emerged from the jungle. Following him were several of his helpers and they were carrying the lifeless forms of the twins.

'Do not worry. They had a slight accident and are unhurt. Nobody gets hurt on a Toolip trek.' The bodies were laid gently on the ground as Mellianna and Barnaby squatted beside them. They gently tapped faces and slapped wrists. It seemed the right thing to do.

'What happened?' Mellianna asked anxiously.

'I did not see. Their canoes had capsized, and we pulled them to the river bank. They will be super fine again soon.' He walked off unconcerned, to supervise the lunch preparations. Winnie coughed once, and Wander jerked an arm. Within moments they were sitting up and coughing the remnants of the river from their lungs.

Barnaby and Mellianna helped them to their tent and rested them on the cots. The girls were soon smiling and asking what happened.

Barnaby said, 'We don't know. Toolip said your boats capsized, and they found you in the river. They pulled you out and brought you here. Don't you remember anything?'

'I know I won the race.' Wander said with a grin.

'No you didn't. It was a draw!'

‘So how did you manage to capsize *both* boats?’ Barnaby said. Both girls shrugged in an identical gesture. ‘As long as you’re all right. That’s the main thing.’

‘We’re fine now.’ They said together.

Lunch passed uneventfully, with the other diners interested in hearing the more detailed version of the girls near drowning. The four sat on a table together and chewed through the delicious chunks of meat and bread.

Barnaby said, ‘Do you still want to go on?’

‘Of course,’ said Winnie.

‘Why shouldn’t we?’ Added Wander.

Barnaby shrugged and said, ‘It’s just that....I don’t know. When I thought you were missing I remembered those two creeps sent by Huutch. I just.....thought the worse. They could still be out there. It could still be dangerous just being here.’

Wander leaned forward and said quietly. ‘It could be dangerous for us ANYWHERE.’

Mellianna said equally quietly, ‘But particularly *here*. Everyone in the Universe knows we’re on this planet, right now.’

Barnaby was thinking. ‘How about.....changing the order? Instead of going to the next planet on our schedule, we go to the planet after that, come back and then jump forward again. It’ll take a little reorganising, but it would fool the creeps out there.’

‘It’d also fool the media. And we don’t want that do we?’ the glare from Mellianna was obvious. She lowered her voice further. ‘You don’t want O’Really on your back for non-promotion. Besides, all the arrangements have been made. To change them may be disastrous. Especially in the light of.....’ she became aware of the girls listening and stopped, using her eyes to convey the last part of the message. Barnaby just looked puzzled.

Winnie said to Barnaby, ‘Mel means that the finances of this trip are in tatters, stretching expenditure further would wreck the whole trip.’

‘Exactly.’ Offered Wander.

Barnaby shook his head. ‘I’d be happier if we cancelled this tour right now.’

‘Well I wouldn’t!’ said the twins together.

Barnaby shrugged. ‘Well if you’re willing to go on.....’

‘We are.’

‘Then on we go. But extra vigilance please.’ Barnaby stood and walked to the river to wash his plate and mug. He wanted to think this through. Barnaby believed they were missing the problem entirely. If either of the girls was abducted, who’d be responsible? Barnaby! He had to take every available measure to protect the girls – and Mellianna too. Barnaby moved upriver to avoid the rest of the camp washing their utensils. He rounded the bend and sat on the soft river bank.

The water flowed smooth and slow at this point. It was wide and very relaxing. He could see upstream until the river made another bend, the water now empty of traffic. This small group were the only Derivatives on this part of the planet. It was a very isolated spot indeed. Time to think and reflect. He rested back on his elbows and watched the river flow. What sort of fish were in there? Anything dangerous?

Something caught his eye, something floating in the water near to where he sat. He sat up, trying to make out what it was. It rolled gently in the water and with a shock, he realised it might be a human body. He was about to shout out to get help when he saw it roll fully over and he was near enough to make out the face. He recognised the body. It was the man who’d tried to kidnap the girls!

At first, he felt horror at seeing a dead body, then relief as he knew who that person was. Further out in the stream floated another body. Difficult to see features, but he just knew it was the dead man’s female partner. Another accident and this time fatal. Barnaby stood and considered wading into the water and drag the corpse to the side. He remained motionless. The fewer people who knew about the deceased couple the better. An overwhelming sense of relief flooded through him. They were safe again.

The trail wound through the jungle and out onto a wide plain. In the near distance were the purple mountains, rising like a wall before them. As the jungle vegetation thinned, the humidity dropped, and the heat increased. The straggling group were getting tired, but it was part of the jungle trek experience. Toolip judged his charges well and knew they would stop shortly. He studied the plain and saw the small smudge that was their resting hut and headed towards it.

To the untrained eye, the plain looked featureless and their course stretched across the rough ground. But Toolip knew his area well and there were small signs on the earth where the safe path lay. The path had an invisible protective tunnel and all of them were perfectly safe while remaining inside it. It wound across the plain to give the impression that

they were taking a stroll across the Savannah. It was all part of a carefully crafted plan to give the tourists the complete Savannah experience.

Several of the older or overweight members of the party were straggling behind. They would be safe as long as they followed their leader and not stray from the path. In front, Toolip paced himself on their behalf but was amused to see the two young and strikingly beautiful women, walking close behind him. He smiled to himself as he searched the horizon to his left and nodded in satisfaction. Right on time, they were coming. Another clever arrangement that always left the tourist gasping in awe. He stopped walking and waited until the stragglers caught up with him. He leant on his knobby walking stick and rested.

The invisible barrier tricked the mind. They all thought they were exposed in the middle of a flat plain, with two suns beating down on them. They could all see the hut ahead and knew it would be nearly an hour before they reached it, at the pace they'd been walking. As they stopped and took a breather, Toolip pointed towards the dark mass near the horizon. 'Welluns.'

'What are they?' ventured someone from near the rear of the column.

'Big and dangerous. That's what they are. Welluns,' said Toolip.

'Shouldn't we go somewhere to be safe from them?' The same person at the rear.

Toolip took an exaggerated look around the plain before saying, 'Where would you suggest?'

The smudge was getting bigger and more distinctive. Hundreds of animals were moving their way. As they got nearer, it became clear it was nearer to thousands. A nervousness crept into the group, but Toolip just rested on his stick. He'd seen it all before – and had lived.

A rumbling sound reached their ears and a vibration could be felt through the ground. Winnie instinctively moved nearer to her sister as Mellianna's hand crept into Barnaby's. The herd now approaching very fast, spanning as far as they could see from one end of the horizon to the next. The sights and the sounds of the herd so close to their fragile and defenceless bodies were terrifying, yet totally absorbing. Death now inevitable, and the small group were too petrified other than to stop. Not moving, talking, or even breathing.

The winding corridor's protection field shifted and adjusted as the herd were about to plough through it. It cocooned into a smaller bubble and toughened against the advancing herd. The first of the animals, taller than either Wander or Winnie, brushed against the outskirts of the field and were deflected away. As the herd bunched up and struck the field with more mass, the field flexed and pushed the animals to both sides of the group.

The herd was all around them. Tall and bulky creatures with six legs and hair down to the ground. Hair covered their heads, eyes and every part of their body. How they could see where they were running, nobody knew.

For many minutes the thunderous roar surrounded them, dust flew in the air almost obscuring their view. Slowly the wave subsided, and the noise diminished. The small crowd began to breathe again, and a collective sigh ran through them. Toolip straightened himself up from his rest and started to walk unconcerned to the hut in the distance, the bubble changing to a corridor once again.

They rested at the hut and took the opportunity to sit in the cooler air inside, out of the heat of the suns. They drank deeply of the water and flavoured juices. Some of the more elderly people on the trek were becoming overwrought with the experience. Two had decided they would like to go back to the comfort of the hotel. The rest agreed they should. The incessant complaints were getting a few others upset. Toolip had seen it all before, there were always drop-outs at this stage and a car waiting to take them back, parked behind the hut.

Toolip allowed his troupes a rest before setting off across the plain once more. Their object, he pointed out, was the base of the mountains. A dark rocky crag that stood out in the distance. It wasn't far. As they trudged, other herds of animals swept by them. Not as large or fearsome as the Welluns, but more graceful and majestic. The line stopped to admire the creatures as they gambolled and galloped past.

There were eight-legged mammals and two-tailed fawns. Creatures with gills and no tail. Some were two-legged, others four. Some were fast, other painfully slow. The carnival of creatures spread past them in a vista of nature's finest. High above, and at a respectable distance, the media machines recorded everything. The boredom and effort of a long march were much reduced by the wonders of nature. By the time the lower slopes of the mountain range were reached, the trekkers were feeling uplifted as well as tired.

There appeared a large fissure in the black rocks, through which Toolip led his party. The second sun now almost below the horizon and the light fading quickly. Inside was a large natural cave and several large bonfires were burning. Toolip's assistants prepared the evening meal and the carcass of one huge animal roasting on a spit. Torches flickered around the walls and the whole atmosphere being created by the shifting lights and smell of cooking food. It looked like a pirate's cave.

In one corner of the cave stood a purpose-built washroom, with a row of modern and effective cleansing units. There was a rush for these as Wander moved nearer the fire and looked into its hypnotic flames. As they passed she heard Mellianna say, 'Isn't this romantic?'

It tired the troupe after their day's trek. Toolip watched his charges as they sat around the campfire, chewing reflectively on the meat. He looked behind him as his own team were preparing the sleeping accommodation for the night. The few visitors leaving the trek earlier had settled the remaining people. There was less complaining about the heat and sore feet. What did these people expect? They paid a small fortune and travelled a vast distance and are surprised that a "Trek across the unique deserts, mountains and forests of Arcsaurus" meant walking!

Toolip chewed on the meat and tried to recognise the taste. He thought Yuobli but wasn't sure. He watched the two women who he understood to be sisters and admired their physique. Coming from a race of Derivatives with tall slender physiques he admired the pneumatic shape and contours of their bodies. He shifted on his seat, uneasy with the effect the two sumptuous girls had on his libido.

There began an attempt to sing camp songs around the campfire, but they spluttered out as people realised they didn't know any. Ahead promised to be another long and tiring day, so Toolip bid his goodnights and wished them all a safe and dreamless sleep. He walked to his pitched tent by the far wall and eased inside.

One by one the campers disappeared into their tents, leaving Mellianna, Barnaby and the girls alone by the dying embers. They sat in silence, watching the flames and recollecting the events of the day. The twins looked at each other and some silent communication took place. Eventually, Barnaby stood and said he was ready to retire. Mellianna stood too, and they walked to their allocated tent.

Alone, the girls looked at each other until Wander said, 'It's been a while now.' Winnie nodded.

Without another word they rose and walked silently towards Toolip's tent. He was in for a surprising and remarkably gratifying night.

The following day the twins were back in their own tent and not ready to get up with the others. Toolip was up and about early, an un-natural buoyancy in his step. The breakfast was ready, and the trekkers were eating, but the Wullen girls slept on. Toolip would normally hassle his tourists to get going as there was a schedule to meet. But he couldn't disturb the sleeping beauties.

Eventually, Barnaby woke them up and got them out of their sleep. He had to look away as he realised they were naked and thought how much he still missed that experience. But he had other distractions in his life now. But he would still like to.....Toolip called for his followers to start the trek and led them out of the cave.

The climb over the mountain range looked more problematical than it turned out to be. From the flat plain, the mountains looked tall, but the track across them kept to the foothills. The inclines were shallow and the mountain scenery spectacular. Sheer rock faces rising either side of them. Cresting a ridge and seeing the plain behind and the jungle out in front of them.

They moved at a steady pace, with Toolip keeping an eye open for stragglers and anyone in difficulty. There being no threat along this trail as the protective invisible corridor was always present. The Tourist Board of Arcsaurus didn't take unnecessary chances. They began the descent, and the walking became easier. They were soon out of the hills and into the flat area before the jungle proper started. There stood the ubiquitous cabin, ready to cool and refresh the weary travellers.

Toolip sat and watched his new obsession. They moved with grace and power and he knew he was falling in love with both of them. He watched as they rested on the loungers and drank deeply from the large kernel of the Froop fruit. The rest of the party talked amongst themselves, but the girls were always a little distance from the main group. They were together and nothing else seemed to matter. He liked that. A loyalty and devotion. Rarely seen in Derivatives.

Toolip sighed as he stood once again and herded his troupes outside for the jungle section of their day's trek. He liked this bit, it was less strenuous on him and he knew the customers liked it too. Toolip waited until he'd counted all his charges and then pushed his way through the bank of shrubbery ahead of him. Once inside it became so dense that light found it hard to penetrate. There formed an instant change of atmosphere. An edge had come to the journey.

Toolip smiled to himself as he knew what was going through the minds of the people walking behind him. The jungle had closed in and could be very threatening. The sounds became more obvious, more important and possibly deadlier. Awareness of the safety tunnel disappeared, and old human instincts came to the fore. Fear and protection were the first reactions of the human mind in times of perceived danger. Toolip parted the way with his staff and they soon came to an open space.

He waited in the clearing until all his charges had caught up with him. He counted them and smiled. 'We are about to travel through on a conveyor belt. It saves your energy and allows you to look around at the wonders of the jungle. The wildlife, the vegetation, the whole atmosphere. It will take about two hours and then we stop for lunch. Please enjoy the experience. This way.'

Toolip walked between two trees and stepped onto a broad, slow-moving belt. It jerked him forward and watched as all the others stood in

line behind him. The belt moved towards the edge of the clearing and into the dense jungle.

Their journey was one of awe. Creatures were a dog's follicle away from them, going about their daily lives. Brightly coloured birds wheeled around them, seemingly perching on their very shoulders, gazing quizzically at them. People reached through the protective shield of the tunnel to touch gently these vibrant creatures. Butterflies cascaded down from the trees, drowning them in colour and movement. Small mammals swung from the tall branches, swooping down to bounce gently off the invisible barrier. Insects hummed by, resplendent in iridescent colours that reflected the minimal sunlight, shimmering as they disappeared back into the foliage.

Large reptiles hung from branches or slithered across the moving platform in front of them. Fruit hung in profusion from widely differing trees and shrubs, every imaginable shape and colour. Perfumes filled the air as flowers sprayed scent. The images and scents were a tour de force on their senses. They emerged from the jungle into a large clearing and hadn't realised two hours had slipped past.

The usual hut was there for their temperature comfort and the travellers were busy talking about their recent journey of wonder. Toolip watched the sisters in animated conversation, their six breasts bouncing. He could not keep the smile off his face.

The lunch was served buffet style and consisting of fruit and vegetables. No one knew what they were eating, but all seemed to enjoy the fare. They sat, eat and talked throughout the whole meal, their body temperatures gradually returning to normal from the heat and humidity of the jungle.

Time slipped past and once again they were on the move. A second conveyor belt led them into the jungle. This time the journey was through a more open bush, rivers and waterfalls were the views. The birds were more evident in these open areas. Larger beasts wandered past them or looked inquisitively at the passing strangers. The presence of the river cooled the air and made the day more pleasant. Their belt wound on and the journey was nearing its end.

Their belt delivered its passengers to one last large hut, outside which was a large transporter waiting to take them back to the hotel. The trekkers said their goodbyes to Toolip and his team and he got a proper kiss from both the twins. His face beamed, and his fellow colleagues were immediately jealous.

The suns set, and the landscape grew dark. Their time on Arcsaurus was nearing its end. Barnaby was particularly relaxed as he realised they could stick to the schedule again, with Huutch's men now gone. He'd

enjoyed his time on Arcsaurus and was sad to leave. He sat watching the sunsets, his arm around Mellianna. It was certainly romantic. Mellianna idly wondered where the twins were.

In a small village, outside the city, a wooden ring had been constructed and was used for entertaining the locals. Rough wooden seats surrounded the low fence and inside the circle, the ground was covered in pale blue sand. Torches flickered from their holders in the walls of the few houses nearby. Outside the ring, taller torches burned, casting an ever-moving golden light into the ring.

Toolip stood near the entrance to the arena. He watched the crowds gather and breathed in the atmosphere. This was his home, this was his life. The noise was growing louder. People talking excitedly, expectantly. This was a special occasion, it was very rare the Master was about to give a performance. But not before the honoured guests had arrived.

Toolip looked past the crowd and out towards the horizon. The path was narrow and winding from the village to the Savannah, but he could hear a vehicle approach long before he could see it. He saw the car arrive, and the doors slid open. Two of the planet's most gorgeous creatures eased themselves out of the car. Long shapely legs followed by voluptuous bodies. Wild hair sprang into the night air and waved at the crowd on its own. The Wullen sisters had arrived.

Toolip moved to greet them and felt the crowd go silent. A wave of emotion swept towards him. Hate and distrust from most of the females, envy, lust and a general feeling of inadequacy emanated from the males. Toolip absorbed it all. This was to be a night to remember.

Winnie and Wander kissed Toolip on the cheek and he smiled to the still growing crowd. He led them to a row of seats halfway up the bank. Here they could see the ring from the best vantage point. He took the time to wave to the crowd and acknowledge the cheer, before sitting carefully between them, his long pole placed upright between his knees. He could not stop smiling. The girls waved at the crowd and appreciated the whistles and cheers they got in return. A silence descended, and an air of expectancy settled on them all.

The twins looked at the ring and waited for something to happen. A wooden door creaked open on the far side of the ring wall. They could see a canvass covered tunnel leading from the door to a nearby shed. From out of this cloth tunnel came an animal in a hurry. For a moment the air was full of blue dust, when it settled a large, six-legged mammal stood in the centre of the ring. It stood nearly as tall as a normal man and had large nostrils which flared and dripped mucus. Three very large reddened eyes glared at

the people surrounding it while it panted loudly. Its long shaggy fur dragged onto the ground, making it look like a walking carpet. All could see the animal was annoyed and ready to let anyone know.

Winnie leaned forward and Toolip could see her breasts clearer. The girls appeared to be wearing a very thin, animal skin. It only covered their more socially sensitive areas, leaving the rest of their finely tuned bodies for all to see. Toolip watched the three nipples, straining at the thin material. Wanda smiled at the old man's lust and leant forward as well. She let her hand drop gently onto his knee. He nearly jumped in surprise, the smile never changing, but the thoughts in his mind racing.

The audience was murmuring, but a silence fell as a reedy instrument sounded a soulful wail into the night. Someone entered the ring. It was a child, a mere adolescent. His dark skin shone as if a fine layer of sweat already covered him.

'My son,' said Toolip with unhidden pride. 'And that's a Muuui.' He added.

With a speed and grace that was deceptive, the boy appeared to float onto the creature's back. The effect was instant and violent. The Muuui objected to anything touching him and tried to buck off the offending rider. With a strength that belied his looks, the boy hung on as the Muuui gyrated and leapt into the air. The crowd held its breath as the child appeared to be dicing with certain death. Or at least, a serious maiming.

Wanda watched Toolip out of the corner of her eye as he watched his son intently. His face showed no fear or anxiety, just hopeful expectation and a large portion of pride. Wanda glanced at the frantic animal and waited for the inevitable end to this performance. The animal was slowing down. He was either getting tired or accepting he had a new master. The Muuui made one last effort to unseat his rider. He splayed his legs until his belly touched the ground and began to roll over on his back, in the attempt to crush his tormentor

With an equal agility as before, the boy slid from the Muuui's back and ran for the fence. He scaled the wooden wall and sat on its top, arms raised taking the thunderous applause of his audience. Toolip stood and clapped his hands together. Both the twins responded and applauded too.

The child's grin broadened, and he waved to his father, A moment later he was off the fence and running into the crowd. He stood next to his father and looked in wonder at the two women on each side of his dad. Toolip introduced him as Tooluup and showed his single row of white teeth. Both the girls bent down and kissed the boy on the cheek. He reddened suitably, and they put an arm around his shoulder while they told him how brave and skilful he was. Another soulful wail sounded, and the crowd

hushed again. The audience settled down on their uncomfortable seats to await the next round of entertainment.

The canvas corridor showed signs of movement and into the ring burst another Muuui. This was significantly bigger than the first and appeared far more aggressive. He pounded the blue sand and kicked it into a dusty frenzy. After a while, he slowed down his angry tirade and looked around at the faces staring open-mouthed at him. The red eyes bored into the soul of all those watching him. This was one mean Muuui.

A young man entered the ring through the tunnel. He waved to the crowd and a ripple of excitement went around the ring. Some started applauding, including the Wullen sisters. This was a young adult and stood naked in the shimmering gold lights. His jet-black skin oiled, showing every detail of his muscular physique. Wander sat forward to see clearer.

‘My son,’ said Toolip, with even more pride. ‘Tooloop.’

The Muuui sensed a presence in “His” area and turned. The crowd gasped, the element of surprise gone for the young man. Tooloop took the time to wave at his father, before turning his attention to the large beast before him. The Muuui’s back was a good head and shoulders above his own head and the width of the beast was almost in proportion to its height. The creature took a step towards Tooloop. Then another, quicker this time, then another rapid pace and soon he was charging the defenceless youth.

The ring was small and there was nowhere to run. Tooloop turned his back on the Muuui and ran at the wooden wall and then up it. In an agility neither of the girls had seen before, Tooloop had spun in the air and landed on the back of the Muuui. Once there, he grabbed two fistfuls of the matted hair around the neck and dug his heels into the creature’s flanks. The Muuui reacted violently.

With enraged snorting and a bellow that sent chills down the younger audience, the Muuui charged around the ring, trying to shake off the creature on its back. It crashed into the side walls, with Tooloop just lifting his legs before the bone-shattering impact. The lad started to smile. It jerked his body like a rag doll in a dog’s mouth, but he hung on. The crowd were on their feet now and cheering. This seemed to enrage the Muuui even further, and he doubled his efforts to get the parasite off his back.

Winnie stood with her hand over her mouth, horrified at what she was about to see. She knew this young son of Toolip was about to be crushed by an animal ten times the boy’s size. Wanda watched Toolip’s face and saw the same calmness and confidence as he’d watched his younger son. Wanda felt an admiration for this man’s demeanour. His strength came not from large biceps, but from inside. A calm assuredness of his time and place in the

Universe and the relevance of those around him. A gasp from the crowd diverted Wanda's attention back to the ring. The beast was going to roll over.

Tooloop waited until the last possible moment before standing on the back of the Muuui and jumping off. He ran gracefully and unhurriedly for the fence and scaled it with ease. Before the Muuui had completed one roll over, Tooloop was taking his applause from his audience.

The girls exploded in excitement at this escape from certain death and Wanda looked sideways to watch Toolip, who slowly nodded his head in quiet approval. The Muuui was confused and looked for his tormentor. What he found was two young locals teasing him and so he charged. What else was a Muuui to do? As he was on top of them they seem to disappear behind a wooden wall and he found himself back in the tunnel and a cage door slammed behind him. He was even more confused now.

'You must be so proud of them, Toolip.' Wanda said, holding his hand.

He nodded and increased his smile. 'They're my sons. I expect nothing less.'

They made way for Tooloop as he climbed up the steps to join them. Introductions were made and now the girls had two drooling young males watching their every move. They smiled at the two boys and watched as Toolip touched both their heads in understated fatherly pride.

The mood of the audience had changed. It had become quieter and a pulsing sound had started. It took a while before either of the sisters could understand what was being chanted, but as the noise swelled, they thought they could hear the one word, "Master". The crowd wanted the Master. Winnie stood tall, looking at the entrance, waiting for the first sign of the Master.

'This should be good!' she said to Toolip.

'I hope so.' He said.

With a slow grace, Toolip started to walk toward the ring. The girls watched him go, and the realisation dawned on them. Fear slipped through Wanda's mind and she almost called out to him not to go. Winnie felt her sister's emotion and was about to call out too when the ring erupted in a cloud of dust. Another Muuui was ready to challenge the odds.

As the dust settled the girls were at first astounded, and then afraid. This Muuui was nearly twice the size of the last. It seemed, at first, as though the ring wasn't big enough for the creature. It just had enough room to turn, but no more. Toolip hardly looked at the massive monster as he handed his stick to an assistant and lazily climbed to the top of the wooden

wall. He took the time to wave to his fans, who exploded in a thunderous roar.

Still maintaining his smile, Toolip leapt from the wall, straight onto the Muuui's broad back. At first, the Muuui hardly felt him. Being of slight build, Toolip weighed little. With an exaggerated kick to the creature's neck, Toolip made his presence felt. The Muuui's head came up, and he tried to look behind him. Another kick and a handful of pulled fur, the Muuui knew he had a visitor.

The animal began to buck and Toolip used both hands to hang on. A spiral and another high bucking kick of the creature's six legs. His aggravating tick was still on his back. Time for more determined manoeuvres. A side charge followed a dizzying run around the ring at the wooden wall. It buckled but didn't collapse.

A gasp from the audience as they realised that Toolip was now standing on the Muuui's back, holding on with one hand. The Muuui tried the same tactics all over again. Toolip's free arm waved at the two sisters, who waved fearfully back. How was this going to end?

The Muuui stopped and considered his options. There was only one thing he could think of. But before he went into a roll, Toolip jerked the fur and made the creature's head rise. As he jumped on the neck muscles, he felt the animal react in anger. The Muuui wanted to charge, that's what they did in anger. He wanted to charge and crush something. A movement caught the creature's eye, and he headed straight for it.

The distraction came from the tunnel mouth and the Muuui was heading straight for the exit. The exhibition was over and all that remained was the dismount. Without losing his smile, Toolip stepped off the Muuui's back and onto the top of the tunnel as the animal charged out of the ring. This brought the audience to their feet, and the applause reached a crescendo that was music to the Master's ears.

Wanda looked at Winnie and said, 'Well that goes some way to explaining that night in the cave.'

The audience streamed towards the ring, surrounding the wall and cheering their hero. The sisters remained in the stands, guarded by the ever-watchful sons of Toolip. They applauded and shouted his name. Toolip saw them and waved them to join him. He jumped to the ground and was handed his stick. He waved again at them to come down. The sons took the girl's hands and led the way. The crowd now turned their attention towards their guests and the shouts became whistles and cheers of admiration. Winnie felt she was blushing.

A door opened in the wall and they were standing with Toolip in the centre of the ring. He stood between them and smiled at his fans. 'Our

honoured guests have enjoyed the show tonight. But as in the old tradition, it is their turn now. They must finish the evening for us.'

He turned his permanent smile on them and a look of incredulity crossed both their faces.

'You want US to do THAT!' Wanda gasped.

'We couldn't possibly...' Winnie finished lamely.

Toolip turned and made a small sign and the tunnel opened and with a gasp from both the girls a very small Muuui ran into the ring. It was waist height to the girls and ran around the ring in an almost joyous gambol. Wanda began to laugh and started to chase it. The crowd roared with laughter at her unsuccessful antics.

Winnie watched, trying to not to embarrass her sister by laughing too. She asked Toolip for his stick and he looked quizzically at her. He slowly relinquished his badge of office and Winnie stepped forward and waited for the young Muuui's next pass. With a quick incisive flick, she pushed the stick between the six rapidly moving legs and the creature tumbled into the sand and lay for a moment, unhurt but perplexed. There was an unspoken communication between the women, Wanda straddled the Muuui and as it rose to its feet she was seated on its back. With both hands buried in the neck fur, she rode it around the ring, being as gentle as she could with the animal's feelings.

The crowd went wild and Toolip even laughed out loud. He led the applause, and the crowd had their night to remember.

Toolip looked at Winnie and she shook her head.

'I don't think I could....'

Wanda smiled and pulled the Muuui up to a standstill. 'It's easy. Get on now while it's quiet.' Wanda said. Again a look and unspoken communication went between them and Winnie nodded. She stepped forward.

Winnie slipped behind Wanda as her sister slipped off. For a moment the Muuui hadn't noticed. As Winnie turned to wave at her audience, the animal took off for its race around the ring. Caught by surprise Winnie was thrown off backwards. She pushed both hands forward to protect herself and the crack was heard around the area. The crowd fell silent as they saw Winnie's arm bent at an unnatural angle.

Wanda was first to her side. 'Just stay calm. Wait.'

There was an intense pain on the face of Winnie, but she nodded and held her sister's hand. They remained still and silent. The audience

remained quiet and puzzled. What were they doing? A doctor should be sent for.

For long moments the ring was like a tableau, nothing moved or made a sound. Even the Muuui watched in fascination. A gasp began to ripple around the ring as Winnie's arm began to move. The odd angle began to right itself and slowly, but surely, the arm was straightening out.

Wanda stood and helped Winnie to her feet. Winnie rubbed the sore area and waved with the miraculously mended arm. The audience didn't know whether to cheer or remain stunned into silence. The Nano-bots had done their work, repairing the human in their charge.

Wanda hugged her sister. 'It's time we went, Toolip.' Wanda said.

For the first time that evening the smile waned on Toolip's face. 'Why? I thought we could all

'Our car's waiting. Barnaby doesn't know we're here.' Winnie smiled.

'And if he finds out.....' Wanda finished.

The smile had gone now. 'Perhaps tomorrow? Sometime?'

Wanda shook her head. 'We leave in the morning.'

'But we would like to return to Arcsaurus one day. If you'll have us?' Winnie said.

'Of course. Must you leave at all?'

'We have a tour to do. It's a kind ofcontract. Sorry. We'll be back.'

Royale O'Really turned the screen off and sat back in thought. Perhaps they had a chance after all. Bald E sounded very confident he could get the sponsorship from the last planet, Qiiop. Royale smiled as he recalled the promotion activity that surrounded E. Royale had watched the re-runs of the newscasts. The media interest had certainly grown over the tour of the Wullen sisters.

Bald E was a wheeler/dealer, manipulating the media to give good coverage for FutureGames Inc. He knew if the trip was cancelled it would be a major media disaster. So, he was resorting to blackmail and cajoling anybody - to make sure they didn't get bad press. He was offering unsurpassed publicity for anyone that would host and entertain the Wullen tour. Who could resist jumping on that bandwagon?

Royale felt better. It was being handled by a professional and he began to think it might all turn out for the best in the end. He slipped a small pill

under his tongue and let the magic flow through his body. He rested his feet on his desk and decided to call Babyloncity. With a wry smile he realised they were on their way to Xeranx, he would have to wait.

Jonno Huutch lay back and made up his mind. His private cruiser was slipping through space and it would not move as fast as he would have liked. Huutch was always in a hurry, especially now. He'd lost all contact with Hugo and Flint, he presumed them dead or lost. He called to the screen to get Dari. Moments later the bloated face of Dari focused and Jonno sneered at him.

'Any news?'

Dari shook his head and several minutes later his chins stopped wobbling. 'I'm awaiting their arrival. Should be any day now. I'll call you when I have something.'

'That "something", had better be one of those girls.' He turned the screen off with ill-disguised disappointment.

Jonno pushed the naked woman off his lap. Since the Wullen twins had entered his life, no other woman would be as good. He wanted the twins, either or both. He would settle for nothing less.

PART 9 - XERANX

The good ship *I Don't Give a Monkey's* appeared from hyper-drive and immediately entered orbit around a pale-yellow planet. It established communication between the automated traffic controllers and soon the ship touched gently down at the spaceport. The whine of the engines faded to silence.

From the porthole of a space yacht not too far away, Dari watched the ship land and awaited the passengers to disembark. Dari noted the other six ships in the spaceport and smiled at his own private cruiser. It was a top of the line, special edition, customised Fortnom 3000. It was his pride and joy and he just lived and breathed the smooth sexy lines and the extreme comfort the interior had to offer. The craft was probably not the fastest private ship in this part of the Universe, but it would give most of the others a run for their money. He'd christened her *Dominated by a Mistress*, because that was his first thought when he saw her. As time went on, he was sure her name was perfect.

There were two cargo vessels, and the rest were transports from various parts of the Universe. He hadn't bothered to check their passenger lists. There was the usual crowd awaiting their relatives and friends off the shuttle. He was only interested in two people and they were about to set foot on a new planet. While they were disorientated, he would make his move.

Dari touched his wrist until and saw the thin face of his colleague, Rynn. 'Ready?'

The angular head nodded and looked to one side. 'The hatch is just opening. Have the transport ready.'

The screen faded, and Dari allowed a mental smile. He'd always thought Flint and Moses were useless. Too soft-hearted and unprofessional. He'd been proven right. How many times had he told Jonno that? He'd show Huutch just how easy a real professional handled these things. Dari's only concern was the intense media interest. Cameras were floating all around the ship and he needed some privacy. He didn't want his picture all over the Universe while he went around kidnapping people to order.

He aimed his small pistol shaped device towards the newly arrived craft and pressed the button. Even from this distance, he could see the sudden disruption to the hovering machines of the Universe's media. This time his smile was on his mouth, but his eyes showed no emotion at all.

The local city elder waited for his special guests to disembark. He'd been promised a great deal of invaluable promotional coverage if he offered the welcoming hand of the city to the FutureGames touring party. Mr E had

made a promise Arrop would not regret hosting the whole party. Arrop adjusted his chain of office and practised his smile, while rehearsing his welcoming speech in his mind.

The pale green sky showed no signs of cloud. But a gentle warm breeze stirred the hats of the assembled ladies of the court as they waited for their first sight of the visitors of distinction. The stage was set for the welcoming party and as the hatch slid to one side, music blasted from hidden speakers and Arrop winced until the volume was lowered. He turned on the smile and waited for the first out of the ship.

It was becoming a tradition now that the two girls exited the ship first. It gave the cameras a chance to capture the essence of the tour and the prime stars got top billing. They stood together at the top of the steps and waved to the assembled people below them. The media machines were everywhere, as usual, although Winnie thought they seemed a little inactive at that moment. Normally their lenses followed the girls every movement. But as they walked gracefully down the short flight of steps to the boarding platform, the cameras did not seem to want to follow their progress. Wanda looked at Winnie and the same thought was being echoed in both their faces. A mental shrug and on with the show.

The crowd were applauding although so far there'd been nothing to entertain or excite them. It was what they thought was expected. Mellianna and Barnaby came out of the hatch next, waved and started down the steps. They halted behind the girls who were being approached by a very old man whose chain seem to weigh him down.

He muttered some incomprehensible words and gave the girls a large key. The sisters looked at each other and hoped it wasn't the key to the old man's bedroom. They thanked him profusely and turned to wave at the rest of the crowd once more.

With a sudden burst of movement, there were more people on the platform. Several strange-looking men were surrounding the two women. Both the sisters felt a sting and saw blackness fill their sight. Their progress into unconsciousness was almost instantaneous. In one swift move, both women were hefted onto the backs of two men and loud explosions sounded all around the ship. Smoke filled the air and the people watching started to panic. As Winnie and Wanda were bourn away by new and unknown assailants, Mellianna and Barnaby could only look on in horror.

Rryn and his two assistants headed for the side stairs that led down from the platform. From there it was a short distance to the *Dominated by a Mistress*. Onboard would be Dari, ready for immediate take-off. It couldn't be simpler. The simple pyrotechnics threw everyone off their guard and this kidnapping would come as a total surprise. From start to finish, in around two minutes.

As Rynn reached the stairs, he took a quick look behind to see how close his colleagues were and suddenly couldn't see anymore. He felt a blow to his head, and he felt his mind slowing down. He went into a deep and involuntary sleep.

Rynn's two colleagues were equally surprised to find themselves facing two very tall people. The man threw a punch that instantly knocked out one of them. The tall woman then aimed punch that laid out the second kidnapper. As he hit the floor, he could feel himself sinking into unconsciousness and knew they'd failed the simplest of well-planned tasks.

Winnie and Wanda were rolled onto their backs and their faces massaged until they showed signs of life. Inside their bodies, the bots were combating the narcotic and forcing it from the system. As the two girls came awake, Mellianna and Barnaby were standing over them.

Winnie could just make out Barnaby's features and muttered, 'Barnaby?'

Wanda said, 'Mellianna?'

With a strong shove, both Mellianna and Barnaby were pushed out of the way and the two rescuers stood over the girls, now naked as the bots thought they were asleep.

'Mum?' said Wanda.

'Wal?' said Winnie

'What the prak are you doing here?' they said together.

Arrop was still shaking and was on his fifth strong drink. His colleagues were trying to get him to stand and visit his guests. They must be devastated at the unprovoked attack and would surely blame the leaders of Xeranx for their inefficiency in preventing it.

In the next room, Wanda and Winnie were in tears. This was because their mother was in tears and the three women held each other and cried in synchrony. Wilberalanlaurencelyleyves Wullen looked on and realised he'd seen it all before. Especially the last hour before his sisters had left Poortantween. He watched his mother trying to comfort her daughters. Her huge red hair wilting from the outpouring of emotion. Wendyhelenmaryirenenormaanna was delighted to see her treasures again but terrified at the events that she was fortunate enough to stop.

'What are you doing here?' asked Winnie for the third time.

Wil could not speak until she had cried her fears out of her system. Wal said, 'We were worried about you. After your last message and all the things, we'd seen on the telecasts. We didn't think you were being...protected well enough. And we wanted to see you both again.' Wanda drew him into the family hug and his eyes began to water too.

Mellianna and Barnaby knew to stay out of the way of the family reunion, especially a family like the Wullens. Both were quiet as they sat in their room and looked around them. The room was very large and appeared to be a single room only. There was a very large bed in its centre and a small cubical for ablutions behind it. A small bar contained food and drinks and there was no window out to see what this world was like.

The furnishings were all pastel colours and seemed very restful, at any other time. The pale blue carpet and walls blended in with the pale-yellow bed and bed curtains. Mellianna looked at her hands and appeared deep in thought.

Barnaby said, 'What's the matter?'

She shook her head, and he sat beside her, holding her hand.

'That was a near escape. We nearly lost them – again!'

Barnaby nodded and said, 'Sure was. Just as well the rest of the family turned up. They can certainly handle themselves, that family.'

Mellianna nodded. 'Isn't the brother goooorgeous?'

Time was ticking away and still, the *Mistress's* hatchway remained empty. Dari moved towards it and cautiously peered out. There was a commotion over by the *I Don't Give a Monkey's*, but that was expected. Where were his men?

Dari looked on in increasing anger as he saw the local police surround the small group of people at the edge of the platform. Several people were on the ground while others stood over them. This didn't look good. He boosted his eyes and saw the details more clearly. He could see his three men lying motionless on the dirt while the two women who were his targets were sitting up. It had all gone wrong. Now they were alerted, the second attempt would be more difficult.

Dari withdrew into the ship and sealed the hatch.

Arrop had arranged the best table, in the best restaurant. Now he was unsure. Perhaps a quieter venue would be more appropriate, given the fright his guests had just experienced – on his planet! The shame was getting to

him. He knew the head waiter was watching his every move. The galactic success of the restaurant depended on how well this evening went. The other tables would be full of Xeranx dignitaries and they would expect to share some of the limelight. And his guests were late.

When the Wullens entered the room, everyone knew they were there. The effect was more startling than the family could imagine. Four of the most stunningly attractive sentient beings in the Universe in the same room together, it was a mediafest. The hovering cameras recorded every movement, every nuance of expression and plenty of close-ups of the nine nipples on offer. The set of three explosions of wild hair almost filled the room by themselves, but with the added bonus of three curvaceous bodies that any hormonal-balanced male would die to touch, the effect was atomic.

For the ladies, Wal. A tall and perfectly proportioned male Derivative with the most classically handsome face that a woman would want to see on a pillow. His arms around his sisters, he smiled at the lenses and most of the female occupancy of the Universe melted.

Wil stood behind her siblings. She was taller than all three of them, but the profusion of hair prevented her face from being clearly seen. But Barnaby was watching it intently. If he thought the twins were irresistible, then the mother was one step beyond that. To start with, she didn't look any older than her daughters. For another thingwell there wasn't another thing, he just wanted to stare at her.

Mellianna noticed the fascination of Barnaby, but it was soon forgotten as she found herself staring at the overly handsome Wal. To her absolute delight, he kept looking at her and smiling. Mellianna took a quick glance to see if Barnaby had noticed, but he was too obsessed with Wil's hair – and what was underneath it.

All three women were almost wearing highly reflective materials in three different colours, matching their hair shades. The material stretched and tightened with every leg movement. The effect made them glow like angels. Wal wore a flowing robe that gave him an ancient classic look. His broad shoulders hosted the gown that swirled at his every movement and slowly settled into its resting place. The overall effect made him look like he was moving in slow motion all the time, giving the women time to absorb the good-looks and realise what they were missing.

Arrop eased between the media machines and his guests and tried to make a formal welcoming speech. The machines crowded him out and so he called a halt to the media session. He'd made strict agreements with all the media agencies that they could have limited access to his guests and tonight's meal was to be private. When his guest left, the media could have full access. He waved his guests towards their table and smiled what he hoped was a warm invitation to enjoy the evening.

The rest of the diners were standing and applauding their distinguished visitors. The Wullens seemed both pleased and embarrassed by the celebrity status they knew they hadn't earned. But the twins were already used to it from their previous eight planet stops. But for Wil and Wal, it was all a new experience, and they didn't know how to react. Winnie took her brother's arm, while Wanda took her mother's. The Heavenly Twins led their family to the table and hugged them tight for moral support.

The table was circular and was a fish tank. The water gently lapped at the edges and as the diners were seated, small fish came to the surface to look at the new arrivals. Wanda leant forward with a look of admiration on her face and touched the water gently. Several small fish moved and kissed her fingertip. She thrilled with delight. Her face darkened as a thought came to her.

Arrop knew this expression and said hastily, 'No. They're not on the menu.'

The tank disappeared deep under the floor and was lit by an invisible source. Its cool blue water was relaxing, and the Derivatives were soon settling back in the couches that were adjusting to their individual shapes. The water began to change colour and shifted to a pale green while more fish rose to the surface to pop air bubbles into the air. Each bubble a myriad of colours as the light touched the spherical surface. They rose above the table and silently exploded.

Arrop raised his voice, 'I must first apologise for the ...disturbance of earlier. It's not something that happens here. I am very sorry.'

Barnaby took the lead and said, 'It is not your fault, Arrop. In fact, you've done everything you can to make us feel safe and welcome here.'

Arrop's face beamed. Now he wanted the media coverage. Barnaby continued. 'We're aware of the particular problem but thought it had gone away. It is *us* who should apologise to *you*.'

Arrop tried a dismissive shrug as he said, 'It is all over. The criminals are in gaol and will remain there until after you've all left.'

More fish had risen and were blowing coloured bubbles at the people peering down at them. Wanda popped one with her finger and sniffed at the scent it released.

'I'm delighted to hear it, Arrop.' Barnaby continued. 'Regrettably, it's a hang-over from a few planets past. Our lovely ladies here do attract attention. Sometimes it is of the unwelcome variety.'

'Why doesn't Huutch leave us alone?' Wanda said quietly to no one in particular.

‘Why didn’t you leave HIM alone!’ Winnie said equally quietly.

‘I did nothing!’

‘Girls!’ Wal warned gently.

Arrop took a diplomatic approach as he said with a smile, ‘With women so...beautiful as yourselves, it must be a regular occurrence. I mean, male attention. You must get that a lot?’

Wil shook her head. ‘Not really. Well, not on our home planet, anyway.’

‘What do you mean?’ asked Arrop, leaning over the table and getting a bubble pop near his eye. He eased back onto his couch to await a response that was developing into an interesting conversation.

Wil looked at her family and leaned forward conspiratorially. ‘Where we come from, we’re not regarded as.....attractive.’

Arrop sat forward again. ‘Surely you’re just being modest, here?’

Wal smiled and said, ‘Regrettably not. Poortantweens are considered extremely beautiful by most of the Derivative worlds. But within that race are some that are better looking than others, some...not so good looking. It is the same with any species in the animal Universe. We Wullens do not consider ourselves good examples of Poortantween excellence. It’s not modesty, but regrettable fact.’

‘It’s a surprise you all find us so...interesting.’ Added Wil. ‘And a delight too.’

Barnaby said, ‘By interesting you really mean attractive and sexy. Don’t you?’ Wil appeared embarrassed and dropped her head. ‘Because that’s how people first see you all.’

Mellianna saw the look on Barnaby’s face as he almost drooled over the three women around the table. She knew she shouldn’t mention it but found herself speaking before the warning in her mind reached her mouth.

‘That would probably explain the sister’s enthusiasm to exploit this male interest.’

Barnaby mouth dropped open and felt he had to say something, but Wil got in before him. ‘What do you mean?’

Mellianna knew she was walking on thin ice, but long harboured resentment began to surface. Fuelled by Barnaby’s revived interest in the females of the Wullen family, Mellianna had to get a few things off her, obviously, inadequate chest.

‘Well.....there’s been several....incidents, hasn’t there.’

‘Incidents?’ Wil enquired with a half-smile on her face. Barnaby glared at Mellianna to stop.

‘Yes, incidents. With men. A good example would be what happened earlier. The attempted kidnapping. That’s all resulted from a...liaison with a well-known, and extremely influential, man – who’s now totally smitten and wants to get them back. Apparently, at any cost.’

A silence fell on the table and the pops of the bubbles were almost audible to all. A hush had fallen over the restaurant as the nearby tables tried to listen in on the conversations of the honoured guests.

Arrop’s smile was falling from his face as he said quietly, ‘Are you saying he’s going to try again?’

Barnaby laughed out loud and shook his head, ‘That’s all in the past. You have the problem tied up in your gaol. We need to look forward now to a pleasant visit to your wonderful planet. What do you have in store for us, Arrop?’

Arrop appeared confused and was trying to ask a question and answer another one. Wil intervened.

‘If you’re referring to sex, then that’s not taboo on Poortantween. On Poortantween sex is normal and happens every day – several times a day. It’s recreational, not *only* procreational. Having sex with strangers at any time of the day is normal. Poortantweens are stunningly gorgeous people and it’s more than natural, it’s essential. With all those attractive people around you, how can you not think of sex every minute of the day! Being the ugly sisters of the planet, the girls are not invited very often and have probably found the other planets more accommodating to their desires. But as I said, we’re not the most attractive of families and consequently not always desired. It’s not surprising then, is it, that my girls make the most of the chances they’re offered. Wouldn’t you?’ She looked directly at Mellianna as if she knew something.

Mellianna knew she should back down. ‘I suppose you’re right Mrs Wullen.’

‘I know I’m right. So....who’s first with me tonight?’

The whole restaurant was silent, and several men made a move until held back by their female partners. Barnaby was on the very verge of speaking, but Mellianna cut him off. ‘One hell of a way to demonstrate your point, Mrs Wullen.’

The silence hung again as more fish touched the surface, releasing a stream of coloured globes.

‘*And me.*’ Volunteered Wal.

It was the turn of the females of the species to be tempted. A respectful silence remained, but several in the dining room were determined to find out Wal’s room number.

Wil said, ‘It’s because of the effect we have on members of the opposite sex, that Poortantween is a barred planet. Unless you’re born there you’re not allowed to visit it. The Universe’s best kept secret and the planet governors want it to stay that way. Few are allowed off, fewer allowed on.’

‘How did *you* get off then?’ A voice from another table asked.

Wil smiled and said, ‘Special dispensation. The governors thought that this trip might not be showing our planet in a good light. We said we wanted to help and so they allowed us. They even paid the travelling expenses. So here we are and just in time, by the look of it. Now....is anyone going to eat tonight?’

Arrop’s smile was slipping as he said, ‘We don’t want the earlier incident to spoil your visit here in any way. But I must talk to my peers about whether we can adequately protect you on your visit.’

Barnaby felt a twinge of panic. What did Arrop mean by that?

The water in the table began to bubble, and the fish sank away. Something dark was rising. All seven of the diners watched in fascination as a huge bubble rose to the surface and slowly dissolved, revealing a circular platter full of food. The momentary distraction was pounced on by Barnaby who was the first to reach forward and offer a plate to his companions on either side of him. Arrop followed the example and was pleased to get off the subject.

The food consisted of a variety of meat, fish and vegetables, which Arrop explained were native to the planet. Everything tasted delicious, and the guests expressed their delight in the quality of the feast. Once again these compliments should have been recorded for the rest of the Universe to hear. Another missed opportunity.

The conversation died as the food occupied the minds and palettes of the circle of diners. The other tables in the restaurant enjoyed their meal, confident in the knowledge there was little to overhear from Arrop’s table. As the mound of food reduced, small fish swam around the central platter and resumed their scented bubble blowing, adding splashes of colour to the now pink water.

Wil talked low and earnestly to her daughters while Wal cast occasional eyes at Mellianna. Barnaby was having trouble keeping his eyes off the mother and twins. Mellianna was trying to watch Wal and Barnaby at

the same time. The air was pervaded by a sweet-smelling lotion, that seemed to compliment the food. The fish were enjoying their game of bubble blowing and Wanda could not take her eyes off them.

‘What delights can we expect from your planet, Arrop?’ asked Barnaby after a particularly long quiet spell.

Arrop looked up from his sliver of fish and smiled, ‘What we are famous for, the whole Universe over. Crystals.’

‘Crystals.’ Repeated Barnaby popping the last of a practically tasty round thing in his mouth.

‘Crystals.’ emphasised Arrop, a new light in his eyes. He looked up to see the Head Waiter watching him and he nodded. The waiter turned and signalled an assistant. The room went quiet and the Wullen family stopped talking. Looking around to see what was happening. As if a switch had been thrown, the whole of the restaurant turned to look at one wall. It was an attractive wall, as far as restaurant walls went, but as it began to fade, it was to reveal a rather spectacular view.

The lights in the room dimmed, along with the lights in the fish tank. As their eyes adjusted to the new ambience, the Wullen party stared out into the night. Three moons hung over the far horizon, One white, one blue and one yellow. Light shone down on an otherwise flat landscape. But in the distance was a tall mountain – made of crystal.

The moon’s light bounced off the shards of the crystals, reflecting a range of colours. Some, way beyond any Human Derivative spectrum. Where one spot of light caught a splinter, the light reflected for long distances over the landscape. Lighting the way like an ever-widening road. This was happening to thousands of splinters, thousands of shards and thousands of flat reflective surfaces. Their view was ablaze with colour. They all watched breathlessly, and the light patterns slowly shifted as the moons changed their position in the heavens.

‘That is beautiful,’ said Wil.

‘That is so romantic,’ said Barnaby

Mellianna took a quick look to see who he was saying it to and saw his eyes focused onto the distant mountain. She looked at Wal, the only person in the restaurant not admiring the view. He was looking at her.

‘I agree.’ Wal said.

Dari took only a few moments to think of his next action. He thought it through, refined the plan and collected the various items he thought he

would need to accomplish that plan. By the time he eased out of his sleek cruiser, the crowd around the transporter was still milling around the stricken women.

Dari walked casually around his ship and looked for the car the police were going to escort his men away. He saw the strange coloured vehicle and waited until he saw people moving towards it. Dari waited and watched. He saw his three men being manhandled into the car and smiled. Aiming a small device he fired the pellet and waited until the car lifted off. He looked around until he found another vehicle and once again pointed another small device at the car. The door opened swiftly, and he stepped inside. Moments later he was on the trail of the police car, following the tracer he'd attached earlier.

By the time they seated Rryn and his colleagues in a secure room, Dari was outside the building and waiting for an opportune moment. It was beginning to get dark, so Dari waited a while longer. He found the nearest restaurant. By the time he'd finished the seven-course meal, it was dark. Time to get his men back.

He stepped into the outer office and faced the blank wall screen. A prompt asked him for his identity and purpose of the visit. With a smile, he said, 'I've come for my boys.'

He pulled a handgun from his ample waistband and fired at the screen. The screen erupted and blew a hole through the wall. Dari stepped through. He touched his all-purpose device and all the electronic systems in the building failed instantly. The place became dark as all lights were extinguished. Adjusting his irises to the night mode, he continued down the corridor until he came to a natural end. Another blast and another hole to step through.

One last blast and the opening revealed three frightened men cowering in the corner of the room. With a look of disdain, he shook his head at them, turned and walked away. Hastily they followed him through the debris and out into the night. Several dazed and dust-covered policemen tried to stop them, but Dari had an answer to that problem. He shot them dead.

The meal had finished, and the restaurant was almost empty. Mother and daughters talked into the night, ignoring the anxious waiters who wanted to go home. Barnaby sat with them and edged ever closer to Wil. He didn't notice Mellianna and Wal leave the table.

Arrop had left earlier and called a meeting of his council members. His concern for the safety of the Wullen party was genuine. But he was more concerned about the safety of Xeranx FROM the Wullen party. One tired employee was waiting to show the guests to their hotel rooms and wished he

could have drawn a longer straw. He was even too tired to admire the nine breasts in front of him anymore.

Wil was finally talked out and wished her daughters goodnight. She graciously accepted the offer from Barnaby to escort her to her room. Arrop's assistant perked up and offered to escort the sisters to their rooms. A look passed between them and they smiled. Placing themselves either side of the young boy, they allowed him to lead them to their hotel.

The first two moons descended below the horizon, reducing the splendourous colourful display of nature. The solitary blue moon cast multiple azure effects across the land. Equally enthralling, but more subdued in colour range. The planet slept on into the night and the hotel settled into a calm silence.

In one room a mother of three was enjoying a sexual experience that had long been absent from her life. Barnaby was enjoying reliving the thrill of a beautiful woman with three breasts and two vaginas.

In another room, Mellianna was overwhelmed at making passionate love to the most beautiful man she'd ever seen in her life. To find out he had two sexual organs and three testicles made her experience even more memorable.

In yet another room a young man was experiencing the delights of the Wullen twins and knew he'd never see a woman in the same light ever again.

In a room across the city, Arrop lay awake next to his wife who was noisily asleep. He'd plenty on his mind, but he wished he was resting his head on the same pillow as a ball of fiery hair. He was concerned about everyone's safety and had put in place as much resource as he could in the short time scale. It would have to do. He slept and dreamt of wild red hair, his favourite colour.

Out in the spaceport, a ship touched quietly and gently down on a spare landing pad. The passenger walked quickly away from the ship and slipped unnoticed into the fabric of the city.

The dawn broke quietly as the new sun crept over the horizon. Its rays caught the crystal mountain and a new array of colours splashed across the valley and plain. Life was stirring on the surface of Xeranx. Soon all would be awake to see the majesty of the crystals and later on see the dark lights of the Crystal Caves.

The room was quiet and three sleeping forms stirred in the one large bed. Both girls appeared naked as they slept. The young man turned over in his sleep, his hand resting on a rigid nipple. Slowly he awakened and realised his dream was a reality. He sat up and gazed excitedly at the two

most beautiful women in the Universe laying in HIS bed. Well, technically THEIR bed. Who would believe him when he told this story?

The explosion threw him against the wall and he hit his head. The pain was sudden and intense. He felt something sting him all over his naked body and soon he was covered in blood, his own blood. He felt his consciousness slipping away and was just able to see a dark, out-of-focus shape coming in through the large picture window. As his lifeblood ebbed away, his last sight was of two naked women whom he was madly and deeply in love with, covered in his blood. He died with that solitary thought on his mind.

Dari stepped into the room from the make-shift ramp that ran from the car hovering outside the window. He waited as the two naked women stirred in their sleep. Waking to a nightmare just about to start.

‘Good morning ladies. We meet at last. If you’d be so kind as to get dressed and follow me. Fast as you like, I only need one of you, I’ll kill the slowest.’

From the car outside Rynn and his two accomplices watched the daredevil attitude of Dari and admired his calmness in the presence of danger. He was a mad prakker, and they loved him for it. ‘If you want to get the job done,’ Dari had said to them, ‘Do it your prakking self!’

They watched through the still smoking hole that was once part of a wall in the hotel as Dari waited patiently for the two women to get out of bed. They could just see the naked women and felt a stirring inside themselves. It would be a real shame to kill either of these two. What a waste. If only they could have a few minutes before.....

‘I’m waiting, and my patience is running out. Get into the car, NOW!’ Dari pulled a small handgun and pointed it to a spot directly between the two sisters.

The twins looked at each other and a message was passed. Dari saw the look and became more alert. If they tried to rush him he had a problem. He could kill one, but not both. *One* was needed *alive*. Dari decided not to take a chance. He shot Winnie.

The bullet entered the dead centre of her middle nipple and exited from her back in a spray of blood and tissue. Wanda was frozen to the spot.

‘Now will you get a move on?’

Dari whirled as he heard a bang from behind him. He saw his car slowly dropping out of sight, the platform tumbling the twenty floors to the ground below. He was stranded in the room. One girl dead, the other he had

to get off-planet immediately. He whirled around to see Wanda bending over her sister, tears falling silently on to the warm body.

Dari snapped open his day coat and activated the anti-grav unit, his body rose gently off the floor. 'Come here or join your sister.' He held his hand out and waited for her to touch him. He would grip her to him and exit through the window. The door to the bedroom burst into tiny pieces and three policemen were suddenly pointing weapons at him. He froze, gun still pointing at the girl, men in combat suits pointing weapons at him.

'Drop the weapons or I'll kill.....' Dari said as he watched the small weapon, along with his hand, disintegrate. The burst of energy had come from behind him and he turned to see two more policemen in the window frame. The pain hit him as the nerve endings warned his brain of the missing hand. He howled in pain and hung in the air as he tried to hold his bleeding stump.

The combat police seemed to ease off their intense stance as they saw their target floating helplessly in the middle of the room. In a motion that was difficult to follow, four of the policemen erupted in blood, sinking almost soundlessly to the ground. One alone stood alive in the room, his weapon still warm from the discharges. He slowly took off his helmet.

Wanda looked up into the hard eyes of Jonno Huutch and felt a wave of hatred that was so intense she couldn't react to it.

'Time to come home to daddy. I won't take no for an answer.'

The sound of the explosion drew guests from many rooms. Barnaby felt a surge of panic and knew their troubles were beginning all over again. He leapt out of bed, taking only a brief look at the mass of red hair on the pillow. Barnaby pulled on a cloak as he hurried into the corridor. He pushed his way through the small crowd outside the door and entered the room to find a gun pointed at him.

Barnaby saw the two bodies on the bed and the amount of blood left no doubt they were both dead. 'Huutch? What have you done?'

The gun swivelled from Barnaby toward Wanda and Huutch said, 'There'll be one more if I don't get out of here with her. Lead the way, Mr Organiser.'

Huutch quickly moved to Wanda and grabbed her by her hair. Resisting all she could, she was no match for the intense and fearful Huutch and the pain from the hair pulling. She had to follow him and seethed inside with blind fury. The crowd parted from the door and Barnaby backed out

carefully into the corridor. He kept moving until he came to the blank wall and had to stop.

Huutch came out of the door and froze. Both sides of the corridor were blocked with combat police. He could only return to the room. Huutch started to back into the bedroom when a distorted voice told him to stop and give up his weapon. He turned it onto Wanda.

Pointing the gun at her head he said quietly, 'If I can't have her, no one can.'

Barnaby shouted, 'No.' as the corridor was suddenly alive with discharging weapons. Barnaby was temporarily blinded and staggered forward to the two bodies on the floor. He turned over Wanda and saw the hole in her neck, blood pumping out.

'Someone save her!' He shouted hoarsely.

One combat dressed policeman came and stood over him. He shook his head slowly. As Barnaby turned back to Wanda, he saw the blood flow slow and then stop. The policeman pulled Barnaby gently but firmly away from the dead girl and kicked the man onto his back. Jonno's face was unrecognisable, and he had no chest left. Dari still hung in the air, his head gone and blood still draining down his body to drip on the pastel carpet. The police were good marksmen.

Barnaby felt the sting of tears and his breath came in spasms. He felt a touch on his shoulder and Mellianna was in tears beside him. A figure moved from the crowd and knelt beside his sister. He took a long look and moved into the bedroom. Moments later he came out and his face was stony and grey. He stood over the body of Jonno Huutch and said, 'Is this the man who was after my sisters?' Barnaby managed a nod. 'Who sent his men to do the dirty work and finally tried to do it himself?' Another nod from Barnaby.

'We did what we could.' The uniformed policeman said quietly.

Wal nodded, 'I'm sure. But too late. Help me get Wanda onto a bed. Somebody had better get my mother.' He looked directly at Barnaby.

The uniform man said, 'We'd like everything left as it is until our officer gets here.'

Wal nodded, 'I'm sure you would. But I need to help my sisters all I can. Now somebody find me a bed and carry her there. Now.'

Barnaby shook off the chill that was stealing all around his body and walked towards his room. Wil was still asleep, her hair covering both pillows, a light sheet covering her body. He sat on the bed and touched her shoulder. After several attempts, she finally opened her eyes. From the look on his face, she knew something was wrong.

Wanda and Winnie lay on a bed together, side by side. A sheet covered their dignity and Wal stood by their side. Moments later Wil burst into the room and her hand went to her mouth in a pointless attempt to hide the fear in her mind. She couldn't speak and sat on the bed, her fingers touching the warm skin of her daughters.

Wal leant forward and opened an eyelid on Wanda. He felt her neck and pulled back the sheet to see the damage to her body. Wil looked at him expectantly.

He nodded to his mother, 'They're working.'

Barnaby eased into the room and they let him stand by the bed. 'Who's working?' he said in a whisper.

'The bots.' Answered Wil. 'We insisted they had the full Nanobot system installed. After all, they're still defenceless women, alone in the Universe. Anything could happen. Like this!'

'Nanobot system?' said Mellianna from the doorway.

'Mother insisted they needed protection. The Nanos are normally only provided for the more....elite people on our planet. But we got a special dispensation, and both girls had the treatment.'

'What are they?' asked Mellianna.

'Microscopic machines that act like viruses, or biological cells. I don't fully understand it, but each of the bots can be controlled by the owner, or they have specific duties to their host. Clothing for instance.'

'Ohhh, I noticed that,' said Barnaby.

'I bet you did,' said Mellianna.

Wil said, 'Pre-programmed and activated by a series of taps and strokes. The clothing appears to cover the body, but really its only reflected light. The Nanos live under, or on top of the skin. They control the temperature of the body – important when skiing and walking the deserts naked. And clothes needn't get in the way for the more....intimate moments.' She looked at Barnaby who was blushing.

'Before they left they tried out the system, just to see if it worked. The little minxes changed the colour of their hair and we couldn't tell who was who.'

Wal added, 'They don't even have to clean their teeth. The bots even do that for them. The bots will also recover body tissue damage.'

Barnaby looked puzzled, 'You sound like they're still alive. But they're dead, aren't they?'

Wal pulled the sheet up and looked the chest wound on Winnie. 'That depends on how good the bots are at doing their job.'

Arrop sat at his desk and faced his council members. They heard the latest news with obvious distaste and looked again at the death toll that had plagued their peaceful planet.

'Is it over now?' was a question.

Arrop nodded. 'For sure.'

'Did we get the publicity we wanted?'

Arrop shook his head. 'All the media cameras were fried. We think by one of the attackers. No, we didn't get anything in the way of good publicity. However, we'll get the publicity now. All the wrong type.'

'We don't have a choice then, do we?'

Arrop shook his head.

All the corridors now silent, and the police force took all the necessary recordings of the destruction. The bodies were removed, and people asked to clear the corridor. The Wullen party waited in the bedroom as if at a funeral. There was some hope, but no relief until it was over.

Wanda's eyes twitched, and Wal appeared by her side instantly. He felt for a pulse and smiled. The eye twitched again and her head turned ever so slightly on the pillow. Within an hour colour had returned to her face, and the wounds were visibly healing. Soon after that, Winnie showed signs of a positive recovery. By the time the afternoon was heading for sunset, both girls had opened their eyes and had managed to say a few words.

Wanda's was, 'Can I kill the prak?'

Winnie's was, 'Was anyone else hurt?'

Mellianna hugged Barnaby, and he felt the familiar warm chill down his spine. Had he been blind, or just stupid? Perhaps both. He looked into her eyes and kissed her gently on the mouth. A smile was there, and she mimed the words, 'I'm sorry.' He repeated the same words to her and they hugged again.

Royale O'Really ordered the screen on and watched the unhappy face of Bald E swim into view.

‘Well?’

‘Bad news,’ said E with a shrug.

‘Tell me.’

‘Well.....it seems like we’ve been asked to leave Xeranx.’

‘What!’

‘Actually, they were thrown out. Apparently, the publicity wasn’t what they wanted and so they were chucked off the planet.’

‘Where are they going to next?’

‘That’s the problem. As you’ve probably seen from the ISB, the full story is emerging andwell, it’s not looking good for anyone. Consequently, the next planet’s cancelled.’

‘What!’

‘There was some sort of fracas and people got killed. One young man who had nothing to do with our tour. Apparently, he was serving the girls breakfast in bed when....bam. After that, the solids hit the rotating object and the Universe media went into hyper-drive.’

‘Can nothing be saved?’

‘Doesn’t look like it. But I’ll stay with it and see what I can do.’ The image faded.

Royale sat deep in thought, his world collapsing around him.

PART 10 - END OF A JOURNEY

Arrop was over-eager to get rid of his visitors and start concentrating on the media interest that had escalated beyond acceptable proportions. It was a combination of Wil and Wal's ideas, that saw the Wullen party sitting in the very luxurious, *Dominated by a Mistress*.

Arrop had been easily persuaded that the fastest route off the planet was by private ship and the only craft available were both owned by dead people. An hour later the luggage was packed and onboard the sleek luxury cruiser. It was a fully automated ship and didn't require a crew. All they had to decide was where they were going. To avoid further problems with Arrop, they decided to take-off first, then decide where to go. Parked in orbit around one of Xeranx three moons, they tried to come up with a sensible plan.

Royale O'Really had called Barnaby to voice his dissatisfaction at his behaviour and performance and to tell him he was fired. Included in the tirade was the main point that the next planet, Qiiop, had refused to have them even get near it. Royale had finished with a threat to shoot both Mellianna and Barnaby Babyloncity into gaol if they returned to Earth while he was still alive.

'So we can't go back to Earth then!' summed up, Wanda.

'It'll have to be Poortantween, then,' said Wil.

'But we can't go with you. We wouldn't be allowed on your planet.' Mellianna said, holding Barnaby's hand tightly.

'So we can't go to Poortantween then!' said Wanda.

'Is there anywhere in the Universe that'll have us?' asked Wal.

Silence was his answer.

'Is there anything to drink on this ship?' asked Barnaby to no one in particular. He stood up and started a search.

Several hours later the Wullen party were in a better mood. Several bottles of Droomian Vodka were empty and Mellianna was almost asleep on the couch.

'For me -Velba. I loved the sea creatures,' said Wanda.

'And the trainer.' Winnie said with a laugh. Wanda made a playful swipe at her sister.

'The race with the Speels. I loved that,' said Wanda quickly.

Mellianna murmured from the comfort of her reclining position. ‘That was my favourite bit too.’

‘I’d really like to go back there again.’ Wanda finished with a faraway look in her eyes.

‘It was all good. Even the bad parts weren’t really bad, bad. Were they?’ Winnie said, finishing another bottle to add to the pile on the floor.

‘I thought the two of you getting shot and I thought you dead – that was bad, bad.’ Barnaby said dripping vodka down his cloak front.

‘Seeing those praks lift my daughters up and try to carry them away, that was my big down moment. Followed quickly when I laid out the little guy carrying Winnie.’ Wil laughed and showed her perfect teeth. Barnaby felt the old feeling rise and brought it quickly under control. As much as he loved these women, the sooner they were out of his sight, the sooner he could lead a normal life again, this time with Mellianna.

‘Perhaps we could drop you off on Poortantween.’ Barnaby said.

‘Where will you go?’ asked Wal, looking at Mellianna, who was almost asleep.

Barnaby shrugged and sipped at his drink before saying, ‘We both rather liked Esteron. Very relaxed atmosphere.’

Winnie’s eyes twinkled, ‘You just like the sex there, didn’t you? You can admit it. We’re all friends here.’

Barnaby blushed again, ‘I don’t know what you mean.’

‘What’s that all about?’ asked Wil.

Wanda laughed out loud. ‘Esteron is a planet, supposedly of relaxation. Anyway, all the staff are particularly...accommodating and it’s most unlikely that any visitor could refuse the special attention from the waiters, room staff, in fact, anyone.’

‘Sounds like my kind of place.’ Grinned Wil.

‘It wasn’t quite like that....’ Barnaby tried to defend himself as he looked to see if Mellianna was listening.

‘The funny thing is....’ Winnie was laughing loudly now. Mellianna stirred. ‘They were all artificial whatsits....robots. Automaton. None of the staff was real people. Built and designed as sex toys.’

Barnaby lost some of his colour. ‘What!’

Royale O'Really was exhausted. He turned off the screen and knew he should go to bed, but his mind was humming. He put a call through to Barnaby Babyloncity and hoped he was awake. The screen remained blank. He left the call on hold and stretched in his chair. Royale stood and walked around his office. He stepped outside onto the balcony and watched the lights of the city slowly blink out as the night ebbed away into the dawn. Royale smiled into the night and let out a laugh. The wall chimed for his attention and he ran back to see Barnaby's face looking round his empty office.

'Barnaby. Good to see you. How are you all?'

Barnaby grimaced and glared at his boss who'd fired him. 'We're okay. Just deciding what to do next.'

'Perhaps I can help you there. Guess what. The tour is back on again.'

Barnaby's eyes widened slightly, then his suspicious side crept in as he said, 'Really. How's that?'

Royale had to stand and pace the floor. 'It seems that your....erhermm, activities, has caused a great deal of interest in the media. I've had ISB on to me all day asking what's happening next.'

'How nice for you.'

'Nice for you too. They want to cover the remainder of your tour and have personal interviews, the whole works. They'll bankroll the whole thing. Apparently, the whole Universe is going wild about the Wullen sisters and their adventures. We have a major hit on our hands here. It could run and run. What do you say?'

'I thought we were all fired!'

'Goodness me, no. We need to renegotiate your contract.'

'And Mellianna's?'

'Of course.'

'What do you want us to do?'

'Go on to Qiiop.'

'I thought they didn't want us?'

'That was then. The danger's all over now. Huutch is gone. The ISB has made a strong representation on our behalf and have...persuaded Qiiop to host you for the last of the planet visits. Great coverage too.'

Barnaby shook his head. 'I think we're all looking forward to going home, or somewhere else. We're tired, Royale. We've had enough.'

'One more planet, that's not too much to ask. Leave it now and it's a disaster. Your last professional engagement will be haunting you for the rest of your life. Go on and finish the tour and it'll be remembered as the defining moment of your career.'

'I mean, we're ALL tired of the tour. I'm not sure the twins will go for it.'

'Then persuade them.'

'I'll try.'

The tired face faded, and Royale grinned at the blank wall. 'Of course, you will. You know it makes sense.'

'So that's the offer. What do you think?' Barnaby concluded.

'Can we come too?' asked Wil, with ill-concealed excitement in her voice.

Barnaby shrugged, 'I don't see why not? But what about you two?' He looked at the twins who just looked at each other.

Finally, Winnie said, 'We're not sure. We think we've had enough. It's been great fun, but very wearing.'

'I've lost count of how many times we could've been killed.' Wanda said seriously.

'Not including the sports.' Added Winnie.

'Spoilsports!' said Wal sadly.

Mellianna looked up and said, 'Why don't you two go!' She looked at Wal and Wil.

There was a moment's silence, before Winnie said, 'Would they go for that, Barney?'

Barnaby shrugged again, 'Better than nothing I suppose.'

'Call O'Really and see what he says.' Mellianna said quietly.

'He'll be asleep by now.'

'Exactly.'

Barnaby hesitated before saying, 'Would you two like to go?'

'Love to,' said Wal.

'Raring to go,' said Wil.

Barnaby looked at Mellianna and said, 'And what would you like to do?'

'Well, they shouldn't go on their own and it is our job to look after the tour. I think we should go too.'

Barnaby nodded, 'Okay. Let's tell Royale the deal.'

The sea rolled towards her and splashed softly on the rocks. Wanda put her hand in the water and immediately hundreds of Reeps nibbled at her fingers. The sun was setting and the whole atmosphere was soft and warm. She felt a movement beside her and felt Winnie settle onto the bench and look out over the smooth surface of the ocean.

'It really is lovely here, Wan.'

'Will you stay with me for a while, Win?'

'A while yes. A while.'

'At least until Mum and Wal get back home?'

'At least until then, yes.'

'Good.'

'Barnaby says there's a movie of you with that guide, what's his name....?'

'Zup.'

'Yes, Zup.'

'Not of us doing.....?'

'Oh yes. Apparently, some remote camera covered your activities on the seabed.'

'I'd like to see that,' said Wanda wistfully.

'You're the only one who hasn't, it's been shown regularly on the ISB.'

'What!'

'Fraid so.'

'Prak!' Winnie smiled.

‘It was great fun though.’ Wanda said, and both women burst out laughing.

‘I’ll have to see him tomorrow.’

‘Apologise for making him famous?’

‘No. I want to do it all again.’

EPILOGUE

The Universe never stops changing. It expands, and it contracts. It's all a matter of timescale. No matter how interesting the latest news from around the Universe is, a moment later there's something else. All gets forgotten, few things remembered.

One of the things remembered was a summons for Mellianna Nordstum to pay for the damage she made to a remote camera the day the Wullen twins arrived on Earth. It was a charge she was happy to pay, especially as she gave the bill to FutureGames Inc. to settle.

Another remembrance was for the young man who died in the twin's bed at the hands of an overweight hitman. His family was distraught and there was nothing the Heavenly Twins could do to make it any better.

One of the things forgotten was the spaceship once owned by Jonno Huutch. It sat on the spaceport on Xeranx until somebody climbed aboard and stole it.

The Universe turned and lived on.

The Wullen twins lived happily on Velba. Both married two of the most handsome men on the planet but acknowledged their husbands were unattractive compared to Poortantween males. But they knew that in this Universe you took what you could get. They looked back on their adventures and were quite surprised how far two girls could get in the Universe, with just a smile.

As for what happened to Wal, Wil, Mellianna and Barnaby on Qiop? That, as they say, is another story.

THE END – SORT OF.....

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