

Τηε Ανδρομεδα Τριαλ βψ Λεε Εδγαρ

DEDICATED TO INNOCENTS EVERYWHERE

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EARLIER BOOKS IN THIS SERIES

The Andromeda Burn
The Andromeda Seed
Return to Andromeda
Andromeda Time

ΤΗΥΡΣΔΑΨ

Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Hardy gripped the padded arm of her seat so tightly that her knuckles were white as Orion Space Station loomed large in the forward viewer of their shuttle craft.

'You're approaching too fast,' she cautioned the pilot. 'Take evasive action.'

'I c..c..can't,' stammered the young man on her left, frantically stabbing at buttons to fire the lateral retros. 'It's too late.'

He was right. Untrained instincts were too slow. The shuttle started to turn, but the stubby port wing caught the edge of Orion's docking bay, sending up a shower of sparks. Turning as if in slow motion, the craft went into a lateral spin and the nose cone rammed through the thin skin and pierced the space station's reactor bay. The jarring crash shook them all just seconds before the reactor went critical and exploded in a ten-kilometre ball of irradiated fire.

Cassi's head was in her hands.

'I'm sorry,' said the pilot, getting shakily to his feet.

She looked up sharply but spoke without malice. 'Sorry? Paul, you have just destroyed seven billion pounds worth of space station, four shuttles which were docked, an interstellar cruiser worth untold millions, and in the process killed the hundred or so workers and scientists on Orion, not to mention your own crew. You have got to start

getting it right.'

She stood up and faced the group of twenty young men and women behind her. 'If this wasn't a simulation, you would now all be dead. How do you feel about that?'

None of them said a word. They had all failed. Paul Andrews had been the last to try his hand at docking a shuttle in space.

She sighed. 'Okay, we'll try again next week. Might I suggest you take a little more notice in Professor Akherd's class. What he tries to teach you may only be the theory side of things, but a knowledge of basic cosmology and the laws of stellar motion will one day save your lives.' She sighed again. 'Now can any of you tell me where Paul went wrong?'

A hand at the back shot up. 'He did it too fast.' The young woman giggled. 'Typical Man.'

Cassi sighed. 'Thank you, Carla. Will someone just tell me where everyone is going wrong? Not one of you has completed the simple task of docking a shuttle. If you cannot dock at Orion, how do you expect to get to Luna Base in one piece?'

No-one spoke.

She wiped her hand across her forehead. 'All right, let's go back to basics. Can anyone tell me how fast Orion is moving?'

'It doesn't move,' grinned Robin Merry. 'It's geostationary.'

'It may not move in relation to Earth's surface, but it is still moving. How fast?'

A girl of seventeen nervously put up her hand.

Cassi smiled. 'Yes, Janine.'

'Just over eleven thousand kilometres per hour, Miss.'

'Well done. And what is the escape velocity of Earth?'

'Eleven point one eight kilometres per second to the power of minus one.'

'And how far from the surface is a geosynchronous object, such as Orion?' She looked round the class.

'Thirty-five thousand, nine hundred kilometres.'

'Good, so assuming a shuttle has reached escape velocity, how fast will it be travelling when it reaches geostat?'

There was a delay before a man of almost thirty muttered: 'Thirty thousand kilometres per hour.'

'Thank you, Neil.' She started to pace the area at the front of the class. 'So can any bright individual please tell me what that means, in ordinary English?'

'You've got to slow down,' said Paul, back in his place next to Janine.

'Good grief, that's an understatement. You've just spent an hour getting up from Europoort and you've got a half-kilometre wide space station in the forward viewer. Taking off is now automatic. Launch Control on Mount Aigoual keeps you on a parabolic course through the atmosphere and steers you through the satellite window so you don't collide with one of the thousands of bits of junk in orbit over the mid Atlantic. It then pulls you round over the equator and into a geostatic corridor behind Orion. All you have to do is guide the shuttle in for the last hundred kilometres without ramming the flaming thing up the backside.'

A titter went round the room and Cassi silently cursed herself for dropping to their level and using semi-vulgarity to make her point.

She stared at them till she got their attention once more. 'I know Orion looks pretty small from a hundred kilometres away, but a hundred kilometres away is when you start to retrobrake. If you don't..' She shrugged and waved her hand toward the simulator screen: 'This happens.'

'Can't we guide the shuttle right in by remote control?' asked a laid-back young man, friend of the lout at the front. Cassi sighed. *Where did the Directorate find some of these promising student astronauts?* She said nothing for a long time. Gradually, an uncomfortable silence fell over the group. When it had lasted thirty seconds, she sat down on the edge of her desk.

'By the time any of you lot qualify,' she said slowly and evenly: 'The whole procedure will be automatic. Once they attain geosynchronous orbit, shuttles will be guided in by tractor beam and on-board computers will control the retros to bring the speed down from thirty thousand to eleven thousand kilometres per hour.'

A buzz broke out until someone had the courage to ask: 'Then why are we here?'

'You are here because the Europa Corporation has the foresight to realise that space exploration does not stop at the moon. It was rather hoped that some of you might qualify before Wayfarer Three is finished and become part of her crew. At this rate, I shall be taking her to Antares on my own.'

There was a silence for a while until Janine spoke. 'You flew in Wayfarer One, didn't you, Miss?'

Cassi relaxed and smiled at the girl who was short and skinny and, in her jeans and tee-shirt, looked no more than fourteen years old. 'Yes, I did. As a matter of fact, I was born on board Wayfarer Two on the way back from Andromeda.'

The two of them were still looking at each other when the buzzer went; ending their session. Cassi smiled again. This girl, the youngest of the group, was by far the brightest. However, she did have a hang-up about working with others. In a group, she retired deep into the darkest recess of her shell.

Without turning her head, Cassi called out; 'Neil!'
The untidy youth ambled over. 'You rang?'
'Six-thirty tomorrow morning - in the gym.'
He grinned. 'Need a good seeing to?'
She straightened to her full five-foot-six and looked him almost straight in the eye.
'You'd have to catch me first.'
'What about my mates?'
Cassi smiled. 'The more the merrier.'
Janine slowly got to her feet as Neil departed. 'You don't mean it, do you, Miss?'
'Mean what?'
'About meeting him in the gym.'
'Why don't you come, too?'
The young girl looked horrified. 'But they have been talking about you all month since the course began. Neil said he'd love to...'
'Give me a good seeing to?'
She nodded. 'Something like that.'
'And you think he'd really try and do it? Some lads are all mouth, you know.'
Janine shook her head furiously. 'No, he means it. I...'
Cassi frowned. 'Is there something I ought to know? Has he...?'
'Oh, no, Miss. He...'
'He tried though, didn't he?'
The younger girl looked down at the floor. 'I feel so ashamed.'
Cassi lifted Janine's chin with the tip of her long index finger. 'Being a virgin is not a disease. It's highly sensible in this day and age.'
The younger girl swallowed. 'How did you know?'
Cassi smiled. 'I asked Dr Carrero. You are the only member of the group who hasn't asked to be HIV tested. That suggests that you are capable of behaving yourself and have nothing to fear from STDs.'
The young girl beamed. 'You approve?'
Cassi nodded. 'I approve. See you bright and early in the morning.'

CASSI changed out of her flight-suit in the changing room and locked the classroom door. As she skipped down the corridor in her short summer dress, a door marked "Dr J Carrero" opened and out came a woman in her early thirties with dusky skin and curly black hair. 'You have-a finished for the day?'
Cassi slipped her arm round the older woman's shoulders. 'It's our wedding anniversary. Mike says he'll leave me for another woman if I don't get home on time tonight.'
Juanita laughed. 'He'll not do that. He is-a loving you too much.'
'How has Andi been today?'
The white-coated biophysicist smirked. 'We are-a changing the nappies four times today.' She grinned. 'But it has been good practice for the students.'
'I'll take her out of your way then.' Cassi stooped down to pick up her eight-month-old baby. 'So you've been a naughty girl for Auntie Juanita, have you?'
The child's face broke into a grin at the sight of her mother, and baby-speak commenced in an unbroken chain as Cassi kissed her cheek and forehead.
'Mike sent you a message on the fax,' said Juanita. 'He says can you pick up Maggie on the way home?'
'Is he going to be late?'
'I don't think so.' She looked at the paper. 'He is mentioning something about a helicopter.'
'Helicopter?' Cassi frowned. 'What does he need a helicopter for, tonight of all nights?'
Juanita shrugged her ignorance.
'Set a date with Bob yet?' asked Cassi as she pulled on Andi's jacket.
'Four weeks. Would Maggie like to be bridesmaid?'
Cassi thought of her twelve-year-old step-daughter, the only child of Mike's first marriage which had ended so tragically. 'I'm sure she would. Do you want me to ask her?'
'Would you mind?'
'Not at all.' She looked at her watch. 'Better fly. I want to miss the rush hour. The Rotterdam by-pass is not a good place to be at five o'clock.'
'Don't forget Maggie,' Juanita called after her in the corridor. Cassi waved her acknowledgement and so did Andi.

THE fourtrack pulled into the gathering traffic smoothly and roared down the A15 motorway and into the Oude Maas Tunnel. Two-point-nine litres of turbo-diesel engine kept Cassi in the fast lane as she headed alongside the disused oil terminals which once were the life-line for Europoort harbour and the Maas estuary. Now, the area was one big space port, just two kilometres from the conveniently-situated Hoek van

Holland. In ten minutes, she was pulling off the motorway into Dordrecht where she collected Maggie from outside the school.

She pulled back out into the stream of traffic. 'Rehearsals go all right?'

'Terrific,' said the grinning twelve-year-old as they turned under the railway bridge and drove along the long narrow road toward Mookhoek. 'We've got a dress rehearsal next Tuesday.'

'Looking forward to the show?'

'I've got butterflies about it. Sometimes, I wish I hadn't volunteered.'

Cassi laughed pleasantly. 'It'll be all right on the night.'

After Mookhoek, they turned left beside the stream and then over the bridge just short of Strijensas. The farm at the end of the somewhat secluded drive, no longer used for its original purpose, seemed to greet them as they pulled into the yard and parked under a dutch barn.

'Will daddy be home soon?' asked Maggie as Andi squawked to be let out of the restraining straps of her child seat.

'I hope so, darling. Pop in and put the kettle on, would you?'

When Cassi entered the kitchen, Maggie was holding up an envelope which had been pushed under the door. 'It's for you.'

'No stamp?'

Maggie shook her head. 'It must have come by hand.'

Cassi frowned. 'Someone who knew where to find us? Out here?'

'Aren't you going to open it?'

'In a minute. Let me get some food for Andi first or else we'll never hear the last of it.'

Maggie cocked her head. 'Sounds like a helicopter.'

'Your father, I expect. And I haven't even thought about dinner yet.'

'Why is daddy coming home in his helicopter?'

'Don't ask me, pet. You'll be able to ask him yourself in a minute.'

The noise level reached a crescendo and then died away as the helicopter landed in the open space behind one of the barns. By the time Cassi had Andi in her high chair with baby food on her plate, the door opened and Mike walked in. He had a rather pretty teenage girl with him. Cassi frowned.

'Babysitter,' Mike clarified as he kissed his wife. 'You and I are going out on the town tonight.'

'Out on the town? But I have nothing to wear.'

'Ta-da!' he announced, pulling out a package like a rabbit from a hat.

Cassi had fallen in love with Mike whilst they were marooned in Saturn orbit. They married a few months later and moved to the farm after a short honeymoon in East Anglia. Since then, they had been to Andromeda and back and survived many adventures together. She loved his tall frame, his almost black hair, his brown eyes which had seemed so dark and almost oppressive at first and now had become warm and inviting. His job as Security Marshal at the base kept him fairly busy, and out at odd times, but they had both been drawn into a warm, comfortable relationship which satisfied them both.

She unpacked the carrier bag and held up the dress. 'But it's so...'

'Sexy?'

'Short.'

'Short? It suits you right down to the ground.'

Cassi smiled wryly. 'If this hemline ever comes to within a metre of the ground, I'll be very surprised indeed. I only have to bow slightly and everyone will see my underwear.'

Mike turned to his companion for support. 'What do you think, Nicole? Won't she look fabulous in it?'

The redhead looked Cassi over. 'It may be a bit young for her.'

Cassi laughed and tossed her head of golden hair. 'Come off it. I'm twenty-two, not fifty-two.'

Nevertheless, the implied challenge was there and she agreed. Fifteen minutes later, Mike whistled. 'Wow! Now that's what I call sexy.'

'You,' said Cassi, poking a finger in his chest; 'Are swiftly becoming a dirty old man.'

'With you around, who wouldn't be?' He turned to Nicole. 'Will you be all right?'

'Sure.' She opened her bag. 'I brought my nightie.'

Cassi looked down at the scrap of virtually transparent material which seemed no bigger than a handkerchief, and then grabbed her husband's arm. 'Come on, let's go before you change your mind and decide to stay at home with the babysitter.'

'What about your letter?' reminded Maggie.

Mike frowned. They normally had everything addressed to the office in Europoort. 'Letter?'

Cassi inserted a long finger into the top of the envelope and slit it neatly open. It contained a single sheet of paper. Mike watched as Cassi's face went white and then snatched the paper from her hand as she slowly sat down. It read: "SUCH LOVELY CHILDREN. IT WOULD BE A SHAME IF ANYTHING HAPPENED TO THEM."

Tears were in her eyes as Mike punched numbers into his cellphone.

'Stan? I need your help. Can you come over? Better bring Terry.'

In twenty minutes a second helicopter stood beside the first, and the kitchen-diner was crowded as Cassi sipped tea from a mug.

'Don't worry,' a balding man was saying to her husband. 'Terry and I will take care of everything. You just go off and enjoy yourselves.'

Terry Green, an athletic young officer with well-developed muscles and the speed to use them well, was eyeing up the babysitter with serious interest. Mike leaned over and whispered in Stan's ear. 'Don't let her put her nightie on yet or you'll get no sense at all out of Terry.'

Stan's eyebrows rose. 'Like that, eh?' He laughed. 'Sometimes I wish I was young again.'

'Call me if you need me back in a hurry.'

'Taking this seriously?'

'Until General Phillips is behind bars for good, I'm taking no chances. Cassi and I are among very few witnesses that he arranged the deaths of a lot of people, and he has always fulfilled his threats to date.'

'And you believe he will carry them out now?'

'I believe he will try.'

Cassi took a lot of persuading to leave the children but Mike was adamant that his two armed security officers were more than capable of looking after a teenage girl and two children. The helicopter rose into the air and then turned south-west, following the coast for while before turning inland.

'Where are we going?' asked a subdued Cassi.

'Where do you think? Where we had our very first meal together.'

'Paris?'

He nodded as the autoroute appeared beneath them and the sun began to lower away to their right.

'Happy?' he ventured.

'Worried,' she replied.

Mike laughed as he veered up and over power cables close to Rove. 'Stan is an old hand at this kind of thing. He might look past his sell-by date, but he has the instincts of a wily old fox. Also, Terry is chief instructor at the gun club as well as Regional Weight-Lifting Champion. Between them, they won't let anything happen to the kids. Not only that, the Base Security Office is within three minutes flight. They are safe.'

Cassi visibly relaxed and pushed her hair back from her face. 'Okay, I'm being paranoid. I just can't forget that they killed Tara's baby.'

'The people who most likely did that died at Andromeda, you know that. It was you who killed them.'

'You make me sound like some kind of marine commando.'

'I didn't mean to. However, when you turned Wayfarer Two into a thermonuclear bomb to neutralise the black hole, you did the whole universe a favour.'

'Okay, you've convinced me. Wine me and dine me.'

A mischievous smile touched his lips. 'I had a little more than that in mind. I booked a room at the hotel we stayed at before.'

She turned to face him. 'But I have to be back early in the morning.'

'It won't hurt to take a day off. Juanita can cover for you.'

'It's not that simple.'

'Yes, it is. I've booked a day off so that we can spend the whole day together if we want to.'

'I have to be there,' she said, looking down at her hands in her lap.

'You take your work too seriously,' he said a little sarcastically.

She turned towards him again, her eyes pleading. 'Don't let us fight, not tonight.'

Mike was silent for a moment but then sighed. 'Okay. We wine and dine and forget the hotel.'

'Don't you dare.'

'What?'

'We'll have a couple of hours to spare, won't we?' she said cheekily.

He glanced at her quickly. 'A hundred pound room for two hours?'

'Don't you think I'm worth it?'

He grinned. 'Okay, you convinced me. Two hours, best of three rounds. Satisfied?'

'No. But I guess I will be by morning.'

THE man in the raincoat watched as the couple entered the hotel later, laughing and giggling like teenagers on their first date. He saw the length of Cassi's dress, the look in Mike's eyes. He saw them enter the lift, deep in passionate embrace before the doors had properly closed. He smiled and then dialled on his phone.

'Go!' was all he said.

ΦΡΙΛΑΨ

Cassi yawned as the helicopter rose into the dawn sky. Few clouds dotted the rosy eastern horizon as Mike headed north-west, his tie undone. He glanced over at his wife in the other seat while she stretched, her arms high above her head.

He grinned. 'Good grief, you look sexy, even early in the morning.'

'Without having had a wink of sleep and with my hair all over the place?'

He jerked his head towards her short black dress. 'You'll knock the lads cold in that outfit.'

'I'm not giving them the chance. Drop me near the gym and I'll get changed before I face the rabble.' She looked at her watch. 'Damn, I'm going to be late.'

Mike grinned. 'It was worth it, wasn't it?'

Cassi sighed. 'Yes, I suppose so.'

'Thank you very much,' he scolded playfully. 'Is that all the thanks I get?'

She looked round at him. 'Until tonight - yes.'

'Looks good, doesn't it?' Mike said after a while, pointing ahead to Europoort. Beside the wide Maas estuary was the flat space terminal and, dead centre, the launch complex itself. Off to the left, between the sea and Brielle harbour, was the long pair of wide runways. As they watched, a Lunar shuttle rolled along the north one, seemingly too big to leave the ground, much less fly to the moon. As they curved round the south of the complex in normal security approach pattern, the shuttle accelerated rapidly and pulled up into the sky, its rocket boosters pushing it up at a forty-five degree angle. Soon, the main engines would fire to take it right out of the atmosphere and needed daily supplies would reach their destination.

'Rather be up there?' he ventured.

She shrugged as they came in to land beside Europa Corporation's seemingly deserted sports complex. 'Sometimes. Most of the time, I'd rather be wherever you are.'

'Only most of the time?' he jibed.

'I just wish we could combine the two. It was fun going to Andromeda together.'

'One day, perhaps; when the kids are grown up. Space will always be there, waiting for us.'

She smiled as they touched down. 'First, I've got to show a bunch of green cadets how they get a shuttle up to Orion without causing a major catastrophe.'

Mike laughed. 'You'll do it. You taught Steve and the others, didn't you? They were just as green at first.'

'That,' she said, unbuckling her harness; 'Is my sole consolation.'

CASSI pushed open the changing room door and stepped inside, sighing with relief at finding it empty. Quickly, she pulled off her dress and hung it carefully in her locker. She had just stepped into her shorts and trainers and was in the act of pulling her tee shirt on over her head when she realised she was not alone. How much had they seen? By the lust-filled looks on the faces of Neil and his friends as they encircled her, a great deal more than was prudent. She smiled. 'I didn't think you were actually capable of getting up this early.'

'You invited us,' said Neil. 'Remember?'

'Well?' she said with a wry smile. 'What are you waiting for?'

MIKE wheeled the helicopter over the barns and dropped to the ground beyond, calculating that he would have time for a spot of breakfast before he would have to take Maggie to school and Nicole back to her mother in Rotterdam. He landed, and then

whistled as he strode across the yard, realising for the first time that he hadn't slept for what seemed like ages and could catch up on rest during the day - if little Andi gave him the chance.

He stopped a few metres from the back door. It had a pane of clear glass in the top half and, dead centre, it now also had a small round hole. Looking up at the first-floor windows, he saw no movement. *Odd*, he thought, *it was almost seven and Maggie would normally be up, if no-one else*. Cautiously, he backed away to the helicopter and lifted the seat panel. From behind it, he retrieved a short-barrelled repeater shotgun; standard issue for base security staff. He also opened the glove compartment and took out his automatic, shoving it into his jacket pocket.

The yard was still quiet as he ran across it, zig-zag fashion, until he was beside the back door once more. He took a deep breath, pumped a round into the breach of the shotgun and then carefully pushed down the handle and kicked open the door. No fusillade of gunfire greeted him. Silence reigned. *Was his imagination getting the better of him?* Dropping to his haunches, he peered round the door frame at knee height. The kitchen was a mess, but what caught his eye was the pair of boots in the opposite doorway leading to the hall. They were still on someone's feet but the wearer was flat on his back.

'Stan?' he whispered but got no response. 'Terry?'

He straightened and took out his phone, pressing the red button which immediately linked him with security headquarters. 'Don? Code One. Man down. My place. Bring a team and medics.'

'Where are you?' came the reply.

'Back door, outside.' He studied the make-up of the hole in the glass for a moment. 'Looks like they used a high velocity steel tip - probably from across the yard.' His eyes swept the grounds. Plenty of cover on the other side, especially if they had come under cover of darkness when there was a light on in the kitchen. They couldn't fail to miss an unsuspecting target. 'I'm going in.'

'Mike,' came the urgent reply. 'Wait for the team. We're on our way. Give us two minutes.'

'I'm going in,' said Mike again and shoved the unit back into his pocket.

THE youths were taken aback for a second at Cassi's brazen reply which was all the time she needed to step over the central bench and into the gymnasium. When they followed her inside, she was already skipping, the rope simply a blur.

'Neil said we can have some fun if we catch you,' said Benny a little nervously.

She backed away, still skipping. 'Ah, but you haven't caught me yet.'

Two of them suddenly lunged for her but she was too quick for them, hopping backwards into the centre of the huge gym. They spread out, walking, trotting, then running towards her; but she simply ran back wards, still skipping. 'Come on, you can do better than that.'

'Head her off,' shouted Neil as the chase headed towards the fire doors.

Cassi crashed into them without a hesitation, threw the rope at the closest, then turned and ran, the sight of her long legs dragging them after her like a pack of sheep. The playing field was wide and empty as they chased her across it and into the trees beyond.

MIKE looked down at the single hole in the centre of Stan's forehead. *He wouldn't have felt a thing*, Mike thought. In the older man's hand was clutched a teamaker and there was a brown stain on the floor beside it - almost dry. *But where were the others?*

He slipped into the hall and crouched beside the stairway. Silence.

'Terry?' he called from the shelter, not wishing to be blown in half by friendly fire. The reply was a faint groan from upstairs.

First checking the downstairs rooms, virtually untouched, he ventured back to the stairway, climbing carefully, shotgun at the ready. He found Terry on the landing, face down in an ocean of blood. Mike carefully turned him over and felt sick. Long dead. The groan came again.

He crawled toward the children's bedroom. The door was open and, on the floor in the entrance, his staple gun. He frowned. *That should be in the garage*. He had bought it the previous week so that he could dry-line the cellar. It was a new device which fired serrated zinc-coated staples into soft limestone walls. The staples didn't go deeper than an inch or so and made a relatively small entry hole. They worked because, inside the fabric of the wall, the jagged metal twisted and flared out, forming a perfect anchor point. Boards mounted with these staples stayed put.

Peering into the bedroom at skirting height, he looked inside and could see nothing worthy of alarm. In the background, he could hear the thwack-thwack of several rotors - approaching fast.

'Maggie?' he called out softly, his heart in his mouth.

The moan came from the bed.

With total disregard for his safety, he leapt to his feet and stared down at the

figure on the bed. It was not Maggie.

CLOSE to Brede Water, Cassi trotted along the beach as the tide ebbed. Fifty metres behind her, the youths were running out of steam. She turned to face them, jogging in reverse. 'Getting tired?'

The sound of her taunting voice gave them a sudden burst of energy. They were within twenty yards of the gym, having completed a five mile circuit when, with gritted teeth, Neil spurted forward, desperate to release his frustrations upon her. At that moment, Cassi slipped and fell on the dewy grass.

NICOLE was tied, spread-eagle, across the bed, her eyes wide and staring at the ceiling, her night-dress spattered with blood. Nauseous, he looked away and opened a window to signal to the men who were pouring from three helicopters, a dozen in combat blues, three in whites. He knelt beside the bed and touched the teenager's forehead lightly. She instinctively jumped which must have caused her terrible agony for she screamed loud and long.

'It's all right,' soothed Mike. 'You're okay now.'

'I'm sorry,' she cried through her tears of relief at recognising Mike. 'I'm so sorry.'

'Shh. It's okay. We'll soon have you in hospital.' He heard the steps in the hall and called out: 'Up here.'

As men checked out the house and medics flooded in, Mike got a chance to see what they had done to Nicole. Three pieces of paper had been arranged to form a warning he couldn't ignore. Each had been laid onto the front of her torso and, so that he would get the full import of the message, the notes had been sadistically stapled into the soft tissue of her breasts and belly to read; 'YOUR GIRL NEXT.'

CASSI rolled to one side as they pounced but she was not quick enough. Neil pinned her arms while others grabbed her legs and held them firmly. She fought with all her strength but five of them was too many, even for her.

MEDICS took over, looking into Nicole's eyes and ears as only medics know how while Mike carefully cut the thongs holding her wrists. The skin of both her wrists and ankles had been torn away where she had obviously struggled and screamed in her agony. *Whoever could have done this to a poor young girl had to be totally without feeling.* He wanted to ask her about Maggie and Andi but was not so unfeeling himself. He guessed he would soon find out.

The medics carefully lifted Nicole onto a stretcher as his own team declared the area secure. Don Parsons stood in the doorway, machine carbine in hand, as they pushed past him, his face grim from a brief sight of what they had done to Nicole. As they hesitated, the teenager turned to look at Mike. He smiled. She smiled back. 'I didn't tell them,' she said and passed out.

CASSI felt the cold on her midriff as they tugged at her tee-shirt. With all her strength, she arched her back and heaved her body upwards. At the same instant, Neil grunted and fell off her. Ben swore viciously, holding his head in his hands. Cassi jerked her arms free and caught another by the hair and pulled him sideways.

'Get off,' came the strange voice as the heavy sports bag struck again, catching Neil full in the face.

Cassi lifted her legs and rolled to one side as the pressure eased a little and got to her hands and knees, filthy from the exchange. The boys were all running.

She got to her feet and hugged the newcomer. 'Thanks, Janine.'

MIKE and Don stared down at Terry's body as the medics rolled it onto a stretcher.

'Took twenty or more soft-nosed slugs before he went down,' announced Mike's second-in-command. 'He must have put up one hell of a fight.'

'My god, what a mess.'

They started down the stairs and met a dark-haired female officer who pointed to a stain on the wall. 'He nailed one of them here. That's shotgun debris.'

'I think you're right, Sarah. How many of them were there, do you reckon?'

'Oh, three or four, at a guess. They wanted to make sure nothing went wrong.'

Mike nodded grimly and left her to her further observations. The doctor was waiting for them downstairs.

'Will she live?' asked Mike.

He shrugged. 'Can't say till I get a look inside her. Those staples have made a real mess.'

'They'll come out, won't they?'

'You tell me. It is almost certain she will lose both breasts, they're probably

chewed to shreds inside. The third one may have damaged her spleen. I'll know more when I've given her a proper scan.'

'Where will you take her?'

'Rotterdam General, assuming she survives that long.'

'She doesn't seem to have lost much blood.'

'There speaks a non-medic. She has been in constant agony for hours, I'm surprised her heart hasn't given up by now.'

Mike grabbed his arm. 'What do you mean?'

'You don't think those staples were all put in together, do you?'

'You mean...?'

'The bruising around the puncture hole in her right breast is well established but not so much in the other, and even less around the one in her abdomen. My guess is they started on her sometime before midnight and played games with her for most of the night.'

'Was she..?'

'Was she raped, you mean?'

Mike nodded, fearing the worst in spite of the fact that she had still been wearing her panties. But what could be worse than what he had already seen?

The doctor shook his head. 'Strange though it might appear, there is no immediate evidence of penile activity. They got their kicks in other ways.'

Mike sat down heavily as the doctor left to his ministrations. It was his fault. If he hadn't brought her here....

'Any sign of my girls?' he asked eventually, dreading the moment when he would have to tell Cassi.

Don shook his head and then clapped him on the shoulder. 'But don't you worry. We'll get them back for you.'

'Yes,' said Mike quietly nodding towards the medical helicopter which was just taking off. 'But will they be like that?'

THE classroom door slammed back on its hinges as Cassi burst in, immaculate in her pale blue flight suit with maroon flashes which identified currently-serving Europa flight personnel. Unaware of the drama at home, she placed her hands on either side of her desk and simply stared at the class. Some students saw the look on her face and hurried to their seats. Others assumed their normal stance.

'Sit!' she said quietly and evenly, without emotion.

Taking a deep breath, she came out from behind her desk and faced them. 'Before you all disperse for the weekend, I think it's time we all got one or two things straight.'

Silence gradually came over the room as she leant on Janine's desk.

'Up to now, I have tolerated all kinds of questionable behaviour from some of you in the mistaken view that you would improve, given time. You all have something to offer the space programme. If that were not so, you wouldn't be here.'

No-one dared speak.

'In six months time, Wayfarer Three will be completed and a crew for her will be chosen from persons in this room - that is supposing any of you qualify, something that is seriously in doubt at this moment of time. The rest of you will be assigned to domestic duties between here and Luna Base where you can do little damage. I have to say that some of you may not even last out today.'

A buzz broke out which she allowed to run until it fizzled out.

'Who.. who makes the decision as to personnel?' asked Janine.

Cassi looked down at the girl and smiled. 'I do.'

'But isn't that a decision for the Directorate?' protested Ben Parker.

'Not any more,' said Cassi. 'I have just spoken to the Director, Alan Thompson, who has placed the whole affair within my jurisdiction.'

'What did you tell him?' sneered Neil.

She looked straight at him. 'Nothing involving any events of today.'

He didn't answer.

'From now on, you will fly by my rules and my rules only. One.' She counted on her fingers. 'There will be no further sexual harassment of any kind. If I observe the slightest hint of male chauvinism...' She looked at Neil then switched her gaze to Carla at the back; 'Or petty feminism, I will have that person grounded - permanently.'

'You can't do that,' protested the dark-haired, gum-chewing Italian.

Cassi looked straight at her. 'Try me.'

Carla met her gaze for almost a minute before she backed down.

'At Europa, we all work as a team. No-one is more or less important than the others. A Wayfarer commander relies totally upon his crew. He has to know that the pilot will control the Proton Drive effectively, that the Navigation Officer will take him into the right orbit. He knows that the Mission Controller will provide the back-up, including ground crew who service the ships. Even the shuttle pilots have to be relied upon to ferry supplies into orbit. There is no room anywhere for cowboys, racists or sexists.'

Fifty-four eyes watched her as she returned to the blackboard.

'Second rule. You will attend all the classes to which you have been assigned. The moment you begin to think that Professor Akherd and Doctor Bartek are just stuffy academics, please remember that they have all been there, while you were still at nursery class. Heinrich Akherd was part of the original flight control team in the nineties and it was Hans Bartek and his father who actually invented the Proton Drive. Bob Walker, who takes your lesson in fusion production, was his chief assistant.'

'Is it true that your father, Admiral Duncan, was Commander of the Wayfarer Two mission which went to Andromeda?' asked Janine.

'Yes, that is true.'

'And have you been in space for very long, Miss?'

Cassi nodded. 'I have spent twenty of my twenty-two years in space.'

'You must have started young,' sneered Neil.

'I was born in space,' she replied calmly. 'And what credits do you have?'

'My great-uncle was first man on the moon.'

'Well, Mr Armstrong. I can't help wondering how proud he would have been of this morning's little escapade.'

Neil fell silent.

'Third rule. I have learned a lesson myself today.'

One of the lads tittered.

She looked straight at him. 'Out!'

'What?'

'You are off the programme. Pick up your gear on the way out and I will have Security see you off the premises. I'm not going to be screwed around by you or anyone else.'

'But, Miss...'

'Didn't you hear what I said?'

'My father will kill me.'

'You should have thought of that before you got up to your mischief this morning.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Could I hear that again? A little louder, perhaps?'

'I'm sorry!' he shouted, getting to his feet to leave in disgrace. 'Satisfied?'

'Sit down,' she said quietly.

After a moment, he obeyed.

'Starting Monday, each of you will spend at least three hours a day in the gymnasium. If you are not physically fit, you are neither use nor ornament in space.'

'That's not fair.'

'I think that is perfectly fair. If you can't even catch me on the ground, how will you survive in negative-G?'

'We did catch you,' grunted Neil.

'Eventually,' Cassi said softly. 'But then five strapping young men were seen off by one girl. How do you account for that, Mr Armstrong?'

He couldn't.

'I will now divide you into three teams of nine. Each team will eat together, work together, sleep together...' She hesitated at the subdued laughter and waited for it to die away. 'I meant that literally. You will share bunkrooms and showers, meal tables and study periods as you would in space. There will be no hanky-panky of any kind and I will allocate points for behaviour as well as for professional competence.'

'Who will be team leaders, Miss?' asked Marie Duval.

'The team leaders, whom you will obey without question...' She paused and then repeated herself: 'Without question - are Neil Armstrong, Carla Sporetti and...' She looked down. '...Janine Hunt.'

Roars of agreement and disagreement filled the room but Cassi ignored them all until it became quiet again.

'Janine may be a little embarrassed if I repeat to you something she told me in confidence this morning. But I am going to tell you anyway.' Cassi took the young woman's hand. 'She told me that wants to become the first virgin in space.'

Laughter broke out and Janine blushed. Cassi waited for silence.

'And you lot had better make damn sure that her wish comes true.'

SOMETHING bothered Mike but he couldn't work it out - something just didn't fit. *What was it Nicole had said?* " I didn't tell them."

Didn't tell them what? Her mother, Antoinette Duchanet, was daytime receptionist at the base and not privy to any secrets. Nicole was a poor, innocent schoolgirl. What did she know? More important, what did the kidnappers think she knew?

The doctor's preliminary report suggested they had not just left her as a warning, they had tortured her. They could have killed her as they had Stan and Terry, but they hadn't. Why not? They left her alive - in terrible agony, but alive. With good surgery and care, she could conceivably survive to live a reasonably normal life. They had not raped her which meant those men had been professionals. But they didn't just snatch Maggie and Andi and run, they wasted hours systematically abusing Nicole. But why? She knew nothing.

Think! he told himself. What was it? He went back upstairs to the bedroom and tried

to remember. He looked down at the bed and, in his mind, saw Nicole lying on it, her arms and legs pinioned so that she couldn't move. He even heard the scream of agony as one of them held the piece of paper containing the word "YOUR" to her chest and fired the jagged staple deep into the soft flesh of her right breast, not yet fully developed but now rendered useless. Then the word "GIRL" which made doubly sure she would never suckle a child.

G I R L - girl. He frowned. GIRL - singular. Why not GIRLS - plural?

His heart-rate increased as he pondered the repercussions. Had they already killed one of the children? If so, which of them had survived? Had either of them been made to suffer like Nicole? He gritted his teeth at the thought of what he would do to them when he caught up with them.

GIRL. The word kept coming back. He took out his phone and dialled. 'Doctor Norah? Mike Hardy. Any news on Nicole Duchanet?'

'She's still out, I'm afraid.'

'Has she said anything?'

'Not that I know of.'

'Can she be woken?'

'Not now. She is in the operating theatre. They've got to get those zinc staples out - fast, before they poison her blood stream.'

'But you're sure she said nothing?'

'One moment, I'll check with the helicopter crew.'

There was a moment while Mike bit his lip and waited to hear the result of the muffled conversation on the other end of the line.

'Marshal?'

'Yes?'

'The paramedic says she came round once during the flight but was pretty delirious. The only word he remembers clearly sounded like plank.'

'Plank?'

'She then said what sounded like a name - Sue Twa?'

'Thank you, doctor. Don't let her die.'

'She is in good hands, Marshal.'

He rang off. *Plank? Sue Twa?*

Another thought crossed his mind. How the hell was he going to break all this to Cassi?

JUANITA Carrero looked up as the door opened. She smiled. 'Classes over for the week?'

Cassi nodded, pulling the band from her hair. 'A week I'll not forget in a hurry.'

Juanita carefully closed the door so that they were alone. 'Tell me, Cassi. Why did you let those young men catch you this morning?'

The younger woman looked guilty. 'You knew?'

'Of course. We all know.' She smiled. 'Everyone is proud of you.'

'It was Janine who saved the day.'

'That is not the truth and both of us know that. You could have outrun them for hours and those young men should never have caught you. They are only human, after all. Whereas you...'

Cassi grinned. 'You are far too clever for me.'

'I ask you again, why did you let them catch you?'

'Perhaps I wanted to be assaulted.'

'Don't be ridiculous. I know you better than that. You are being up to something, aren't you?'

Cassi held up her arms in defeat. 'Guilty as charged.'

'Tell me. Your secret is my secret.'

'Janine Hunt is an extremely clever young lady,' said Cassi, pacing. 'One of only a few who take this training seriously. However, recently, her parents split up and she is blaming herself for it.'

'Not an uncommon reaction. Go on.'

'She felt guilty because, in a way, she was directly involved in their split up.'

'She was sexually abused by her father?'

Cassi's mouth dropped open. 'How did you know?'

'I guessed. It explains so many things about her.'

'It had been happening for years. No actual intercourse took place but the poor girl developed a terrible phobia about the whole thing. I had to do something to shock her out of her shell or she would never finish the course, because she would never be able to work with men and those men would never see her as an equal, never mind a leader - for which she has tremendous potential.'

Juanita grinned. 'Unless she is becoming an instant hero.'

Cassi nodded. 'I knew Janine was waiting for us at the gym and guessed how she would react at seeing me being attacked.'

'You are guessing right. But what if you had been wrong?'

'I wasn't though, was I?'

The door opened and in popped a head. 'I thought I'd find you here. I've come to give you a lift home.'

Cassi curtsied and smiled. 'Why thank you, kind sir. May I get changed first?'

Don didn't smile. 'If you must. Better make sure it's not that little black number I've been hearing so much about.'

'Is everything all right?' said Cassi suddenly. 'There has been a lot of activity over the field this afternoon.' She suddenly drew in her breath. 'Mike's all right, isn't he?'

'Mike's fine. He simply asked me to get you. I'll let him explain.'

CASSI couldn't help but notice that Sarah was also there along with two other security guards, one a fair-haired woman she didn't recognise, and a young man with narrow eyes. Everyone in the helicopter seemed fully alert as they took off and headed south-east. She didn't speak as they crossed the flatlands with the wide Maas on their left and the Haringvliet away to the right. The farm looked normal as they landed, but Mike didn't as he ran out to meet her and clutched her tightly as guards stood ready.

'What is it?' she whispered. 'What's wrong?'

'They... they've taken the kids, at least, one of them.'

She pulled away. 'What do you mean?'

'Mike,' warned the ever-wary Don Parsons. 'We'd be better off inside.'

Cassi noticed the hole in the door glass as they entered and tension escalated inside her. Most of the debris had been cleared away and, after the forensic team had been and gone, the place had already been fairly-well cleaned up except for the bloodstains at the bottom of the stairs.

'Tell me,' she eventually said as they sat in the lounge.

'They shot Stan and Terry. And they...they did terrible things to Nicole. She's in hospital.'

'Poor Nicole,' she whispered. 'And the children?'

'I think one of them is still here, somewhere.' He explained why he thought so.

'Plank?' said Cassi when he had finished.

Mike nodded. 'That's what she said in the helicopter.'

'Est ce qu'elle est française, n'est ce pas?'

'What?'

'Nicole's mother is French, isn't she?'

'What difference does that make?'

'If Nicole was delirious, she would default to her native French. We're looking for a hideaway.'

'Hideaway?'

She nodded furiously. 'La planque.'

Mike jumped to his feet and faced Sarah. 'If you were responsible for a twelve year old and a baby under threat, what would you do?'

Sarah shrugged. 'Hide the baby, of course. A twelve-year-old would be too obvious.'

'Exactly. Andi is here, somewhere. We've got to find her.'

'Are you sure about this?' asked Cassi.

'Absolutely. Nicole may only be sixteen but she has a mother's instincts. Any mother would go through hell to protect her infant. Nicole went through that hell three times.'

Don turned to the other security officers. 'Search the place thoroughly. I want that baby found.'

'But we've already been through it once,' sighed the blonde.

'Then do it again, Debbie. This time, we know precisely what we're looking for.'

'Wait!' said Cassi. 'I have a better idea.'

'What's that?' said Mike.

'Get everyone out of here.'

'But how will they find the baby?'

'They won't. But I will. Andi will be getting very hungry by now and will also need changing. I need absolute silence.'

Mike grabbed his phone. 'Marshal Hardy here. I want every flight out of Europort stopped immediately. And get onto the Autoroute police. I want the motorway blocked off north of Dordrecht and traffic diverted from Roosendaal through Breda onto the A27. And I want it done now.'

It took fifteen minutes for all the background noise to die away. Little could be done about the whirling seagulls over the estuary but all radios were turned off and the men sat down while Cassi closed her eyes and moved slowly about the house.

'Not inside,' she finally acknowledged.

Debbie grinned. She had not missed anything. Cassi moved outside.

'Andi won't be far outside,' whispered Mike. 'Stan was shot from the yard and they will have surrounded the place. Nicole would not have been able to get far before she was caught, even in the dark.'

'Dark?'

'The teamaker Stan was using read eleven twenty-two when it fell off the unit.'
Cassi went back to the door and closed her eyes.
'Not this door,' said Don. 'They came in this way.'
Mike agreed.
'Where would Nicole have been when she heard the first gunshot?' she asked.
'In the lounge?'
'At twenty past eleven? No, both our girls would be in bed at that time of night.'
'Yes,' said Mike. 'And Terry was shot at the top of the stairs. He was likely shielding them.'
'But how would the attackers know that Nicole had hidden the baby?' asked Sarah.
'Because they went to such a lot of trouble to find out where.'
'So they must have seen her with my baby,' said Cassi slowly. 'And then saw her again without it.'
'Upstairs?'
Mike and Cassi looked at each other. 'La planque sous toit. Hiding place under the roof?'
'The loft?'
Cassi ran up the stairs and stared up into the dark void at the top of the steep aluminium ladder.
Mike shook his head. 'She would have had no way to get up there, especially carrying a baby.'
Cassi paused thoughtfully and then saw the normally-closed landing window standing slightly ajar. She pushed it open and looked out. Just below it was a narrow parapet which ran right round to the front. Cassi stepped out onto it and closed her eyes. 'I need quiet.'
The wind was light as she shuffled along the ledge, her ears straining for the slightest sound. She reached the corner and opened her eyes. In the distance, she could see shipping in the faraway Maas estuary. Everything looked so normal.
A fluttering near her head caught her attention and a house martin popped out of a crevice under the eaves. She peered into the vacated aperture. Too small for a baby. She closed her eyes again and paused to listen. It sounded like a seagull in the distance but the sound was not quite right. Frantically, she shuffled further along, nervously aware that it was a ten-foot drop to the ground below.
She heard it again, this time closer. *Good grief, she thought, this is terrifying in broad daylight. How on earth had Nicole done it at night?* A movement caught her eye. There was a flash of light in the woods across the lane. Someone was watching her. Through binoculars? Or a telescopic sight? The answer came when a splinter of brickwork was torn off the wall an inch from her face. She flinched. She was like a fly on the wall. *How could they miss if they fired again?*
They did fire again - and they did not miss. A piercing pain came to her stomach and she was falling. But not for long before she hurt briefly all over and everything faded into dense darkness.

SHE woke up to the smell of hospital. A tube was in her arm and she seemed to ache from every inch of her body. The nurse who was adjusting knobs on some kind of machine turned and smiled. 'Good evening, Mrs Hardy.'
Cassi tried to smile back but her stomach hurt - everything hurt.
The nurse tucked her in. 'I'll get your husband. He's been worried about you.'
After a few moments, Mike came in and Cassi burst into tears as the baby was placed on the bed next to her.
'On a ledge under the eaves,' Mike explained. 'You were almost there.'
'Who..?'
'Who shot you? No idea who he is yet. Don and Sarah caught him on the way to Antwerpen.' He laughed. 'Caught in a traffic jam. Sarah almost broke his arm while tearing him from the car.'
'They still have Maggie,' Cassi reminded him.
'Not for long, if Don gets his way. He was breathing fire and brimstone after you got shot.'
'Am I hurt badly?'
Mike shook his head. 'Steel-tipped bullet, same as got Stan. Passed right through you with minimal damage, though the doc says it will probably give you a lot of pain for a while. The concrete below didn't improve your complexion any, but you'll soon be back on your feet.'
She grinned and then winced. 'Can't keep a good Andromedan down for long. How's young Nicole?'
'Still critical. They got the staple out of her belly okay but the ones in her breasts are giving problems. They may have to amputate them completely to save her life.'
'Poor girl.'
'She's happy enough.'
'Happy?'

'They let her come round after the first operation and you should have seen her face when we told her we'd found Andi. She was heavily sedated, in agony in spite of the drugs, faced with the possibility of being horribly disfigured for life but she was laughing. Can you believe that? '

'Yes,' said Cassi quietly, gently touching her baby. 'I can believe it.'

'You've got another visitor,' said Mike eventually.

'Another visitor?'

He stood up and opened the door. 'Come on in.'

In spite of the restricting tubes and enswathing bandages, Cassi struggled to sit up. 'Billy, oh Billy. It's great to see you.'

" Five minutes," said Mike with his hand and left them alone. William Bates rolled his wheelchair closer and took her hand. 'You and I just can't keep out of trouble, can we?'

She leant forward as far as the pain would let her and kissed his cheek. 'Oh, Billy, thank you for coming.'

'I had an escort of a dozen guards to protect me. When I heard about what they'd done to you, I just had to come.'

'Are they looking after you all right?'

'As well as any other witness for the prosecution, I guess.'

'We need you more than ever. They've kidnapped Mike's daughter.'

'That cheeky little kid who played chess with me after I was injured on Wayfarer? I'll have their guts for garters.'

She glanced at his wheelchair. 'I think they may have some advantages over you. Mike will have their guts for garters. You just give the judge the evidence to put General Phillips away for good.'

'Anything else I can do? I love that kid.' He looked up. 'I love you.'

'I know you do, Billy. You must come and live with us when... when this is all over.'

'Mike won't like that.'

'Don't you underestimate my husband. He knows you saved my life at Andromeda. Anyway, Maggie would be tickled pink to have you around. She'd mother you for ever.'

He tapped the arm of his wheelchair. 'I reckon a mother is all I'll ever be able to have.'

'Is there no hope of you ever walking again? Maggie reckons she's going to marry you, you know.'

Tears came to Billy's eyes. 'I wouldn't be much good to her.'

'It'll be a few years before Maggie is seriously ready for marriage so you've got plenty of time to get fixed. Miracles do happen, you know.'

'Good grief, you're an optimist. Even if I do recover, I'll still be ten years older than she is.'

Cassi grinned. 'Mike is ten years older than me.'

'Perhaps you've got a soft spot for older men.'

She gently touched his face. 'Right now, I've got a soft spot for men in wheelchairs.'

'You say the nicest things.'

'Billy, would you do me a favour?' she said suddenly.

'Anything for you.'

'Look after my baby.'

He frowned as she placed Andi in his lap and swung her legs out of bed, discarding tubes as she went. 'Why, where are you going?'

'To find Maggie.'

'On your own?'

She turned her back and pulled off her gown, replacing it with bra and panties. Half-dressed, she turned to face him. 'It's the last thing they will expect. They think I'm dead.'

He laughed. 'You look as if you've spent a couple of days in a cement mixer but you can still set the world on fire.'

CASSI'S overalls were stained back and front with her blood so she knew she had to get changed soon else someone was bound to notice, even in the dark. The jump from the window wasn't far but she lay curled up in pain for a minute on the damp grass outside before she could straighten and walk something like upright.

She found the fourtrack in the car park where Mike had left it and roared out onto the main road. In ten minutes, she was back at the base, waved through by a guard who had just come on night duty and wasn't aware of earlier events. Parking round the back of the gymnasium, she noticed the light in one of the offices. She frowned. *Who on earth would be working here at this time of night? Only students came here - and then only in daytime.*

As she got out of the fourtrack, something nudged her leg, something long and hard. She gripped it and pulled it free - Mike's shotgun. It felt strangely reassuring in her hands. She knew in her heart that because of her half-Andromedan ancestry, she would never be able to use it to kill anyone. However, the human half of her said that there

were nasty things she would like to do to men who kidnapped children and stapled teenage girls to their beds.

Silently, she crept up the fire-escape stairs and along the stark corridor, the light drawing her inexorably along till she reached the door with the strip of light under it. She put her ear to it but no sound came from within. Perhaps someone had simply forgotten to turn the lamp off. Holding her breath, she pushed down the handle and carefully poked the barrel through the gap in front of her. A rustling sound made her freeze for a second. Someone was in the room, someone bent over the dark side of the desk. She took off the safety catch.

'Don't shoot,' said the sudden voice. 'Please don't shoot.'

Cassi frowned. 'Janine, what are you doing here at this time of night?'

The girl's hands went to her face. 'Mrs Hardy, what's happened to you?'

'I got shot,' said Cassi simply, laying the gun on the desk.

'My god,' said Janine, moving forward hesitantly. 'You're hurt bad, you should be in hospital.'

'I just came from there. It seems the bullet went right through me.'

'Bullet? I thought perhaps the boys....'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not them. A few of them may be sex maniacs but they would never seriously harm anyone, not even me.'

'But how? Why? When?'

'Someone has kidnapped my daughter - my husband's daughter. They also badly hurt the babysitter who really is in hospital and is likely to be there some time.'

Janine sat down. 'I feel so helpless. What can I do?'

'You do? Why should you get involved?'

'Because I want to.'

Cassi leant forward and winced at the pain. 'Janine, you are a nice girl and will make an excellent astronaut. But I cannot let you get tied up in murder and kidnapping.'

'Murder?'

'Two men were shot in the kidnapping. They also tried to kill me.'

'But why?'

'Because there is a certain man who wants power and will go to any lengths to get it. I found that I got in his way and he had a lot of people killed because they helped me.'

'Who is this? A terrorist?'

Cassi shook her head. 'General Dwight Phillips, Commander-in-Chief of the combined defence forces. My husband arrested him four months ago and the trial starts in a few weeks. My guess is that his supporters are trying to eliminate the witnesses to his activity.'

'And you are one of them?'

'Yes.'

'I want to help you.'

'I'm not involving any more people. You could get hurt or killed.'

'You cannot manage alone. Look at the state of you. You're in pain, aren't you?'

Cassi nodded feebly. 'Yes.'

'Then I'm coming with you. Have you got any other clothes?'

'Some in my locker. I daren't go home. My husband will take me back to hospital and try to do this the official way.'

'Do you have a car?'

'I came in Mike's fourtrack.'

Janine shook her head. 'Too obvious. We'll take mine.'

Cassi agreed and then queried: 'What were you doing here?'

'Just swatting. I'm trying to catch up lost ground.'

'Can you use a shotgun?'

Janine grinned. 'You bet. I was brought up on a farm in Cumbria. I can hit a running rabbit at fifty paces.'

'The gun's yours. I must get changed.'

'The little black number?'

Cassi laughed and wished she hadn't. Clutching her stomach, she said: 'It's either that or shorts and tee shirt.'

'Do you need to contact anyone?'

'No,' she began to say then changed her mind. 'I'll leave a note for Doctor Carrero. She will understand what I have to do.'

Janine helped her teacher to the changing area where Cassi pulled off her overalls. Her bandages were soaked with blood due to the exertion.

'I'll get some fresh ones,' Janine said and ran to the first-aid cabinet.

She changed the dressing and bound Cassi up as tight as she dare and then helped her into her black dress, pulling the tight garment down over the bandage with some difficulty. Cassi changed her shoes and stood up with assistance.

'I feel like a new woman,' she announced.

Janine smiled. 'You'll need some heavy make up before you look like one. Let's go, we'll do it in the car. Someone might come.'

Cassi wasn't sure what she expected in the way of a car for Janine. She most certainly was not expecting a brand new BMW-Porsche 735.

'Where will the General be?' Janine asked as she started the car and shoved it in first gear.

'He's in jail, somewhere in England.'

'Any idea where?'

'A place called Haverigg. Any ideas?'

'I know the place. It's two miles from where I was born.'

'Good grief, that's a coincidence.'

Janine turned towards the gates with a screech of tyres. 'Who said the baddies have to get all the luck?'

ΣΑΤΥΡΔΡΑΨ

Cassi remembered little of the overnight journey - she slept most of the way. Ten minutes to Hoek van Holland, three hours by Jetfoil to Hull and then three more hours over the moors to Cumbria. They stopped at the Settle Motorway Services and ate a hearty breakfast before covering the last fifty miles. The early morning sun was reflecting in bright sparkles off Morecambe Bay as they followed the M590 along the coast of Cartmel, over the Furness peninsula, and across the wide Dudden estuary. The huge hump of Black Combe looked solid and comforting ahead of them as they wound their way round the busy Millom by-pass towards Silecroft. It was good to be alive, Cassi thought.

Janine pulled into the old farmyard between complaining hens and jerked on the handbrake. She took off her sunglasses and smiled. 'Welcome home.'

MRS HUNT greeted her daughter warmly and then shook hands with Cassi when she was introduced.

'What's happened to her face?' she asked inside as she put the kettle on while Cassi was freshening up in the bathroom.

Janine grinned. 'Don't ask.'

'You look happier than when you left here last.'

'I feel great, mum. I'm going to be an astronaut.'

'I thought you'd been thrown out of college when you came home early like this.'

'We won't be here long. Cassi has a few things to do and then we'll be heading back. Aren't you glad to see me?'

Mother hugged daughter. 'Of course I am. Stay as long as you like - both of you.'

Janine grinned. 'Thanks, mum.'

Mrs Hunt nodded in the direction of the bathroom. 'Is that really your teacher? She looks awfully young.'

'She's the best. She seems to understand... everything - especially about people.'

'How did she hurt her face?'

'She fell at home,' Janine over-simplified to prevent her mother worrying.

'Is she married?'

Janine nodded. 'Her husband is chief of security at the launch complex. He's really handsome.'

'There is nothing going on, is there? No triangle developing?'

'Not at all,' replied the teenager, blushing. 'We are all just friends.'

'What about the other young men in the class?'

Janine shook her head vigorously. 'No chance. They are all perverts.'
Her mother placed a hand on her shoulder. 'Sorry, love. I didn't mean to bring back old memories.'

'It's okay, mum,' sighed Janine.

At that moment, Cassi re-entered, looking tired.

'I'll leave you two alone for a while,' said Mrs Hunt, standing. 'I'm going up to feed the horses.'

'What is it?' asked Janine when they were alone.

'I think I'm bleeding inside.'

The young woman looked horrified. 'How do you know?'

'There is blood in my urine. I also feel so weak.'

'We must get you back to hospital.'

'No, I'll just rest for a while if that is all right.'

'Are you sure?'

Cassi nodded.

'Inside or out?'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'Pardon?'

'It's a beautiful day. You could lie on the lounge out in the sunshine.'

'Okay. That sounds good.'

Janine helped her to stand. 'Are you sure you don't want a doctor or something?'

'I'll be all right by tea-time.' She touched her arm. 'Trust me.'

THE afternoon sun was indeed warm as they lay together in the garden, Janine in shorts and bikini top, Cassi with her black dress pulled up, her long bare legs soaking up the sunshine. Nothing of Janine's would fit her, especially bandaged up as she was.

'Is there someone we ought to tell?' asked the younger girl eventually.

'I need to let Mike know I'm okay.'

'He will be worrying, I expect.'

'Not my Mike. After all, he knows I ran away voluntarily because Billy Bates at the hospital will have told him. He'll be concerned, of course, but Juanita will ease his mind.'

'You can ring him from here if you like.'

'I don't think that would be a good idea.'

'Why-ever not?'

'Because there may be a leak at the base.'

'A leak?'

Cassi nodded without opening her eyes. 'Somehow, someone found out where we live. As a matter of principle, addresses of security staff and flight teams are not public knowledge, for obvious reasons. Person or persons unknown must have gained access to the base computer to get the information, someone with a high security clearance.'

'Couldn't they have just followed one of you home?'

'No chance. We have a strict ritual we follow to avoid that. It has become instinctive since the General was arrested.'

'School records?'

'All records show the base office as our postal address. It has to be someone within Mike's own department. That's why I daren't ring him.'

'But they won't know where the call is coming from, will they?'

'Don't bank on it. Mike says it takes about three seconds to trace a call since fibre-optics were introduced. If the Genral's people are keeping vigil, which we must assume they are, they could be here in no time. The last thing I want is SUAT teams swarming all over this village.'

'They'll know I'm missing. Won't that bring them here?'

'No. The message I left for Juanita said you're sick. They have no way to connect us. They are after me, not you.'

'Who do you think could be the bad apple at Europort?'

'Not many to choose from. It's not Mike or Don Parsons so..'

'How do you know it's not this Don?'

'If you'd seen his reaction to Maggie's abduction, you wouldn't ask. He loves Mike's kid as much as I do.'

'Who else, then?'

'Sarah is Mike's cousin so I doubt if it will be her but I don't know the one Don called Debbie. The secretary, Antoinette Duchanet, has access to the files but I can't see her doing anything which would contribute to the torture of her own daughter.'

'Unless she was given no option.'

'I'd rather consider other alternatives first - more likely ones.'

'If there is a problem with Europort's phones, can't you get him on his cellphone?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Scanners can monitor all radio phones, even digital ones nowadays. We could be traced.'

'There must be a way. We need help.'

'I'll think of something.'

They were both quiet for a while before Janine spoke. 'Tell me, how did this all

start?'

'I suppose you have a right to know. Do you want the whole story or the abbreviated version?'

'I think you'd better tell me everything.'

'Okay. What do you know about Shoemaker-Levy Nine?'

'Wasn't it a comet which crashed into Jupiter about thirty years ago?'

'Well, lumps of it did, yes, in the summer of ninety-four. The impact, I understand, was pretty impressive. However, that was just the start. Apparently, over the next few years, changes began to be noticed in Jupiter's cloud belts.'

'Changes?'

'Freak storms and the like. Now when the original impacts were due, all kinds of predictions were made from "the Earth will be destroyed in the process - it's the end of life as we know it," to "nothing will happen at all." '

'What did happen?'

'Something in between. The Armageddonists were silenced for a while by the non-event as far as Earth was concerned, but they soon pricked up their ears when they heard about the changes in the cloud belts. The only way to settle things was to send someone to take a look.'

'Weren't there probes up already? Like Galileo?'

'There were, but the data they sent back was limited. Fortunately, two of the three Wayfarer inter-planetary cruisers were almost completed so they were adapted to fly to Jupiter and make observations of Saturn at the same time. The two planets were in alignment, you see.'

'When was this?'

'Well, it should have been much later but, due to the breakthrough in anti-matter reactors, a launch window was possible in the spring of twenty-twenty.'

'They used the Proton Drive?'

'Exactly. Doctor Bartek's father started the research to find a faster drive unit ten years previously, but it was Hans who finished the project.'

'Go on.'

'Wayfarer One departed from Orion Space Station on the sixteenth of March under the command of ex-test pilot Henry Markham. The ship disappeared seventeen and a half minutes after take-off.'

'Disappeared?'

Cassi nodded. 'Completely, I understand. No trace was found. You can imagine the fuss those against space exploration made.'

'What had gone wrong?'

'No-one knew at the time. However, a campaign was started to stop all further trips, regardless of their perceived value. General Dwight Phillips was at the forefront of the opposition.'

'Why?'

'Because he had recently been appointed as commanding officer of all the security forces - world wide. He wanted the money for updating his weapons, not having it squandered on what he saw as fruitless missions into space.'

'What happened then?'

'Wayfarer Two was stripped down and the technicians went over it with a fine tooth comb but they found nothing wrong. My father volunteered to take command of this second ship.'

'Even though it had every chance of going wrong, like the first one?'

'Yes. He left with a crew nine months later on the twenty-first of December. Seventeen and a half minutes after blast-off, it too disappeared.'

'I bet the General had a field day.'

'He did, all right. He was hero of the day and promises of unlimited funds towards weapon systems were given. However, it all went wrong for him a month later when my father turned up out of the blue, claiming he'd been to Andromeda and back.'

'Andromeda? But that's...'

'Two million light years away. I know.'

'How could it happen?'

'Time compression. When you exceed the speed of light, years are compressed into minutes. The faster you go, the greater the compression. Einstein knew something like that could happen but no-one would believe him.'

'How do you know it's true?'

'Because I was born in transit on the way back. The Andromeda Spiral was collapsing into a black hole and father tried to save the people of several planets but there were no suitable worlds nearby. As a compromise, he brought back female eggs and male sperm cells to preserve the race which never fought or had wars.'

'Were the Andromedans different to humans?'

'Very little. The gravity was quite a bit greater so they were relatively stronger and fitter and, having eliminated hereditary diseases over the centuries, they could virtually live forever. And here they were, about to be wiped out.'

'Was your mother on the ship, too?'

Cassi shook her head. 'My father was unmarried when he left Earth but he fertilised

one of the female eggs with his own sperm on the way back and incubated the embryo to life.'

'You?'

Cassi grinned. 'Me. My father was human and my mother was Andromedan. I spent the first nineteen years of my life on board Wayfarer Two.'

'I can just imagine the kind of effect your appearance would have on General Phillips.'

'He didn't believe it, of course. Or, rather, he couldn't afford to be seen to believe it.'

'Do you think he really did believe it?'

'Of course he did. Why else would he try so hard to have me eliminated?'

'He tried to have you killed?'

Cassi nodded. 'Several times. Then, he tried to kill the Andromeda Seed.'

'The what?'

'The eggs and sperm cells from Andromeda. He exaggerated the whole thing out of proportion and spread the rumour that Earth was being invaded by aliens.'

'How did it work out?'

'Father and I found Wayfarer One and brought it back. This proved beyond reasonable doubt that father had been telling the truth. The computer data-logs on both ships checked out.'

'I bet the General was livid.'

'He was. Dad was then appointed as Admiral on Orion which effectively prevented it being used as a battle station. Mike and I were instructed to return to Andromeda with an uprated Proton Drive in the hopes that we could distort time even more than on dad's trip and help the people there. General Phillips commandeered Wayfarer Two and sent it after us with orders that we should have an "accident" somewhere out there.'

'It obviously didn't work because you're here now. Or is this another time warp?'

'No, I'm here. After they had tried several times to kill us, I managed to get on board their ship and programmed their Iris to send the reactor critical.'

'Iris?'

'The Interactive Radar Identification System, the on-board guidance computer. It effectively turned Wayfarer Two into a neutron bomb. I aimed it into the neck of the black hole and - Bingo! No black hole.'

'You found a way to destroy a black hole?'

Cassi nodded. 'We'd gone back a fair way in time, you see. We caught it early enough to be effective.'

'And the General's men?'

'All killed, except one. Billy Bates, who I mentioned earlier. Other than our own testimony, Billy is the only real witness to what has happened.'

'Will it be enough?'

'The General obviously thinks so or he wouldn't have arranged to have Maggie kidnapped. I...'

'What is it?'

'I've just realised something. He didn't want to have Maggie kidnapped at all.'

'How do you know that?'

'When his thugs broke into our house, they could have just grabbed Maggie and run. But they didn't. They tortured Nicole for a long time in an effort to find my own daughter, Andi.'

'How do you know they didn't want to kidnap both the girls?'

'I saw the notes they left. The words "YOUR", "GIRL" and "NEXT" had been pre-printed on a laser printer. It said "GIRL" not "GIRLS." They had come for one girl - my baby.'

'Why your baby?'

'Don't you understand, Janine? My baby, my part-Andromedan baby. General Phillips is still trying to eliminate the Andromeda Seed. That's why I was shot at the house. If he can wipe out all traces of the Andromedan race, as well as the witnesses, he will have won.'

'But that means...'

'It means that now they think I'm dead and, as far as they know, there is no trace of Andi, Maggie is no earthly use to them. Her life is worth nothing at all. In fact, she may already be dead.'

'Then we must act quickly, before the message gets back to General Phillips and he gives the order for her execution.' Janine thought for a moment. 'Tell me, whom do you trust?'

'Implicitly?'

She nodded. 'Without question.'

'Doctor Carrero...'

'Why her?'

'Because Juanita and I went to Andromeda together. She was also on the General's hit-list.'

'Okay. Who else?'

'Professor Akherd. He's been like a grandfather to me and has publicly challenged

General Phillips several times over the use of the Andromeda Seed. The idea was, not to create some kind of master race, but to integrate the race into our own - preserve their genes and improve ours at the same time.'

'Anyone else?'

'Mike and Sarah, of course, and Don Parsons for reasons already stated. If he had been involved in any way, Maggie would not have been taken.'

'Is that it?'

'No, there is also Natasha Ralentov. She is Operations Manager of the Orion project. The space station was originally built by the Russians and it is, in effect, only leased to the Europa Corporation.'

'You sound sure of her.'

'Like Heinrich Akherd, she has challenged the General on many occasions. She effectively blocked his attempt to install weapon systems aboard Orion. She is also my friend, even though she is a lot older than me.'

'That's not very many people.'

'There are plenty of others I half trust. You just asked me about ones I would stake my life on.'

'How can we use them to help us?'

'I don't know,' said Cassi sadly. Her face suddenly lit up. 'But I know a man who does.'

MICHAEL Hardy sat down opposite his colleague, both of them weary from hours of intense searching. 'Bring me up to date, Don.'

The Deputy Marshal shuffled papers for a moment. 'We found the fourtrack behind the college block as you already know, but Cassi definitely isn't anywhere on the base. Neither has she been home. Her overalls were found in her locker and her dress has gone.'

'The black one?'

'Yes. But we have no idea how she got off the base again. There were no shuttle flights between the time she left the hospital and we got there, due to your shutdown. Guards monitored all traffic and they only have her logged as entering the base ten minutes after leaving the hospital.'

'Did anyone else leave the base around that time?'

'Only one of the students who had been working late.'

'One of Cassi's students?'

Don nodded. 'Some wimp of a girl who permanently looks about to break into tears.'

'Where did she go?'

'Home for the weekend, according to the note she left for Juanita.'

'Home? To her flat in Rotterdam?'

'No. Home, home. Back to mummy in England.'

The hairs on Mike's neck stood on end. The General was imprisoned at a top-security prison in England. 'Whereabouts, do you know?'

Don consulted his notes. 'Way up in Cumbria.'

'Cumbria? That lets her out. Cassi would not go anywhere so far away from the place where it's all happening. Anyone else leave the base? Later, perhaps?'

'Plenty of people, especially when the shifts changed at ten.'

'Too late, we were already there by then.'

'Any clues from this Billy guy?'

Mike shook his head. 'She didn't tell him anything.'

'She was in a bad way, Mike. Surely she won't go far.'

'You underestimate my wife, Don. She's Andromedan. Andromedans have certain advantages over us.'

'Such as?'

'They are much stronger, for one thing. Here on Earth, she is just ticking over.'

'Anything else?'

Mike nodded. 'They have a much stronger resistance to infection and their natural healing powers are quite remarkable.' He looked at his watch. 'I wouldn't be surprised if, by now, she isn't already back on her feet and raring to go.'

'Wherever she is.'

'That's right. Tell me, whereabouts in England is this top-security prison where the General is held?'

'Place called Haverigg,' said Don, looking at the paper in front of him. His face went dark as he looked up at Mike. 'In Cumbria.'

ITwas almost tea time when, to Janine's amazement, Cassi leapt to her feet. 'Do you have a PC?'

Janine nodded with her mouth open in dismay at such a swift recovery. 'In my study.'

'And a modem?'

'Yes. I keep in contact with NASA and Europa bulletin boards.'

'Show me.'

Janine led the way back into the house and to a room at the front of the big old house. The room was almost filled with computer equipment of all kinds, all carefully linked together and neatly labelled. To Janine's amazement, Cassi pulled off her dress and unwound the bandages from her midriff. Janine gasped. Apart from slight bruising and two small indentations, there was little trace of where a twelve millimetre steel-capped bullet had punctured her skin and torn through her insides and exited at the back. She also noticed, for the first time, that almost all her facial scuffs had vanished.

'Does it run in standard Windows 25?' Cassi asked, sitting down beside Janine in her undies.

'Yes.' The younger girl switched on and booted up.

'Log on to the net,' said Cassi. 'What's the baud rate?'

'Forty thousand. Standard NASA configuration.'

'Raise it to one hundred and seventy-six thousand, eight hundred. Can you do that?'

'Of course. But that's awfully fast.'

'It needs to be to defeat the monitoring systems. The message I send has to be transmitted in less than three seconds, allowing for protocol, so as not to be detected and identified.'

'What is the message?'

'BURN.'

'Burn?'

'He will understand.'

'Who?'

'My father. I need a safe means of communication and the only terminal not on the monitored network is Iris.'

'Wayfarer's on board computer?'

'Precisely. Burn is the code word he once used, and only he and I know that. When he gets this four-letter message, he will know what to do.'

'How will we get this message to him?'

'Via Europort.' She paused. 'Tell me, can you see the sea from here?'

Janine laughed. 'What's that got to do with anything?'

'Can you?'

'Of course, from my bedroom.'

'Go upstairs and tell me whether the tide is in or out.'

Puzzled, Janine ran up the stairs and was down again in less than a minute. 'It's in. High tide is in about an hour, at a guess.'

'Good.'

'Why did you need to know that?'

'You're a bright girl. Think about it.'

'The moon?' she replied after only a brief pause.

Cassi grinned. 'You'll make a top rate astronaut. Now, programme in my Eurocard number.'

'Why do I need to do that?'

'Because if you don't, your phone number will appear on the computer at Europort. If we use my international phone card, there will be no record of the point of origination. Also, the cost of the call will be redirected to the base account.'

'Is this going to be a long-distance call?' asked Janine suspiciously.

Cassi grinned wryly. 'I think you might say that.'

Janine sighed and sat down again in front of the computer. 'What's the number?'

'My card number? Get the terminal to dial one-four-four first, then wait for five seconds and dial three-three-six, five-four, nine-eight two.'

Cassi watched as she tapped the numbers into the auto-dial sequencer. 'Now the PIN number - Eight-four-seven-two.'

'Done.'

'Okay. Now we have to punch in the number of the station redirect computer at Europort - Oh-oh-three-one, one-oh, seven-seven-six, four-one-nine.'

'Okay.'

'When that rings and the computer's code page responds, type "GO TRANS-AIGOUAL." I'd programme this into a function key if I were you, so you can respond instantly.'

She did.

'When you get through to the main communication transmitter on Mount Aigoual, type "RELAY DALEM-ORION". This will bounce our message to Orion off the relay station in the D'Alembert Mountains.'

'On the moon?'

Cassi smiled as she nodded. 'On the moon.'

'Good heavens, that's an awful long way round to send a simple four-letter word.'

'The message will be gone so fast no-one will have the slightest idea where it came from. Even if they bother to try, it will take days to track it down and that will give me plenty of time.'

'To do what?'

'To spring General Phillips from prison.'

ADMIRAL James Duncan looked up as the screen bleeped at him.

'Message received from Europort, sir,' said the accompanying voice. 'It came via Luna Base.'

Jim stared at the four letters on the screen and then his grin slowly widened. 'Okay, Phil. I've got it. How's the work coming along on Wayfarer One's data-link?'

'Fine, as far as I am aware. Do you want me to check?'

'No, it's time I got some exercise. If anyone needs me, I'll be back in thirty minutes.'

'Affirmative, Admiral.'

Jim switched his equipment to stand-by and closed his office door. There had been no shuttle visits all day so something was going on. Perhaps his daughter could throw some light on the matter.

The dome of Earth looked huge beneath them as he strode down the corridor and entered the airlock at the end. A sealed umbilical connected the cruiser to the space station, so there was no need for him to suit up before making the short crossing. The airlock light turned from red to green as he entered Wayfarer One. Sounds of activity could be heard in the distance to his right, probably in the kitchen, or one of the store rooms above - not unusual when in dock.

The flight deck was deserted as the hatch opened with a slight pressure hiss and he found that all terminals were switched on except those powering the drive units. Originally, the ship had been fitted with a conventional main drive which could, with gravity assist, power the ship forward at close to a hundred thousand kilometres per hour. In addition, auxiliary drives could provide guidance as well as a limited amount of forward motion. The breakthrough had been when the Proton Drive was fitted. He did not fully understand the system himself but he knew that phenomenal speeds could be achieved. He, himself, had reached well over the speed of light and his daughter had used the Cassiopeia constellation to boost her velocity to a quarter of a million times the speed of light in order to reach Andromeda in under ten years. It was now believed that there was no limit to the speed, provided gravity-assist could be gained from other stars and planets.

'Good morning, Iris,' he said as he sat in front of the left-hand white terminal screen. The black one in the centre gave external views and the red one on the right was the drive control computer. In an emergency, they could all be linked together to provide instant results.

'GOOD MORNING OFFICER DUNCAN >' wrote the amber characters on the screen.

'Prepare to receive tri-binary transmission from Terra.'

'CONFIRMED >'

Jim leant back in his chair and waited. It was a week since he had last spoken to Cassi. He didn't understand the reason for all the secrecy but knew his daughter well enough to know that she would never cry "wolf" .

'INCOMING MESSAGE IN TEN SECONDS >' said the screen.

'NINE >'

'EIGHT >'

'SEVEN >'

'SIX >'

'FIVE >'

'FOUR >'

'THREE >'

'TWO >'

'ONE >'

'INCOMING MESSAGE IN PROGRESS >'

The garbled squawk lasted no more than a second before Iris said: 'RECEIVED > DO YOU WISH TO SEE THE MESSAGE? (Y/N) >'

'Y' Jim typed.

The screen cleared and then : 'GENERAL PHILLIPS UP TO OLD TRICKS. KIDNAPPED MAGGIE. MURDERED MINDERS. NEED HELP. PLEASE INFORM MIKE CONFIDENTIAL I AM WELL. WILL CONTACT HIM FIRST OPPORTUNITY. SAFETY OF BILLY BATES NOW PARAMOUNT. LEAVE REPLY ON EUROPA BULLETIN BOARD. WILL ACCESS BY PERSONAL CODE. LOVE YOU. C .> END TRANSMISSION >'

Jim ready the message twice and then typed 'DUMP' at the prompt. *So that's what it's all about. She is afraid her conversations will be monitored. Not surprising, the General has men everywhere. He covers his back then covers his cover. No wonder, there is a lot at stake, not only for himself but for all the cronies he buys and keeps on a lead.*

He sighed. *What could he do? Especially from up here? What was the General's weakness? Could he be bribed? Jim shook his head. He had money already. Power? Loss of it, possibly. Was there something of value that could be taken as contra-hostage? No. Dwight Phillips would sell his own mother as a white slave if he thought it would improve his career prospects. He had to have a weak spot somewhere. How could he find it?*

'Iris, data retrieval, please.'

'INPUT NAME >'

'PHILLIPS, DWIGHT.'
'SEARCHING >' Then: 'ACCESS DENIED-CONFIDENTIAL>'
'Security override JAD-1'
'ACCESSING DATA USING SECURITY OVERRIDE JULIETTE ALPHA DELTA UNO >'
 'PHILLIPS, DWIGHT - GENERAL, UNITED FORCES.
 BORN 13/02/1967 - BIRMINGHAM, ALABAMA
 GRADUATED 1987 - JOINED REGULAR ARMY
 SERVED IN OPERATION DESERT STORM AS MAJOR
 CONGRESSIONAL MEDAL OF HONOUR 1989
 PROMOTED TO COLONEL - MARCH 1993
 SUPPORTED UN IN CONSORTIUM EVACUATION
 MOVED FROM EUROPE BASE 1997
 PRESIDENTIAL DISTINGUISHED AWARD - 1999
 APPOINTED GENERAL IN CHINESE CAMPAIGN 2004
 BECAME DEPUTY COMMANDING OFFICER, UNITED
 FORCES - 2013, COMMANDING OFFICER - 2018 >'

Jim signed. Nothing there. An exemplary military career.

'Come on, Dwight. What's your skeleton in the cupboard?'

'WHY MOVED FROM EUROPE BASE 1997?'

'CLASSIFIED >'

He sat in silence for a moment and then pushed keys on the radio before speaking.

'Wayfarer One to Orion. Come in, please.'

'Orion receiving, Admiral. Go ahead.'

'Patch me through to Marshal Hardy at Europoort.'

'Affirmative. One moment.'

He tapped his fingers while he waited. He would have to be careful not to give away more information than was necessary. You never knew who could be listening.

'Europoort Security.'

'Mike? It's Jim.'

'Hi. How's the weather up there?'

'Meteoric, as usual. I understand you've mislaid some equipment.'

There was a pause and then: 'Yes. Can't find it anywhere.'

'Shame. I've managed to locate one but it's twenty-two years old. No match for your other one. That was a lot newer, wasn't it?'

'It was.' Another pause. 'This equipment you've located. Is it in good condition?'

'Perfect condition. It's just lying around somewhere, waiting to be used.'

'I'd like to take a look at it sometime.'

'Okay. I'll let you know when it's available for inspection.'

'Is there just the one?'

'As far as I know. It may need modifying before you can use it.'

'No problem. It's a pity I can't use the newer one I had as well. The two of them would look good together.'

'I'm sure they would. Perhaps you could provide a substitute of some kind.'

'It would have to be done quickly. The other one is almost worn out.'

'I understand. Tell me, is there a flaw in the main controller?'

'The main controller?' There was a long pause this time. 'Not that I am aware of.'

'I thought there might be at input point number one-nine-nine-seven.'

'I can check and ring you back.'

'That would be great. I feel that the two things are linked somehow.'

'Okay. Europoort out.'

MIKE Hardy stopped the recorder and ran it back. he pressed a button on his intercom.

'Don, are you free for a moment?'

'I'm on my way.'

The big man came in and sat down opposite his boss.

'I've just had a call from Cassi's father. See what you make of it.'

He played it back.

'The twenty-two year old item must be Cassi,' Don said when he had heard it. 'She's obviously all right, though Jim doesn't know where she is. And the newer one has to be Maggie.'

'I think we can assume that. The reference to being modified could mean Cassi needs help.'

'Yes, and soon. What's the main controller?'

'I think it must be General Phillips.'

'Does he have a flaw? Other than an overwhelming desire for power and the ability to seemingly destroy anything or anyone which stands in his way?'

'I don't think he ever married. Perhaps he is homosexual.'

'That doesn't count for much these days. Some would even class it as having a distinct advantage over the rest of us.'

'Don, you're as old-fashioned as I am.'

'Why don't we take a look in the files?'

'Try nineteen-ninety-seven.'
'Why?'
'Just a hunch. Jim mentioned it.'
'Hang on, I'll pull it up on the screen.' There was a delay, then: 'That's odd.'
'What is it?'
'There seems to be a section of data missing.'
'How can there be a piece missing?'
'It shows details of his action in nineteen-ninety-six when he was involved in that Consortium affair. He served with Admiral Davidson in the UNpeace-keeping force which was sent to France.'
'And then?'
'Nothing, till he arrived in Washington the following spring. Where did he go for six months?'
'Is this Admiral Davidson still alive?'
'I have no idea. If he is, he must be at least ninety.'
'See if you can find out for me.'
'Where are you going, in case I get results?'
'To have a quiet little chat with Juanita Carrero.'

THE biophysicist looked up as Mike entered. 'Any news of Maggie?'
'Not yet.'
'Cassi?'
'I think she's in Cumbria.'
'Why would she go there?'
'She went away with Janine, didn't she?'
Juanita hesitated too long before answering.
Mike nodded. 'I thought so.'
She grabbed his arm. 'Don't mess things up for her.'
Mike frowned. 'How could I possibly do that?'
'I understand that the ones who took Maggie might think Cassi is dead. That shot did go right through her. Any normal human would never have survived.'
'So...?'
'If you go looking for her, they'll know she's still alive and you could lead them right to her.'
'I could make sure that I'm not followed.'
'I don't think that would work.'
'Why not?'
'Because I know where you live.'
Mike was visibly shaken. 'How did you gain access to the computer files?'
'I didn't.'
'Then how? Did you follow one of us?'
She nodded. 'In a manner of speaking.'
'How?'
'I tracked you in by satellite.'
'What?'
'I took over Cassi's class today and we were discussing how to recognise if there is life on other planets. One way is to use infra-red scanners to look for heat output from vehicles and the like. When I saw you going out of the gate, some of the students and I used you as a guinea-pig. We followed you easily all the way home.'
'How many others were with you? How many others know?'
'Only the members of Cassi's class.'
'That's twenty-odd people,' he said with alarm.
Juanita shook her head. 'The point I am making is that if we can do it, anyone can.'
The phone rang and Juanita picked it up. After listening for a second, she handed it to Mike. 'It's Don, for you.'
Mike took it from her. 'Hi. Results?'
'Admiral Davidson is still alive. He lives in Wyoming.'
'Then I'd better get on to him.'
'I already did that.'
'And?'
'Our Dwight has been a naughty boy.'
Mike sat down and nodded to Juanita's offer of coffee. 'Tell me.'
'Apparently, he stayed on in France after the trouble and was told to set up a base in the Rhone Valley. He was there until he returned to the States in late ninety-seven.'
'Why?'
'Prostitution. Our beloved General was running a child porno ring.'
'It wouldn't be the first time someone did that with the army as a cover. It happened all the time in South-East Asia.'
'Ah, but this was different and it was why the Admiral was so keen to talk about it. One of the General's "girls" didn't survive.'

'Oh, no. What about my Maggie?'

'General Phillips doesn't have Maggie, remember? He's still in prison.'

'But his friends do. And I'm beginning to think they actually enjoyed doing what they did to Nicole.'

'But they didn't rape her. Keep that in mind any time you start getting over worried.'

'Is there anything else?' he asked eventually.

'I'm still looking. Are you going to tell Jim Duncan?'

'I'll have to. If he's in touch with Cassi in some way, I want to make sure she keeps herself and her friend well away from that evil man.'

JIM Duncan looked up as the radio buzzer announced an incoming call. 'Admiral Duncan.'

'Jim? It's Mike.'

'Go ahead.'

'I found the fault on the main controller. Like you said, it was at point one-nine-nine-seven.'

'Was it a big fault?'

'Yes. The main controller was repaired using parts of the wrong generation.'

'Was it now? Is that why it was moved to another unit?'

'Apparently so. One part was too new and came apart under the strain.'

Jim stared at the faded ten-year-old picture of a young, laughing Cassi on the desktop and clenched his fist. 'That equipment needs to be terminated before it does further damage.'

'It's on stand-by, of course. But others are seeking ways to place it back on line.'

'To do that, they would have to remove certain safety systems.'

'The one I had at home is still missing. The broken one is locked away for security reasons.'

'And the small one?'

'Safe in storage.'

'Good. That could be the determining factor. I think you should advertise it for sale.'

There was a very long pause. 'Advertise it for sale?'

'Yes. It could prevent the other part breaking down. The small part has been modified and is of more use to anyone wishing to reinstate the main controller.'

'I think I get your drift. But you and I have a certain item in common which will not function indefinitely without both parts.'

'Mike, I think you underestimate that equipment. I believe that item is already functioning at full efficiency and will continue to do so long after the main controller has been shut down.'

'I hope you are right.'

'Do you have any idea where the missing part is being stored?'

'Not yet. We have managed to get hold of a piece of the main controller circuitry but it has not yet revealed any reliable data.'

'Perhaps you could exchange it for the missing equipment.'

'I don't think so. The main controller seems able to function without the part we have in stock. I believe our part is now surplus to requirements.'

'Then we may have to find a way to override the main controller itself, perhaps permanently.'

'That could be dangerous without recovering all our own equipment first.'

Another pause. 'I will advertise the small piece of equipment I have in stock and let you know when I have a buyer.'

'Very good. Wayfarer out.'

CASSI read the bulletin board carefully as night fell over Cumbria and then leant back and closed her eyes.

'What is it?' asked Janine.

'Mike is going to offer to exchange Andi for Maggie.'

'Good grief! Swap your baby for his child?'

'He's up to something. He wouldn't really do it and Father could not afford to say too much on an electronic mail system which might be read by almost anyone.'

'I thought the system was supposed to be private.'

'It is. But we cannot take the chance of being too detailed in case one of the General's men has gained access in some way.'

'Is that why you made me change the station identifier on my modem set-up?'

'Dead right. I don't want them tracing me here.'

'Us.'

'Pardon?'

'Us. I'm in this too, remember.'

'It could be extremely dangerous.'

'It's good practice for when I go into space.'

'Janine. You are going to be one hell of an astronaut, you know that?'

The younger girl grinned. 'Beam me up, C3P0.'

Cassi burst out laughing. 'I think you're getting your cult sci-fi movies mixed up.'

A head came round the door. 'Dinner, you two?'
Cassi slipped her dress back on and followed Janine into the dining room. She found Mrs Hunt staring at her oddly. 'Didn't you have marks on your face a short while ago?'
'I'm a quick healer,' grinned Cassi. 'What's for dinner?'
'Macaroni Cheese do?'
'Perfect. Smells good.'
'Tell me, mum,' said Janine as dinner was served. 'Does Uncle Melvin still work at the prison?'
'He doesn't work there permanently. He's just a counsellor. Helps to rehabilitate reformed criminals.'
'Can I go in with him tomorrow?'
'That's up to him and the prison authorities. But why on earth would you want to go to that place? It's full of disreputable men of all kinds.'
She turned to her teacher. 'It's part of my project, isn't it Cassi?'
Cassi nearly choked on her first mouthful. *What was Janine up to?*
'Sometimes it's good to see the bad side of life, so you can appreciate the good side,' she improvised. 'It's all good training for today's youth.'
'Better ring him after dinner,' said Mrs Hunt. 'He'll be at home by then.'
The young woman grinned. 'Thanks, mum.'

ΣΥΝΔΑΨ

It was eleven o'clock as the familiar vehicle drew up at the main gates of Haverigg Prison and parked in the car park. The guards watched carefully as Melvin Hunt got out, accompanied by a girl who looked around thirteen or fourteen, dressed in a pretty white blouse, short black tennis skirt, ankle socks and trainers.

'My niece,' announced Melvin as he held up his own identity card and, for confirmation, Janine's student inter-euro railcard. 'She's doing a special project for school.'

Janine, looking her presumed age without any make-up, smiled her most disarming smile from under big, innocent eyes and, within minutes, they were inside, walking across the compound towards the main building. The steel doors were opened to them as they approached and their photographs were automatically taken and stored for possible future retrieval.

'Morning, Mel,' said the guard at the desk. 'Anyone special today? The rota's clear.'
'Just a couple, Joe,' the visitor replied with a smile. 'I hope to get an early day. My spuds need banking up.'

The guard laughed. 'Rather you than me. That sounds suspiciously like hard work.'

Melvin placed his arm around Janine's shoulders. 'My niece is going to help me.'

'I hope you're fit, young lady. Have you seen the size of his vegetable patch?'

'I've got a friend from school to help me,' replied Janine pleasantly. 'We'll soon have it done.'

'Sign in here, both of you,' said the guard, turning the visitor log round for them and handing out visitor badges. 'Who do you want to see?'

'Fred Lawson and Dwight Phillips, if that's possible.'

'No problem over Fred, he's due out next month anyway. Our Dwight could be more difficult. He's only here pending trial.'

'Whatever you think is best, Joe. It's just that I have a message from his brief who can't get here till early next week.'

'Ah well,' sighed the guard. 'It's Sunday. Why not?'

They were shown down a corridor where they spent fifteen minutes with a quiet middle-aged prisoner who reckoned this was his last time in prison.

'Nice man,' said Janine as they were shown out. 'He says he's going straight.'

Melvin grinned. 'I'm an optimist myself, but I wish I had a pound for every time I've heard that statement.'

Two guards accompanied them across the yard where men were exercising. Janine ignored the loud whistles of approval as they were shown into the high-security area.

'Down here,' said the guard as hardened steel gates closed after them and cameras followed their every movement. 'You know the form, Mr Hunt. You will be under constant observation. Remain at least a metre from the screen and do not attempt to convey any hidden messages.'

They passed slowly through scanners which picked up the tiny hair pins in Janine's hair which she casually removed and presented to the guard as her dark hair fell loose around her shoulders. After several more gates, they arrived in the internal visitor complex and sat down facing a large plate glass panel. Janine fidgeted nervously as they waited, beginning to wonder if she was ever going to get out again, especially if they found out why she was there.

She looked up as a door opened on the other side of the panel and a large man in prison overalls entered and glared suspiciously at Melvin. 'Who the hell are you?'

Janine felt panic rising in her throat at the sight of the General. Everything Cassi had said about him was correct - his burly frame, greying hair, piercing steel-grey eyes and hard mouth. He suddenly stopped and saw her, and his lips curled in a leer. Janine forced herself to cross her legs as Cassi had instructed, letting her skirt ride up a little in the process. Her heart was racing frantically and she had to grip the sides of the moulded plastic chair rigidly to stop herself running, screaming, from the room. Despite wearing sufficient clothing to deter close examination, she felt as if she was being systematically stripped naked by those lust-filled eyes.

'I've got some information for you,' Melvin was saying but the General wasn't looking at him. He was just outside Avignon in 1997, at a party for visiting dignitaries who had expressed a desire for less experienced playthings. His mind focussed on one particular girl, abducted by members of his staff and abused for hours until her young body could take no more. This girl now before him looked a similar age. He slowly sat down, unable to take his eyes from her.

'What information?' he eventually asked.

'The job you asked about,' he said quietly, leaning forward. 'It has gone wrong.'

The General's eyes suddenly narrowed to slits and switched to Melvin who was carrying out his part well. 'Who told you?'

'I did,' said Janine sweetly, sensing her uncle's predicament. 'They were being watched so they could get a message to you by the normal means.'

'You?'

She could feel terror rising within her but she turned slightly and raised her skirt a little more. The eyes moved and locked on instantly like laser-guided missiles. From where she was sitting, the guard camera could not see up her divided skirt but General Phillips could as he read the three words boldly written on the inside of her pale-skinned right thigh in black felt-tip pen. They read. "GETTING YOU OUT."

'Who's doing ... the job?' he asked without moving his eyes.

She closed her trembling legs firmly, every nerve in her body screeching RUN, RUN, RUN!

'I am,' she whispered in a childlike manner as his gaze went to her face in obvious disappointment at the disappearing vision of paradise. 'I will do.. everything.. for you.'

The General stared at her for a long time, completely ignoring Melvin. His mind had already stripped her, raped her and then buried her like her teenage predecessor.

He smiled. 'I will look forward to that.'

BACK at Silecroft, Janine jumped from her uncle's car and ran crying into the house. Cassi followed her into the bathroom as she tore at her clothing, sobbing and flinging items away from her as she went. Without speaking, Cassi stepped out of her own dress and underwear and followed her into the shower, taking her naked body into her arms.

'It's okay,' she soothed as the warm water cascaded over them both. 'I've been through it. The stain never washes out though. It will stay with you forever.'

'I feel so dirty,' Janine screamed, scrubbing at her leg. 'Every inch of me is filthy, slimy...' She shivered violently. 'It was horrible.'

'I'm sorry,' said Cassi genuinely. 'It was unfair. I shouldn't have put you through that.'

'I feel as though I have been ravaged by a wild animal.'

'You have,' said Cassi quietly. 'But it's over now. You're safe.'

Janine's shoulders heaved for a long time as she clung tightly to Cassi, her fingernails digging deep into her back but Cassi didn't flinch as she caressed her friend gently, stroking her hair and kissing her cheek and neck until the tremors died away.

'I'm sorry,' said Janine eventually as she raised her hand and saw the blood on them. 'I've hurt you.'

Cassi shrugged. 'It will heal.'

'How do you stand all this?' she asked as she turned the water off and lay her head on Cassi's shoulder.

'With great difficulty. There are some things you never get used to.'

'I think he's hooked,' she then whispered as she took down a towel and began to dry Cassi carefully, amazed that the scars of her bullet wound could now hardly be seen at all.

'Tell me later, when you're ready.'

'He.. he wanted me... he wanted me so badly I could almost feel him inside me. Can you understand what I mean?'

'I understand precisely what you mean. And my job is to make sure it never becomes a reality. Tell me, if you had been able to take the shotgun in with you, what would you have done?'

Janine's voice was full of venom. 'I'd have blown off his...' She suddenly stopped and grinned. 'I'd have inflicted irreversible damage on certain delicate parts of his anatomy.'

Cassi laughed aloud and slid open the shower door. 'You may well get the opportunity to do that quite soon.'

'I sincerely hope so, Cassi. I sincerely hope so.'

MIKE and Don were studying the note which had just arrived when Juanita Carrero entered the office.

'I think you had better tell me what is going on,' she said. 'Some of the students are still around and they have read Cassi's bulletin board. I don't think I can hold them down much longer.'

Mike tossed her the note. 'This just came in by E-mail.'

She stared at it for a moment before picking it up and reading it carefully. 'They want to do a deal?'

'It seems so. I get Maggie back if we agree to drop all charges against the General.'

'It's not that easy, is it?'

'You are very discerning, Juanita. No, it is not that easy. I wish it was. At this moment in time, they think that Cassi is dead. As soon as they realise she is still alive, it will start all over again.'

'How can we help?'

'We?'

'The students and I.'

'I don't think you can. Even if you could, I'm not sure I want any of you involved. These men really mean business.'

'There have been too many deaths already,' Don added seriously.

'Do you have any more details?'

Mike shook his head. 'Just that note so far, establishing their interest. We have to place a reply on my bulletin board and they will be back in touch with details. I'm sure it will entail the General's release along with the man Don caught after he shot Cassi.'

'Normally, would you have enough evidence to convict this man?'

Don interrupted. 'We caught him with the rifle in his car. The bullets we got out of the wall at Mike's house fit it and so does the one which killed Stan. His prints also match those on the weapon. It wasn't difficult because he used steel-tipped bullets to make sure he penetrated the double-glazed plate glass window in the back door. We have him cold.'

'And the evidence against General Phillips?'

'More circumstantial,' said Mike. 'We have Billy's testimony, of course, as to how Major Watson was sent after us to kill us all, and we have Cassi's account of the attempts on her life. Unfortunately though, we cannot conveniently place him directly at the scene of any crime, nor catch him with a gun in his hands with prints that match.'

'So this exchange they propose offers no permanent guarantees that he will not try to eliminate any of us after his release?'

'None whatsoever.'

'What are you going to do?'

Mike looked at Don.

'Come on, Mike,' said Juanita. 'We're all in this together.'

'Our first priority must be to get Maggie back.'

'Agreed. Cassi would want that, too.'

'How is Andi involved?'

'She is of the Andromeda Seed. The General will want that loophole plugged for his own reasons. We have to try and nail them before they retaliate.'

'Don't you think they are knowing that?'

'How do you mean?'

'From what you have told me and I have gathered from Cassi's coded messages, these men are not stupid, they are professionals. We have to out-think them, not out-shoot them.'

'She's right,' agreed Don. 'We will have to tread very carefully, else we will lose Maggie now and Cassi later. Perhaps others, too.'

Mike sighed. 'You're right. Any ideas?'

'When you release the man we caught,' said Juanita; 'Can't you follow him?'

Don shook his head. 'Too risky. The General has men everywhere. If we are twigged, we could lose everything.'

'I could follow him.'

'You? How?'

'By satellite. We followed you, didn't we?'

'Could you do it?'

'What kind of vehicle was he driving?'

'A Peugeot.'

'Thousands of those about,' she said. 'Might be more difficult than a less-common fourtrack.'

'We could have it modified before he leaves,' suggested Don thoughtfully. 'Give it a unique emission signature of some kind.'

'That would make it easier. You could then follow him at a distance and find out where he goes. He must eventually lead you to the others.'

'Sounds too simple.'

'Tell you what,' suggested Juanita. 'I'll get my Bob to modify the car and track him by satellite. Don can then follow him to wherever he is going and you can concentrate on collecting Maggie from wherever they agree to make the exchange.'

'And what will you be doing?'

'Me? I thought I'd requisition the minibus from the car pool and take some of the students on a field trip.'

'Where to?' Mike asked suspiciously.

She grinned. 'Cumbria is sounding like a nice spot to me.'

THE message came through within the hour. It demanded the immediate release of the prisoner in custody and a written guarantee that all charges would be dropped against General Dwight Phillips. No mention was made of the baby. After consulting with other members of the directorate, it was agreed and a reply posted on the bulletin board. Details for the exchange were then E-mailed and Juanita Carrero and fourteen of the students boarded the jetfoil to Hull.

An hour later, it began to rain.

CASSI stared at the bulletin board for a long time before speaking. 'They are going to release the General.'

Janine swallowed. 'How soon?'

'Tomorrow, I expect.'

'We'd never have got him out of that prison anyway. It's like a fortress.'

'It was worth a try.' Cassi thumped the desk. 'There has to be a way.'

'I think there is,' said Janine quietly. 'We catch him as he comes out.'

'No. They'll send someone for him.'

'What if we got there first?'

'Even so. What could possibly persuade him to come with us when his own transport was due?'

'I could entice him.'

Cassi whirled round in her chair. 'You? I thought you hated the very idea of ever seeing him again.'

'There are lives at stake. Now that Juanita is on her way with the others, we will have help.'

'Help? A dozen students against armed soldiers?'

'It's something they won't expect. Anyway, don't underestimate some of us kids. Under this layer of soft skin, we're as tough as old boots.'

Cassi stood up, wringing her hands as she watched the rain begin to run down the window. It was just still early evening but almost dark outside. The top of Black Combe was already invisible, swathed in heavy Lakeland clouds.

'They won't be able to use the helicopter,' she suddenly said.

'What?'

Cassi turned to face her. 'The men who come to collect the General won't be able to come by air. Visibility is almost nil out there and the forecast is for more of the

same.'

'They'll have to come by car,' agreed Janine.

'And, if she hurries, Juanita will be here before them.'

'Could that make a difference?'

'I don't know,' whispered Cassi, almost to herself. 'I really don't know.'

MONDAY

General Phillips was concerned that he had heard nothing about the exchange his men had proposed on his behalf. It was unnerving to be stuck in what he felt was such a God-forsaken place like Cumbria, especially when it was raining. He cursed the rain, the delays and, most of all, Cassiopeia Hardy. He smiled. There was one consolation. The young girl who had visited him yesterday was on her way up again.

'Your visitor, General,' said the guard, opening the door to the interview room.

He nodded his thanks. Speaking the words would be demeaning.

'Good morning, General,' came the soft voice and, despite his age and experience with girls of all kinds, his heart-rate quickened. He had never fancied women; once they reached twenty, they were old and worn out. He preferred his victims to be young and unused. The lucky ones lived to regret ever having met him.

He sat down on the other side of the screen and ran his eyes eagerly over her. Today, she was not dressed in school uniform but in the shortest pair of shorts he had ever seen in his life and her long legs seemed to go on forever before terminating in flat beach shoes. He sighed to himself; even her cute little toes looked so alluring. Above her waist was a wide bare midriff and a white armless tank-top.

A smarter man would have, at this point in time, begun to become suspicious as to what on earth this exquisite creature could possibly see in a slightly-balding man three times her age, but the General's meglomaniac ego would never permit such a thought to enter his head.

'You have news?' he asked when he had finished stripping and raping her in his mind.

'I came to see you today,' she said, emphasising the last word; 'Because you may not be here tomorrow.'

He frowned. He had heard nothing. 'Why not?'

'Because today you could be released.'

'Today?'

She nodded and leant forward as close as she dare to the reinforced perspex screen which came between them. Surreptitiously, she allowed the front of her top to reveal more than it should. Written clearly on the paler skin of her chest was one word - TODAY.

He smiled. 'Will you be there, today?'

She smiled back. 'I'll be waiting for you..' She fluttered her eyelashes. 'Today.'

KARL Kruger hoisted his bag of belongings over his shoulder as he was released from jail by reluctant guards. He grinned and then jogged through the rain towards his waiting Peugeot.

JUANITA Carrero stopped the minibus at a phone box close to Leeds and dialled Janine's home number which had been given to her by Carla. She rightly assumed that such a call would be safe. She spoke for a few moments and then listened carefully to Cassi's instructions.

MIKE started his fourtrack and, as detailed by Maggie's kidnappers, turned right onto Autoroute 16 towards Bruxelles - alone.

BOB Walker watched the Peugeot moving south on the satellite picture. Reception was not good due to the weather, but he had no trouble keeping it in sight. He picked up the radio handset. 'Don? Kruger's heading towards Maastricht.'

THE tall American paused at the traffic lights in Hedon Road as he acquainted himself with the correct side of the road on which to drive after coming off the jetfoil at Hull. While he waited for the green light in the morning rush-hour, he checked the action of his automatic pistol, making sure there was one up the spout, and then glanced quickly at the clock on the dashboard of his Mercedes. Two and a half hours by motorway to Haverigg and his superior officer will be free.

CASSI punched a message into the computer as Janine carefully reloaded the shotgun. Via the usual seven-hundred and sixty-five thousand kilometre detour, she sent; 'Father, I need your help.'

KARL Kruger pulled off the motorway near Valkenburg and headed along the back road into Aachen. Bob Walker passed the information on to Don Parsons who began to close the gap.

MIKE drove round the Bruxelles by-pass, his wipers thrashing ceaselessly at the incessant rain, and then headed south towards Luxemburg.

The American considered stopping for coffee but decided against it because he was late due to a motorway pile-up near Skipton. Perhaps the people at the prison would offer him one. He sighed. Probably not.

DON Parsons, reasonably confident that his anonymous green Renault would not now be recognised by his quarry, closed up to within three cars of the Peugeot. He was approaching the limit of the satellite's scanning area and he didn't want to lose him now that it seemed he might be near to the gang's headquarters. The car ahead was just turning into a side street on the outskirts of Aachen when there was an almighty explosion and the Peugeot and its occupant were engulfed in a huge ball of fire.

GENERAL Phillips straightened his tie. In less than half an hour he would be free: free to use the girl who had played into his hands; free to dispose of her quietly when he had tired of her; free to return to his office and commence negotiations to take over Orion Base and convert it into a battle station; free to eliminate Cassiopeia Hardy and the accursed Andromeda Seed.

CASSI clicked the switch on the remote transponder she had hurriedly assembled and checked that it worked. Without it, her plan would fail.

MIKE sat staring at the deserted iron bridge over the River Meuse. There was no sign of his daughter. He rested his head on his hands and cried for the first time in more years than he cared to remember.

THE American frowned as he stared into the pouring rain ahead of him on the slip road from the M595. There was a minibus at a strange angle in the road and a couple of young men were waving him down. Lights were flashing as he drew to a standstill and wound

down his window. An athletic-looking woman of about thirty loomed closer, dressed in tight denims and a tee-shirt moulded to her shapely body by the rain.

'You've got to help me,' she pleaded. 'Some of the children are hurt.'

He peered into the rain and there did seem to be people lying on the wet road ahead. One, a girl of about his own daughter's age, was clutching at her bleeding legs and crying out in agony. The road was blocked.

'Okay,' he said, opening the car door.

He had taken three paces when the woman grabbed his arm. He turned and her knee sank deep into his groin. He doubled up in pain but then her other leg came up like a whiplash and caught him squarely under the chin. His teeth snapped together with an audible crack and his eyes rolled up before he hit the ground. As Paul and Neil dragged him toward the boot of the Mercedes and Carla wiped some of the tomato ketchup from her denims, Juanita grinned at the unconscious man. 'Beunos noches, señor.'

THE prison guards shifted nervously as the group of students outside the gates grew in size. First five, then ten of them had begun shouting and chanting slogans they could not decipher and now, a Dutch-registered minibus had arrived with four more.

Joe looked at the waiting General. 'No sign of your car, sir. Are you sure you got the message right?'

The General scowled. *Could he trust nobody to get things right?* Already, it was getting late, the sky darkened by the low cloud, the air temperature cooled by the howling wind which had the nearby wind-farm rotors going at full speed, just visible through the rain which fell at an angle.

'Hello, what's this?' said the other guard as a sleek BMW-Porsche swung into the car park. He looked at the General. 'This your car?'

General Phillips peered out of the plate glass as the car pulled right up to the gateway. The driver leaned across and swung open the passenger door. He caught a glimpse of long bare legs, tight shorts and a frantically waving hand and then grinned. 'This one will do me nicely.'

THE girl's smile seemed genuine as she welcomed him with a kiss on the cheek. His heart raced as he placed one hand on her bare leg and closed the car door with the other.

'Later,' she laughed. 'First, I have a little present for you.'

'Present?' he asked warily as she swung the wheel and swerved out of the car park between protesting students who now seemed to be running for their minibus.

'You'll like it,' she assured him.

'I'll like it all right,' he leered.

She swung between metal gates and roared onto the open ground beyond at nearly ninety.

'You're going the wrong way,' he protested. 'This road only leads to the old airfield.'

'So it does,' she said with a twinkle in her eye.

For the first time, he noticed the repeater shotgun wedged between the front seats and his tension relaxed once more as she bounced onto the disused runway and opened the throttle wide. After almost a mile, she slowed and a lone figure came into sight, bending over a box of some kind on the wet concrete. The car went past and Janine threw it into a tight turn. After skidding through one hundred-and-eighty degrees, she bore down on the figure, stopping only inches from it as it straightened.

The General stared out of the windscreen in disbelief. 'What the hell...?'

'I told you I had a present for you, didn't I?' said Janine in a sexy voice as she stroked his uniformed knee.

He snatched up the shotgun and got out of the car, walking the last few paces to where Cassi stood in the rain, water dripping from the end of her nose.

'I've been waiting for this for a long time,' he snarled, raising the gun.

She said nothing as the barrel came up, pointing directly at her heart. 'Nothing to say, bitch?'

'What could I say which would prevent you shooting me?'

'Nothing.' He grinned and took off the safety catch. 'Nothing at all'

Janine winced as the gun went off and she saw Cassi spin round and fall to the ground. The General moved closer as she tried to get up, the front of her raincoat stained bright red. He fired again and she lay still.

MIKE waited for almost an hour and then rechecked his instructions. It was clear that he had been taken for a ride. He picked up the telephone and stabbed at the keys. 'Don't we've been had.'

'This end, too. They blew up the Peugeot.'

'Damn it. What can we do?'

'Not a lot. Coming back?'

'I guess so. There is nothing for me here.'

NEIL tried to hold the camcorder still against the wind but was finding it increasingly difficult. He jumped when the shotgun went off but kept filming, even when it went off again.

GENERAL Phillips began to laugh but it faltered as the noise came and grew in intensity till he had to cover his ears. A dark shape, almost the size of a block of flats, was looming out of the rain, spurting fire and smoke. It bore down on them all, the noise reaching a crescendo as the shuttle applied full reverse thrust. It stopped within two metres of the car and the appalling noise gradually died away. He felt the shotgun being taken from his hand and heard the click as another cartridge was pumped into the breach. The shuttle's airlock swung open.

'Get into the shuttle,' said Janine quietly.

He whirled round to face her and found the shotgun pointing at him. 'But..?'

'Get into the shuttle or I'll spread your evil face all over Cumbria.'

In total disbelief, he watched as Cassi groaned and got up from the ground, discarding her ketchup-stained coat.

'We removed the lead shot from the first two cartridges,' she explained. 'But only the first two. I would do as Janine says if I were you. She is longing to inflict irreparable nasties on your person.'

He turned to the younger girl. Even now, his ego couldn't accept rejection. 'But you...?'

'Led you astray?' She nodded towards the approaching Neil. 'My friend has it all recorded.'

Janine handed Neil her car keys.

'You know what to do with the tape?' said Cassi above the rising noise of the wind.

Neil nodded. 'Get this to to the INN television studio. Copies of it will be shown on every news channel tonight.'

Janine turned her attention to the General. 'We could finish it here, if you like. Cassi would like that.'

'But the girl. You'll never get her back.'

'That's the only reason she hasn't already blown you apart,' said Cassi. 'Now will you please get into the shuttle hatch or do I let her relieve you of your legs?'

'I'll go,' he said quickly. 'But this isn't the end.'

'I know that,' said Cassi sweetly. 'For me, this is just the beginning.'

The three of them entered the shuttle and slammed the hatch shut just as the minibus arrived and the students all jumped out, waving their delight.

Cassi hugged her father who groaned. 'What is it, father?'

'Air pressure.' He was gasping for breath. 'I've been away too long. Can't compensate.'

'You sit tight. We'll soon have you out of here. Janine, hand me the shotgun and I'll watch the General.'

The young girl gaped. 'But who is going to fly the shuttle?'

Cassi grinned. 'You are.'

MIKE and Don poured over the map of Aachen. The local police inspector was with them.

'There is little in that area,' he was saying. 'A few disused warehouses and an old pumping station.'

'He was going there for some reason,' said Mike thoughtfully. 'Tell me. How was the explosion done?'

'Some kind of an anti-tank mortar, fired from an open patch of ground behind some shops. I guess they knew he was coming.'

'Hmm. And wanted no witnesses. This is the kind of stunt only the General's men would pull.' He turned to Don. 'Could anyone have seen you?'

The older man shook his head. 'No way. I was still two cars behind him and when it happened so I just kept going; I wanted to make sure no-one connected me to the Peugeot. There was, after all, nothing I could do for him.'

The phone rang and the Inspector picked it up. After a few minutes of monosyllabic replies, he replaced the receiver. 'My men have found something in one of the warehouses. Part of it has been sealed off and has been occupied till recently.'

'Squatters?'

He shook his head. 'From what my colleague tells me, it seems as though it has been used as a kind of film studio.'

'Film studio?'

'Ja. Want to take a look?'

JANINE relaxed as the shuttle coasted into geostat. Cassi smiled and touched her hand. 'You did all right.'

'I'll take over again if you like,' said Jim Duncan. 'It's just the sea-level pressure which affects me.'

'The Andromedans gave father a new body,' Cassi explained to Janine. 'It was to make sure he lived long enough to return to Earth. Unfortunately, they miscalculated slightly and he finds that he can no longer adapt to our atmospheric pressure. It is lighter than that on Mythos so he feels the ill effects quite quickly.'

'But doesn't he feel it on Orion?'

She shook her head. 'Orion is deliberately pressurised slightly higher than down here. Humans can take the extra pressure for short periods, like deep-sea divers do. It is when sudden depressurisation occurs that father gets into trouble.'

'I see. But what about you? You seem to adapt to changes in pressure without ill-effects.'

'I am half Andromedan and half human. I get the best of both worlds.'

'Where is the General?' Jim asked.

'I locked him in the airlock where he can do no harm. I told him I'd flush him out into space if he wasn't a good boy.'

Jim laughed. 'Now that would be what I would call sudden decompression. He'd suffer from more than bends.'

Cassi touched Janine's arm. 'Come with me. I've got something for you.'

'For me?'

Cassi winked at her father who had started the gradual deceleration curve towards Orion, and then led Janine to the suit bay.

She reached inside and took out a garment. 'Here. You deserve these.'

Janine's eyes went wide as she stared at the pale blue overalls in her hands, the ones with crimson flashes on the collar. 'But I can't...'

'Yes, you can. You are a fully-fledged Pilot now, whereas I am merely a humble Navigation Officer.'

'I don't know what to say.'

'Don't say anything, just put them on. If you don't, dad won't get a modicum of sense out of any of the men on Orion, not with you dressed like a beach babe.'

'It was necessary,' Janine said defensively.

Cassi smiled. 'I know that.'

MIKE and Don stood in the middle of a room which had obviously been used for the making of some kind of video film. The kind of film was clear from the double bed which was the centre of focus in the middle of the room, and the age of the leading ladies was discernible from the box of toys in the corner.

'Oh, my god,' said Mike. 'This is worse than I ever imagined.'

'We still don't know that Maggie came here,' Don reminded him. 'We only know that Kruger was possibly... I say possibly... coming here.'

'Don't let's kid ourselves, Don. My twelve-year-old daughter was brought here and probably used for...' He shuddered in distaste. 'I can't even say it.'

'Child pornography is the phrase you're looking for,' said the less-caring inspector. 'The market for such films is extremely lucrative.'

'If...if she came here, what would have happened to her... afterward?'

'That depends on whether she survived the abuse. Many of the younger ones don't. I am having the blood samples taken from the bedclothes analysed as we speak.'

Mike sat down. 'Poor, poor Maggie.'

'Let's wait for the forensic results before we pull out our hair,' said Don. 'We may be jumping to quite wrong conclusions.'

'Even if Maggie did somehow escape all... this, what about the other girls who were made to suffer? If I ever get my hands on Dwight Phillips, I'm going to wring his bloody neck.'

ORION Base loomed large in the forward viewer as Jim gently applied reverse thrust. Already they could see that number four docking bay was lined with men in space suits, working on the tethered Wayfarer Three. It's sister ship stood alongside.

Janine stood open-mouthed at the sight. 'But... but it's so huge.'

Cassi grinned. 'Most of the first-time visitors to Orion say that.'

'But Wayfarer, too. It must be half a kilometre in length.'

'Four hundred and eighty-two metres, from nose cone to drive baffles.'

'And you flew that, almost single-handed, from Andromeda.'

'Not on your life. Iris flew it back. I just sat and watched.'

'I could never do that.'

Cassi laughed. 'Janine. The most dangerous place on Earth, they say, is in the street outside your house. You just flew a Titan Shuttle at Mach-32 along the busiest street in the universe. Out in space you have to be pretty unlucky to bump into anything at all. It would be like crashing into the only tree in a desert.'

'You're just saying that to make me feel better.'

'Have I ever flattered you before? Janine, wake up to reality. You are now a space

pilot whether you like it or not. You still have some brushing up to do on the theory side of things but you'll make it, kid.'

'What do you want to do with our Dwight?' interrupted Jim as he nudged the shuttle into Bay Nine.

'Will the main news have gone out yet?'

Jim looked at his watch. 'Not yet. An hour or so to go.'

'How do we keep him locked up in the meantime?'

'Simple. Shut him in one of the store-rooms.'

'Will it be safe? From interference by his friends, I mean?'

'As can be. No more shuttles are due up today. We have till tomorrow to decide what to do permanently.'

'I want him to see the broadcast.'

Jim nodded. 'We'll go to my office first. Hang on, I'll make the arrangements.' He pressed the radio button. 'Admiral Duncan to Security. Send a detail to bay five immediately. You have a prisoner to escort.'

He leant back in his chair. 'That should do it.'

'Can I speak to Mike?'

'Go ahead. It should be safe now.'

Cassi touched the radio. 'Titan Shuttle to Orion. Patch me through to Europoort Security, please.'

'Will do,' came the reply. 'Good to have you back, Mrs Hardy.'

'Good to be back, Larry. Family okay?'

'Not bad, miss. Your line's through now.'

'Thanks. Mike?'

'Hi, Cassi.'

'Any news of our little package?'

'They tricked us. It wasn't at the pick-up point.'

'So they still have it?'

'Affirmative. Do you have the main controller?'

'You bet I have. Don't worry. I'll find out where Maggie is if I have to beat it out of him.'

'That doesn't sound like you, Cassi.'

'At the moment, I don't feel like me. The human half of me is pretty livid.'

'Don't do anything rash. Promise me that, won't you?'

'Ask me again after the news.'

'The news?'

'At nine. Watch it.'

'Be careful. This line is being monitored.'

'I know. I want everyone to watch it. Perhaps they will all learn something to their advantage.'

'And us?'

'We, too. I hope.'

AT nine o'clock precisely, Universal Time, the International Network News dominated all TV channels. The announcer was Peter Cavannah, an old hand at producing enough interest from Earth-wide events without having to resort to cheap sensationalism.

'Good evening, here is the news. The Democratic Republic of China has finally agreed to a permanent cease fire along its border with the rebel province of Manchuria. Acting President Yun wi-Chin has welcomed the move as a positive step towards peace in the Far East.'

General Phillips shifted on his chair as he watched the report. In the same room were Admiral James Duncan, Pilot Officer Janine Hunt and Navigation Officer Cassiopeia Hardy.

'Savage storms have again struck the west coast of Great Britain. The most severely affected areas are Cumbria and the Lake District, the Lleyen Peninsula in North Wales and the Hebridean Islands of Lewis and Tiree. More details later with the weather report.'

The newscaster faced the screen squarely. 'A report has just come in regarding a plot to overturn the efforts to integrate the Andromeda Seed into human society. The alleged ringleader, General Dwight Phillips of the United Security Forces, was mysteriously released from prison in Haverigg, England, and was then involved in a shooting incident nearby. Over to our roving reporter, Erika Clark.'

The view changed to a windswept Haverigg Prison, the lights behind the reporter barely visible through the falling rain.

'Just a few hours ago, a terrible murder was reported as having taken place just a short distance from this spot. A senior Forces officer, just released from this prison behind me, apparently shot dead a young woman in cold blood. We have managed to get hold of a videotaped report of the incident.'

The scene changed to the runway and, despite the poor conditions, there was no mistaking the identity of the General as he got out of Janine's car and stood facing Cassi in the full glare of the headlights. Nor was there any doubt as to what he then

did with the shotgun he was holding. The look on his face as he pulled the trigger showed sheer hatred for his victim as the muzzle flash was seen on the film. As if that wasn't enough, he then went and stood over his victim and the camera had zoomed in on his face, which was briefly illuminated when he fired the second shot at point-blank range into the prostrate form.

'General Phillips,' the voice was now saying; 'Had already been charged with being implicated in the willful murder of several members of the Europa Space Corporation. It is thought that he has now been apprehended by the security forces.'

The subject changed and Jim turned down the volume. 'I don't think there is any need for me to add to that.'

He dialled on his radio phone. 'INN? This is Admiral Duncan speaking from Orion Base. Could I speak urgently with your producer, please?'

There was apparently some argument as to whether she could be disturbed or not but mention of the General tipped the scales.

'You may be interested to know that we have the General here on Orion,' he said when the connection had been made. 'He is available for interview at any time.'

'Are you able to transmit pictures?' asked Chrissie Campbell.

'We have full audio-visual facilities.'

'Very good, Admiral. Perhaps you could redirect me to your technicians and we will see if we can arrange a link-up.'

Jim pressed a button. 'Colin? Speak to Ms Campbell about inter-visual relay.'

'You can't do this,' protested the General. 'You are having me tried by the media.'

'You brought it upon yourself,' said Cassi calmly. 'You were about to receive a fair trial by judge and jury but you rejected that the moment you distorted justice by bribery and corruption.'

'But how can I be tried for your murder? You're not dead.'

'That's hardly my fault. The intention was certainly there.'

'But its a farce.'

'A farce for which you could lose more than your freedom.'

He was silent for a second. 'What do you mean?'

'Think about it, General. You were accused of complicity in the murder of several persons. The chief witnesses were myself, mostly to provide circumstantial evidence - true evidence but unacceptable without corroboration. Then there was Billy Bates who could only repeat what he had been told by Greg Watson, based solely on heresay. The computer log of the destruction you caused was, in effect, brought back from the future and would not be permitted. The worst you could expect would be removal from your rank as general and perhaps a disciplinary court-marshal. But then you had to go and kill me.'

'But I didn't kill you. It was a trick.'

'Ah, but they don't know that. As far as virtually the whole population of the world is concerned, I am dead - and you killed me. Why they all just saw it happen with their own eyes.'

'I'll get out of this somehow. And woe betide you when I do.'

'Tut, tut, General. You are committing yourself in front of witnesses. For the time being, I shall remain dead and let things take their course.'

'Whatever happens, I'll soon be free again.'

'I don't think so.'

'What do you mean?'

'Have you forgotten where you are?'

'What the hell has that to do with anything?'

'You are on Orion Base.'

'And?'

'Strictly-speaking, Orion Base belongs to the Russians, we just lease permission to use the facilities.'

'And?'

'There is still capital punishment in Russia.'

He suddenly went quiet.

'General, if you are convicted and found guilty, you will be executed.'

'They wouldn't do it.'

'Oh, yes they would. Ask Natasha Ralentov.'

'You've got to tell them that you are still alive.'

'I will do so on one condition.'

'What's that?' he asked warily.

'I will reveal myself to the cameras and the world, the moment my husband has his daughter back - alive, unharmed and intact.'

'I know nothing of that. Any way, how do I know I can trust you?'

'You don't. However, it is your only hope.'

'But I don't know where she is.'

She gestured. 'Use the radio. I'm sure you have ways of finding out.'

'What if I can't?'

Cassi simply shrugged.

While the rest of the news continued, followed by regional updates, sport and the

weather, General Phillips made radio phone calls. In the end, he replaced the handset. 'I'll know where she is within the hour.'

Cassi smiled. 'Then that is when I shall reveal myself, and not before.'

'We interrupt this part of the schedule,' Peter Cavannah was saying; 'To bring you news of a change of programme later on this evening. We have been informed that we are to have an exclusive interview with General Phillips who is currently on Orion Base Station. For those who missed our earlier report, he has been accused of murdering Mrs Cassiopeia Hardy, Senior Training Officer for the Europa Space Corporation. Viewers may remember that it was Mrs Hardy who went with last year's successful expedition to Titan and shared in the recent flight to rescue the people of Andromeda. She will be a sad loss to the world. More news after the break.'

'I won't speak to them,' said Dwight Phillips stubbornly.

'I don't think you have any choice,' said Jim as his assistant set up and switched on a portable video camera pointing at the two of them. 'This may be your only opportunity to redeem yourself.'

'Go to hell.'

Jim smiled. 'Later.'

'I won't share in this utter farce.'

'Please yourself. Questions will be asked and if you are not here to answer them, we will naturally have to answer them for you. We may, of course, get the odd detail wrong and you know how bad it sounds when queries are raised and the only one who can answer them refuses to comment. You will automatically be judged guilty.'

'I'm entitled to a lawyer.'

'Then get one. He can phone in as easily as anyone else.'

The newscaster spoke. 'We have decided to take you live to Orion Base after the big match tonight. Top of the European League Accrington Stanley are again facing Trans-Asia Finalists Beijing Rovers in the play-off. Now, over to sports reporter Maxwell Biggin at the Olympic Stadium in Copenhagen....'

'Seems we've got two hours,' said Jim.

Cassi looked at the General. 'Let's hope, for your sake, that my step-daughter has turned up by then.'

MIKE peered ahead as the fourtrack roared along the A2 close to Senlis. Though it had now ceased to rain, spray was still making visibility difficult as they passed traffic with blue lights flashing.

'Reckon it's for real, this time?' asked Don from the passenger seat.

'It had better be or I will fly up to Orion and remove our Dwight's guts with a pickaxe and blow the consequences.'

Don grinned as he fitted a full magazine to his MP7. 'I'll help you.'

'You people loaded up?' Mike asked into the mirror and received six affirmative answers. They were ready for action.

'Have you informed the local fuzz?'

Mike shook his head. 'Not till I'm sure none of them is implicated. When I've got Maggie away, I'll call them in and leave them to clear up the mess.'

'You're intending to wreak havoc, then?'

'It's funny, Don. All my life, I've never given the porn industry a second thought, it was something I just steered clear of and hoped the vice squad had under control. Now, I feel like tearing it apart.'

'That's because someone you love has become a victim. We humans tend to avoid making a fuss over anything till it touches us personally.'

'It has done that all right. I now find myself wondering, not whether or not Maggie has been abused in some way by these disgusting perverts, but simply how badly it has affected her.'

'We don't know that they've touched her, Mike. It's only been a couple of days.'

Mike kept in the left-hand lane at Aulnay interchange, heading towards St Denis. 'It seems like years.'

'It will do. But it will soon be over.'

He leant on his horn as the owner of a Ford with British number plates momentarily forgot which side of the road he was supposed to be driving on. The soft glow of Paris loomed ahead.

THE Senior surgeon at Rotterdam General Hospital straightened under the bright overhead lights and held up the tweezers.

'That's the last of the staples out,' he said quietly. 'Sew up, nurse. Tiny stitches, please. Let's leave the poor girl with something to be proud of.'

'Will she survive?' asked his assistant.

'That is now entirely up to her. I have done all I can.'

'Was it bad?'

'I think I have saved at least one breast. The other is still touch and go, as is her life. That zinc has poisoned her system pretty badly.' He looked down at the girl, the

front of her entire torso a kaleidoscope of colours ranging from blue bruises to red scars with yellow patches. 'I'd love to take my scalpel to whoever did that. She must have been beautiful before they started on her.'

'She will be again, Pierre. You are the best plastic surgeon in Europe. When the swelling and bruising has died down, she'll still send the boys doolally with what you've left her. They look pretty good to me.'

'Just hope she survives long enough to be able to do just that.'

MIKE cut the siren and blue light a block from the address he had been given. Turning off the Boulevard de Clichy, he parked in a side street and switched off the headlights. It was already quite dark and the streets were filling with punters either going for a meal in a restaurant nearby or contemplating some hands-on activity at one of the many places of lewd entertainment. His mind went back to his childhood when he had seen forbidden pictures of dancers at the Moulin Rouge in the days when they still wore at least some of their underwear.

'Third building on the left,' Mike said to his team. 'Anyone gets in your way, shoot first and let the vice squad ask the questions later. You've all got the new type riot bullets so you'll have to be pretty unlucky to actually kill any of them, not that I shall be at all worried if you do. Just watch out for the kids. I don't want any of them even scratched. Any questions?'

'Are we just looking for Maggie?' asked Sarah.

'That's the main aim of our being here. However, if there are any other girls here who look even vaguely under-age, keep them safe to one side.'

'Okay, boss.' Sarah grinned and pumped a heavy plastic round into the breach. 'C'mon, Debbie. It's ball-busting time.'

Mike and Don led the way, casually strolling down the street, their weapons concealed inside their long raincoats.

'Feels like gunfight at the OK corral,' whispered Don as they neared the front doors.

Either side were pictures of naked children and the headline banner, "only virgins here." A tout smiled as he moved towards what he assumed were his first customers of the evening. The stock of Don's stubby gun caught him hard under the chin and the two of them dragged the limp form inside and dumped him behind the counter. Mike made a signal and two of his men took up a defensive stance out of sight just inside the doorway.

Without pausing in his stride, he pushed open the curtains and soft music drifted around the arena which had large screens all around the walls, each showing a TV picture of different young girls in various stages of undress. Two men were quickly pinned against the wall, the gun barrels digging hard into their throats until they pointed out the direction of the control room and studio. When released, one tried to head for the access but Sarah's aim was never bad and he fell to the ground writhing and clutching at his stomach in agony. The tall brunette grinned, licked her finger and silently marked one up to herself.

Mike and Don went up the stairs two at a time, not making a sound in their soft shoes. The bouncer in the passage at the top turned at the rustle of coats and fell to the floor before he could open his mouth.

Most of the doors were locked but they found one open. It contained a master console with a dozen monitors. CD discs were stacked in piles to be fed into the machines - interactive video was the order of the day. The girls on disc did as they were asked from images digitally stored in memory. The operator looked up, his mouth open. Mike pushed the end of his gun into it.

'Five seconds,' was what he said. 'I want the live ones.'

The man tried to shake his head but stopped when Mike took of the safety catch. He pointed. Mike smiled and removed the gun. The man tried to make a break for it but the butt of Mike's gun hit him hard and he went down.

'Bring in the unit,' he told two of the men and they placed in the centre of the room an object about a foot square with a flat rotating aerial on top. Mike pressed down the switch and the monitors went dead.

'What the hell is that?' asked Don in amazement.

'Emits high-energy pulses which generate a strong magnetic field. Wipes clean all their video disks.'

Don looked around the room at the thousands of carefully catalogued disks. 'But these have to be worth a fortune.'

Mike grinned. 'Not any more.'

Don smiled as he led the way. 'With that, we could wreak havoc throughout the whole of Montmartre.'

In the direction indicated, they found cubicles, some occupied, where men could sit and ask for special positions and acts from "live" girls while they watched through windows and gloated. One young girl was doing something really obscene.

'Why do they do it?' Don whispered, in awe at what a child so young could do to herself. 'Are they drugged or something?'

Mike went closer and then shook his head. 'Look at her eyes.'

Don did. 'My god, she looks terrified.'

'She is. I think she's been hypnotised. Under the spell, she will do everything she is told, even though, inside, she is hating every second of it. It's the closest thing to rape you can get without actually spilling blood.'

'How do we break them out of it?'

'I don't know. Call in Debbie. She's the medic, and will know how to do it while leaving them reasonably sane. I'm going further to look for Maggie.'

'Wait for me,' Don said, but Mike was gone.

Another flight of stairs led to what he knew must be the attic. Brilliant white light shone from under the door and the sounds came of some people arguing.

'I won't do it!' shrieked a voice which made the hair on Mike's neck stand on end. He tightened the grip on his gun and nudged open the door with his knee.

The room was identical to the one he had seen at Aachen, right down to the pink sheets on the bed. A certain twelve-year-old child was kneeling on it, naked but for the sheet which she was clutching tightly around herself. Two men, one with a TV camera, were trying to coax it from her.

'If you don't give it to me right now,' the other man was saying; 'We'll do it for real. How would you like that?'

'I've had enough,' said a fat man Mike suddenly saw, getting out a deep armchair and undoing his belt. 'Hold her down. It's time we filmed a decent rape scene.'

Mike was about to intervene when he heard a rustle behind him.

'My god,' said the voice at his shoulder and Sarah fired from the hip.

The man, his trousers at half mast, caught the force of the shell where it really hurt. Screaming in agony, he pitched forward onto the bed. Maggie squealed and pulled away as he rolled onto the floor, his whole body jerking and convulsing.

'Daddy,' shrieked Maggie as one of the men went for her to use her as a shield but Mike's shot caught him full in the face and the young girl was spattered with blood from his broken nose. The other man put down his camera and raised his arms high. He shook in terror as Mike walked towards him, stopping only a metre away. Mike grinned, lifted the lightweight camera with his foot and hurled it against the wall where it dissolved into very small pieces.

He put his arm around his daughter. 'It's okay, pet. You're safe now.'

Maggie began to cry as she hugged her father while Sarah went in search of further playmates.

'It's clean,' announced Don as he entered with his gun nonchalantly over his shoulder, like a big game hunter on his way back from the shoot. 'Vice are on their way.'

'And the hypnotised girls?'

'Debbie has snapped them out of it. She's getting them dressed now.'

'Okay. I want this place trashed. Leave nothing of value intact.'

'Vice won't like that.'

'Perhaps if they did their job properly, this situation wouldn't occur. They must know what's going on in places like this.'

'Too busy, perhaps. Or on the take.'

'That, of course, is always possible.'

'Will you miss me for a while?'

Mike grinned. 'Taking my little box of tricks for walkies up and down the street?'

'You bet I am.'

CHRISIE Campbell sat herself down in front of her console and ran her eyes over the various monitors in front of her. At thirty-four, she was the youngest news producer the network had. She was where she was because she found the right news and was not afraid to take chances in order to shake some truth out of a sackful of propaganda.

'Is the link to Orion Secure?'

'Yes, Mis Campbell,' said the young man on her right. 'Peter is also ready in the studio.'

'Okay, we go in three minutes. Is Erika back from Haverigg?'

'Her jet's just landed. She's had a terrible flight but she's on her way down.'

'Right. I want her on the phone link to Orion. She's been on this story right from the start. She'll worm out a conspiracy if there is one. Do we have pictures yet from Orion?'

'Switching through on channel eight, Mis Campbell.'

'At last. Who's the tall guy?'

'That's Admiral Duncan, Chief of Orion staff.'

'Two minutes,' said the Assistant Producer.

'And the girl?'

'Not sure. Could be his secretary.'

A man in uniform moved into shot and sat down at the desk, his hands clenched in front of him. 'And that must be the General. He seems uptight.'

'So would you be if you had just shot someone in cold blood,' said a bouncy blonde who had just come in.

'You cut it fine, Erika. Is the weather still bad?'

'It's clearing up gradually from.' She laughed. 'At least our weather forecast was correct for once.'

The Producer frowned. 'Who's the girl who has just moved into shot?'

Erika stared at the screen in disbelief. 'It can't be.'

'Can't be who?'

'The girl who was shot.'

'Cassiopeia Hardy? The Andromedan woman? Of course it can't be.'

'That's her, I'd swear it. I interviewed her last year at Europoort.'

'One minute,' came the call.

'I thought she was dead.'

'So did I.'

'We've got forty seconds to blow this out. I'm not going to look an idiot in front of the whole world, am I?'

Erika looked at the clock. 'Warn Peter. I'll do the intro.'

'But you're not ready.'

'Trust me. I know this girl. She is inherently incapable of deceit.'

The Producer looked at the sea of faces around her, close to panic. The clock said five seconds to broadcast time when she said: 'Go!'

FOLLOWING the commercial break, the TV screens cleared to Erika Clark as she strolled seemingly casually across the studio floor.

'In the news earlier this evening, we showed you pictures of the dastardly murder of a young woman in Cumbria. The fact that so many of you are watching this programme proves that we have gained your interest. My colleague, Peter Cavannah, and I will be asking some direct questions tonight, not only of General Phillips himself but also of the staff at Orion Station who have become involved in the unfolding drama.'

She paused for a second for effect as she sat on the edge of her desk, her long legs hanging over the edge, encased in sheer black nylon.

'Before we go direct to Orion, I will remind viewers of the phone-in number which should now be at the bottom of the screen. Full details may also be found, as usual, on Mailbox.'

The camera slowly zoomed in on her small round face, almost cheeky beneath her immaculate fair hair.

'Just a few weeks ago, Wayfarer One returned from Andromeda and the crew related an incredible story of attempted murder on a scale which most of us, myself included, found difficult to accept. I now believe that the current events are connected with that series of actions.'

As she spoke, a smaller screen seemed to appear behind her and, on it, Cassi's face. 'Mrs Hardy. Forgive me for saying so, but you do not appear very dead to me.'

Cassi smiled at the remote reporter. 'Good Evening, Erika. No, I am very much alive. Hospitals can do wonderful things these days.'

Erika's jaw dropped in surprise. 'Then you were really shot?'

'Oh, yes. I was shot all right.'

'You do seem to have made an amazing recovery.'

'That is because I was not shot today. I was shot on Friday.'

'I don't understand. I saw the pictures. I interviewed the witnesses.'

'At Haverigg? No, I was shot at home in Holland. The pictures you saw were simply to gain your attention.'

'I have to say Cassi.. May I call you Cassi?'

'Of course.'

'I have to say that you have certainly got my attention. Why were you shot?'

'Because I am the main witness against General Phillips. He has also resorted to kidnapping and murder.'

'Attempted murder, surely. You are still alive.'

'I was not referring to my own shooting. I am happy to say that the bullet which struck me passed right through me and I survived.'

'Not a shotgun?'

The world saw Cassi shake her head. 'Not a shotgun. A high powered rifle which was fired by an army marksman, Lieutenant Karl Kruger of the United Security Forces.'

'And is this man in custody?'

'He was. But the General's men sent an ultimatum for us to have him released or my step-daughter, who had been kidnapped by them, would be killed.'

'Is that why the General was also released?'

'Yes.'

'And your step daughter...?'

'I have just had a call from my husband. He has recovered her safe and well.'

Chrissie Campbell noticed the General's greying face and clicked her fingers. 'Switch to General Phillips.'

Erika heard the command in her earpiece and instantly changed tack. 'General Phillips. Do you have anything to say about all this?'

'The whole darn thing is a put up job,' he snarled back at her. 'Why in tarnation would I have this girl kidnapped?'

'To get yourself freed from prison, perhaps?'

'I was kidnapped myself, and brought here against my will.'

Erika laughed lightly. 'Come now, General. I have personally been to Haverigg and I have the statements of a score of reliable witnesses, including several of the guards at the prison, that you went out of the gates of your own free will and were seen to go off with a young lady who had come to collect you, alone, in her car. According to them all, no form of coercion was used.'

'I was tricked.'

'You? A five-star General, Commander of the United Security Forces? Tricked by a young woman? Pull the other leg.'

'Calls are coming in fast and furious, Erika,' said the Producer's voice in her ear. 'Four hundred and twenty-nine so far. The lines are all jammed.'

Erika smiled. She had hit the right button.

The Producer spoke through the earpiece. 'Ten seconds, Erika. Switching to Peter for the news update.'

The reporter nodded her comprehension and finished the conversation with; 'And now over to Peter Cavannah at the newsdesk.'

'Reports are just coming in of a series of raids in the red light district of Montmartre in Paris,' said the news reader. 'Arrests have been made and it believed that millions of pounds worth of pornographic video disks have been mysteriously wiped clean. A number of rescued children have been interviewed, and several men are now helping police with their enquiries.'

He paused. 'In view of the number of telephone calls our office has received, all lines on the advertised number are now being switched over to computer log. Press 1 if you feel the General is guilty and would recommend prosecution and internment. Press 2 if you believe there is reasonable doubt as to his guilt. You may do this immediately and then replace your handset. Press 3 only if you are able to contribute evidence of some kind and you will be transferred to a recorder for evaluation.'

The phone rang on the Producer's desk. She picked it up. 'Chrissie Campbell.'

'Good evening, Ms Campbell.'

The Producer frowned. 'Who are you? And how did you get this number?'

'My name is Mike Hardy. I am Security Marshal at Europoort Launch Centre and also Cassi's husband.'

Light dawned and she frantically waved for quiet. 'What can I do for you, Mr Hardy?'

'Get your reporter to ask the General about 1997.' He explained why.

Finishing the call, she stabbed buttons. 'Erika, get in here now. Peter, elaborate for a couple of minutes. John, get ready to do a weather-fill.'

The young Swede came at the double and quickly read the transcript of the phone call she had been given. As she neared the bottom of the page, her face went ashen. 'My god.'

The Producer grinned. 'The computer says the vote is about even. Get back in there and tear the bastard apart.'

TENSION built up as the calls continued to flood in. Erika Clark waited for the weatherman to finish, her hands clenched tightly at her sides, tears in the back of her eyes, determination in her suddenly hard face. The red light came on atop camera one.

She smiled. 'And now, we resume our conversation with General Dwight Phillips, Commander-in-Chief of the United Security Forces who is presently on Orion Base Station, thirty-six thousand kilometres above the Mid-Atlantic.'

She paused for effect. 'General Phillips, I would like you to cast your mind back to the month of May, nineteen-ninety-seven. You were, I believe, stationed at Lyon in France.'

The General looked momentarily stunned. 'That's right.'

'Your second-in-command was, I believe, a Lieutenant Gregory Watson, later to become Major.'

'What does that prove?'

'Would this be the same Greg Watson who has made several attempts on the life of Mrs Hardy?'

'I don't know anything about that.'

'Was it not under your orders that he was sent to destroy Wayfarer One and all its crew, including Mrs Hardy?'

'Not under my orders.'

'What if I was to say that one of Major Watson's crew is prepared to give evidence that it was you who gave specific orders for their termination?'

'I'd say he was a liar.'

Erika walked slowly across the studio, the cameras following her. 'Have you heard of a Karl Kruger?'

'I don't believe I have.'

'He was caught in the act of shooting Mrs Hardy.'

'Was he now?'

'And you haven't heard of him?'

'I don't think I recall such a name.'

'That is surprising, as he served in your unit in France.'

'Almost a hundred men were in that unit. How in tarnation am I expected to remember them all, especially after twenty years?'

'I'm surprised you don't remember him. After all, you and he worked in the same office, didn't you? What if I said I was able to produce documentation to show that you specifically requested him for your team?'

The General said nothing.

'It was the same elite team, was it not, which included Major Watson and two others - Willi Humbolt and Stefan Whittaker?'

He shrugged. 'Could be.'

'Why, precisely, was the unit formed, General?'

'I can't remember.'

'Come now, General. The four of you served together, in one way or another, for over ten years. Tell me, why did you all leave Lyon?'

'We were shipped back to the States. Our assignment had finished.'

'But why you four in particular? No-one else was sent back at that time. In fact, most of the other staff stayed on for three more years under a new commanding officer. I ask you again, General. Why were you sent home?'

'I guess we were needed elsewhere.'

Erika wrung her hands in front of herself for a moment as if debating with herself how to continue. Every eye was rivetted to the TV screen. 'Tell me about Dominique Dubois.'

The General was clearly staggered and his steel-grey eyes went to slits as he stared at the camera, obviously wondering how much they knew.

'I'll tell you, shall I? Mademoiselle Dubois was thirteen years old, a brilliant student according to her record. She and a couple of her friends were lured away from the college they were attending to provide entertainment at one of your little parties. You had a number of visiting dignitaries from the East whom you wished to impress. These girls, I understand, were made available to them.'

'I don't know what you are talking about.'

'You don't? Why, General, my sources tell me that you already had several girls on your staff who were paid quite well for performing certain "favours" for your guests. It was unfortunate that some of these particular "gentlemen" had a preference for younger girls. It was also extremely unfortunate that one of these girls, Dominique Dubois, died as a result of the abuse that she suffered.'

'I don't remember this.'

'You don't remember?' Erika was getting angry. 'How could you forget? You and your guests raped her repeatedly for three days. She was lucky to have survived so long. The other girls were hospitalised for weeks. One of your own men did some pretty disgusting things to them.'

'How did you get your information?' he snarled. However, he was obviously shaken.

'Because Rear-Admiral Michael Davidson sent in an investigation team led by one of his own trusted men, a Major Slazinski. He compiled a report which is very revealing.'

'That file is classified.'

'So it is. However, before Major Slazinski died in that little accident you arranged for him, he wrote all the details in a diary which he left to his widow. Bettina Slazinski has been very obliging, General, and she is presently being flown here, direct from New York, to present that document to us.'

The General was silent.

'We know what happened to Major Watson,' Erika stated quietly. 'And Lieutenant Kruger was conveniently eliminated after he had been released from custody in Rotterdam, following his attempt on the life of Mrs Hardy and the abduction of her step-daughter. Blood-stains were also found at the scene of the kidnapping, bloodstains which DNA fingerprinting has linked to Willi Humbolt.'

'How do you know that?'

'All army personnel are blood-tested regularly as a matter of course, General, you know that. His body was found this morning, floating in the Maas. Tell, me, who was the third member of the group who abducted Margaret Hardy?'

'How do you know there were more than two?'

'Karl Kruger was a sniper. He carried a very special rifle which could fire steel-tipped bullets through plate-glass windows and wooden walls. Willi Humbolt was shot by one of the security guards at the bottom of the stairs at Miss Hardy's home. That security guard himself was then shot and killed, not with a high-powered rifle, but with an eleven-millimetre, semi-automatic gun firing highly-illegal soft-nosed bullets. There had to be a minimum of three men in the team.'

'You can't be certain.'

'Oh, but I can. You see, the baby-sitter was tortured for some time in an effort to find another child whom she had hidden and Herr Kruger could not have managed that alone. Apart from that, the torture was more like the handiwork of Stefan Whittaker. It

was he who was actually responsible for the ultimate death of the girl in Lyon, wasn't it?'

'I have nothing to say.'

'You don't need to, General. We have just been in contact with the hospital in Rotterdam where she underwent prolonged emergency treatment. Nicole Duchanet is now completely out of danger, and is ready and extremely eager to identify her attackers.'

THE hospital receptionist looked up at the wiry, middle-aged man in uniform before her. He had cold eyes and a hard mouth which he tried to force into a smile.

'Good morning, sir. How can I help you?'

'I am here to take over the security arrangements of one of your patients,' he said with a slight accent; 'A Mademoiselle Duchanet.'

The receptionist smiled back and then pointed. 'On the third floor, room seventeen. You may use the lift if you wish, Sergeant..' She read his name badge; 'Whittaker.'

JIM straightened his tie as the camera turned to face him.

'Admiral Duncan, what are the security arrangements on board Orion?' Erika was asking. 'Some members of the public are concerned that General Phillips has already been condemned without formal trial and is now being kept in close custody. Do you have anything to say?'

He smiled. 'As far as I am concerned, Miss Clark, the General has the freedom of Orion. He is able to come and go as he pleases.'

'Without restriction?'

'Only within the normal arrangements. A security officer will accompany him wherever he goes, for his own safety, you understand. Such is normal procedure for any visitor to the space station.'

'And what about leaving Orion?'

'General Phillips is free to leave whenever he pleases.'

'So a shuttle could bring him down to earth at any time?'

Jim shook his head. 'I'm afraid not. We seem to have a slight problem with orientation at the moment. For technical reasons all shuttles are temporarily grounded.'

STEFAN Whittaker looked both ways as he stepped out of the lift. In either direction, there was little activity. After all, it was almost midnight. He smiled to himself and then followed the numbers until he reached room seventeen. He smiled to himself and gently pushed open the door.

MIKE Hardy smiled in the near darkness as he greeted the tall black woman who stepped down from the helicopter while the rotors gradually swished to a standstill. She was around sixty but held herself erect and proud as she reached out and shook his hand.

'I remember you,' she said in a deep Bronx accent. 'You are Miss Suzette's boy.'

Mike smiled. 'I didn't think you would remember me.'

Lit by the bright runway lights, her white teeth sparkled - still obviously all her own. 'I never forget the face of a friend, Mr Hardy. My Al always loved your family.'

'I'm sorry about what happened,' he said as he led the way towards his brightly-lit office.

'It was along time ago, Mr Hardy.'

'Mike.'

'Okay, Mike. Al died doing what he knew was right. Someone had to try and bring those devils to justice.'

'It's almost at an end, Bettina. Al's work is finally bearing fruit.'

'And General Phillips is really on trial?'

Mike smiled. 'In a manner of speaking.' He pushed open the door and bade her sit. 'Coffee?'

She nodded and sat. 'I want to do everything I can to help.'

'You have Al's notes with you?'

'I do.'

'Good. My mother was proud of Al. If she had lived, she would also be proud of you now.'

'How did your momma die?'

He shrugged. 'When it happened, everyone thought it was an accident. She and my wife were working on modifying Princess when they were both killed in a car accident.'

'Princess? That's the space satellite, isn't it?'

Mike nodded. 'It had been misused to start a war but my mother altered the launch codes so that it could only be used for peaceful purposes.'

A slight smirk touched her face as she accepted the steaming mug of coffee. 'The General wouldn't have liked that.'

'He didn't, nor many others like him. I now firmly believe that her death was no accident.'

'Miss Suzette was a good woman, young Mike. My Al would have died for her.'

'In a sense, I suppose he did: at least for the same ends; to bring evil men to justice.'

She raised her mug. 'Amen to that.'

THE girl lay on the bed, her chest swathed in bandages, her hair covered with a white cap, an oxygen mask completely covering her face. Stefan Whittaker took this all in within the first few seconds. He also saw the machine to which she was attached with several wires and tubes. He smiled to himself as he screwed the silencer onto the barrel of his automatic. The gun was loaded with oddball eleven-millimetre soft-nosed slugs which had been deliberately split at the tip so as to cause optimum damage to soft human tissue. Three fired into her at such short range would smash her entire torso into to an unrecognisable bloody pulp. He took aim. This was going to be so easy.

MIKE studied the files with a grim face while Bettina Slazinski watched him, now sure that, at last, justice was to be done.

'This is great stuff,' he said. 'Names, dates, everything.'

'Will you use it?'

'You bet I'll use it. It connects General Phillips directly with so many illegal practices; from child porn to murder and drugs. We'll certainly nail him hard with this.'

STEFAN Whittaker took off the safety-catch and hesitated. Something was not right. At that moment, the door opened. He whirled round and fired instinctively, catching the fair-haired nurse in the centre of her chest. She was flung backwards into the corridor by the tremendous impact and he was raising his arm again to make sure when a sharp pain came to the side of his neck. He tried to turn as he felt the fluid seeping into his blood stream but he instantly felt sluggish. He tried to lift his right arm but the gun now weighed a ton. His knees buckled under him as he stared, wide-eyed, at the girl kneeling on the bed.

The nurse in the corridor sat up and fingered the round hole in the front of her uniform. 'I'm damn glad I took Mike's advice and wore a flack jacket underneath. I'm going to have a bruise there for weeks.'

Sarah pulled wires and tubes from herself and picked up the gun, not so heavy in her hand. 'You're just out of condition. You should do aerobics more often instead of flirting with the lads.'

Debbie got to her feet. 'Look who's talking.'

'On your feet, soldier,' said Sarah, grabbing Stefan Whittaker by the hair. 'You and I are due for a short conversation.'

'Go to hell!' he managed to make his half-paralysed mouth say as he felt Debbie's handcuffs pinioning his arms behind his back.

Sarah placed the gun at the side of his face. 'You know, I'm dying to see what you look like without teeth.'

'Later, Sarah,' said Debbie, taking down the portable video camera which had recorded everything. 'Let's take him next door first.'

Sarah stared at the man before her. 'Do you walk? Or do we drag you along?'

He walked unsteadily in the direction indicated, passing through a dividing door. On the bed in the next room was a teenage redhead, her chest swathed in bandages, her eyes alert and frightened at the sight of her torturer.

She nodded. 'It's him.'

Despite his drugged state and having his arms restricted, the man suddenly lunged towards Nicole but Sarah caught him by the hair again with her left hand as her right arm came swinging round in a deadly arc. The sickening crunch as gun barrel met teeth was not a pleasant sound, but it was an extremely satisfying one to almost everyone present.

MIKE dialled the now-familiar number which was answered immediately. 'Ms Campbell? I have the information from the Slazinski file.'

STEFAN Whittaker swayed on his feet as the service lift began to descend and he would have fallen to the floor if he had not been supported by two extremely fit young women who had given him another injection which prevented his limbs responding to commands from his brain. His whole face hurt, despite the drug, and he could feel the sharp

stubs of his teeth whenever he tried to move his tongue. He was sure his jaw was also broken in several places for he could not move it without almost passing out with the pain. Only his terrified eyes showed through the bandages.

'Whoops, we've gone down too far,' said Sarah as the floor number indicator showed "basement" and the door opened.

The area was deserted and in front of them was a conveyor belt which had baskets on. The sign above them said "disposables" and the conveyor was slowly moving in the direction of a large furnace at the end, where the baskets were tipped up and the bandages and other contents were totally consumed without fuss.

Only moans and grunts came from his smashed and bound mouth as Whittaker and his gun were tipped into the nearest moving basket. He tried to sit up, to clamber out, but his arms and legs wouldn't work properly as he heard the roaring furnace growing closer.

The flames flared for a moment and Sarah smiled and winked at Debbie. 'Time to go and tell my handsome cousin about Mr Whittaker's unfortunate accident.'

'You, Sarah Blackman, are going to go too far one day.'

The dark-haired girl laughed. 'I hope so, Debbie. I really do hope so.'

ΤΥΕΣΔΑΨ

Mike listened as Sarah related the details of the murder attempt at the hospital, nodding, but in no way disagreeing with their somewhat unusual course of action.

'What did you do with him?' he eventually asked.

'We disposed of him,' said Sarah, laughing.

'You mean you dispensed with him.'

'No, I really did mean disposed.' She explained.

'I guess your father will see the funny side of that when you tell him. Any other problems.'

'Not so far. We've told the staff that we'll shoot anyone who tries to enter the room without forewarning us, so most of them have decided to stay away.'

'I don't blame them,' he said. 'But you might as well remain there for the rest of the night. But be very careful. Your trick might not work a second time.'

The intercom behind him buzzed.

'I'm wanted on internal. Speak to you later.'

He pressed "clear" on his cellfone and picked up the internal phone. 'Mike Hardy.'

'It's Juanita.'

He looked at his watch. 'What are you doing up? It's the middle of the night.'

'Looking at the satellite pictures. I programmed the computer to wake me if anything unusual came up.'

'And?'

'Princess is identifying three subsonics heading your way.'

'Aircraft?'

'They are not being on the normal flight pattern. Most likely helicopters of some kind.'

'Helicopters? Coming here? At two in the morning?'

'I thought I'd better warn you.'

'You did right. Is Bob still with you?'

'He's around the base somewhere. Are you wanting me to get him?'

'It's perhaps just as well that you page him and warn him, too.'

'Okay.'

'Juanita?'

'Si?'

'Thanks.'

He dialled his cellfone and was transferred via the Trans-Aigoual link. 'Jim? It's Mike. This is just a precautionary call, but the weather satellite has identified three subsonics heading this way. I've got Bettina Slazinski and all her late husband's evidence with me so I'm going secure, just in case. It is possible that bandits may try to commandeer a shuttle and get up to you.'

'Are you going to be all right?'

'I'm not sure. We're a bit thin on the ground at the moment. Sarah and Debbie are

baby-sitting Nicole at the hospital and Don and his crew are creating mayhem to video-disks all over Amsterdam. I'm not expecting him back for a while.'

'How many of you are there?'

'Seven, in total. Two on the gate, two pairs on patrol, and myself.'

'I suggest you let them in.'

'Let them in?'

'Three helicopters could be fifty men or more, all armed to the teeth. We don't need any more bodies than we've had already. Can you connect any of the security cameras to the computer?'

'Probably.'

'Then do it. I'll inform INN what is happening and they can dial it up and show the pictures live. You get Mrs Slazinski out of there. She is no use to any of us dead.'

CHRISIE Campbell and Peter Cavannah looked on as the trans-link pictures came over her monitor. She spoke over the headset. 'Erika, take a break. We've got live pictures from Europoort. It looks as though the space port is under some kind of attack. Peter, improvise.'

'We are receiving these pictures direct from Europoort Launch Complex as we speak,' said the news-reader. 'It appears that persons unknown have decided to take matters into their own hands. We have tried to get confirmation from the Acting Commander of the United Forces but he is currently unavailable for comment other than to deny that any kind of attack is taking place.'

The pictures showed a helicopter gunship landing amidst floodlights close to the shuttle station and armed men jumping to the ground whilst two other helicopters hovered overhead to give cover. It was clear to everyone watching that this was no hoax.

BETTINA Slazinski held on tightly to Mike's hand as they crept through the shadows towards his fourtrack. One of the helicopters was now heading for the main gates and he was thankful that he had ordered his men to disperse. Tough though they were, they were no match for one of the General's elite sUat teams.

'Where are we going?' asked Mrs Slazinski without a hint of fear.

'To get you somewhere safe. You are too valuable to lose now. It seems that the General's friends knew you were coming.'

'It was announced on TV, young man.'

Mike smiled. *Nothing got past this wily old bird.*

The fourtrack started without hesitation and he drove quietly, without lights, towards the main college block where he had ordered his men to congregate. It was not built like a fortress and would not withstand any kind of direct attack by determined men, but he was banking on the fact that they wanted Bettina Slazinski alive - at least for the time being.

CASSI took the news without comment. A shuttle was about to be launched and her husband was cornered in the college block with six other security guards, a biophysicist, a proton engineer, and an elderly lady who was worth more than her weight in gold with the evidence she had in her possession. The attack on the base had been shown on TV and General Phillips was grinning from ear to ear at the prospect of being imminently rescued and regaining full control. If necessary, might could be made to win over right.

'What are you going to do?' asked a shaken Erika over the air. Things were moving too fast, even for an action reporter.

'What's the latest public verdict?' asked Jim.

The screen flashed eighty-seven percent "guilty" - two percent "not guilty" - eleven percent "don't knows". There was little doubt about what the public thought of it all.

'How long does it take for a shuttle to get up to you?' asked Erika.

'Most part of an hour,' replied Jim.

'And do you have any way of preventing them gaining access?'

'Not for long. Orion was designed to be used for scientific research, it was never intended to be a battle station.'

'So, in an hour's time, General Phillips could be free?'

The man in question looked distinctly ecstatic at the prospect.

'Over my dead body,' said Cassi, standing.

'What are you going to do? Execute him?'

Cassi smiled. 'Nothing so dramatic, although he may well deserve it. For now, I simply intend to take him somewhere out of their reach.'

'But where is there? There is nowhere to hide on Orion, they will trace him if you bring him down here, and they could even find him if you took him to Luna Base.'

She grinned. 'I know just the place.' She turned to the General. 'Say goodbye to your

fans, they won't be seeing you again for a while.'

He looked wary. 'Where are you taking me?'

'You'll find out in due course.' She turned towards the door. 'Come with me.'

'What if I refuse?'

She stopped in the open doorway. 'You have two choices. You accompany me or my father will have you thrown out of an airlock.'

'He wouldn't dare.'

Jim smiled. 'It would be my pleasure.'

She crooked her finger. 'Come.'

He hesitated but then saw the look in Janine's eye as she raised the shotgun she still carried.

'I'll need the Titan Shuttle,' said Cassi to her father. 'Could you get it mounted for me?'

Jim smiled his understanding and nodded. 'It will be ready by the time you're fired up.'

Cassi led the way down the corridor to docking bay five where the huge bulk of Wayfarer One stood alongside her half-built sister ship. They walked along the umbilical and entered the airlock which opened at her touch.

'Where are you taking me?' said the puzzled General, far happier when his feet were firmly on the ground.

'For a little ride. It won't take long.'

'Wherever you take me, my men will find me and bring me back. When they do, I will have you publicly stripped and flayed alive.'

She grinned. 'You say the nicest things.'

'I'm not through with you. I'll see you dead very soon.'

'You haven't had much success at doing that so far, have you?'

It was too much for his wounded ego. As they exited from the airlock, he grabbed Cassi's arm and swung her around between himself and the girl with the gun, slowly crushing her body in his powerful grip.

'Put down the gun,' he snarled at Janine.

The younger girl looked at Cassi with a worried face. Cassi nodded. Janine put down the gun. The General started to laugh as his muscles flexed and he squeezed his victim in a powerful bear hug.

Pulling up her knees, Cassi placed them against the bulkhead wall and pushed backwards with all her strength. The reinforced titanium shook as the General's back hit it and all the breath went out of his body. Cassi broke free as he groaned in agony and she whirled round and grasped him by the throat. He weighed just over sixteen stone but Cassi easily lifted him from the floor with one hand and slammed him back against the bulkhead again. 'You pull that trick once more and I will personally tear you apart, limb from limb, do you understand?'

He couldn't speak so he simply nodded, pain coming from almost every part of his anatomy. She let him fall to the deck in a heap and turned to the open-mouthed Janine. 'Don't leave the gun where he can reach it.'

'What are you going to do with him?'

'Leave him to wander. He can't do any harm out here. Just watch him till I cast off, would you? If he moves, shoot him in the legs.'

She opened the hatch to the control room while Janine watched the General. Sitting in front of the red console, she typed; 'EMERGENCY OVERRIDE CAS-1.'

'READY >' said the screen.

'ALL FUTURE COMMANDS BY VOICE CONTROL VIA IRIS.'

'CONFIRMED >'

She slipped across to the white screen and pressed CTRL-V.

'Good evening, Iris.'

'GOOD DAY, OFFICER HARDY >'

'Activate main reactor.'

'CONFIRMED > CRITICAL MASS IN TEN MINUTES >'

'Retract umbilical and disengage docking clamps.'

'CONFIRMED >'

There was a slight clunk as the ship was detached from Orion.

'Slow reverse thrust on Auxiliary Drive.'

'CONFIRMED >'

The ship moved slowly backwards until it cleared the docking area, the Titan Shuttle now clamped on top in its usual position.

'Left ten degrees. Activate Main Drive.'

'CONFIRMED > CRITICAL MASS IN NINE MINUTES >'

'Maintain synodic trajectory. Take us to half speed, Main Drive.'

'CONFIRMED >'

There was little sensation of movement as Orion seemed to glide past them and began to retreat in the rear viewer.

'Where are we going?' asked Janine eventually.

'CRITICAL MASS IN EIGHT MINUTES >'

'You'll see. This is your chance to really fly. I'll bet you never thought you'd be

piloting an Inter-stellar space cruiser within your first year.'

'I never thought I'd be in space at all within my first year.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SEVEN MINUTES >'

'Sit in front of Iris,' said Cassi. 'Warn me when we are about to go critical so I don't get spread all over the bulkhead.'

'Where are you going?'

'To make sure our guest is behaving himself.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SIX MINUTES >'

She went out into the corridor but General Phillips was nowhere in sight. Putting her hands on her slim hips, she smiled wryly. 'Come on, Dwight. Don't play games with me. Not now.'

There was no reply.

CASSI sat down beside Janine and strapped herself in before pressing the button marked "tannoy". 'You had better get strapped down somewhere, General. The G-forces can be very uncomfortable if you don't.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN ONE MINUTE >'

'Will he be all right?'

'Don't get too concerned. He can do little damage on board, even if he knew how, which I doubt. And he's not going to jump out of an airlock, even if he finds a suit to fit himself.'

'CRITICAL MASS ACHIEVED >'

'Very good, Iris. Activate Proton Drive in ten seconds.'

'CONFIRMED > TEN >'

'NINE >'

'EIGHT >'

'SEVEN >'

'SIX >'

'FIVE >'

'FOUR >'

'THREE >'

'TWO >'

'ONE >'

'Activate, Iris. Take us to light speed.'

The surge as the Proton Drive dropped in pushed Janine back into her padded seat with a force which made her eyes water. Wayfarer One turned into a parabolic curve just below the geostationary orbit of thousands of satellites and other artificial bodies, accelerating all the time.

'You know how fast light speed is?' asked Cassi.

'I know the theory.'

'Once round the Earth in geostat every second. Just over a second to the moon, eight minutes to Sol.'

'How long to where we are going?'

Cassi grinned. 'Twenty-one.'

'Twenty-one what?'

'Twenty-one minutes, of course.'

'But where...?'

'Can't you guess?'

'The only place within that time is...Mars!'

'Got it in one.'

'We're going to Mars?'

'For the last ten years, there has been an atmosphere regeneration operating there. The original crew who set it up left an airtight module and food supplies for months. He will be quite safe until this mess is sorted out.'

'But can't he be rescued from there?'

Cassi shook her head. 'For one thing, no-one knows where he will be, not even my father. Secondly, Mars is so near but so far away. I can reach him in a matter of minutes in Wayfarer but it would take a shuttle several months to cover the same distance, even at its closest point to Earth.'

'Are you going to land this ship on Mars?'

'Not possible; we'd never get off again without solid fuel boosters. Wayfarer was not designed to land on planets. We'll use the shuttle to ferry him down to the surface.'

'We?'

'Wayfarer will be quite safe in orbit. Iris won't let anything happen to our only chance of getting home in a hurry.'

'Any idea where General Phillips might be?'

'Probably feeding his face in the galley, always assuming he survived the jump to light speed.'

'Are you sure he can't do any harm?'

'Fairly sure. If he was tampering with anything vital, Iris would soon let me know.'

The red planet loomed large in the forward monitor as Cassi showed Janine how to

apply the correct amount of reverse thrust to bring them into a safe geosynchronous orbit seventeen thousand kilometres above the triple-peaked Tharsis Mountains.

Cassi pressed the tannoy button. 'Time to go walkabout, General. See you in the loading bay in five minutes. Please don't make me have to come and look for you. Being messed about does not improve my temperament.'

Janine grinned. 'Do I get to wear a space suit?'

'If you want to survive the trip, yes.'

Cassi switched Iris to stand-by and led the way into the long corridor, carefully sealing the hatch behind her as a precaution. On the right hand side of the passageway were the suit bays, washing facilities and airlock. They stepped into space suits and tucked their helmets under their arms before continuing further. The left side of the ship, facing the stern, was divided into accommodation units for the normal crew of nine. Above was the lab, store rooms and exercise areas. Beyond the accommodation units was the galley and food stores whilst beneath their feet were the water tanks and filtration units as well as oxygen tanks and scrubbers. Wayfarer One was designed to be self-supporting. Even food was grown in bays under ultra-violet lamps, though only on long voyages. At the end of the corridor was the access to the Proton Drive with its anti-matter exchange unit and liquid oxygen tanks. Between the drive support units and the store-rooms was the main loading bay from where access could be gained to the shuttle. When they got to the loading bay, the outer door red warning light was on.

Cassi frowned. 'That's odd.'

'What is it?'

'No-one can open the outer door, not with the inner door still open, at least not without draining this bay of air.'

'Then why..?'

'Put your helmet on.'

'But...'

A strident alarm suddenly started and the red light began flashing over the loading doors.

'Don't argue, do it. And then hang on tight to something solid.'

Janine was still fumbling with the unfamiliar catches when the loading doors began to move apart and the air inside howled as it rushed towards the widening gap between them. She began to slide across the floor but Cassi locked her legs round the younger girl's body and hung onto a nearby stanchion.

She looked at the panic in her eyes. 'Put it on, quickly.'

Janine managed to finish the job as the doors clunked into the open position. Cassi held her breath, fully aware that it was not oxygen starvation that would kill her, it would be lack of the atmospheric pressure which was keeping her body intact, and that air pressure was getting dangerously low. She reached out and pulled Janine's safety line, wrapping it round the stanchion and let herself go so that she could use both hands to clamp on her own helmet. She managed it just as she slipped through the gaping void, grabbing at the doorway for support. When the bay was a total vacuum, Cassi was able to pull herself back inside.

She saw Janine on the other side. 'Are you all right?'

'Yes, I think so.'

'Look at the illuminated read-out displayed along the top of your visor. How does it read?'

'Air pressure one point one five kilogrammes per square centimetre. Air reservoir four hours and seventeen minutes.'

Cassi breathed a sign of relief. 'Okay. Any difficulty in breathing?'

'Not noticeably.'

'Good. Just breath normally. If you begin to feel light headed, adjust the proportion of oxygen till it clears.'

'Where's the General?'

'I don't know. What did you do with the shotgun?'

'I dropped it when I was trying to put on my helmet. It must be here somewhere.'

A male voice spoke. 'Is this what you are looking for?'

'What are you going to do?' asked Cassi over the radio as the space-suited General Phillips advanced towards them, but wisely remaining just outside Cassi's reach.

The General's laugh was horrible. 'What do you think, bitch? The advantage of a shotgun in space is that one tiny hole in your suit means you're history.'

'You do realise that if you kill either of us, you have no way of getting back to Earth.'

'How do you work that out?'

'For one thing, I don't believe you have the skill to fly Wayfarer home. You cannot use the computer to help you because, out of the three of us, Iris will only respond to my voice pattern.'

'I could take the shuttle.'

'You're very welcome to try. It will take you about three months the way the two planets are aligned at the moment and I don't even know if there is enough food and air to permit that kind of trip.'

'I'll take food from Wayfarer.'

'Is there any? This ship wasn't due to leave yet so food stocks are likely to be nil. There's oxygen, of course, but you don't have the facility to transfer enough for a three-month voyage.'

'So what are you saying?'

'I'm saying that we didn't come prepared for a long trip. Your only chance of survival is down there on the surface.'

'Unless you take me back.'

She shook her head. 'I won't do that. Not until someone has reached a decision as to your future prospects.'

The gun barrel swung towards Janine. 'I could always kill your pretty friend if you don't do as I say.'

Cassi remained calm. 'You could. That would certainly guarantee that you never returned to Earth.'

'How so?'

'Because, if you look, you will see that there is only one cartridge left in the gun. Shoot Janine and I will make sure you die here.'

'You couldn't kill me. You Andromedans are unable to take lives.'

'I wouldn't need to kill you, General. If we don't get you down to the surface within the next few hours, you will die all by yourself when your air runs out.'

'There's plenty of spare oxygen on board.'

'Not in bottles. Wayfarer was in dock for maintenance.'

'We found these three suits. There must be others.'

Cassi shook her head. 'I doubt it. Safety regulations state that on every space craft there must always be a minimum of three suits available with full bottles at all times. I think you'll find that we have only what we stand up in.'

'We could stay up here in orbit.'

'No food.'

'We could go back.'

'Not an option.'

'Then what the hell do you propose?'

'That we take you down to the surface as planned where there is plenty of everything you will need.'

'And then you'll leave me there, alone.'

She nodded. 'Where you can harm no-one but yourself.'

'Like hell!'

'Then what do you propose?'

'Take me back.'

'I told you. No chance.'

He was clearly undecided as to what to do. He obviously wanted to kill them both but not if it meant being stranded. He wasn't even sure if he could take the shuttle down to Lassell Base all by himself.

He jabbed Janine in the stomach. 'Can you fly this thing?'

She shook her head. 'Not alone.'

'What about the shuttle?'

She hesitated. *A short flight up to Orion, under supervision, was one thing. Flying down to an alien planet, alone to all intents and purposes, with not the slightest idea where she was going or what she was going to do when she got there, was something entirely different.* She shook her head. 'I don't think so.'

He swung round on Cassi. 'What about you?'

Cassi nodded, unable to lie. 'I've been down. We did some training here.'

'Then you'll take me.'

'Not without Janine. She'd be stuck up here without food or water. We'd all have to go.'

He pondered for a few moments and then jerked the gun. 'Okay, get in the shuttle, both of you. When we get down, I'm gonna make the next three months pure hell for the two of you. You will both very soon be wishing you had never been born.'

FROM the top floor of the college block, Mike and his party watched the personnel preparing one of the Orion shuttles for lift-off as the first light of dawn touched the jagged skyline of Rotterdam. He felt so helpless.

'Where's Don now?' asked Bob Walker.

'I don't know.' Mike pulled out his cellphone. 'I'll find out.'

He dialled and, after a short conversation, rang off. 'He's about ten miles out.'

'Could he crash the gates?'

'There only seems to be two men there. It's possible, though someone could get killed.'

'What if I distracted them?' said the biophysicist.

Mike looked at her. 'Distracted them?'

Juanita smiled. 'Follow me. I'll show you what I mean.'

THERE was barely a sound as Cassi sideslipped the shuttle. The red planet looked enormous beneath them, its surface pock-marked with craters, and the enormous twenty-

seven kilometre high mass of Mount Olympus standing tall to the north. East of them, on the far side of the wide Plain of Syria, they could just see the nearest end of the five thousand kilometre long Valles Marineris, once thought by human astronomers to be an artificial waterway.

'What's it like down there?' asked Janine as Cassi banked round and nudged towards the atmosphere.

'Gravity is about half of that on Earth. There is some oxygen but not enough to keep humans alive, at least not in the short term. Some scientists think it's possible we could learn to adapt.'

'So life here is still a possibility?'

'Eventually. That's why they set up atmosphere regenerators. In the valley just coming into sight, there is acre upon acre of trees under inflatable domes. Mars atmosphere is allowed in under controlled conditions and excess oxygen produced by the trees is then let out. It will take a long time but it may just be possible to vitalise the atmosphere enough to allow life as we know it to exist. Inside the domes, of course, it is virtually like Earth.'

'Will you two stop wittering,' growled the General. 'Just get on with the job.'

Cassi dropped the nose and the wind noise became noticeable, as well as a slight vibration as they tore into layers of stratospheric turbulence. The orange-red reflection of light in the cabin seemed to make everything look warm, despite the fact that the temperature outside would be well below freezing point. At a few hundred metres, Cassi pulled the shuttle into level flight and their stomachs heaved as she dropped over the rim of the Plain of Syria and virtually fell into the wide gorge beyond. Out of the sun, everything looked dark as the sides seemed to close in on them. But, soon, the valley widened and they turned left into a huge flat area, sheltered from the desert winds and extremes of temperature. After another ten minutes, the valley turned right again. Right in the neck of another gorge, the domes could be seen, stretching for hundreds of kilometres into the distance - man's attempt to bring a breathable atmosphere to an alien environment.

'That's beautiful,' Janine couldn't resist saying, and even the General looked awe-struck at the sight of this seemingly never-ending forest beneath them.

After half an hour of flying above them, Cassi lifted the shuttle over the lip at the end of the forest and swung round behind a number of bubble-encased buildings on a sheltered ledge. The slogan "Welcome to the Lassell Hell" had been sprayed on the plastic by some wit on a previous journey. The dust rose in clouds as Cassi landed neatly less than ten metres from what was clearly the entrance-way.

'What do you fancy for lunch?' Cassi joked as she flicked off switches and shut down the flight computer.

General Phillips struck without warning, ramming the stock of the shotgun against the back of her head and she fell sprawled across the control panel. She tried to get up, aware that Janine was screaming for him to stop while she tore at her restraining straps. The butt struck her again and she saw spots of blood spatter onto computer screen, presumably her own. Her eyelids felt heavy and she couldn't move and when the third and final blow came, she fell down a black hole of darkness. She didn't see the General slap Janine, hard, across the face to stop her screaming, nor saw him lift her forcibly to her feet by her hair. Neither did she hear the words as he dragged the young girl towards the airlock. 'Come with me, bitch. You and I have got some unfinished business to attend to.'

MIKE gaped as Juanita stood before him.

'Wow!' was all he could find to say.

'Mike, you are so funny,' said the biophysicist.

He frowned. 'Funny? How?'

'You are having the best-looking wife in Europe and you are ogling me like a schoolboy on his first date.'

He looked away, embarrassed. 'I'm sorry. I...'

Juanita moved closer and kissed his cheek. 'I am forgiving you.'

'What do you want me to do?' asked Bob.

'Well, there are three things we could try to accomplish, though I'm still not sure how.'

'Such as?'

'First priority - we must protect Mrs Slazinski here. To do that, we would be on firmer ground if we held the gate. That's our second aim. Don will be here soon and he could help.'

'Thirdly?'

'Try and prevent the shuttle launch. Or, at least, delay it.'

'How can we do that?'

'I'm not sure.' He turned to Bob Walker. 'Any ideas?'

'It won't be easy. All our own people were sent home when Jim ordered the base shut down, so they must have brought their own technical crew to arrange the launch. They will be slower because of not being used to our systems, but it won't delay them long.'

The Orion shuttle is not so dissimilar to the forces' own X-49 prototype.'

'So can it be stopped?'

'Not from here. We would have to sabotage it in some way. Not easy, I would think, with so many men around it.'

'What about on take-off?'

Bob shook his head. 'Difficult. You could park a wagon on the runway and hope for a crash, but they would be bound to spot it on radar before they began their run.'

'Couldn't we shoot it down?' asked Bettina. 'My Al used to like a nice big bang.'

Bob winced. 'To do that, you'd need a missile of some kind and you may have noticed that we don't have any.'

'How thick is the outer skin?' asked Mike unexpectedly.

'The skin? Of the shuttle? Not too thick. It is designed to withstand pressure from the inside.' He grinned. 'You'd never shoot one down with an MP7, powerful though they may be. First, you'd have to be extremely good to hit it in precisely the right place and none of your weapons would be accurate enough from any kind of a distance. Second, the eleven-millimetre soft-nosed rounds would spread when they hit. They wouldn't penetrate the skin, they would just make one hell of a dent.'

'I wasn't going to use an SMG. I have something better in mind.'

'Better? Here on base?'

Mike grinned. 'In the back of my fourtrack.'

MIKE and Bob kept low as they ran across the open ground close to the perimeter fence. The dark shape loomed ahead and they dodged into the shadow of it as one of the General's helicopters roared overhead. Mike looked over to where men were leaving the shuttle, take-off preparations presumably completed. Bob jumped up into the cab of the goods locomotive and familiarised himself with the controls. At Mike's nod, he pressed the button to start the seven-thousand brake horse-power diesel-electric engine which roared into life, the noise muffled by the surrounding trucks and covered by the shuttle's rockets as they were tested prior to lift-off.

Mike swung onto the flat wagon behind as the loco rolled towards the hump near the fence, where the line ran parallel to the runway, two hundred metres away from where the shuttle would be passing whilst taking off. He looked at his watch as they passed under a gantry, its red light ignored. The timing would be critical. Laying flat, he peered into the magazine of the high-powered rifle taken from Karl Kruger. The sight of the two remaining steel-tipped rounds cheered him slightly - but not much.

DON Parsons pulled into the lay-by two hundred metres from the main gate to the base and consulted his watch. Four minutes left. He turned to his colleague. 'Ready?'

The other man nodded, pulling back on the cocking lever of his MP7. 'Ready as I'll ever be.'

JUANITA Carrero also looked at her watch from the doorway fifty metres from the brightly-lit gates. She looked up at Bettina. 'Its time.'

THE guards at the gate looked up at the sound. In the distance, they could hear the roaring of the shuttle engine. Slightly closer, what sounded like a railway engine. Nearby, and approaching, the click-clack of high heels. One grabbed his Uzi. 'Who the hell is that?'

A female figure stepped boldly towards them out of the slight mist which covered the estuary. The men gaped.

'Why, hello, boys,' said a grinning Juanita as both men stared, open-mouthed, as she drew closer.

'Its a trick,' one of the men said suddenly and turned.

He found the silencer of Don's Heckler and Koch assault rifle an inch from the end of his nose. His colleague started to bring up his own weapon. It was an error of judgement he made only once.

MIKE wanted to cover his ears as the shuttle screamed down the runway towards them. The short train had cleared the distribution hump and was tearing, hell-bent, towards a line of stationary trucks in the distance. He didn't have long.

DON pressed his gun into stomach of the live guard. 'Get on the radio to your friends. Tell them the whole base is being surrounded by thousands of armed police and security officers.' He switched his MP7 to rapid-fire. 'And please do it now.'

MIKE swallowed. His train was moving at close to a hundred kilometres per hour on a collision course with stationary rolling stock. The shuttle was accelerating alongside,

its nose lifting as it reached rotate speed. The shuttle plans Bob had shown him on the computer kept flashing through his mind as he eased off the safety catch and looked for the point Bob had indicated was the shuttle's Achilles Heel. It overtook them at a tremendous rate and he knew he would be lucky if he was able to get off both rounds. He would have to get it right first time, if he could. He saw the spot through the sights and heard Bob's warning voice as the engineer leapt from the careering train. Mike pulled the trigger twice in quick succession and then rolled from the flat truck, curling into a ball before hitting the ground - hard. Two things happened simultaneously - the locomotive struck the stationary trucks, smashing them out of its way - and a brilliant light filled the dawn sky as the lifting shuttle dissolved into a huge cloud of fire, its remains bouncing along the runway, flaming wreckage flying off in all directions.

CASSI slowly opened her eyes and wished she hadn't. The blurred screen in front of her was on a merry-go round, whirling round and round and round at colossal speed. She closed them again, aware of the tremendous pain at the back of her head. Gradually, memory returned and she tried to sit up. It was a mistake and she began to vomit uncontrollably, her thin bile making a grotesque pattern amongst the blood on the top of the console.

It was a long time before she dared to try again, aware that the motor neurons in her body did not want to respond to the commands from her battered brain. Vaguely, she could see the outline of her left hand a matter of inches from her face but, try as she may, she could not make it move. Good grief, she thought. I'm paralysed. Desperately, she tried again and, this time, her finger twitched a little. However, she couldn't see it very well because, for some reason, everything was out-of-focus. Then she remembered the terrible blows the General had viciously rained on her skull. It was probably cracked.

Despite the pain it caused, she managed to move her head far enough to confirm that she was alone in the shuttle. Everything had been shut down, including the heating. Out of the window, she could see nothing without standing and she was not about to try that manoeuvre, not yet. However, by the length of the hazy shadows from the dome, it was clear that the almost twenty-five hour Martian day was nearing its end. Over the next hour, the outside temperature would plummet due to the thinness of the atmosphere. She had to make herself move or she would freeze to death. She also knew that she needed medical help, but the nearest hospital was more than three hundred million kilometres away.

The flight deck started to spin again as she tried to sit up. However, by trial and error, pausing frequently, she managed to raise herself into a near-upright position. Her hands were covered in blood and bile as were her overalls and the top of the flight console. This was evident through a mist which blurred her vision and the more she tried to focus, the more it hurt. With a supreme effort, she reached forward to where she knew the radio button would be. The static she got by way of reply told her she had pressed the right button. She pushed it to transmit and opened her mouth to speak but no sound came. She tried harder, causing her head to spin once more, but the only result was an unrecognisable gurgle. *What's happening to me?* she thought. *Am I dying?*

Her brain tried to calculate. Three hundred and odd million kilometres at light speed. That's approaching twenty minutes. Twenty minutes to send and twenty more to get a reply, always assuming her message got through. Now what was the universal m'aidez signal? Three shorts, three longs, three shorts. As regularly as she could, she pushed the switch to transmit three times and then again more slowly, repeating the last three quicker.

The exertion of doing it just once made her head spiral up from the neck and she keeled over, falling hard onto the floor, wedged between the console and the chair which was bolted firmly to the deck. Not only did she hurt in so many places that she lost count, she also could no longer move.

ADMIRAL James Duncan listened carefully to Mike's report of the shuttle's destruction and the fact that the remaining attackers had subsequently "done a runner", to use his phrase. The explosion had been seen on TV due to the close-circuit cameras at Europoort. As the daylight brightened, all was calm on the base. During the eight-am news, Jim was asked about the whereabouts of General Phillips.

'I don't know,' was his honest reply.

'You don't know?'

'My daughter took him away in Wayfarer One. She could, literally, be anywhere.'

'Anywhere?'

'Anywhere in the galaxy. Wayfarer can easily exceed light speed which means over the last six hours, she could have travelled billions of miles.'

'Has there been no transmission?'

He opened his mouth to say no, then remembered the message he had been handed some while ago. 'We did receive a message just after four this morning, but we have no idea

who sent it.'

'What did it say?'

'SOS.'

'A mayday? Do you have any idea where it came from?'

'Not the slightest. Some of the radio room staff say it could easily have been a hoax.'

'But you don't think so?'

'No.'

'Why not?'

'It came in on a frequency normally only used by shuttle craft.'

'Not Wayfarer?'

'No. The Wayfarers use E-band.'

'Were there any shuttles out at that time?'

'None. The most probable is the one which went with Wayfarer One.'

'Then your daughter and the General have the capability of landing somewhere.'

'That is so.'

'And the message came in around three?'

'Yes.'

'How far away could that be?'

'They had been gone just over two hours. They broke light speed within ten minutes of departure, so...'

'How do you know that?'

'They vanished from our screens. They could only do that if they were going away from us faster than their image was returning.'

'So if the message came from them, they have to be somewhere within an hour or so at light speed. How far away could that be, Admiral?'

'Venus is within a radio hour and so is Mars. Jupiter is too far and so is Saturn. Anyway, Cassi wouldn't even bother to send us a message if she was stranded near either of those.'

'Why not?'

'Because, without Wayfarer, it would take us almost six years to get there. They have virtually nothing in the way of food on board so they would be dead long before we could attempt any kind of rescue.'

'So let me get this right for the viewers. Wayfarer must be somewhere near to some stock of food to consider the possibility of a rescue. Could they be on our own moon?'

'No. If they were going to Luna, Cassi wouldn't have bothered to take Wayfarer. At light speed, it takes just over a second to reach the moon. If they had struck the surface, you would be able to see the crater they would have made from Earth - with the naked eye.'

'Admiral, could you make your best guess? Now that the General's men are being rounded up and their own rescue attempt has failed miserably, there need not be any secrecy any more, need there?'

'I would plumb for Mars.'

'Why Mars?'

'Because we have a base there, stocked with emergency supplies. There will be enough food, air and water to last until we get there.'

'And how long would it take to get there in a shuttle?'

'Anything up to twelve weeks, even with all the stops pulled out.'

'How was the message received?'

'By morse. Their radio must be faulty in some way. It will be dark by now and, unless they are under cover, they will soon freeze to death.'

CASSI felt as if she had already frozen to death. Her fingers and toes had lost all feeling and her breath collected in clouds in front of her face. It wouldn't be long before she wouldn't be caring what happened to General Phillips. A bright light caught her eye. It was blurred but she could have sworn that the indicator lamp over the airlock had been red, indicating that it was void of air. Now, it was clearly green. Someone was in the airlock.

As the inner door swung open, she closed her eyes. Perhaps if the General thought she was dead, he would leave her lying there and do whatever he had come to do without hurting her any more. The dark shadow shuffled closer and then dropped to its knees beside her.

'Oh, my poor Cassi. What has he done to you?'

Cassi opened her eyes and then her mouth to reply but no sound came.

Janine jerked back in shocked surprise. 'You're alive?'

Cassi tried to move, to touch her friend, to speak to her but could do none of these.

'Lie still,' said Janine sharply. 'I'm going to get you out of here.'

Cassi tried to shake her head but even that didn't work.

Janine sat at the controls and pushed switches. The lighting and heating came on. After further examination of the console, she turned to Cassi. 'I can't do it. The controls are different.'

Cassi raised her arm a little and pointed. Janine followed the direction. She was pointing at the computer screen.

'What is it? Do I use the computer?'

A slight nod.

'Okay,' she said turning and logging on. 'But what do I enter?'

She turned again and Cassi was writing something with her finger in the drying blood on the floor. 'H O M...'

'Homing? There's a homing signal from Wayfarer?'

Cassi nodded again and winced from the exertion.

Janine typed. 'HOME' in the absence of a better idea.

The screen replied: '1) EUROPOORT 2) LUNA BASE 3) ORION 4) WAYFARER > CHOOSE NOW >'

Janine pressed 4 and the drive motor started up.

'Oh, my god,' she cried with a mixture of both relief and surprise.

However, the shuttle didn't move. Frantically, she looked round at Cassi who was pointing again, this time at a short joystick beside the keyboard. By alternately pushing in each direction, she felt the shuttle rocking as the lateral drives fired. Nevertheless, they were still on the ground.

She looked back to Cassi who had her arm up, palm down, as if pushing on something. Janine pushed down on the joystick and the roaring increased and the shuttle began to rise. Taken by surprise, she let go again and the shuttle fell back to the surface with a thud. It took a while to get used to the sensitivity of the control but, eventually, she had the shuttle lifting slowly and moving forward. She didn't rise quickly enough and the front leg dug into a slight mound, swinging the craft round on its own axis. In response, she pushed down hard and the shuttle rose into the darkened sky like an eagle on a thermal. She then experimented until she found a balance between upward and forward motion and the shuttle gradually left the surface far behind.

Janine turned to see how her patient was. Cassi was smiling.

DOCKING with Wayfarer was not easy and, in the end, Janine settled for clamping on close to the loading bay. There was a button on her console which was labelled "loading bay" so she pressed it and the sliding doors began to open - the bright lights inside a very welcoming sight. She knelt beside Cassi, knowing that she she would never be able to lift her or carry her inside, not without risking further injury.

Cassi saw the predicament and started writing with her finger again. 'G R A V...'

Janine frowned and Cassi made a movement across her own throat.

She frowned. 'Cut the gravity?'

Cassi smiled and nodded.

'How?'

Cassi pointed at the computer.

'You can do it from here?'

Cassi shook her head and wrote one word: 'I R I S.'

Janine patted her shoulder. 'I'll be back.'

It was a short jump from the airlock into the loading bay and Janine struggled with the unfamiliar controls as she closed the outer door to allow repressurisation of the hold. Completed, she pulled off her helmet and ran up the long corridor to the flight deck. Iris was patiently waiting. She sat down in front of the computer. *But what should she enter?*

In the absence of any guidance, she typed: 'GRAVITY.'

'GRAVITY OFF ? (Y/N) > '

'Y,' she typed and instantly found herself rising into the air from her own movements.

'Yes!' she exclaimed with excitement and almost did herself irreversible damage as she tried to head for the door. In the end, she got the hang of free-fall and pulled herself swiftly along the corridor, hand-over-hand, nearly doing herself another nasty when she tried to stop at the other end. She clipped on her helmet, opened the bay and had little difficulty in easing Cassi out of the shuttle and into Wayfarer, the biggest problem being getting Cassi's helmet safely over her blood-encrusted hair and skull.

When both were strapped in, Janine realised that her other problem was - how on Earth do I fly this thing? Iris would only respond to Cassi's voice pattern and, for some reason, Cassi obviously couldn't speak. She asked Cassi what to do. Cassi pointed at Iris.

'The computer? I use the computer? But how?'

Cassi was sitting in front of the central vision monitor. She reached across Janine and pressed 'CTRL-K' to switch to keyboard input. She sat back and closed her eyes, in pain from the effort. Janine held her breath trying desperately to remember what it was Cassi had typed in to get them there in the first place.

She jumped when the radio spoke. 'Wayfarer One, this is Orion Base, do you read?'

Cassi was smiling but also shaking her head and it took Janine a few moments to

realise that instant communication was not possible over so great a distance. That message must have been transmitted twenty minutes ago.

She pressed the send button and cleared her throat. 'Orion, this is Wayfarer One. Pilot Officer Janine Hunt speaking. Cassi has been badly hurt and needs urgent medical attention. I am going to try and make it back if I can. Any help you can give me on how to fly this thing would be appreciated.'

She turned and Cassi was grinning.

'Now then,' she said, returning to Iris. 'Where's the start button?'

A hand touched her arm. Cassi was pointing at the deck.

Janine frowned. 'You want the gravity back on?'

Cassi nodded, smiling.

'GRAVITY,' she typed. Janine didn't know why it was important that the ship had full artificial gravity whilst in flight, but she knew enough not to question Cassi's judgement. Then she remembered the acute effects upon confined liquids when subjected to the sudden stresses resulting from a rapid change of equilibrium.

'GRAVITY ON ? (Y/N) >'

'Y,' she responded and the weightless feeling disappeared.

'ACTIVATE MAIN REACTOR,' she entered, remembering the terminology Cassi had used on the way out.

'CONFIRMED > CRITICAL MASS IN TEN MINUTES >'

'Can I use the Main Drive in the meantime?' she asked.

Cassi shrugged as though she thought it wouldn't make a great deal of difference. When Janine considered the pros and cons, she realised that in ten minutes the distance they would cover in Main Drive would hardly be noticeable. She waited.

'CRITICAL MASS IN NINE MINUTES >' said the red screen on the right.

'Want anything to eat or drink?'

Cassi smiled her thanks and shook her head slightly.

'Anything else I ought to do before we go critical?'

Cassi raised both her arms a little and made a channel sign.

'CRITICAL MASS IN NINE MINUTES >'

'Oh, yes,' said Janine, laughing. 'I haven't told Iris where I want to go. How do I do it?'

Cassi just waved towards the screen.

'Okay, trial and error. Here we go.' She pushed her hair out of her face. 'TRAJECTORY FOR ORION.'

'CONFIRMED >'

'Hey, I got it right.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN EIGHT MINUTES >'

Cassi's eyes were closed.

'Don't you dare go and die on me, not now.'

No response.

'Cassi!'

Nothing.

'CRITICAL MASS IN SEVEN MINUTES >'

Quickly, Janine unclipped her belt and leaned over Cassi, pressing her fingers to her neck. There was virtually no pulse. What could she do? She held her cheek to Cassi's mouth. The breathing was very shallow.

'Come on, Cassi. We're nearly there.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN SIX MINUTES >'

Quickly, she ran to the washroom and returned with a wet flannel. Gently, she wiped Cassi's face and dabbed the cool cloth on her hot forehead.

'CRITICAL MASS IN FIVE MINUTES >'

As carefully as possible, Janine replaced Cassi's helmet facemask, easing up the pressure slightly to keep a good flow of oxygen.

'CRITICAL MASS IN FOUR MINUTES >'

She then taped the helmet firmly to the headrest so that her head would not roll about during the acceleration and deceleration.

'CRITICAL MASS IN THREE MINUTES >'

It was all she could think to do. She wished she knew more about first-aid and medicine, but she had spent all her spare time studying rocket propulsion principles and advanced aeronautics.

'CRITICAL MASS IN TWO MINUTES >'

'Please, Cassi, just hang on a bit longer.' She stabbed the radio button. 'Wayfarer to Orion. I don't know what to do. Cassi's pulse is faltering and I think she's got a fractured skull. We're about to go critical out here and I don't think she's going to make it back.'

'CRITICAL MASS IN ONE MINUTE >'

Her fingers fumbled with the straps as she got back into her seat, knowing that if she didn't, she was unlikely to survive the initial G-forces during the jump to light speed.

'ACTIVATING PROTON DRIVE IN TEN SECONDS >'

'NINE >
'EIGHT >
'SEVEN >

She moved her lips in silent prayer. She had tried everything else.

'SIX >
'FIVE >
'FOUR >
'THREE >

She closed her eyes.

'TWO >
'ONE >
'ACTIVATING PROTON DRIVE >

The seat hit her in the back with a force which almost stunned her as Wayfarer One peeled out of Mars orbit. She struggled not to black out. The drive computer screen said LUM-1 thirteen seconds later but the speed continued to rise. Within another five seconds, it read LUM-10. My god, she thought, this thing's gone crazy.

'Orion to Wayfarer,' came the message which met her half way back. 'You have a deep blue shift which means you're coming in too fast. Stand by to apply emergency reverse thrust.'

How? she asked herself.

Her brain whirled with calculations, if it took twenty minutes to get to Mars at LUM-1, at LUM-10, they would arrive back in two minutes. She began to panic.

'Janine. Is Iris on voice control or keyboard? If she's on voice, press CTRL-K at once.' Janine ignored it. Cassi had already switched to keyboard control.

'I'm assuming you are now on keyboard input,' said Jim Duncan's calm voice. 'Don't try and answer me. Just type in what I tell you or you'll go right through Orion. Input "Proton Drive to stand-by." '

She followed that instruction and the whining of the engines died away immediately.

'Now input "Trajectory Luna synodic." '

She did that, too, but noticed no change.

'You're doing great. Now tell Iris to apply emergency reverse thrust.'

'EMERGENCY REVERSE THRUST,' she typed as advised and the whole ship creaked and groaned as it pulled round into a tight orbit around the moon, slowing rapidly.

'Now you've got to get back to Orion. Use the Main Drive only and I'll see you in about a minute and a half. Two shuttles are waiting to guide you in. If you see a problem, just overshoot. You can always go round for another try.'

'ACTIVATE MAIN DRIVE,' typed Janine and Wayfarer edged smoothly towards Orion, now clearly visible on the forward monitor.

'Reverse thrust,' came Jim's voice and she obeyed, bringing the nose straight into bay five alongside Wayfarer Three.

'Good girl. That was perfect. Now could you now make sure that the inner airlock door is closed so that we can gain access.'

She didn't need to check, she knew it was closed because she had come past it on the way up from the loading bay.

'Inner door confirmed closed,' she said over the radio. 'Thanks for the flying lesson.'

'Nothing to it. Is Cassi in her suit?'

'Yes. I mean, affirmative.'

'"Yes" will do just fine, Janine. Well done.' A pause. 'Is General Phillips with you?'

'No. I'm afraid he is dead.'

'Say again.'

'He is dead.' Then, quieter; 'I killed him.'

'Okay, we'll talk later. The medics are on their way across to you. Just let them take over.'

'Okay,' she said quietly with her eyes closed. 'Wayfarer out.'

'HERE is the news,' announced Peter Cavannah of International Network News. 'In the early hours of this morning, the situation surrounding the General Dwight Phillips affair took a more serious turn. For a full briefing, over to Erika Clark who has just arrived by shuttle at Orion Base Station.'

The scene on almost every TV set in the World switched to the interior of Jim Duncan's office on Orion. They saw Ms Clark introducing herself and reviewing the events of the last couple of days. They also saw Jim Duncan himself, resplendent in his dark grey uniform with the gold flashes on the collar. The third person visible wore pale blue overalls with a pilot's crimson collar. She looked in her mid-teens with her hair in a band. Her eyes looked dark and tired.

'I would like to introduce Miss Janine Hunt,' said Erika eventually. 'Up to recently, Miss Hunt has been a space cadet at Europoort but has now gained her wings.' Erika turned to Janine. 'I understand you have just come back from a short space voyage. For the benefit of the viewers, perhaps you could start by telling us where you went.'

'We went to Mars,' replied Janine nervously.

'We? Who accompanied you on the trip?'

'Mrs Hardy and General Phillips.'

'Tell me, Janine, why did you take the General to Mars?'

'Because we wanted to make sure that he was safe and beyond the reach of either his enemies or his supporters.'

'This, I understand, was Mrs Hardy's idea?'

'That is correct. It seemed like a good plan.'

'But the General did not come back with you, did he?'

Janine shook her head. 'No. I killed him.'

Erika smiled to show Janine that she meant no hostility. 'Perhaps you could tell us all the circumstances surrounding his death.'

'We went into Mars orbit and then took the shuttle down to the surface.'

'We?'

'All three of us. The idea was to leave the General at Lassell Base where he would have plenty of food and water as well as air. It would take anything up to three months for anyone else to reach there and rescue him and it was hoped that the current situation could be resolved before then.'

'What happened when you reached the surface?'

'Cassi had refused to bring him back to Earth so he... he beat her up.'

'With his fists?'

She shook her head, obviously close to tears. 'No he hit her repeatedly with the stock of a shotgun. I was sure he had killed her. There was blood all over her head and face and...' She shuddered. 'It was horrible.'

'And then what did he do?'

'He dragged me inside the dome, he threatened to shoot me if I didn't do precisely what he told me.'

'And what did he tell you to do?'

'He made me...'

'Yes?'

'He made me...' The thought of anything up to three billion people listening in was incredibly embarrassing. 'He made me take my clothes off.'

'Your space suit?'

'Everything.'

'Everything?'

She nodded. 'He said if he ever caught me wearing any item of clothing, he would shoot me with the shotgun.'

'And you thought he was serious?'

Janine was becoming emotionally charged. 'He had just smashed in my best friend's skull and left her for dead. Of course I thought he was serious.'

'So you did as you were told?'

'Yes. I had no choice. I was terrified.'

'So what happened next?' Erika asked gently.

'He tried to rape me.' She put her hands to her face and began to cry. 'He wouldn't leave me alone. He just kept trying again and again.'

'I'm sorry to put you through this, Janine. It must have been a terrible experience for you.'

The tears gradually subsided. 'I ran away but he came after me.'

'With the shotgun?'

'Yes. In the end, he cornered me beside the airlock and tried again. We struggled and... and the gun went off.'

'And the General was killed?'

She shook her head. 'It missed, but it made a lot of small holes in the plastic dome.'

'And?'

'The air started to seep out. '

'What was the General doing now?'

'He didn't seem to notice. He just kept coming after me. So I shut myself in the airlock. I reduced the pressure slightly so that he couldn't open the inner door.'

'What did you do then?'

'There was a space suit hanging in the locker. I put it on and went outside. I left the outer door open so that he couldn't get to me.'

'Where did you go?'

'I went to the shuttle.'

'What did you hope to do?'

'I didn't know. I was just desperate to get away from him.'

'And you found Mrs Hardy was still there.'

'Yes. I'd thought she was dead, but she had moved from where she had been sitting. She was badly hurt and could hardly move, but she was alive.'

'And then?'

'Between us, we managed to get the shuttle airborne and flew back up to Wayfarer in orbit.'

Erika frowned. 'But I thought you said the General was dead.'
'He must be. There would soon be no air left.'
'So, in a way, his death was an accident.'
'Yes, I suppose so. But I could have gone back and rescued him.'
'But you couldn't face him again.'
'No,' she said quietly. 'I just left him to die.'
'So, as far as we know, he could have put his space suit on. In fact, he could still be very much alive.'
Janine looked up. 'I hope not. But it is always possible.'
Erika smiled and then turned to Jim. 'What about a rescue attempt?'
He shook his head. 'Not possible. Even if he managed to get into a suit, he would have less than an hour of air left by now. Only Wayfarer One could get there in time to be of any use and Cassi is in no fit state to fly there, even supposing she felt so inclined.'
'And what about yourself? Surely you have the credentials and experience to get there.'
He shook his head again. 'Even if I could, I wouldn't. I am not risking the lives of a crew to fly all the way to Mars on what is almost certainly a fruitless mission.'
'But what if the Directorate were to order you to go?'
He looked straight at the camera. 'I would resign.'
'So, in fact, there is not the slightest possibility of a rescue being made.'
'A shuttle could always go but that would take three months.'
'So, if he isn't already dead, he soon will be.'
'I'm afraid so.'
'And you feel no regret?'
'None whatsoever.'
She turned to another man. 'I have with me the chief surgeon from Rotterdam Hospital, Dr Philip Norah. Dr Norah, what is the condition of Mrs Hardy following her return from Mars?'
'She is still on board Wayfarer at the moment - in a cryonic chamber under reduced gravity. I would give her a five percent chance of recovery.'
'Would she not be better off down on Earth?'
'Almost certainly. However, in her present condition she most certainly would not survive the stresses of re-entry.'
'And how about her sight and speech? I understand they were severely impaired as a result of the attack made upon her.'
'There could be permanent damage. My initial examination has shown that the Occipital and Parietal parts of her skull are badly fractured and there was some splintering into the back of her frontal lobe. I have removed these splinters and dressed the rest of her cranium as best I can. She is extremely lucky to be alive at all. She would not be if it were not for the skill and bravery of Miss Hunt.'
'You do not seem to rate her chances very highly. How soon will you know, one way or the other?'
He looked at his watch. 'This is the most critical period. I would say that if she is still alive an hour from now, she will have a slight chance of living through this, although she will still take a very long time to heal. How normal a life she could live after all the damage that has been done, I cannot tell at this stage. Ask me again a year from now.'
Erika faced the camera once more. 'It seems that there has been a concerted effort by General Phillips and some of his well-meaning supporters to dispose of Cassiopeia Hardy. Mrs Hardy's husband is now also here on Orion and remains continually by her side as does his daughter, Margaret.'

MIKE gently stroked the back of Cassi's hand as she lay face-down in the padded chamber. Her head had been shaved and heavily bandaged after the doctor had done all that was possible.

'Is Cassi going to die?' asked a weeping Maggie.
'I hope not,' replied her father. 'But it's up to her now.'
'I don't want her to die.'
'Nor do I, but everyone has done all they can.'
Cassi's eyes fluttered and Maggie saw them immediately. 'Daddy, Cassi is awake.'
Mike leant closer and smiled. 'Hi, babe. We were getting worried about you.'
A slight smile touched her lips. She opened her mouth to speak but no sound came.
'It's okay. Just lie still. You're gonna be all right.'
It was clear from the way she moved her eyes that she was agitated about something. Her finger also moved, drawing a pattern on the sheet.
Mike touched her hand. 'Hold on, my love, I'll fetch the doctor.'
Something resembling a high-pitched grunt of protest came from her mouth and she was trying to shake her head.
'Don't,' warned Mike. 'Just lie still.'
Her eyes continued to plead silently.

Mike looked at Maggie. 'Have you got a crayon?'

'No, but I've got some felt-tips.'

'Give me one, quickly. Black, if possible.'

She did and Mike carefully placed it between Cassi's finger and thumb and eased a sheet of blank paper under her hand.

He touched his radio. 'Jim, you'd better come quickly. Cassi's trying to tell us something.'

When he arrived, it was with the doctor, Erika Clark and the INN camera crew who set up and focussed on the writing hand. It had already completed three letters.

'Gen?' asked Mike. Then; 'The General? You want to know about the General Phillips?'

Cassi smiled her affirmation and stopped writing. Mike told her the latest news.

Her hand moved again.

'R E S C,' spelled out Maggie to the watching viewers.

'Rescue?' said Mike with alarm. Cassi smiled again. 'You want us to attempt to rescue him?'

She nodded and then closed her eyes, exhausted from the exertion.

Mike looked at Jim. 'Why would she want him rescued? He's safer to everyone where he is.' He grinned. 'Even safer, dead.'

'It's obviously very important to Cassi.'

'What are the chances of him still being alive?'

He looked at his watch. 'Practically nil by now. Space suits hold a supply of four hours air and he has had over three and a half, not counting what was used on the way down to the surface in the first place. So if anyone goes, it will have to be right now.'

'Why would anyone want to go at all? No-one else seems to care very much what happens to him.'

'Cassi obviously does, for some reason, and I don't want to be the one to break it to her that we didn't bother to try.'

'What about Cassi?'

'She'll have to stay where she is.'

'But who will fly the ship? Cassi is certainly not in a position to do so.'

'I'll do it,' said a new voice.

Mike's mouth dropped open. 'You? After all that has happened? And what he tried to do to you?'

'On one condition,' said Janine. 'I don't want that man to come within three metres of me at any time.'

Mike pulled out his automatic. 'If he does, he will suddenly begin to leak like a sieve.'

Hasty preparations were made for departure. Janine fired up the reactor while Mike and the doctor made sure that Cassi could not roll about and do herself further injury. Alone on the flight deck, Janine looked at Iris. It would be five more minutes before the reactor became critical. Running all the way, she entered Mike's quarters. Carefully unzipping his kit, she searched until she found what she was looking for. Smiling, she dropped it into the pocket of her space suit in the locker and then ran back to the computer just as the Proton Drive went to stand-by.

WAYFARER One peeled out of Earth orbit under full power, heading for the tiny orange pinpoint of light that was Mars. Janine sat in front of Iris. Compared with her frighteningly-fast return from Mars, the ten-minute run back out at LUM-2 seemed to take forever. A chill ran through her at the sight of that red desert once more as Wayfarer was pulled into geostat in more or less the same position as before. This time, however, the sun was just rising and the shadow of Olympus Mons receded almost in front of their eyes.

'I'll try the radio first,' said Mike whilst Janine pulled on her suit. 'Wayfarer One to Lassell Base, do you read? Over.'

There was no answer.

'General Phillips, this is Marshal Hardy. Are you receiving? Over.'

Still nothing.

'Either the radio is out or he's too far gone to answer.'

'Won't he wonder why we're here?' asked Janine.

'I reckon he will. If he is still alive, he will not expect us back just yet.'

'I'm ready,' said Janine, tucking her hair into her helmet and pushing down the securing clips.

'Me, too,' said Mike. 'Radio check?'

'Getting you loud and clear.'

'Be careful. General Phillips is a wily old bird.'

'Don't I know it?' said Janine with some vehemence in her voice. Instinctively, she touched her pocket and smiled to herself at the feel of what it contained.

Mike put his arm around his daughter. 'Maggie, your job is to look after Cassi. Go and sit by her. Okay?'

The twelve-year-old nodded. 'Okay, dad.'

In the shuttle, Janine activated the computer and drive controls while Mike strapped himself in beside her.

'You all right with this?' he asked. 'We will all understand if you can't face him again, even Cassi.'

She took a deep breath. 'I have to do it.'

'Will you find the place on your own?'

She nodded. 'Admiral Duncan says its easy. The details of every journey the shuttle makes is retained in the memory for possible future use. All I have to do is call up the last trip down to the surface and tell it to repeat. The computer will then duplicate every move Cassi made. Assuming Wayfarer is now in the same relative position, this shuttle will land in exactly the same spot as before.'

He laughed. 'I could have done this trip alone then.'

'You could,' she said, releasing the docking clamps and using the retros to inch free of the mother ship's superstructure; 'But I wouldn't let you. Cassi would kill me if I let anything happen to her favourite man.'

'You think she'll survive, don't you?'

'I know she will. Your wife has guts.'

He laughed. 'You can say that again.'

The shuttle sideslipped and then fell towards the surface. Mike's stomach felt as if it has been left ten floors up in an express lift. Janine hardly needed to touch the controls as it dived into the wide gorge as before and flew along just above the valley floor. Turning right at the intersection, it lifted slightly to pass over the plastic tree-filled domes before rising over the lip of the cliffs just short of Lassell Base. The whole area looked lifeless and barren as the shuttle raised a huge cloud of orange-red dust as it settled close to the main airlock.

Mike took out his automatic. 'Coming or staying?'

She flipped off her harness. 'Coming. There is no way I am going to be left out here all alone.'

He took her arm gently just before entering the shuttle's small airlock. 'Stay behind me, Janine. I think it is also true that Cassi would kill me if I let anything happen to her favourite student.'

The reduced gravity of Mars always took some getting used to and they had to walk carefully as they covered the ten metres to the Base airlock. It opened at Mike's touch and they stepped inside. He pressed the button to pressurise but there was no response. All the air had been drained from the dome. Stepping carefully inside, they looked round. The plastic membrane hung limp on its hollow aluminium framework, the inside surface wet with condensation formed by the sudden drop of temperature. There was no sign of the General.

'He must have gone outside,' said Mike. A sudden thought grabbed him. 'Can he get into the shuttle?'

Janine shook her head. 'I took out the vertical drive relay; a little trick I learned from Cassi. He might get in but he'll never get it off the ground.'

'Stay here,' he said, pointing at the floor to show he meant it. 'I'm going to take a quick look round. Yell if you see or hear anything.'

Janine nodded. 'Okay.'

Mike opened the inner link door and went to inspect the toilet units and food storage areas. Janine walked across the room and picked up the discarded shotgun. She shuddered upon seeing traces of Cassi's dried blood on the stock. She then ejected the spent cartridge and looked up at the holes in the lining. Decompression must have been absolute in ten to fifteen minutes.

She swung round as the door opened again.

Mike shrugged. 'No sign of him. Is his suit missing?'

Janine looked and then shook her head. 'No, it's still here.'

'He's not likely to have gone outside without it.'

'What about in the forest?'

'The forest?'

'Cassi said there is something like thirty thousand hectares of trees under the canopy. Apparently, they've been producing oxygen for some years now, maybe enough to allow normal breathing.'

'What about pressure under the canopy?'

'The air pressure is likely to be considerably lower than on Earth but better than outside due to the inflation pressure. I expect a clever person could don a pressurised environment suit and last out for quite some time.'

'Then he must be out in the forest. How would we find him?'

'I guess we have to go down and take a look.' She pointed. 'That looks like a lift of some sort over there.'

Mike sat down on the edge of the table and consulted the map on the wall. It would be pointless to wander about in a sixty-thousand acre forest. He watched as Janine rubbed away the last traces of blood from his repeater shotgun and then pull back on the loader. That weapon was just about useless without cartridges and he had left his spare supply in his kit bag up on Wayfarer. He smiled to himself. Just the feel of it in her hands must be reassuring to Janine.

'Do you want me to come with you?' she asked.

Mike shrugged. 'You could stay up here if you like. The sleeping and kitchen sections are still partially pressurised so you could take your helmet off for a while and conserve the oxygen in your suit. You'll also be more comfortable. I shan't be long.'

He entered the lift and pressed buttons while Janine went through to the living quarters. Like Mike had said, there was some air and she removed her helmet. It was quite warm due to the fact that the sun was now high in the sky and the cooling system was not at full efficiency due to the reduced atmosphere in the dome.

The food store was well stocked despite the obvious fact that the General had raided the supplies. However, he had meticulously cleaned up after himself and put his dishes and cutlery away, almost as if he was expecting visitors. She caught her breath for a second but then relaxed, she was already beginning to imagine things. How could he possibly be expecting visitors out here, half an astronomical unit from the nearest civilisation?

She took a drink of orange juice from a sealed container. It was ice cold and fresh. For the first time, she wondered what kind of trees had been planted. Oranges, perhaps? Big-leafed deciduous more likely to convert the most carbon-dioxide to oxygen. A hum came as the lift started again. That's odd, she thought, Mike's not been gone more than a few minutes. Why was he coming back so soon? She waited beside the lift door, orange juice in hand, as the indicator showed the lift approaching. It stopped and the door slid open.

'Well, well, well,' said the General with a sneer. 'Now this is indeed a bonus.'

'Where's Mike?' she blurted out, her heart beating uncontrollably.

He grinned. 'Chasing my remote-control buggy all over the forest. I'll be long gone before he catches it and finds me gone.'

'Where are you going?'

'Back to Earth, of course. Now, you can come or I can leave you here. It all depends on you.'

'I'm not going to let you rape me again.'

'You've got little choice, baby. Your friend and mine will be down there for ages yet. He can't use the lift while this top door is open.' He wedged a chair against it. 'So you and I are all alone once more. This time, I intend to hurt you real bad.'

Janine backed up, shaking her head, as he advanced towards her. When she reached the table, the hard stock of the shotgun touched her hand. She grabbed it and swung the barrel round to point at him.

He laughed. 'That won't help you, kid.'

'Stay where you are or I'll shoot.'

'With an empty gun?' His smile faded. 'You know something? This time, I'm gonna enjoy taking you all the way out. Only one of us will be leaving this goddamn place today.'

She smiled as she squeezed the trigger. 'For once, General, you are dead right.'

ΩΕΔΝΕΣΔΑΨ

Quite a crowd gathered beside the viewing window on Orion as Wayfarer One came into sight against the dark backdrop of stars. They had received little warning of the approach until the ship dropped out of Proton Drive and appeared on the radar scanners. Retros fired and Wayfarer swung round in a perfect turn and came to a standstill a metre from the dock in Bay Five.

Jim grinned. 'Now that's precision for you. That Janine girl is learning fast. Until now, only Cassi could get that manoeuvre right first time.'

'Do you think they found General Phillips?' asked Erika as her companion focussed the TV camera on the docking ship.

Jim shrugged. 'We'll soon find out.'

'You would have thought they would have radioed in a message to let us know what had happened.'

'Impractical. Travelling above light speed, they would have arrived before the message they sent.'

They watched clamps secure the ship against drifting and the umbilical snake out and snap around the airlock.

'In a sense, it's a shame they got back so soon,' observed Erika. 'They've only been gone a few hours. It would have been better if Cassi could have recovered first and then her evidence would have sewn this all up quickly. As it is, this public trial could go on indefinitely, especially if the General is still alive.'

'Is there much support for him?'

'My producer says the results of various TV polls are swaying. What the world needs is something final. If your daughter dies and the General survives, I'm afraid what has been achieved will soon be forgotten. He still has plenty of supporters.'

Jim nodded his agreement. 'He is a figurehead. An symbol of all that is evil and cruel.'

'Cassi is also a symbol, Admiral. I'm afraid that all the other witnesses will be mere voices in a very large wilderness without her leadership and outspoken boldness in

support of what is right. It is essential that she recovers and is able to speak out before the fervour against things like child prostitution dies away.' She sighed. 'I regret to say that all we have done may be for nothing.'

Jim touched her arm in moral support. 'A miracle could still happen.'

Erika looked up sharply. 'A miracle? What we need is for your daughter to be alive and her usual self and the General dead. Now that would be the kind of miracle which would benefit the whole of mankind.'

Jim smiled a secret smile. 'Don't write Cassi off yet a while. She has a strange mixture of blood - Andromedan fortitude and good old Scottish determination to the point of stubbornness.'

Everyone seemed tense, even the normally unshakable news reporter, as they crowded round the bay exit, waiting. She cleared her throat as the green light came on and stood in front of the camera and counted down to transmission.

'This is Erika Clark at Orion Base. Wayfarer One has just returned from Mars and soon we will have the answer to many questions. Is General Phillips still alive? If so, what will be his reaction after his short stay on the remote planet? Has Mrs Hardy survived the trip? And what of Janine Hunt? How has she coped with a return to the place of her attempted rape? So much depends upon us finding the answer to these questions.'

The airlock door slid open with a hiss. Erika turned, still speaking, and then caught her breath. A stunned silence reigned as the camera continued to run and transmit to the billions below on Earth.

The girl with the long golden hair smiled and then kissed her grinning father's cheek. 'Hi, dad.'

'But... ' began Erika. 'I don't understand.'

'We've been for a little ride,' Cassi explained, hugging Mike's arm. 'It was the only way.'

'But you're...'

'Recovered?'

'Yes. You look really well. And your hair has grown. If I hadn't seen you leave a short while ago, I would say that you've been away for several months.'

'We have.'

Erika frowned her disbelief.

Cassi laughed. 'When I came back from my voyage to Andromeda, no-one could believe in time differential. When you approach the speed of light, time is dilated. However, when light speed is achieved, things are reversed, hours are condensed into seconds for those travelling. You think we have been away just a few hours, but we have been on a very long journey which took us over four years.'

'But how? Why?'

Cassi smiled at Erika. 'It was Mike's idea. I needed time to recover and Maggie needed to get herself stabilized. Although she was not actually harmed by the General's men, it was nevertheless a severe emotional trauma for her. My family gave us both the time we needed.' She turned as Janine came out of the tunnel with a stunning young woman with short dark hair. 'As you can see, my step-daughter is now all grown up.'

Erika gaped. 'This is too much. If I hadn't seen this with my own eyes, I would not have believed it. Some of our viewers may think this is some kind of a trick, done with mirrors or the like.'

Cassi shook her head. 'No trick. We simply ferried up some of the supplies from Lassell Base and went to Artares and back. I have been very well looked after.'

'Are you completely recovered?'

'I feel all right. Although I would be perfectly happy for Doctor Norah to examine me if you need further convincing.'

'I have been informed that Nicole Duchanet has made a satisfactory recovery so it is good news all round.'

'I'm pleased.'

'The General?' Erika got round to asking.

'I found him dead, I'm afraid,' said Mike. 'It was just as Officer Hunt had stated.'

'He died of oxygen starvation? From the puncture holes in the dome?'

Mike shook his head. 'It seems he shot himself when he realised he was slowly suffocating.'

Erika frowned. 'I thought there were no shotgun cartridges left.'

'I guess he must have found one somewhere on Lassell Base.' He glanced quickly at Janine and then spoke directly into the camera lens. 'There is no doubt about it. It was definitely suicide.'

Erika turned to Cassi. 'And what about you? Will you go back down to Earth straight away?'

'Of course.' Cassi grinned. 'I have a baby who is long overdue for a feed.'

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Albion Gold
The Curse of King Arthur's Brood
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Plot to War
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