

# Ανδρομεδα

## Τιμε

βψ Λεε Εδγαρ

DEDICATED TO TIME TRAVELERS EVERYWHERE

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### SEQUELS TO THIS BOOK

The Andromeda Burn  
The Andromeda Seed  
Return to Andromeda  
The Andromeda Trial

## **Andromeda Time**

The atmosphere in the large court-room felt cold to the young woman after the warmth of the cell. Standing with her head high, facing the

judge, she felt that the whole world was watching her; it probably was in view of the notoriety of the case, particularly as it came hot on the heels of the much-publicised Andromeda Trial. As the whisper of voices died away, and the TV cameras zoomed in on him, the judge opened the papers in front of him and cleared his throat.

'Cassiopeia Hardy, you stand here today accused of the wilful murder of Colonel Dwight Phillips of the United Forces. How do you plead?'

Cassi hesitated but for a second, her short, natural golden hair reflecting the lights high in the ceiling recesses. 'Guilty!'

'You have also been charged with conspiracy to murder..' he consulted his notes; 'a Lieutenant Gregory Watson, Captain Willi Humboldt, and Sergeant Stefan Whitaker, all serving members of the United Forces. How do you plead on these charges?'

No hesitation this time. 'Guilty!'

A murmur ran around the court room. Many people had tried to eliminate this woman and here, it seemed, the establishment was accomplishing what they had failed to do on so many occasions.

'Before we consider any mitigating circumstances, I would like to hear a review of the evidence against the accused.' He looked at the prosecutor. 'If you would be so kind, Mr Adams.'

The Counsel for the Prosecution got to his feet, clearly without his usual confidence. 'My Lord, in view of the circumstances, I shall be reasonably brief. The evidence against the Mrs Hardy consists solely of her voluntary confession taken by one of my colleagues. It is somewhat lengthy but, in it, she admits to the premeditated murder, and conspiracy to murder, of the aforementioned deceased persons on Thursday the third of July, nineteen-ninety-seven.' He sat down.

The judge was dumfounded. 'There are no witnesses?'

'No, my Lord.'

'No other evidence?'

'None, my Lord.'

'Not even circumstantial?'

The Prosecutor shook his head. 'No, my Lord. And, in view of the period of time which has passed, the gathering of forensic evidence is no longer possible.'

'Were the bodies not available for post-mortem?'

'No, my Lord. The bodies have not been recovered.'

The judge leant forward. 'You wouldn't be trying to make a fool of me, would you, Mr Adams?'

The prosecuting counsel swallowed and hurriedly shook his head. 'No, my Lord.'

There was silence for some time before the judge looked straight at the defendant over the top of his prinz-nez. 'Young lady, if I may be so bold, how old are you?'

'Twenty-two, sir.'

He stared at her for some time before turned to his clerk. 'This is not April Fool's Day, is it?'

The clerk, clearly embarrassed, shook his head. 'No, my Lord.'

The judge slowly leant back in his big chair which creaked a little - he was a big judge. 'Veyr well, gentlemen. I am intrigued and, for that reason, will go along with this for the time being. But, first of all, I will need a very convincing explanation as to how this young lady, who is by her own admission, twenty-two years of age, could have committed these alleged crimes which took place almost twenty-four years ago - two years before she was born.'



# 1

Thirty-five year old Antoinette Duchanet looked up from her word processor as the navy blue and grey fourtrack drew into the car park with a squeal of tyres. On the driver's door was the logo of the Europa Space Corporation. As she watched out of the window at the younger woman who jumped down, she reached out and pressed a button on her desk. 'Your wife has arrived, Marshal.'

'I'm on my way,' came the reply from the intercom.

The outer door swung open and the newcomer seemed to sail into the room, dressed in a short white pleated skirt and tank-top which contrasted well with her flawless suntanned skin. The secretary smiled a genuine smile to her. 'Good Morning, Mrs Hardy. Mike will be down in a moment. Won't you take a seat?'

Cassi smiled. 'Thanks. How is Nicole?'

'Fine. Her father has taken her to Switzerland for a couple of weeks to convalesce.'

'That's good. She deserves a rest after all she's been through.'

The inner door opened and a dark-haired man in his mid-thirties strode in and and hugged his wife briefly. 'You're wanted upstairs.'

Cassi looked puzzled. 'When?'

'Immediately. Something has come up.'

She glanced down at her attire, fresh from tennis and sunbathing in the garden. 'But I'm hardly dressed appropriately to meet with the Directorate. Let me at least get changed into something more suitable.'

Mike took her arm and guided her towards the wide stairway. 'No time for that. Alan has got some important visitors who need your help right away.'

A plea for a clue in the direction of the receptionist brought nothing but a shrug of ignorance as Cassi was propelled up the stairs. At the top, they went along a corridor until they reached the door marked "boardroom" . Mike knocked.

'Come in,' came the instant reply and Cassi found herself standing at the head of a long table around which sat half a dozen people, all staring at her. Nervously, she attempted to pull down her top to cover her bare midriff as she felt half naked in front of so many well-dressed people. Alan Thompson, Director of the Europa Corporation, stood up and smiled his greeting, gesturing towards the empty chair beside him.

Apprehension filled Cassi as she walked down the long room. On the way, she silently greeted the individuals she knew: Professor Heinrich

Akherd of the Rocket Propulsion Unit; Hans Bartek, inventor of the Proton Drive; Natasha Ralentov, Chief Executive of the Orion Space Station. In addition to these were two individuals whom she did not recognise. One, a balding man in his late fifties, stared at her over his glasses, clearly disapproving of her appearance. The other, slightly younger man was sitting back in his chair, his face totally expressionless. Cassi sat down where indicated, wondering what it was that was so important on this sunny July afternoon.

'I would like you to meet Doctor Maximilian Schmidt of the Zurich Academy of Science and Technology.' He pointed to the older man who's nod was barely discernable. 'And his assistant Doctor Henri Martin.' Not even a nod from this one.

The Director waved his hand in the opposite direction. 'And this is our Senior Training Officer, Cassiopeia Hardy.'

Cassi tried to smile but it felt false, even to her.

'Mrs Hardy,' the Director continued; 'is training the crews for the Wayfarer space cruisers. How is it coming along, Cassi?'

'Almost finished, sir. Janine has taken them all in Wayfarer One to Lascelles Base for evaluation. They should all be back at Orion Space Station within the hour. After debriefing, the shuttle will have them down by tonight.'

'That's good. We may need to use one or two of them for a little project which has been proposed.'

Cassi frowned. 'A project?'

'Is there not someone more suitable?' interjected Doctor Schmidt. 'This girl is far too young for what I am suggesting. She looks no more than a child and seems to have little experience in either life or the practical application of the sciences.'

Cassi felt the beginnings of anger start and felt her cheeks redden in embarrassment. She started to lean forward but felt a restraining hand on her arm. The bearded man next to her winked and pursed his lips. Cassi relaxed.

'Mrs Hardy is our most experienced astronaut,' the Director was saying in her defence. 'I would go so far as to say that, without her, the current programme would be grounded and what you are proposing would be impossible.'

'Just what is it that is being proposed?' asked Cassi quietly.

For almost a minute, the older scientist stared at her for daring to speak.

'You would not understand,' he said eventually.

'Try me.'

'My company...' He paused. '...my research organisation, is proposing to experiment with time. We have heard that Wayfarer One went back in time on her last trip. We wish to evaluate the data and...'

'Wayfarer is not a time machine, Herr Schmidt,' Cassi interrupted.

'But it did go back in time, didn't it?'

'Not meaningfully.'

'Perhaps I could help,' suggested the elderly gentleman beside Cassi. 'I have studied the data brought back by Wayfarer in her computer and have reached some staggering conclusions.'

'Such as?'

'That at a speed approaching that of light, time dilation occurs.'

'Of course,' the scientist sneered. 'We worked that out in the nineteen-nineties.'

'But what was not worked out at that time was that upon reaching the speed of light, a reversal occurs. Time is compressed quite

dramatically. On the first Wayfarer voyages, they flew to Andromeda and back, a distance each way of over two million light years, in just four weeks.'

'How sure are you that this incredible trip took place?'

'I have seen the data log on both ships. There is no doubt whatsoever. Massive time compression takes place upon exceeding light speed. And the faster you go, the greater the compression.'

'At what point does time actually stand still?'

'The precise calculus is not yet available, but it is believed to be around fifty thousand times the speed of light. Commander Duncan, in Wayfarer Two, reached a speed of just over eighty-thousand times the speed of light.'

'And went back how far in time?'

'Five years.'

'Over what time period?'

'Seventy-five years, and over a distance of four and a half million light years.'

'And this latest trip to Andromeda?'

'They exceeded a quarter of a million times light speed and went back twenty-five years.'

'So, technically, it should be possible to take off today and return twenty-five years ago.'

'Theoretically, yes.'

'Why only theoretically?'

'Because it has never been done. Each time, the crew made a point of returning after they had left, never before.'

'Why not?'

Professor Akherd shrugged. 'Think of the repercussions. It would be grossly unethical to try to rearrange past events. Who knows what disasters could happen as a result.'

'Or benefits, perhaps,' said Doctor Martin, speaking for the first time.

'Benefits?'

'Preventing a past war, for example. Taking back in time the cure for a disease now eradicated.'

'We are scientists,' said the professor quietly. 'We must not attempt to play God.'

Doctor Martin laughed. 'My colleague and I are merely suggesting an exploratory mission, just to see if such a thing is possible. We have no intention of changing history.'

Cassi thought for a moment. 'Just how far are you proposing to go back in time?'

The scientist shrugged. 'Just a few years-enough to prove the point one way or the other.'

'It could be very dangerous.'

Doctor Schmidt interrupted angrily. 'You are making excuses. We all know that space travel has now been rendered safe.'

'It's not the going that is the problem,' replied Cassi carefully. She looked straight at him. 'It's the coming back.'

'The coming back?'

Cassi nodded. 'If we are not expected, we will not be welcome, especially if our means of transport has not yet been invented.'

'But I thought...'

'Just imaging the repercussions of a strange craft turning up unexpectedly at almost any time during the latter part of the last

century. In the middle of a cold war, someone is quite likely to shoot first and ask questions afterwards.'

'So we arrange to get there in peacetime. It's easy.'

'Not necessarily,' interjected the Director. 'Don't forget that the Wayfarer space cruisers cannot land on Earth, or any other planet for that matter. Someone would have to take a shuttle down to the surface to prove the point one way or the other. Such a visit is not likely to go unnoticed, certainly not during the last hundred years or so.'

'Then what would you suggest?'

'I recommend that I inform Admiral Duncan on the Orion Space Station what is going on and that Wayfarer One will be returning from a mission tomorrow. Then, we wait a few years and eventually come back in time as arranged. You will be expected and, therefore, not destroyed by the Earth defence systems.'

'We cannot wait,' said the scientist. 'We must know immediately.' He looked accusingly at Cassi. 'There are others who would use the arrangement for their own ends. We must find out if it can be done...and then plug the loopholes so that time travel cannot be misused.'

Cassi shrugged. 'I admire your motives. But rather you than me.'

'You do not think it feasible?'

'Oh, it's feasible all right. It's whether it's entirely ethical or not which bothers me.'

'That's what they said about space travel in the first place,' he sneered. 'And rail travel before that. History shows that we humans are extremely short sighted.'

'I'll agree with you there. When do you plan to go?'

'Within a few days, if possible.'

Cassi turned to the Director. 'Have you made any decisions about the crew?'

Alan Thompson smiled. 'I was going to leave that up to you. You are, after all, the Training Officer.'

'What is the normal complement?' asked Doctor Schmidt.

'Nine, in three shifts of three,' said the Director. 'Originally, however, it was planned that the crew would be away for anything up to six years at a time, so this had to cover them for any emergency. Now that the full potential of the Proton Drive has been realised, a smaller complement would suffice.' He turned to Cassi. 'Any suggestions?'

'You have a choice of two for pilot. Janine Hunt already has her wings and Paul Andrews is about to sit his finals.'

'If you had to stake your life on one of them, which would it be?'

'Janine, without hesitation. She has already made a dozen successful solo trips to Mars and has also proved herself capable of handling the shuttle in adverse conditions.'

The Director nodded his agreement. 'Navigation Officer?'

Cassi shrugged. 'If necessary, I could do that myself. It is my job, after all.'

He shook his head decisively. 'I don't want you going as Navigation Officer.'

She was a little taken-aback but hid her shock well. 'Then there is only Carla Sporetti who is fully qualified. None of the males has come up to scratch.'

'Okay. Engineer?'

Cassi thought for a moment. 'I'll have to let you know on that one. Bob Walker would have been my obvious choice, but he's away on Mars

until the end of the month.'

'Medic?'

'Juanita is the best all-rounder. She has the experience as well as the skill. However, she's on honeymoon.'

'What kind of an organisation are you running here?' asked Doctor Schmidt. 'Half your staff seem to be gallivanting all over the place.'

'Bob and Juanita are away together,' said Cassi patiently. She longed to reach over and bop him one on his big nose but restrained herself with some difficulty. 'They were married on Saturday and are spending their honeymoon traversing the Martian South Pole. They will be out of radio contact for several weeks.'

'So we have to be lumbered with second best, I suppose.'

'Not at all. You can always postpone your expedition till they get back.'

'Do you have a substitute for this Doctor...?'

'Carerra,' said Cassi. 'Now Doctor Walker, of course. I will come back to you tomorrow with a suitable alternative in case you insist on leaving before her return.'

'What about the other crew members?' asked the scientist. 'Who does the cooking and the cleaning?'

'The crew share those duties on a rota basis,' interjected the Director. 'There are neither chiefs nor indians on board a Wayfarer. In any case, there are only ten cryonic chambers. If we reduce the crew to five or six, there will still be room for yourselves and two research assistants.' When neither of the scientists replied, he looked round at the other members of the Directorate. 'Anything more to add?'

The others shook their heads. There was much to think about.

The Director smiled at Cassi. 'Thank you, my dear. Would you please inform Janine and Carla of the idea in principle and see if they are prepared to volunteer. Remember that this trip is, to all intents and purposes, not happening.'

Cassi stood up. 'Of course. I will also let you know about medic and engineer if I can come up with anyone suitable.'

When she had gone, Doctor Schmidt protested. 'Why on earth do you take counsel from that...girl?'

The Director shrugged. 'Why not? She is, as I said earlier, our most experienced astronaut.'

There was silence for a moment. 'And another thing. This Admiral Duncan on Orion. How do you know you can trust him? Wasn't there some rumour about him having brought back some strange kind of an alien creature from Andromeda? Is this true?'

'Perfectly true.'

'I think that before we can make any decision as to his integrity, we must meet and evaluate this alien.'

The Director smiled. 'But you just did.'



Mike Hardy greeted his wife with a sly grin as she strode into his office at Europoort Space Terminal. 'And what was all that about?'

'Some team of nutty scientists wants to play with time.'

'That could be dodgy. Forwards or backwards?'

'It would have to be backwards. There is no way of going forwards.'

'There must be, or what would be the point of going backwards if you could never come back to your proper time?'

'It's called the waiting game. We did it on the way back from Andromeda.'

'Waiting game?'

She nodded. 'The crew fly fast enough to break the time barrier, do what they have to do, and then simply wait till time catches up with itself. In the case of Mad Max and his gang, they would have to repeat our last journey to Andromeda so they could arrive back here anything up to fifty years ago. When they have done their thing, they go back into space with Wayfarer and wait until they come back to the correct time.'

Mike frowned. 'Why do they have to go to Andromeda? Can't they just fly round in orbit for a while?'

Cassi shook her head and laughed. 'They'd never get up sufficient velocity. Besides, it would be too dangerous to spend all that time within the Solar System. The radiation would fry their brains.' She smiled. 'Which would probably be an improvement as far as Doctor Schmidt is concerned.'

'But Orion Space Station has people on board all the time. How come they are not affected?'

'Orion doesn't have to go anywhere, so it can carry substantial radiation shielding. The Wayfarers have to be manoeuvrable so they cannot protect themselves, or their crews, to the same degree.'

'There must be somewhere safe nearby without having to fly all the way to Andromeda and back.'

'I'm afraid not. The Earth is protected by its atmosphere or all life would be long dead. The only other relatively safe place is in the void between the galaxies. The crew wouldn't have to stop at Andromeda, of course. Iris could be programmed to fly round Andromeda and come back in a kind of figure-of-eight.'

'What about the return trip to our own time?'

'Same trip again but they wouldn't have to go all the way to Andromeda.'

'I thought that once you left our galaxy, there was no turning back.'

'There isn't. You can't turn in space like they used to in the old cult Star Trek movies. However, at a slower speed, a parabolic trajectory could be plotted which would swing the ship round the outside of our own galaxy and bring them back in at the right time.'

Mike grinned. 'With luck.'

'As far as space travel is concerned, there is no such thing as luck. In astrophysics, it's called planning.'

'Who are you sending as crew?'

'If I had my way, a set of androids. But as it is, it looks as if I shall have to send Janine and Carla. All I need to find to go with them is an engineer and a medic.'

'Who will be in command?' said Mike with a sly grin.

Cassi frowned. 'What do you know that I don't?'

He opened the top drawer in his desk and took out a buff envelope. He handed it to her. She stared at it for some time. It was addressed to "Mission Commander Cassiopeia Hardy".

She opened it carefully while her husband watched her. He let her

read for a while and then said; 'Well?'

'We're not going to take Wayfarer One.' She looked up. 'We're taking Wayfarer Three.'

'Is that good?'

'She has never been flown. It'll be her maiden voyage.'

'I hear she's an improvement on the others.'

Cassi nodded. 'Same shell, of course, but with smaller food storage bays because of the reduced time-scales. There are better observation areas, and the shuttle can be launched from within the loading bay instead of having to ride piggy-back.'

'Faster?'

'Not much. There is, after all, a limit to how fast a ship can accelerate.'

'Because of the drive?'

'No. Because of molecular degradation.'

'What's that when it's at home?'

'Everything is made up of electrons in one form or another. Confuse them by going too fast and matter can become unsteady in state. The ship, and everything in it, could be transformed into a kind of plasmatic jelly.'

'What flavour?'

Cassi laughed. 'Something which tastes pretty disgusting, I expect.'

'Did you say you were short of a couple of crew?'

'You can't come, you're needed here.'

'I don't want to come, thank you very much. I was thinking of Debbie and Sarah.'

'Debbie, I can understand. She trained as a paramedic. But why Sarah? The last thing I need on this trip is a marine commando.'

Mike laughed. 'Sarah's not that bad. She breeds cats.'

'Those "cats" you refer to are fully-grown black panthers. I don't know why her parents let her get away with it.'

'Uncle Roger and Aunt Liz fought the Consortium in France. My cousin was brought up in a war zone. She could drive by the time she was six and shoot a semi-automatic before she was eight. It's not surprising that she grew up a bit on the tough side.'

'A bit on the tough side? Miss Rambo might have the prettiest face in Europoort, but her innocent exterior doesn't fool me. Your cousin is as tough as old boots.' She paused. 'Besides, what does she know about engineering?'

'She can fix almost anything and make it work. She's had to many times over the years.'

'How about a leaky Proton Drive?'

'If you had one, what would you do with it?'

'Run like hell. Antimatter plays havoc with my complexion.'

'So, in reality, if anything went seriously wrong, there's nothing anyone could do without a complete refit.'

'I suppose not.'

'I'd be happier if you had Sarah with you.'

Cassi paused thoughtfully. 'On one condition.'

'What's that?'

'No guns.'

'No what?'

'No guns. This is a peaceful scientific expedition. I'm not having stray projectiles punching holes in the hull of my nice new spaceship.'

Cassi made only one stop on her way home. Fifteen minutes later, she arrived at the farm and switched off the engine. She turned to her fourteen-year-old step-daughter whom she had picked up from school. 'You're very quiet today, Maggie. Is anything wrong?'

The teenager quickly opened the car door and stepped out. 'No, it's nothing I can't handle.'

Cassi followed her inside, frowning at the sight of a slight limp. She didn't say anything more but simply greeted the baby-sitters and took seven-month-old Andi in her arms. 'You can go if you like.'

'It's okay,' said the male security officer. 'I have very strict orders to wait for Mike.'

There was obviously to be no repetition of the events during the Andromeda Trial. The young woman with him smiled her agreement. Cassi sighed. Were they going to need this kind of protection for the rest of their lives? Perhaps that is why she liked space travel. It was a lot safer than living on Earth.

Noticing that Maggie had gone straight to her room, Cassi left the baby in her high chair, excused herself, and went into the hall. On the telephone table was Maggie's homework. She picked it up and began to climb the stairs when she dropped one of the books. It fell open. Scrawled across the fly-leaf in blood red felt-tip pen were the words in a strange handwriting: " My step-mother is an alien."

Without knocking, she went into Maggie's room and softly closed the door behind her. For several minutes, she waited for her step-daughter to explain her mood. When she didn't, she spoke quietly. 'Take off your dress.'

Maggie frowned. 'What?'

'Take off your dress.'

With trembling fingers, Maggie unbuttoned her school dress and dropped it onto the bed. Cassi gently turned her round and carefully examined her bare back. Eventually, she hooked her finger into the top of the girl's knicker elastic and looked inside. 'Who did this to you?'

'It's nothing, mum, honest.'

'It's a very big, blue nothing. Your bottom is covered in bruises.'

'I daren't say anything. They'll kill me.'

'I think " kill" is an overstatement-but I know what you mean.'

Maggie gaped. 'You do?'

'I know about bullies. It's a concept unique to human civilisation. What did they do to you?'

'They attacked me when I was in the shower.'

'Boys or girls?'

Maggie looked down. 'I promised not to tell.'

'I need to know whether this is sexual or physical abuse.'

'It was some of girls in my class. They tied my hands to the shower rail above my head and then took turns at beating me with table-tennis bats.'

'Which girls was it?'

'I don't know. They wrapped a towel around my head so I couldn't see them.'

'There must be something which could identify them-a voice, perhaps.'

'It was difficult because they were laughing all the time.'

'Try.'

'I did recognise one voice. It was Maria Braanson.'

'Are you sure?'

'Yes. After they had all had enough, she told them to stand clear.'

'Was she trying to help you?'

Maggie shook her head and then looked down in shame. 'She took photographs of me. She said she wanted the whole school to see....' She

looked up into Cassi's eyes; 'Everything.'

Cassi said nothing.

'Then they... Then they went and left me there.'

'Naked?'

Maggie nodded. 'I was there for ages until a couple of the boys found me.'

'What happened?' Cassi whispered. 'Did they. ..?'

'They didn't touch me. One of them wrapped a towel round me and the other one got my clothes.'

'Seems like you have a few gentlemen at your school. What happened to the film?'

'I don't know. I guess Maria still has it.'

Cassi stood for a while, deep in thought.

'Don't tell dad,' Maggie pleaded eventually. 'He'll probably be hopping mad and shoot them or something.'

Cassi smiled a little. 'I won't. Get dressed. I'll go and start dinner.'

In the hall, she stopped by the phone. What should she do? She couldn't just overlook it, but she had promised not to tell Mike. This had to stop. But who could do it?

Reluctantly, she picked up the phone and dialled a satfone number. It was answered immediately.

Cassi forced a smile. 'Sarah, I need your help.'



Maria Braanson lived in one of the less salubrious parts of Dortrecht and she was what many "experts" would call a victim of society. Her Dutch father had been a merchant seaman on a long-haul oil tanker, regularly away in the Gulf for several months at a time. When at home, he spent most of his time in downtown Rotterdam, gambling away the money he had worked so hard to gain.

Her English mother drank a lot. The children, five of them, had very much brought themselves up, never being able to rely on either parent. Maria, the eldest, had been more of a mother than a sister to the others. This meant that the shock of finding her good-for-nothing father in bed with her eleven-year-old sister was all the more profound.

She had tried to kill him with a carving knife. When she failed, he had stripped and viciously raped her and left her in hospital with a perforated spleen and numerous broken ribs after knocking her down and then repeatedly kicking her round the floor for what had seemed to Maria like hours. She remembered the swearing, the repeated pain, the screaming of little Heidi, naked on the bed, begging her father to stop.

Her mother was too drunk to visit the hospital, so Maria had had to walk eight miles home after releasing herself, knowing that her younger brothers and sisters would be neglected without her.

That was almost a year ago. Poverty had increased over that intervening period, following the father's permanent disappearance to the ends of the Earth to find a family more "appreciative".

Sarah Blackman, however, was somewhat less understanding of Maria's predicament. In the period following the Consortium War in Europe, she had met many children who had encountered similar circumstances but had not resorted to using drugs, had not turned to crime, had not found it necessary to bully other, seemingly weaker, youths. Sarah also knew that bullying has always been the most extreme form of cowardice and is normally only undertaken by youths in packs where numbers represented

strength. A bully will never, ever, take on someone who is big enough or tough enough to fight back.

She, on the other hand, could not tolerate wimps and loved a challenge. To Sarah, family was everything. Family came first, last, and everywhere in between. That is why she was waiting on the first floor balcony of the block of flats when Maria and two friends arrived home from "trawling the mall".

She smiled when she saw them, loving the odds, and knowing she could eat all three of them alive without even breaking sweat. The girls stopped when they saw her, wondering who this dark-haired young woman was leaning against the wall. They eyed her up and down with contempt. Obviously not a local, she was too clean. Also, her leathers were unmarked and her fingernails painted evenly.

'Who are you?' Maria demanded to know.

'I have come for the photographs,' replied Sarah calmly and sweetly.

Maria's hand went instinctively towards her left jacket pocket. 'What photos?'

'The ones you took of Margaret Hardy.'

'You a cop?'

Twenty-one-year old Sarah smiled as she eased herself from the wall. 'Not today.'

'Then we ain't telling you nuffink, so sod off, bitch.'

'That's not a very nice way to talk,' said Sarah, ambling casually towards them.

'You can't make me do as you say,' defied Maria, wary of the approaching woman in black. She sneered to her mates. 'Let's get her.'

None of them saw Sarah move but, suddenly, one was rolling back down the stairs and Maria was up against the wall with Sarah's right forearm across her throat. The third girl began to swing her heavy bag but found herself, instead, sitting on the floor, clutching at her midriff. Sarah had learned several forms of Martial Arts during her misspent youth and, therefore, when she had launched her kick, she could easily have smashed the girl's face to an unrecognisable bloody pulp or rendered one or both of her mammary glands useless to future infants. Instead, she had simply punched the wind out of the bully's lungs.

Maria's eyes showed intense fear as Sarah said; 'The photos, please.'

Out of the corner of her eye, Sarah saw Maria's right hand descend hesitantly towards her jacket pocket.

Sarah smiled again. 'If that hand comes out containing anything but photos, I'll crush your windpipe. You know that, don't you?'

Maria changed hands in mid-delve and her left hand produced a packet of photographs, fresh from the developer. Sarah gently took them from her. 'And the negatives?'

Maria swallowed with some difficulty. 'In the packet.'

'If I find that you have lied, or that copies appear. I will be back.'

'I haven't lied. They're all there.'

Sarah moved so that her nose almost touched Maria's. 'Leave Maggie alone, understand?'

The teenager nodded as far as she was able.

Sarah smiled once more and then simply walked away. She had not gone ten yards before Maria was screaming for help, shouting that she had been attacked and robbed, begging her neighbours to come to her assistance. Sarah saw the faces appear from several flats, jumped over the railings, and landed nimbly on the concrete below. Several people began to move towards her carrying weapons of all kinds but Sarah was astride her motor cycle before they could reach her, pressing the auto-start and skidding round in a tight turn which spewed water and mud all over them.

Missiles fell around her as she powered the 2-litre engine up the grass bank and over the wall, bouncing her fat tyres along the roofs of two parked cars, before roaring off down the road beyond.

Maria's face was as black as thunder. She kicked her friend on the floor. 'Get up, scumbag. We've got a score to settle with goody-miss-two-shoes.'



Later that day, Mike Hardy got the shock of his life when he arrived home from collecting Maggie from school. As he pulled into the yard, he almost ran into Sarah's bike.

He grunted. 'Wonder what your Aunt Sarah is here for. I haven't heard of any trouble.'

Sullen Maggie didn't answer as she got out of the passenger door and followed her father into the farmhouse. They were greeted by peals of laughter from within. He frowned and pushed open the door. 'I never expected to find you two so much in harmony. What's the celebration?'

'Nothing at all,' smiled Cassi as she stood up and kissed his cheek in welcome. 'Sarah was just telling me a little story.'

'Is she staying for dinner?'

Cassi smiled at Sarah. 'Of course. But first, she wants to take Maggie out for a short run on her new motor bike. That's all right, isn't it?'

Mike shrugged. 'I guess it's okay.' He turned to his daughter. 'Wear your crash helmet.'

Maggie seemed slightly cheered by the prospect of a distraction from her worries, and Mike and Cassi soon heard the engine start up and its note gradually fade into the distance.

Mike sat down and grinned. 'Okay, what's going on?'

'Nothing,' Cassi said innocently. 'Sarah and I have agreed to live with our differences. I'm quite looking forward to having her along on the trip.'

'Have you heard when you are leaving yet?'

Cassi nodded. 'Tomorrow.'

'How long will you be gone?'

'About fifty years.' She grinned at his sudden shock. 'But hopefully only a matter of hours in real time.'

'Fifty years?'

'We'll sleep through most of it, of course. Parallel time will only be a few days, I expect - just enough time for Mad Max and his friends to complete their observations.'

'You are going to have to stop calling him that, you know. Doctor Schmidt is a world-renowned scientist. He won the Nobel Peace Prize last year. He has also written many papers on his revisions to Einstein's Theory of Relativity.'

'Huh. He only got it half right.'

'And, I suppose, you know better.'

'Of course. But I don't make a song and dance about it.'

Mike laughed and shook his head. 'You and that computer of yours will get us into trouble one of these days.'

'Iris is not just a computer, Mike. She is the brains behind the whole system at present. Professor Akherd and his team have just finished transferring the data from Wayfarer One. They'll be doing all the final testing on the vital systems tonight.'

'Janine is back from Mars, then?'

Cassi nodded as she bent down and picked up her stirring baby. 'And raring to go.'

'Carla?'

'Her, too. I couldn't hold either of them back.'

'So, you've got your full crew then?'

'All I need. There is one spare cryo unit so if we have any last minute bright ideas, we have room for another person.'

'One thing worries me.'

Cassi began to stir baby food in the warming can. 'What's that?'

'What will you do if you meet someone, whenever it is you go back to?'

'We have a plan,' said Cassi, laughing. 'Because of the possible repercussions of admitting we are from the future, we will simply say that we are aliens from another galaxy. After having circumnavigated the Andromeda Spiral, it won't be far from the truth. Our clothes will be different and the shuttle craft totally unrecognisable. We hope to convince them, assuming we do meet anyone. We will try not to.'

'When are you aiming to go back to?' asked Mike thoughtfully.

Cassi sat down, her baby on her left arm, food in her right hand. 'I can't tell. I plan not to go quite as fast as we went when we returned to Andromeda the last time. Iris can only work on averages, of course, and no allowance can be made for the periods of acceleration or deceleration.'

'What's your best guess?'

She shrugged. 'Twenty-five, thirty years. It's really not that important for the purposes of the experiment. All Mad Max wants is to prove that it can be done at all.'

Mike paused thoughtfully for a moment and then said; 'I know when you will land.'

Cassi grinned. 'If you do, you're cleverer than Iris.'

'March, nineteen-ninety-seven.'

Cassi nearly dropped both baby and food. 'How on Earth can you work that out?'

He leant forward and tapped her knee. 'I'll show you. Wait here.' He went upstairs and, as Cassi continued to give Andi her tea, she heard him rummaging about in the loft.

Cassi rubbed noses with her baby. 'Now what's your father up to, eh?'

She would have been very surprised indeed if her child had produced anything more than a wide grin and a gurgle. Mike was back in ten minutes, blowing the dust off the top of an old shoe box. Cassi instinctively covered Andi's face and frowned her annoyance at his lack of care but was, nevertheless, intrigued by his actions.

'I never told you much about Sharon, did I?' he began.

Cassi shook her head. In spite of being married to Mike for over two years, she knew virtually nothing about his first wife. There were no photos or mementoes, and he always steered clear of the subject whenever she raised it. Maggie was too young to remember anything at the time she was killed. In spite of all this, Cassi suspected that he had loved her very much.

'Did I tell you that she and mother died in the same car crash?'

'Yes, you did. Twelve years ago. wasn't it?'

Mike nodded. 'They were both about to give evidence in a rather complicated trial so the police thought that it may not have been an accident after all.'

'What did you think?'

'I agreed at the time. Now....?'

'What's in the box?' Cassi asked to change the subject to a less emotional one.

'My mother was half French,' he continued as if Cassi had not spoken. 'My grandmother was a deBosville.'

He said it in a manner which seemed that he expected Cassi to

understand, but the name meant nothing to her.

'My grandfather met her in nineteen-forty-five, at the end of the Second World War. They had no children for a long time. Then Uncle Roger was born in nineteen-seventy and mother was born three years later.'

'Were there others in the family?'

'My grandfather had a brother, Michael Blackman. He died just before the Consortium War of ninety-six. His children, Jennifer and Jonathan, still live in the North East of England. They'll both be in their forties now.'

'And on your grandmother's side?'

'The deBosviles? My grandmother had two sisters. Dominique died young but Pascale had a son, Emile, who had a daughter, Simone. Her death was a bit of a mystery until we discovered evidence to suggest that she had been blown up by terrorists on a cross-channel ferry.'

'Before the Consortium War?'

'So I have been told. Both Grandfather and Great Uncle Mike were in the secret service or something like that.'

'Was your mother involved in the same sort of thing?'

'Good Lord, no. She was a weather girl.'

Cassi frowned. 'A weather girl?'

Mike laughed. 'Not one of those you see on TV. Mother deciphered data from a geostationary satellite called Princess.'

'She sounds as if she was quite a clever person. What about your father? What was he like?'

'I never met him. He disappeared before I was born.'

'I bet that upset your mother.'

'You'd have thought so, wouldn't you? I gather they had not known each other long but had been very close.'

'Where did he go? Do you know?'

'I asked her once.' Mike suddenly smirked. 'She told me that he had been abducted by aliens.'

Cassi laughed. 'Abducted by aliens?'

'That's why I want you to see a letter she wrote to me not long before she was killed.'

He rummaged through the contents of the box for a few minutes before producing a letter on wrinkled pink paper. It had obviously been read a great number of times.

'See here,' he said, turning one of the pages over. 'This is the only time she had ever spoken seriously about him. For years, I and everyone else thought she was either joking or nuts when she went on about his abduction by aliens, but read this. It makes perfect sense to me now.'

Cassi looked where his finger was. It read: *It was for the best. I knew I could never keep him for ever. But I never expected him to be taken away by an alien from Andromeda.*

She drew in her breath sharply at the sight of her place of ancestry. Was there a connection?

'Hardy wasn't my father's real name,' Mike was saying, waving another piece of paper under her nose.

It was a marriage certificate. The name Suzette Michelle Blackman was clearly visible as was the name of the acting registrar, a Rear-Admiral Michael Davison. Where had she heard that name before? The marriage was witnessed by a Marianne deBosville and a Major Alphonse Slazinski. The hairs began to stand up on her neck at the sight of all these half-familiar names. The surname of Mike's father was definitely not Hardy. In was a much longer name, faded and unreadable, but beginning with what looked more like an "N" than an "H". The first name was obviously either Andrew or Andre.

Cassi's eyes went back to the letter. *He was always so good and*

patient with me that I used to call him my Hardy Perennial, it read. In the end I was happy that he was taken to another... The last word was slightly smudged. Was it place? No, it started with " T" . Town? Not quite.

Her hand went to her face. 'My god.'

'What is it?'

'What your mother wrote. She said she was happy that your father had been taken to another *TIME*.'



### 3

The implications had still not dawned fully when Sarah and Maggie returned from their ride. Maggie rushed in first, breathless and obviously totally delighted with life. Cassi smiled to herself. Her step-daughter had obviously been made a present of a certain packet of highly embarrassing photographs.

'Please say yes,' she begged her father with some enthusiasm.

'What am I agreeing to?' he asked cautiously.

'I want to go with Cassi and Sarah tomorrow.'

He thought of what was in the letter from his deceased mother. 'I'm not sure that is a good idea.'

'Please. Sarah says there is a spare cryo.'

Mike looked at Sarah for back-up. He didn't get it.

'I'll take care of her,' Sarah promised instead. 'I won't let her out of my sight for one second.'

'I'll think about it,' he sighed, feeling outnumbered.

'Can Sarah stay the night with us?' asked the excited teenager.

Mike looked at his cousin. 'Sarah can stay with us any time she likes. But she might not have brought her nightie.'

'That's oaky. I'll lend her one of mine.'

'You want to stay?' he asked Sarah. 'You've got a busy day tomorrow getting ready. Briefing is at six prompt on board Orion.'

Sarah grinned as she stood up. 'I'm ready now.' She leaned towards Mike as she prepared to follow Maggie up to her room to unpack her small bag of personal belongings. 'And I have never worn a nightie in all my life.'

Mike was playfully offended and called after her as she swung her slim, boyish hips out of the room. 'Now don't you go teaching my daughter all your bad habits.'

There was silence for a while as Cassi and Mike heard the girls chasing each other upstairs and bouncing on beds. Mike smiled and shook his head. 'It has been a long time since I have heard Sarah laugh like that. Maggie seems to have stripped ten years from her.'

Cassi was not listening. 'Mike, about your father.'

He came down to earth with a bang. 'What about my father?'

'It sounds from your mother's letter that we are supposed to abduct him from his own time.'

'Now you're jumping to conclusions.'

'Just think. He is supposedly abducted by aliens from Andromeda and taken to another time. What else could it mean?'

'I don't know. Why does it concern you now?'

'Because if we take him in nineteen-ninety-seven, then we will bring him back with us the day after tomorrow.'

Mike sat down. 'That could be awkward.'

'How else could it work out?'

'Cassi, we must not change history. It could have catastrophic effects in all kinds of ways.'

'But there has to be a good reason why we will pick him up. But I can't think of anything which could make us do it. After all, we're only going to observe.'

'Then don't go. Don't do it.'

'But we obviously did go and we did do it. It's already too late. If we go ahead as planned and then leave him behind, that will change history, won't it? He will have stayed with your mother instead. In fact, she might not have died if he had stayed with her.'

Mike shook his head. 'This is getting very complicated. Perhaps you are right and we had better advise Alan to cancel the whole thing.'

'We can't. As I said, it has already happened. It's in the letter from your mother. In fact, if your father had stayed in his own time, then this letter cannot exist.'

'It's unethical to play with time,' Mike protested.

'I know that. But whatever happened, happened.'

'I guess if it's for the best, we must continue. If you change that one act, other things could alter.'

'Your mother could live. In fact, your wife might live. The events could easily be connected.'

Mike was silent for some time. Cassi placed her sleeping baby in its cot and sat down beside him. 'Tell me honestly. Is that what you want?'

'I don't understand.'

'Suppose, just suppose, I could change some small detail which would make it likely that Sharon would still be alive.'

'Cassi, don't put me in a position where I would have to choose between the two of you.'

'You wouldn't have to. If she survives because of some inadvertant change, you and I would never meet.'

'Cassi, I love you.'

'But you loved Sharon, too, didn't you?'

'Of course. But even if you don't abduct my father, there is no guarantee that Sharon would not die.'

'Why do you think she was killed?'

'She was about to expose certain high officials in the United

Forces.'

'Including General Phillips?'

Mike nodded.

She looked down at her hands in her lap. 'I see.'

He put his arm around her. 'Cassi, there is no going back. I loved Sharon, there is no secret about that. It would certainly have been better for both myself and our daughter if she and mother had survived, but they didn't. I don't see how anything you or anyone else might do will change that. I love you and that's all that matters right now.'

'I have to be sure,' she said, standing. 'I am going to send Janine down in the shuttle as planned, and I will stay with Wayfarer. That way, I cannot inadvertently do anything which will alter the present state of affairs for the better or the worse.'

'Cassi, I love you.'

'I must leave early tomorrow for Orion.' She looked into his eyes with a touch of sadness. 'Take me to bed.'



The final briefing was held on Orion Space Station. The quartet of scientific staff was met as it arrived by shuttle and the men were ushered them into the boardroom where six young women awaited them, all dressed in the pale blue overalls with crimson collars which identified currently-serving members of the space team. They were accompanied by a tall, grey-haired man dressed in maroon.

He smiled a greeting and shook them all warmly by the hand. 'Good afternoon, gentlemen. I am Admiral James Duncan, Executive Officer of Orion Station. I hope you had a smooth ride up from Europort.'

There was a mixed mumble of agreements and disagreements as they all sat down. Through the long side windows could be seen their home planet and, in the distance, the brightly-shining sun.

'It is my pleasure to formally welcome you to Orion on behalf of the Directorate who, because of age and circumstances, find the ascent a great deal less comfortable.' He stood before a wide screen. 'In a few moments, I will ask Commander Hardy to run through the details of your expedition, but first I will cover some of the more general procedures regarding space flight.'

He paused until it seemed they were all listening.

'The trip is to divided up into three phases: the travelling; the sleep; and the observations. Firstly, the travelling. During the flight, Commander Hardy has full responsibility for all functions on board Wayfarer Three. Her word is not to be questioned at any time.' He smiled. 'She has done this many times before and prefers not to have amateurs under her feet. That being so, only crew members will normally be permitted to remain on the flight deck. This is for your own security as well as the safety of the mission. Any questions?'

There was mumbling as Cassi stood up and smiled, but no direct questions.

'Once clear of the galaxy, Officer Deborah Clark, who is a trained paramedic, will assume responsibility for your safety whilst crossing the void.' He paused while the fair-haired nurse-cum-security officer made herself known. 'Whether you choose to sleep for the whole journey or just the more boring parts is entirely up to any arrangement you may make with her.'

'Remember,' said Debbie from Doncaster; 'You will only age while you are awake. In the cryonic units, you will effectively be frozen in time and as to age.'

'On the ground,' Jim continued; 'Doctor Schmidt, you will have

primary control of his team. You and your team will be ferried to the surface by Pilot Officer Hunt who will remain with her shuttle craft at all times. She will be using a modified version of the Titan Shuttle which has full vertical take-off facilities. It is already secured inside the main loading bay.' A painfully thin girl of nineteen stood up and smiled nervously.

'Does that mean we are to be on our own on the ground?' asked one of the scientific assistants.

Jim shook his head. 'I will ask Engineering Officer Blackman to accompany you. She will be able to keep in touch with both shuttle and Wayfarer by radio which should, incidentally, be used as little as possible so as to prevent detection.' Sarah casually got to her feet and nodded.

'Why her?' asked Doctor Schmidt.

'Because, hopefully, she will be the only one without a direct function. If a fault develops in the craft, another of the crew will go instead, possibly Navigation Officer Sporetti.' A dark-haired woman in her early twenties stood up, her jaw moving in the permanent mastication of chewing gum, her large gold earrings giving her an almost gypsy look.

'Ciao!' said Carla.

'Who's the kid?' demanded the scientist, indicating Maggie.

'Margaret Hardy is the daughter of our Security Marshal. Her mother and grandmother were heavily involved in the evolution of the space programme, so it is fitting that she accompany you as a student astronaut. She has indicated that she is also willing to assist with the cooking.'

'When do we leave?'

Jim turned to Cassi and raised one eyebrow.

'Tomorrow at five in the morning,' she stated. 'Your equipment has already been stowed on board so that will give you all plenty of time to check it out before we have to leave.'

'Are we not permitted to rest?'

'There will be plenty of time for sleep once we have launched.' She suddenly grinned. 'I don't think you have any idea just how boring life can be on board a space cruiser.'

'Why are you all female?' asked Doctor Schmidt. The gender description was made to sound like an insult.

Cassi smirked. 'Ask our parents. We had little say in the matter.'

'Sarcasm is unwarranted, young lady. I meant why have you chosen a completely female crew?'

'Not by design, nor by some attempt to goad you, herr doctor. They are simply the best.'

'If there are no further questions,' interrupted Jim Duncan tactfully. 'I will ask Signorina Sporetti to briefly cover the route you will take.'

Carla went to the board and flicked on the back-screen projector. 'When we launch, we fire forwards to increase our velocity from Orion's speed of just over eleven thousand kilometres per hour to normal cruise rate.'

'I thought Orion was stationary,' argued one.

'Only with reference to the planet's surface. Earth is rotating, and so is Orion.' She paused to defiantly glare at him for daring to interrupt her. 'We launch inbound, towards the sun, to achieve maximum slingshot. After that, we follow the course our Commander took last year when she went to Andromeda. It will take almost three months to leave the galaxy completely. After that, Iris has been programmed to swing us round the far side of the Andromeda Spiral and bring us back to this exact spot twenty-five years from now. With luck and a fair

wind, we will have travelled about the same time back into the past.'

'Who is this Iris?'

'Iris is the navigation computer. It's an Infra-red stellar identification system.'

'Why back to this spot?'

'Because Officer Hunt can set the automatic pilot on the shuttle which will take you all straight down to Europoort from where she can get her bearings.'

'You mention coming back here,' said Doctor Martin thoughtfully. 'I understand the reasons why because you will need a reference point, but Orion had not been built twenty-five years ago.'

Carla smiled genuinely for the first time. 'You're right. However, Orion has been positioned on the same site as the failed Intelsat. Upon final approach, all I will have to do is home in on the MTV broadcast. Easy.'

'Do we sleep the whole time?'

Cassi stepped in. 'I would advise it.'

'And how do we get back to real time?'

'We wait. Eventually, our time will catch up with real time while we are asleep once more.'

'There is no way to speed up the process?'

Cassi shook her head. 'None.' She grinned cheekily. 'Sorry.'

This didn't seem to fully satisfy the scientists, so Jim Duncan interrupted. 'I will now ask Janine and Carla to take you on board and show you to your quarters. Commander Hardy will join you shortly.'

They all followed the girls out into the corridor, through the airlock and umbilical into Wayfarer. Cassi took her father's hand. 'Thanks for the moral support.'

Jim sighed. 'There is nothing worse than scientists who have half the picture. Are you going to be all right baby-sitting that lot?'

Cassi grinned. 'I'll manage. If they get too stropky, I'll leave them behind to fend for themselves.'

'Don't do that. There'll be hell to pay.'

'Dad, I was only joking.'

'You know you won't be able to call for help, don't you? I was a wee lad in Inverness at the time you will arrive, trying to reprogramme Sat Nav units on North Sea fishing boats.'

She stood back in admiration. 'And just look at you now in your posh uniform.'

He slapped her bottom playfully. 'Go and sort out your passengers. If you don't, they'll be arguing about who gets the top bunks.'



The launch was an anti-climax after all the hurried activity in preparation. Wayfarer Three unlocked her docking clamps, inched clear with retros and fired her main drive at five am precisely. Within minutes, she was accelerating smoothly away from Earth with Sol in the forward viewer screen. Cassi relaxed for the first time and unclipped her seat belt. 'Janine, you have the deck. I'm going to check on our friends upstairs.'

There is no window at the front of the Wayfarer craft. However, the next best thing is a viewing aperture in the stellar observation room above. She found them all trying to look through the metre-square telescope window at the same time.

She coughed to gain their attention. 'Gentlemen. If you are interested, I am about to check out the ship. I will be happy to show any or all of you round.'

After some discussion, Doctor Martin decided to accompany Cassi, with a science technician called Bruce, a tall Australian with not a trace of hair upon his head. She had smiled when they were introduced, believing that Australians were only called Bruce in movies. She had almost asked him if he was married to a girl named Sheila.

Behind the observatory was the Medlab. On the original series, there had been a series of store-rooms behind this but, on Wayfarer Three, one of the larger ones had been converted into a kind of dormitory where they found Debbie checking over the cryo units in readiness for the long sleep. She smiled her welcome and briefly discussed the procedure for bedding down.

From there, Cassi took the men through a maze of passages and rooms, some of which were filled with growing plants. She explained that in the prototype it had been foreseen that the crews would be awake in flight for months, and that at least some fresh food had been arranged for their diet. But technology had overtaken time and the present vegetable stocks were more for variety than for dietary necessity.

Amidships, they came to the loading bay. It had been enlarged on the new model and contained an unused Series Two Titan Shuttle, so named because the prototype had been designed to descend to the surface of one of Saturn's moons. Inside the loading bay, it seemed huge and Cassi pointed out the latitudinal doors in the roof of Wayfarer through which the shuttle would launch. She briefly explained the procedure for departure and showed them the airtight doors on either side.

She pointed aft. 'Through there is access to the Proton Drive. The door carrying the antimatter warning sign must remain closed at all times whilst the reactor is active. If you pass through, the door automatically seals to prevent isotopic contamination and you will be unable to return until the drive has been shut down and the area checked.' She made sure they were listening before adding: 'There will be no exceptions.'

'Is it that dangerous?' Doctor Martin asked with a laugh.

Cassi did not laugh. 'Yes, it is. That is why we shall go this way.'

She gestured towards a hatch leading forward and they filed through into a long, well-lit corridor. 'This passageway leads straight back to the flight deck.'

'How do you manage the gravity?' the doctor asked, lifting one foot from the neoprene-coated deck.

'Artificial,' she replied. 'This deck is at the mid level from nose cone to drive baffles. Gravity is activated from both sides of this central plate. It can be adjusted, of course, or switched off altogether. But that is only done in an emergency.'

'Why is that?'

'Because of the unstable nature of liquids in a free-float.'

She laughed politely at his puzzled face. 'Below this deck, filling the entire lower holds, are the water and liquid oxygen tanks. They are gravitised upwards towards this deck. It helps to keep the centre of gravity in the middle of the ship, increasing its stability under stress. This corridor runs down the almost exact centre of the ship. On your left are all the washrooms and toilet facilities as well as the main airlock. Suits are stored in the adjacent lockers and other safety equipment in well-marked bays.'

'And on the right?'

She pushed open the first door. 'This is the science lab where we brought most of your equipment. I think you will find everything is in order.'

Doc Martin looked Impressed whilst his Aussie companion seemed not to realise what most of the things were. 'It seems that we may have underestimated your capabilities.'

Cassi smiled. 'Humans are doing that to me all the time.'

The doctor looked taken-aback by her forthrightness. 'You are really Andromedan then?'

'My mother is Queen Lyniera of Mythos.'

'I must say that you appear quite normal to me.'

She laughed. 'That depends how you define normal. The two races are not dissimilar in most regards.'

'Even inside the uniform?' sneered big Bruce, speaking for the first time.

Cassi smiled sweetly. 'Try to find out and I'll break both your arms.'

A stunned silence followed which was broken by the scientist asking about the next room.

'Kitchen and dining area,' said Cassi, leading the way as if nothing untoward had been said. Maggie was inside, stirring something inside a wide saucepan.

'Dinner?' asked Bruce, moving behind her, suddenly more interested in what might be found inside the teenager's jump-suit.

Maggie lifted her wooden spoon and wafted it under his nose. 'Sterilising fluid.'

Cassi watched the playful banter for a moment and realised she would have to watch these two. Bruce had that rugged sportsman look about him which seemed to attract naive young virgins. Maggie was one naive young virgin who was not going to be allowed to become attracted. Not yet.

'Food stores and refrigerated bays are through there,' Cassi said, and pointed to regain their attention. She turned on her heel. 'If you would like to follow me, I will show you the accommodation section.'

Half an hour later, they had seen everything she was prepared to show them. According to the forward viewer, they were passing a large object off the port bow.

'Where are we?' the doctor asked.

'Just passing Jupiter by the looks of it.' She stuck her head over the ballustrade. 'How soon to Saturn, Carla?'

'Eight minutes. Neptune in twelve. Everything is going to plan.'

Cassi smiled. 'Good.' She turned back to the men. 'Can I leave you to find your own way back to your colleagues? I need to check some figures with Iris.'

They left and she sat down on the flight deck. Carla pressed two keys on the keyboard at Cassi's nod.

'Iris,' she said. 'Estimated time for Kappa at present progression factor.'

The screen bleeped and they read; '**54d 19h 22m 08s >**'

'Estimated time for arrival off Andromeda.'

'**4123d 19h 41m 57s >**'

'Eleven years and four months,' calculated Carla quickly.

'Estimated time of arrival Intelsat,' Cassi said.

'**9125d 01h 11m 29s >**'

'Dead on schedule,' said Janine with a smile. 'It seems that we females get something right some-times.'

'Huh!,' said Cassi. 'You're going to be over an hour late. You'll have to do better than that, you know.'

Carla looked stunned and Janine swallowed hard.

Cassi burst out laughing. 'I think you might be allowed a point nought nought nought five percent error when basing your calculations on an uncertain variable. Especially on a journey of over five million light years.'

They relaxed and laughed with her.

She felt a firm hand on her shoulder. 'Cassi, can I have a quiet word?'

'Sure. Your deck, Janine.'

Cassi followed her Security Officer into the corridor. The hatch closed with a pressure hiss. 'What is it, Sarah?'

'There is something odd about a couple of the boxes in number three storage hold. Can I have your permission to check them out?'

'What do you expect to find?'

'I don't know. Perhaps I'm being over-cautious.'

'Can you do it without them knowing about it?'

Sarah nodded. 'The portable x-ray unit Debbie brought along can be used to scan suspicious parcels and the like.'

'Okay, do it. But don't get caught,' she warned. 'I don't want any more arguments with Mad Max than I have to.'



They were out of the Solar System within the hour. Course set for Ross 248, there was no more anyone could do for three weeks. After that, it would be two days to Alpha Groombridge 34 and, later that same day, the giant flare star, Beta Kruger. It was then to take them another month to criss-cross the many stars of the Cassiopeia Constellation, each stellar body giving their speed further boost so that on the fifty-fifth day after launch, they would leave the Milky Way Galaxy altogether and enter the void-to face eleven years of absolutely nothing.

Andromeda would take three years to circumnavigate, its gravity swinging them round in a wide arc, tossing them back towards their home galaxy as if spewing out something which tasted bad. After a further eleven years of void, they would commence gravity braking and arrive back at Earth twenty-five years before they had left.

With the recently-discovered tenth planet, Xen, disappearing fast in the rear viewer, Janine shut down the Proton Drive. With nothing to push against, any form of propellant was useless. According to the laws of astrophysics, Wayfarer could not accelerate, decelerate or change course by more than a few microns. Carla configured Iris to perform a long range forward scan and then sat back in her chair with her legs up on the console.

Cassi jumped to her feet. 'I propose a game of basketball before dinner and I suggest we make that meal a full dress affair in celebration of our first leg completed.'

Sarah's eyes went upward. 'What about them?'

Cassi leaned forward and touched the intercom switch. 'We, the crew, are going to the gymnasium for a game of basketball. If any of you would like to join us you will be very welcome.'

'Aren't you leaving anyone on watch?' asked Sarah.

'No point. Iris is the best watchdog we could ask for. Her reactions are quicker than any of ours.'

'I was thinking of..' Her eyes went upwards again.

Cassi laughed and extracted what looked like a small calculator from her overall pocket. 'Iris would warn me immediately. Don't worry. They want to get there, too, don't forget. You didn't find anything unusual, did you?'

Sarah shook her head as they walked into the corridor. 'Nothing I could pick up by x-ray. Only one box was inconclusive. It is lined with a thin layer of lead. However, it could easily be shielding something completely innocent, like blank video or computer discs.'

'Video discs?'

'To bring back evidence. The lead lining would prevent contamination by radiation. Twenty-five years is an awfully long time to keep digital

data intact, especially with the possible threat of radio-activity in space.'



"Gymnasium" was a rather flowery title for what was, after all, only an empty storage bay. However, it had been swept clean and net rings screwed to the wall at either end. It gave them all a chance to get some exercise.

After much persuasion, Bruce and the other scientific assistant agreed to join in the game while Doctors Schmidt and Martin sat and watched from the sidelines: Doctor Schmidt with a slight look of distaste at the sight of six young women prancing about in shorts and tee-shirts; Doctor Martin with his usual blank expression.

The two younger men seemed to enjoy the game, though they were inclined to believe that fair sportsmanship included shouldering the lighter women out of their way. In spite of these macho activities, the agile Maggie ran rings round them most of the time, whilst Cassi never seemed to tire. Sarah looked somewhat like one of the Gladiators, while Janine gave the appearance of being about to be blown away. The heavier-built Debbie looked almost comical as she struggled to keep up, and only Carla approached the game philosophically, her long hair held back in a pony-tail, always appearing in the right place at the right time without seeming to try.

No-one bothered to keep score, nor took the game terribly seriously. It was clear that the men wanted to be seen as being superior to the women but they failed even in that. After three-quarters of an hour, the two teams of four collapsed in a heap, laughing hysterically at each others antics.

The ice was broken.



Dinner was a delightful affair. Everyone made an attempt to look smart-Cassi in her long black dress was hostess, assisted by Maggie. Dressed in an electric blue dress with plunging back, no-one would believe she was only fourteen and her eyes sparkled with delight at her privilege. Carla wore extra large earrings and, somehow, ate a four-course dinner without ever removing her chewing gum. Janine held a quiet conversation with Doctor Schmidt's assistant, a young man called Peter with an unpronounceable Slavic surname. At Cassi's request, Sarah kept Bruce's attention away from Maggie, and the two of them spent the rest of the evening arm-wrestling in the corner.

Alcohol was not normally allowed on board but Cassi made an exception on the understanding that the whole stock was finished that evening. Wine flowed fairly freely but none of them actually became drunk. Even with little to do, they each were responsible people. Only Maggie became slightly giggly and was allowed to stay up as long as the adults. She fell asleep just before midnight, Universal Time, with her head in Sarah's lap.

'When do we sleep?' asked Doctor Schmidt from the opposite end of the table.

'Tonight? Or for the trip?'

'For the trip, of course.'

Cassi smiled. 'Anytime you like. Debbie has prepared the sleepers in expectation of some wanting to go up early. The longer you sleep, the less real time you will lose.'

'How many crew are needed to run the ship?'

'At least one of us must remain alert until we leave the galaxy. There are some minor course adjustments to be made as we pass each star. Technically, even that could be left to the computer, but I feel happier seeing us out of our back yard before resting.'

'When will you wake us?'

'Iris has been programmed to wake me as we approach Kappa inbound. After that, we can wake as we are needed. The fewer awake, the less food we will consume. I guarantee that everyone will be awake and alert long before we regain Earth orbit.'

'I am no longer a young man, Commander Hardy. Would you object if I went to sleep fairly soon?'

Cassi smiled to herself. He was asking her permission. 'Not at all, Doctor Schmidt. That seems eminently sensible to me.'



## 4

Iris woke Cassi on the first of January, nineteen ninety-seven, two days out from Kappa Cassiopeiae, the star after which she had been named. She could have handled the deceleration alone—she had done so before. However, Janine and Carla needed the experience, so she woke them the next day, along with Maggie who, because of her youth, wouldn't miss seven weeks out of her life.

They all watched the forward screen as they approached.

'We seem to be coming in awfully fast,' noted Janine more than a little nervously.

'We are,' laughed Cassi. 'However, some of the effect you are seeing is an optical illusion.'

'Why so?' asked Carla. Cassi wondered if her Navigation Officer had slept for twenty-five years with that same piece of chewing gum in her mouth.

'We cannot see Kappa itself, only the light from it which is coming towards us at, would you believe, the speed of light. We, on the other hand are coming in at well over a hundred thousand times that speed. As we get closer, the light is concentrated up between us, producing a most weird effect. After we pass, we will be moving away faster than the light is leaving the star. In fact, if it was not a continuous spread of light, we would not see it at all because we are travelling considerably faster than that light. The further we get away from it, the older the light will be. By the time we reach Earth, the light presently being emitted from Kappa will be over three thousand years old.'

'And we will cover the distance in what period of time?'

'At this speed? About nine days. But we would have no way of stopping once we got there. The stars we passed on the way out each almost doubled our speed, cumulatively, by slingshot effect. Going back, we must use these same stars to slow us down, which means using full reverse thrust at just the right moment and letting their gravity do

the hard work by pulling us back towards them. If we reduce our speed by a third at each juncture, Wayfarer will be at the correct speed to slip into Earth orbit in just over two months.'

'How does that compare with the predicted time?' asked Janine.

Carla tapped keys on the computer. 'We will be seven minutes early.'

Cassi shook her head sadly. 'Tut tut.'

The Italian swung round to see if she was serious and found her grinning widely.

The intercom buzzed. 'Grub up!'

Cassi slid out of her chair. 'Let's go and see what Maggie has cooked up for us.'



The gravity-braking worked just as well as it had on the two previous occasions Cassi had done it. It seemed odd to her that someone else was doing all the hard work, but it was good practice and both girls took their jobs very seriously. It left Cassi and Maggie with opportunity for a lot of time together for which Cassi was grateful.

The teenager spent hours peering through the big telescope upstairs, seeing stars from a direction opposite to usual. She was given the project of looking for planets round any of the stars they passed, but none were found. It seemed that, contrary to expectations, Sol was alone in having accompanying planets.

By the third week in February, they had passed Ross inbound and were ten days from home, the dot that was Sol barely discernible, even through the telescope. A week later, Cassi woke Sarah and Debbie and, as they passed within a million miles of the Pluto/Charon binary, she turned off the last four cryo units.

Excitement grew amongst the whole crew as they went through the orbits of Saturn and Jupiter, veering only slightly to pass under the asteroid belt. By the time they passed Mars and her tiny moons, Phobos and Deimos, Wayfarer was at full reverse thrust and Sol was clearly the nearest star.

Gently, Carla swung the big ship round the far side of Earth to dissipate the momentum while Janine slowed it with retros. On the third of March, Wayfarer Three was upside-down and almost geosynchronous over the Amazon delta with the Intelsat TV communication satellite dead ahead.

They all jumped as Maggie found what she had been searching for. Nineties pop music bellowed from the speaker, but on the flight deck they were without the means of getting a picture.

'What on earth is that?' asked Doctor Schmidt, frowning.

Maggie grinned. 'MTV.'



The celebration this time was far more subdued, mainly because of the lack of alcohol. The drives had been totally shut down to prevent the possibility of being picked up by emission sensors on Earth and everyone held their breath for an hour until Cassi announced that they had apparently arrived undetected.

Being inverted meant that the detail of Earth's surface could be seen via the viewing panel in the upper laboratory, and the four scientists made numerous scans and took copious notes about what they could see.

There was considerable to-ing and fro-ing between observatory and laboratory store to the great amusement of Cassi and, after a while, even Maggie got bored and announced that she was going to load the

dishwasher for something to do.

'I think I'll go and check out the shuttle,' announced Cassi. 'It's best you get to Europoort at sunrise so as to have the whole day to look around.'

Janine got to her feet and stretched. 'I'll go. I need the exercise.'

'Okay, but check the integrity of the seal on the outer doors before you open the hatch to the loading bay. We've come a long way and put the ship under a lot of stress whilst gravity-braking. I don't want you blown out into space.'

'Had I better wear a suit?'

Cassi shook her head. 'Not necessary if the pressure is up in the hold. Check the gauge before entering. If in doubt, buzz me.'

Janine smiled. 'I will. No chances will be taken.'

The door opened with a hiss and she jogged off down the long corridor.

'How many times do we go down?' asked Sarah as she came from speaking to Debbie in the Medlab.

Cassi shrugged. 'That depends on how long we are here. By rights, one day should get the team the evidence they need. But they may opt to stay a little longer after coming all this way.'

'Won't that be increasing the chances of detection by people in the present time?'

'Of course. But it....'

The lights dimmed briefly and Iris bleeped.

Cassi's heart almost stopped and she instinctively stabbed at the intercom with the kitchen area, the only place where a sudden power surge was normally possible. 'Maggie, are you all right?'

'Sure,' came the instant reply.

Cassi looked up the ramp. The scientists had not noticed anything and the level of conversation had not changed.

Cassi tried another button. 'Janine?'

There was no answer. Sarah was half way to the door before Cassi got to her feet.

Maggie's voice came suddenly. 'I have found Janine in the corridor outside. I think she's dead.'



Cassi called for Debbie who came on the run with what looked like a large briefcase. They found Maggie and Sarah over the prone form close to the loading bay door which was still firmly closed.

'Stand clear,' yelled Debbie, dropping to her knees beside Janine. She tore open the velcro fastenings to her flight suit and felt for a heart beat. There wasn't one. She flicked open the case and tossed a wire to Sarah who plugged it into a wall socket. There was a slight whine as the resuscitator powered up.

'What happened?' asked a very shaken Maggie.

'I don't know,' said Cassi thoughtfully.

Janine's back arched for a second as the power surged through her. Sarah was filling a long needle ready for Debbie. Pure adrenaline, Cassi surmised, to go straight into the heart.

It took several attempts and ten minutes to restore the pilot's pulse but she did not regain consciousness. Debbie rolled her carefully into the recovery position and asked Cassi and Maggie to go for a stretcher.

Sarah slowly got to her feet and stared at the loading bay hatch. There was nothing unusual about it except for a wet patch on the floor in front of the door. Carefully, she reached out her hand and, after some understandable hesitation, placed her hand firmly on the metal

hatch. Nothing. She checked the frame which was also dead.

'Static?' she asked quietly.

'Not that strong,' replied Debbie as she covered Janine's resting form with a blanket.

Sarah bent down to help her. As she did, she looked at the young pilot's fingers. On her right index finger, there was a bright red mark, like a burn. As the others arrived and they got ready to take her to the Medlab, Sarah stared at the door thoughtfully once more. Nothing.

After a while, she looked at the gauge which Cassi had mentioned. The loading bay was fully pressurised. She reached out her hand to press the door button and drew it back sharply. There was something wrong with the panel. She examined it carefully and eventually located a tiny copper wire sticking out of the plastic escutcheon around the button, too fine to be seen by the naked eye. With her hand meter, she measured the voltage. Fatal to anyone standing on that wet patch on the floor.

With the end of her plastic pen, she pressed the button and the door slid open. Nothing unusual beyond. The door release had been deliberately booby-trapped by someone who really didn't care who might get killed in the process. But by whom? And why? Janine was young and her heart was strong. What if it had been Doctor Schmidt? But then, she thought, what were the chances of him coming down here to enter the loading bay?

She sighed. Only one of two people were known to be definitely come down here today. Either Cassi or Janine. Someone was trying to kill one or both of them. But it was nonsense. There was no-one else who could fly to the surface with some reasonable certainty of getting down in one piece. Not only that, without a pilot, they had no way of getting safely back to their own time.

Who had opportunity? She thought of all the activity since they had arrived. Almost anyone. Her stomach screwed up at the thought of poor little Maggie getting a vicious belt of such proportions.

Carefully, she extracted the remnants of the wire with her insulated pliers and rendered the mechanism safe. Slowly and thoughtfully, she walked back to her quarters and locked the door after herself.

Bending down, she recovered her suitcase and glanced at the handle. Her precautions had paid off-someone had tried to open it at some time. She set the 18-digit electronic combination from memory and flicked open the lid. Very gently, she peeled apart the tiny spring clips inside and removed part of the lining. Inside was a false section, not three centimetres deep, of compacted polystyrene. With a sharp knife she sliced this open and removed the flattish object inside, smiling as she held it firmly in her hand. She then took out a smaller clip and inserted it into the butt of the automatic, shunting one up the spout.

Sitting on the edge of the bed, she unfastened her flight suit and eased it right down to her knees. With her knife, she slit open her left pocket-few knew that she was ambidextrous-and tore it out altogether. For a moment, she considered her own reflection in the mirror. The tan she had acquired whilst visiting her parents in the Pyrenees was fairly even, except for where her tiny panties had kept her almost decent.

She opened her legs wide and placed the gun high up on the inside of her left thigh, the butt forward and tight against her crotch where she hoped it wouldn't show through her tight suit. With her other hand, she took out a roll of ordinary masking tape and wound it liberally round both gun and leg.

Standing and pulling on her flight suit, she tested it. It was not too uncomfortable, and also undetectable as long as no-one tried to grope her. She knew the masking tape would tear and release her secret

weapon quite easily, but she also hoped that if she ever needed to use it in a hurry, she wouldn't do herself a serious mischief in the process.



Safe in the Medlab, Debbie pronounced Janine "stable", which meant that she would likely survive but be unable to fly the shuttle down to the surface. With heavy heart as to the possible repercussions of her going instead, Cassi began the routine check-out of the shuttle, ready for departure, while Sarah and the men-folk placed on board various items of equipment.

At six o'clock in the morning of the fourth of March, the Titan shuttle moved slowly out of the loading bay of Wayfarer Three, leaving Debbie to watch Janine, and Carla to watch ship. Cassi had originally intended for Maggie to remain behind also but finally decided that she would rather have the teenager where Sarah and herself could keep a safe eye on her. Carla had strict instructions from Cassi to peel out of orbit and hide behind the moon if danger threatened their only means of getting back to real time. Radio silence was to be observed at all times except in the case of dire emergency.



Cassi allowed the automatic homing device bring her down to the spot where she knew Europoort should be. She had seen the archive pictures of the ferry terminal as it had been before the Consortium War, but she wasn't sure just what the area had been like during the months that followed. The reports were incomplete, but it was clear that some extensive flooding had happened due to the breaching of the Haringvlietdam. As a result, it was difficult to identify the Dutch coastline as they dropped out of the clouds above what had once been the city of Rotterdam.

'Mien Gott,' exclaimed Doctor Schmidt. 'So this is what it was like here. I was in Dusseldorf when the bombs struck and we heard the flooding in the Netherland was severe, but we didn't think it was this bad.'

'There's nowhere to land,' muttered Sarah, peering out of the window.

Cassi turned southward. 'We have to put down somewhere. We're a sitting duck hovering up here like this.'

In silence, they passed over where Putten Island had been. Of Dortrecht, only the tip of the church spire poked out of the water.

'Try towards the city,' suggested Sarah. Cassi nodded her agreement and swung north, crossing the Old Maas River close to Ridderkerk.

She suddenly pointed forwards. 'What's that?'

Cassi also peered. 'Looks like the roof of a building just sticking out of the water.'

'Can you land on it?'

'It seems flat enough. I can try.'

Cassi came in fast, desperate to get down as quickly as possible, wondering just how many people might already have them on radar. The sprung legs depressed fully as Cassi dropped the shuttle onto the flat roof and immediately shut down the drives to reduce the possibility of detection by means of their heat emission. Maggie was first to the airlock, pulling it open.

'Let Sarah go first,' Cassi called out sharply and the teenager reluctantly stepped aside. Sarah tousled the youth's hair in passing and slammed the door after herself. The airlock was only big enough for

one person at a time and both doors could not, for obvious reasons, be open at once, even when atmospheric pressure was equal. It was, therefore, several minutes before they all stood outside on the flat roof together.

The breeze off the North Sea was quite cool and Maggie turned her back to it and zipped up her anorak, aware that a slight spray was also in the air as the minor waves splashed against the building's walls ten feet or so below them. Sarah was leaning over the edge.

'It looks like the top floor is clear of the water,' she announced. 'There must be a way to get inside, out of this wind.'

'Here,' called Maggie, pointing at a kind of trap-door in the roof. She tried to open it, but it remained stubbornly closed.

Sarah was moving round the edge of the roof. 'There is a ladder here. If I can get down it, I can enter through one of the windows. There is a broken one just along the ledge from it.'

Cassi was about to say "be careful," when the dark-haired girl swung her leg over the edge and was gone. It seemed like hours but was only minutes before the trap-door opened and her smiling face appeared.



After the cold outside, the interior was warm by comparison as the party congregated in the stair-well, passing down various pieces of equipment. They could hear water lapping against the stairs below them.

'How long do you need to be here?' Cassi asked the scientists as they began to unpack.

'Long enough to gather some hard evidence as to the time. There must be something here.'

'Then I'd better move the shuttle. It's too vulnerable where it is.'

'Where will you put it?' asked Maggie.

Cassi grinned. 'Where no-one will see it.' She explained her plan.

Sarah nodded her agreement. 'But how will you get back up here?'

'Hopefully, the stairways will be clear. This building looks suspiciously like a hospital. If so, the entrance should be wide enough not to have become blocked by debris.'

'But you may have to climb several floors. How will you breathe?'

'I'll wear a space-suit. It will keep me warm, dry and alive.'

'Is there any way I can help?'

'Come and get a suit, too. If you work your way down from this floor, we should meet in the middle. If we don't, then one of us is in trouble.'

In ten minutes, Sarah was back with them in her own suit, clipping on her helmet, and the building trembled for a moment as Cassi took off in the shuttle. Maggie knelt on one of the beds beside the window, watching it settle gracefully onto the surface of the water and then gradually sink from sight, while the scientists searched the nearby offices for data and their assistants set up a mobile generator with associated lighting and heating units.

In the stairwell under water, it soon got very dark as Sarah descended carefully, and she was glad she had brought a hand lamp. Carefully, she went down step by step until she reached the first floor. There, she found she could descend no further. The whole floor had been filled by a slide of mud and rocks, presumably washed down by the Maas. Reluctantly, she made her way back up the stairs and emerged from the water, hoping there was another set of stairs. As she lumbered along the corridor in her dripping suit, she saw the men eagerly at work, taking photos of everything. Of young Maggie, there was not a sign.

A lump came to her throat at the thought that something might have happened to her niece so she went further afield, looking in every room. The four scientists were still busy so, presumably, one of them hadn't kidnapped her for some obscure reason, not in so short a time. She thought about Cassi and hoped that the car park below the water was level enough to prevent damage to the shuttle. She also was aware that she might already be trying to get up the stairs and in need of help. Without her, they were all stuck here. For now, Maggie would have to wait.

At the end of the corridor was a door into a ward. Sarah frowned. Several of the beds looked as though they had recently been slept in. There were magazines and comics on the side tables, as well as dirty plates on the table. Someone was obviously living here.

A movement caught her eye in a room at the end. Cautiously, she made her way towards the gap in the door through which she had seen it, wishing that she was able to get at her automatic deep inside her suit. She blundered in, slamming the door back on its hinges with a crash which Cassi must have heard three floors down.

Maggie was in the corner, surrounded by three youths who looked round quickly. They were unkempt and dirty, their eyes wide in alarm as Sarah appeared. She stopped. They were all staring at her. Suddenly, Maggie began to laugh.

Cautiously, Sarah removed her helmet and they stood, eyes wide in awe, at this visitor from outer space.

'Hi,' she said with a smile to disarm them. 'I'm Sarah.'

One of the youths was a young woman. Because of her mishmash of dress and her wild hair-do, it was impossible to guess her age. The other two were boys, probably aged somewhere between fourteen and sixteen.

'My name is...' began the younger boy.

'Tais-toi!' snapped the girl. 'Dites-leur rien!'

Sarah smiled. 'Donc, est-ce-que vous comprenez le Français?'

The young woman blinked. 'Oui,' she whispered.

'Vous ne parlez pas de l'Anglais?'

The girl shook her head frantically.

Sarah smiled again. 'Then we will have to take you to someone whose French is better than mine.'

'You can't do that,' the young woman spat and then stopped. 'How did you know?'

Sarah held up one of the comics. 'Some of your books are in English.'

'I... I haven't spoken English for a long time. Jacques and Pierre speak French and a little English.'

Sarah waved at the boys. 'So they are Jacques and Pierre. And what is your name?'

'They call me Roof.'

'Roof? You mean Ruth?'

She shook her head. 'No, Roof. It was where they found me after the tidal wave hit.'

'So what is your real name?'

'I don't know.'

'How did you come to be up on the roof?'

'I don't know.'

'Where did you learn English?'

'I don't know.'

Enough of that for now. Sarah pointed at Maggie. 'This is Margaret. We call her Maggie.'

The girls nodded at each other. What a contrast: Maggie-well-groomed and clean; Roof-untidy and dirty.

'Stay with them,' said Sarah to Maggie. 'I have to go and make sure Cassi is okay.'

Maggie nodded. 'Shall I take them to the men?'

'Not just yet. Let me get Cassi first. We'll let her decide what to do next.'

Sarah put her helmet back on and went down the fire-escape stairs carefully, her torch barely penetrating the murky water ahead of her. At the third floor, she met Cassi coming up, giving her the thumbs up sign. They broke the surface together to find the quartet looking down at them.

They removed their helmets and Cassi found the strangers staring at her golden hair.

She smiled. 'Hello. My name is Cassi.'

'Are you English, too?'

Cassi shook her head. 'No, I'm from Andromeda.'

'You speak funny English,' said Roof, giggling.

'It's because...'. She nearly said it was because her father was a Scot but changed in mid sentence. 'It's because I was taught English by people from Inverness in Scotland. I have a Scottish accent. Sarah has a Cambridge accent because she was taught by people from Cambridge. Maggie speaks English, Dutch and a little French.'

'Maggie says you have all come from outer space. Is that true?'

Cassi nodded. 'We have a very big spaceship high up in the sky.'

'Did you come down in that flying saucer?' asked one of the boys. 'We saw it go into the water.'

'I put it in the car park where it will be safe.' She grinned. 'But it's not a flying saucer. It's a shuttle craft.'

'Like a helicopter?'

Cassi nodded. 'Something like a helicopter.'

'We had a helicopter come here once.'

'Did you see it?'

Pierre nodded. 'It was big and blue with UN on its....'

'We shouldn't be talking about that,' said Roof suddenly. 'We promised each other we wouldn't.'

It was clear to Cassi that for some reason the subject was painful so she let it lie for a while. Instead, she left Sarah and Maggie with them and went in search of the men.



'Finding everything you need?' she asked Doctor Schmidt when she had removed her suit.

'There is much to examine,' he replied. 'We will need to be here for at least the rest of the day.'

'There are beds down the corridor. I'll have some made up in case we have to stay the night. In the meantime, we have found three survivors. If I can take a lead from the genny I'll make hot water for washing. I'll also arrange some food for them.'

Doctor Schmidt nodded. 'I'd like to talk with these survivors.' He moved towards the door.

She placed her arm firmly across the frame to bar his path. 'Later. Too many people at once might frighten them. They are only youngsters.'

'I think I would rather...'

'Later,' she insisted.

'May I remind you that I have full authority on the ground. Your place is in the air.'

She stood her ground. 'Later. They look as if they haven't eaten a proper meal in weeks. Their tongues will loosen when they have been fed. They won't be going anywhere.'

He stared at her for a long time, debating whether he should enforce

his authority. His colleagues moved and stood behind him. Cassi didn't budge.

'Okay,' he said eventually. 'Later. In the meantime, I'll get Bruce to help you with power from the generator.'

Cassi smiled. 'That would be a great help. Thank you.'

Hot soup was welcomed by all. Doctors Schmidt and Martin were introduced briefly to the survivors while the assistants carried on working. Bruce did much of the labouring whilst Peter removed the discs from the digital cameras and transferred the photographic data to a laptop computer for storage on compact disk. Cassi sat watching and found herself impressed by the high-definition produced on the small LCD screen considering the relatively poor light inside the building.

The youths were clearly disconcerted by all the confusing activity going on around them, particularly Roof who kept herself in the background at all times. With help from Bruce, Sarah managed to get one of the showers working but the water pressure was very low.

'Do you know where the tank is?' Sarah asked Roof who, without speaking, led the way up a short flight of steps and through a small access door into a metre-high roof space. As Sarah had suspected, the level of water was no more than a few inches deep.

'We'll have to top it up.' She turned to Bruce. 'Could you organise a pump?'

The Australian grinned. 'Sure thing.' He went off in search of equipment. When he returned with a portable pump and hoses, they set about arranging a transfer of water.

'No, not yet,' cried Roof suddenly.

Sarah frowned. 'What is it?'

Roof was clearly nervous. 'Wait for the tide to turn.'

Sarah smiled. 'Don't worry. We have is a chemical filter which will remove the salt from the water. It will be almost drinkable.'

'It's not the salt which is poisonous,' said Roof.

'Then what is it?'

'It's the Tetramethyldiarsine.'

Sarah looked stunned. 'The what?'

'Tetramethyldiarsine. Can't you smell it?'

Sarah sniffed and then shrugged. 'Just seaweed.' She sniffed again. 'And, perhaps, a faint smell of garlic.'

Roof nodded vigorously. 'Tetramethyldiarsine.'

'And this tetra-whatever? It's poisonous?'

'Of course. It's not entirely water soluble but if you pump it into the tank, all our water will be polluted.'

'Problems?' said Cassi as she returned, seeing the consternation on Roof's face.

'Roof says the water is toxic,' replied Sarah.

'Tetramethyldiarsine,' repeated the teenager. 'It's used in the production of rubber sports shoes.'

'How do you know that?'

Roof shrugged. 'I don't know.'

'Are you a chemist?'

'I don't think so.'

'Did you go to University?'

'I can't remember.'

'Then how you know about tetramethyldiarsine?'

She shrugged again. 'I don't know. I just know it.'

Cassi thought for a moment and then said:. 'Would you also use

polytetrafluoroethylene?’

Roof looked puzzled. ‘What’s that?’

Cassi smiled. ‘If you were a chemist, you would know all about PTFE.’

‘What is it?’ asked the confused Sarah.

‘It’s used by plumbers and housewives throughout the galaxy.’

‘Coffee?’

Cassi grinned. ‘Teflon. Your suit is treated with it to keep out the water.’ She gently put her hand on Roof’s arm. ‘So you are not a chemist after all. So why, I wonder, would you know all about tetramethyldiarsine—an accelerator used in the production of rubber?’

‘She said “rubber sports shoes” ,’ prompted Sarah.

‘Have you been involved in making sports shoes?’

Roof was beginning to look scared. ‘I can’t remember.’

‘Okay,’ said Cassi kindly. ‘I won’t press it. Can you remember how you came to be in this hospital? Were you sick?’

Roof no longer looked scared. She looked terrified.

Cassi smiled again. ‘Sorry. I’m just trying to help you.’ She tactfully changed the subject. ‘When is the water safe?’

Roof noticeably relaxed. ‘In about an hour when the tide starts coming in again.’

‘Okay.’ Cassi smiled and then looked at her colleague. ‘Could you help me outside for a minute, Sarah?’

Alone on the roof with a cold wind whipping up spray, they huddled together against the low parapet wall. ‘Roof is obviously very frightened about something.’

Sarah nodded. ‘I agree. What will we do with them all?’

‘Well, we cannot take them back with us, that’s for sure. The shuttle was overcrowded on the way down. There isn’t enough power to get back into orbit with everyone on board.’

‘Can you make two trips?’

‘That’s possible. But every time I move the shuttle, we risk being picked up on radar or by emission release. I think we may have to leave them.’

‘We can’t leave them here,’ said Sarah. ‘There is hardly any food left and practically no fresh water.’

‘Where could we take them? Just by discovering them, we could be changing the future.’

‘There must be something we can do.’

‘I agree it would be more humane to do something.’

‘I wonder who Roof is?’

‘Why the concern?’

‘I don’t know. I just have this feeling that it is important. Something has clearly terrified her out of her mind. It isn’t so much that she doesn’t remember as she doesn’t seem to want to remember. I wish Debbie could take a look at her.’

‘That could complicate things.’

‘Could we drop them off somewhere safe before going back to Wayfarer?’

‘I think we may have to, and risk the consequences.’

‘Do you want me to try and have a quiet word with her?’

‘Would you mind? She seems to trust you a little.’ Cassi looked at her watch. ‘I’d better see how the scientists are getting on. If we are going to move the kids and then get off again today, we can’t lose much time.’

‘Okay. I’ll get Roof to help me make the beds or something. Perhaps

being alone together will get her talking.'



The two women went down again and Sarah took Roof aside as planned while Cassi took the boys to watch Peter working at his lap-top computer. Bruce filmed the proceedings with a digital camcorder.

'Have you been here long?' asked Sarah when they were alone.

Roof shrugged. 'Almost three months.'

'Just the three of you?'

'No, there was...'

 She stopped, looking scared.

Sarah smiled. 'It's all right. It will be our secret.'

The teenager worked in silence for several minutes.

'There was a nurse,' she said unexpectedly. 'Her name was Anna.'

Sarah sat on the bed next to Roof. 'Where did she go?'

Roof's eyes flared. 'She died, all right?'

'I'm sorry,' said Sarah softly.

Roof wrung her hands for a few minutes then sat back on the bed. 'She came with me from the other hospital, but a big wave swept the helicopter off the roof before Anna and the boys could get into it. I jumped clear but the pilot was trapped inside.' She hung her head. 'He just drowned.'

'Who else was here?' said Sarah to divert the girl's mind.

'Just the two boys. They had been the last to leave and were waiting for our helicopter to come for them. The others all went by ambulance but there wasn't enough room for everyone.'

'So,' said Sarah, recapping slowly. 'There was you and Anna and the two boys, all alone.'

Roof nodded vehemently.

'But someone else came, didn't they?'

'How did you know?' said Roof with alarm.

Sarah smiled. 'Pierre said so. Don't you remember?'

'He shouldn't have said anything. We promised.'

'Promised who?'

'Anna. She made us promise not to tell.'

'But now, she's dead.'

Roof nodded. 'Yes.'

'Was it because these other people came in the helicopter?'

Roof paused and then nodded slightly.

'Did they hurt Anna, these other people?'

'They...they tied her to a bed and...and...they did terrible things to her.'

'Who did?' whispered Sarah, her heart in her mouth.

'The men who came in the helicopter.'

Sarah touched her arm. 'Did they hurt you, too?'

Roof shook her head. 'When she saw the helicopter coming, Anna made us hide on the floor below, just in case they were Russians or something. It was cold and wet, but the men didn't find us.'

'But you saw what they did, didn't you?'

Roof nodded after a while. 'I crept up the stairs even though I shouldn't have done. There were three men and they had taken all Anna's clothes off. She must have been really cold.'

'What happened?'

'When they had finished...using her, they pushed her out of the

window.'

Sarah remembered the broken window she had climbed in when they arrived. She also remembered noticing the bloodstains on the wooden cill inside.

'I dived in the water to save her,' said Roof between sobs.

'Couldn't Anna swim?'

Roof shook her head sadly, the tears increasing. 'She was still tied to the iron bedstead. I tried to undo the knots under the water but my hands were too cold.' The trickle became a flood. 'She died because I couldn't undo her knots.'

Sarah folded her arms around the girl who sobbed for some time. 'How long ago was this?'

'About five weeks,' said Roof through her tears. 'I tried to save her.'

'I know you did,' soothed Sarah. 'Tell me, if you saw those men again, would you recognise them?'

Sarah felt Roof's head nod against her chest. Sarah then knew that, whatever it took, she would not be returning to her own time till she had killed every one of those men.

By mid afternoon, the scientists seemed reasonably satisfied that enough evidence had been collected to prove the point. For once, all of them looked elated as they began to pack things together, partly thankful that they would not have to spend a night in that cold, damp place.

The wind and drizzle abated during the early afternoon and, soon, all the equipment was up on the roof and Cassi had donned her suit and gone down for the shuttle. The sun broke through as they sat on the boxes and waited. It was then that they heard it.

The sound of a helicopter was unmistakable even though it could not be seen. Sarah grabbed her suit helmet and pressed the radio button. 'Cassi, we've got company.'

She swallowed as Roof disappeared back down through the trapdoor like a rabbit with Maggie hot on her heels.

It came in fast from the south-west. It was pale blue and, on the side were the large white letters UN.





## 5

The helicopter circled twice, the side door open and cannon showing, before side-slipping towards the roof and gently landing not twenty feet from where they were. Sarah carried on a commentary for Cassi's sake as the door slid open and out stepped two soldiers, each carrying a machine carbine.

*Very clever,* thought Sarah as they took position. *These men are professionals, spreading out and covering all of them with their weapons.* Their leader was a big black man in battle dress with an unlit cigar sticking from between his clenched teeth.

Sarah stood up and stepped slowly towards the man who had the insignia of a major. Her hands were deep inside her pockets, the left one around the butt of her automatic as she smiled the widest smile she could fake.

The major frowned. 'Any of you guys speak English?'

'Of course,' said Sarah sweetly, her helmet under her arm so that Cassi would be able to hear the conversation below in the shuttle. 'Do you?'

The American's eyes closed to slits as he pointed the gun barrel straight at Sarah's heart. 'This is forbidden territory. Where did you come from?'

'We came from outer space.'

This was clearly not the answer the officer expected to hear and he was obviously debating with himself as to how to take her as a trace a smirk touched his lips. 'So, we have a comedienne amongst us.' He may have seen something close to the funny side of it but the gun never wavered. 'How did you get here?'

Sarah saw the slight disturbance in the water behind the helicopter. 'We came in a shuttle.'

The cynical grin grew a little. 'A shuttle? What shuttle?'

Cassi's timing could not have been better. As Sarah smiled again, the shining hull broke the surface and began to rise slowly.

Sarah pointed over his shoulder. 'That shuttle.'

The grin became a laugh. 'I'm not going to be caught by that one, young lady.'

At that very second, the vertical lift rockets broke surface and the impact of the noise was incredible after the relative quiet. It would have taken a superman not to turn and look and none of the men were supermen. The major grunted as Sarah threw her arms around him, trapping his arms, and rammed the barrel of her gun behind his left ear.

With her nose almost touching his, she said: 'drop the gun,' in a voice which, at that range, could be heard over the noise of the shuttle which rose gradually into the air till it was thirty feet above the helicopter.

The major reluctantly obeyed.

'Tell your men to do the same.'

This was the insult to end all insults. It was the first time any one had gotten the better of him and it had to be a woman. He gave the order and his men obeyed.

'And tell your man to take the belt out of the cannon feeder or we will destroy you and your helicopter.'

The shuttle was not armed in any way and Sarah also knew that Cassi's ancestry would not let her take a life. However, one direct blast from the vertical lift rocket at close range could, in seconds, reduce the 'copter to a very small pile of ashes.

With them all disarmed, Sarah called for Maggie who stuck her head out of the trapdoor. 'Bring Roof up here.'

As the shuttle settled beyond the helicopter and the noise began to lessen, the teenagers came closer.

'Roof,' said Sarah. 'Are these the men who came before?'

The girl moved closer, eyeing them all carefully before announcing; 'No.'

Sarah instantly released the major and stepped back from him, still covering him with her gun. 'I may owe you an apology, major.'

The negro slowly lit his cigar before speaking. 'Now what in hell was all that about?'

'You are not the first soldiers to arrive here.'

'Just who are you?' he said.

'I told you. We are visitors from outer space.'

'Where, specifically, in outer space,' he asked cynically.

'Andromeda,' replied Sarah. 'We arrived this morning.'

'I know, we saw you come down. That's why we're here. This is Russian territory but we was sent to investigate.'

'Well, now you know, and we are about to leave. You can, however, do us a favour.'

'And what's that?'

'We found these youngsters here and they are almost out of food and water. Can you take them somewhere safe?'

'I'm not going anywhere in that helicopter,' announced Roof stubbornly. 'I'd rather stay here.'

Sarah thought for a moment and then turned to Maggie. 'Take her to the shuttle. We'll decide what to do with her later.'

A voice from the helicopter interrupted them. 'Major, we've got visitors. Red bandits coming in fast from the north-east.'

The major spun on his heel. 'ETA?'

'They're thirty miles out and coming in at mach2. We've got just over a minute.'

Sarah knew that it would be impossible for everyone to get through the airlock one at a time so she made a snap decision, ushering the boys into open bay of the gunship. 'Cassi, get airborne. We'll contact you later.'

The soldiers were quick to assist as Sarah pushed boys and the scientists towards the 'copter.

'The equipment,' protested Dr Schmidt. 'We can't just leave it.'

'You can if you want to survive the next few minutes,' growled the major. 'Them reds shoot first and ask questions later.'

Peter made a desperate leap and managed to salvage his lap-top before the gunship was lifting from the roof with Sarah and the major swinging in through the open doorway.

Just clearing the parapet, the 'copter sideslipped and dropped almost to water level before turning and roaring away under full power.

'Foxbats,' announced the helicopter pilot who had the rotor pitch at optimum and the whining turbos flat out. 'We ain't gonna make it.'

As if to confirm his observation, there was an enormous explosion

behind them as the roof of the hospital erupted into a gigantic ball of fire.

'Did Cassi get off?' yelled Sarah frantically.

'Couldn't see,' the pilot called back. 'I was busy.'

Sarah hung onto the side of the gunship, the slipstream furiously tugging at her hair, as she leant out as far as she could and saw the great plume of black smoke coming from where the hospital had been. Of the shuttle, there was not a sign.

She was hauled bodily back inside as the gunship turned east and followed the wide river Waal toward the Rhine valley at zero feet. The noise was incredible as the 'copter passed over where bridges had been before the flooding, rising only a little to skirt the towers at Nijmegen.

'Where are they?' shouted the major.

'Right behind,' called the pilot, his attention divided between the windshield and the radar screen. 'Coming in fast.'

'Take the Maas,' ordered the major suddenly and the helicopter banked round the Berg en Dal and practically took the top off the church spire at Groesbeek. Caught unawares, the faster jets were caught in the wider Rhine valley and had to pull up to relocate them again.

It was beginning to get dark as the fugitives ducked under the Autoroute bridge at Venlo and then roared past Roermond.

'It's no good,' yelled the pilot as they approached Maastricht. 'They've found us again. They're closing in attack pattern.'

'Evasive action,' shouted the major. 'Try and get us beyond Liege where the hills restrict them.'

'They'll have the same idea. They'll want to stop us before we get there.'

'Then weave.'

The pilot weaved and an air-to-air missile passed by the open door not a metre away and left the acrid smell of rocket fuel in the cabin.

'It's no good. We're sitting ducks. He won't miss next time.'

Sarah looked behind and could see the two Russian jets less than a mile away, coming in fast. She closed her eyes at the hopelessness of the situation and waited for death, the frustration of being so helpless eating at her, when there was a screaming noise and one of the jets peeled away as if struck. The other held its position for another two seconds and then simply nose-dived into the ground. The first jet tried to swing round again but a large shape erupted between it and the 'copter breathing fire from its lateral nacelles. The jet banked away just in time and just made it over the nearby hill. It was not seen again.

'I can't keep down to this speed,' Cassi's voice came over Sarah's suit radio. 'I'll have to see you later.'

With that, the shuttle rose rapidly into the clouds and was gone.

No-one said anything for a very long time and the helicopter settled on a straight course southward, passing Metz as the hazy sun finally set, and then Dijon as darkness fell completely. It was another hour before Sarah looked ahead and saw the dim lights of an airstrip.

At nine o'clock precisely, they landed close to some airport buildings and, as the noise of the rotors diminished, Sarah wondered where on earth they were and what she was going to say.

## 6

Even in the poor glow from the emergency lighting, it was clear that the terminal building and adjacent railway station had suffered extensively from fire, even though there appeared to be little structural damage. Probably caught in the Alpha radiation, Sarah thought to herself. On the partly melted sign above the main doorway which no longer contained any glass was the word Bienvenue (welcome) but the other word was not easily discernible.

'Satolas,' prompted the major as if reading her mind. 'Welcome to post-apocalyptic Lyon.'

An icy hand closed round her heart at the implication of being in that particular place at that particular time as he led them around the side towards an accommodation block which was more sheltered and had survived to a greater degree. There was still no glass, but the windows had been boarded up with plywood.

'We might as well stay here the night,' he told them cheerfully. 'It's always difficult refuelling in the dark.'

'Is that why we're here?' she asked carefully as they entered the foyer.

'Of course. Although I will have to radio in to Columbia. Admiral Davison will be worried about his favourite Huey crew.'

They were all fed in a makeshift canteen and then the dejected-looking scientists were taken to allocated rooms by the pilot while the major escorted Sarah and the boys to another room.

The lads were dead to the world in minutes and Sarah closed the bedroom door softly behind herself. The major had taken off his combat jacket and was washing his hands. When he turned, towel in hand, Sarah's mouth dropped open. She was staring at his name badge. 'You're Al Slazinski.'

The major frowned, aware that his badge only stated his surname. 'Have we met?'

'Not exactly,' she said, sitting down on the edge of the settee, implications growing by the minute. 'But I once met your wife.'

'My wife?' He was astounded. 'Where?'

She smiled thinly. 'At Europoort.'

He frowned again. 'But Bettina has never been to Europe.'

'No, but she will.'

He sat down slowly. 'I saw this film once. In it, people came from the future to change the past but other people came and tried to stop them. It was good fiction.'

'We didn't come to change the past,' Sarah said quietly. 'We simply came back to see if it could be done.'

'I knew it,' he said. 'You're not from outer space at all.'

Sarah smiled wryly. 'Cassi is. She really did come from Andromeda.' She shrugged. 'But I'm pretty human.'

'This Cassi...She's....'

Sarah laughed. 'Cassi is just like us. But don't get into a fight with her. She will win. She is stronger than both of us put together.'

'What were you doing at Rotterdam?'

'Just gathering evidence. The menfolk with us are scientists of sorts and they're collecting data to prove we really did come back in time.'

'How far?'

'Twenty-five years.'

'You mean in twenty-five years...?'

Sarah nodded. 'We will have several bases on the moon, one on Mars, and ships will have been to other stars and even another galaxy. It's because of those journeys that we are here. We have no ulterior motives, I assure you.'

'But why Rotterdam?'

'Because when the floods abate, a massive space complex will be built there. We will be ferrying supplied up to Orion and...'

'Orion?'

'The Russian space station in orbit.'

'Russian? You mean...?'

'Yes, there will be peace in the end.'

'That seems a long way away. We thought we had reached a state of world peace some years ago when the Wall fell. But it didn't take much to get war going again.' He paused. 'Who are the kids? And why are they so scared?'

'They had visitors before us.' Sarah told them what Roof had revealed and major gritted his teeth at learning of the treatment meted out to the nurse, Anna.

'That wasn't any of our team. We're carrier based in the Med. But the new army base is just a couple of miles from here at Valbonne.'

'Valbonne?'

He nodded. 'The Russian missile struck the south of the city and wiped out the Renault factory as well as the refineries along the river bank. Most of the upper city was flattened in the blast but some people survived in the old town which was sheltered in the gorge. They hid out in the tunnels until the fallout dissipated. The troops were airlifted in to help them.'

'How did people survive? I mean, for food and water?'

Al laughed. 'With great ingenuity, as well as luck. There were quite a few vehicles caught in the Tunnel de Fourvière and one of them was an articulated lorry carrying supermarket foodstuffs. Some clever clogs thought of filtering the water from the washer bottles on all the cars. About a hundred people lasted out for over a week until relief came.'

'And they are still around?'

Al nodded. 'Some are here, in this hotel. Others repaired houses in the town and preferred to stay there.'

'And they have supplies?'

'There is a daily drop from the barracks. Water is still a problem though. The fallout drifted north-east with the wind so the Rhône is polluted for miles and is likely to stay that way for quite some time.'

'And the Saône?'

'Okay above Trévoux. Some chemical storage tanks were ruptured on the Industrial Estate at Genay-Neuville so the water downstream is pretty toxic. The barrage went below Lyon to the water levels are all over the place at the moment. Engineers have been flown in from the States to try and make a makeshift dam and filtration system.' He looked up at her. 'Did we get it right?'

Sarah laughed. 'You must have done. Lyon is a thriving city again in my time.'

He stood up. 'I must report in. I think that, for the time being,

this remains our secret. Admiral Davidson will decide where we go from here as far as the events at Rotterdam are concerned.'

'Please don't tell him everything. Not Yet. It could complicate things more than necessary.'

He grinned. 'Okay.' He turned to leave then paused at the door and pointed a finger at her. 'Now I recognise you.' He paused for effect. '...Miss Blackman.'



Sarah was stunned as she sat down, alone for the first time since she had returned to Earth. How did he know her name? How could he possibly know her name?

She sat down on the bed and wondered about how deep they were getting. The correct thing would be to radio for Cassi to come and get them and drop off Roof and then high tail it back to Wayfarer and sanity. But now there were too many questions to be answered. Who is Roof? Why does Al Slazinski get involved? How does he know her name?

She tried the TV but although there was power to the room, there must be none to the transmitter for there was no signal. Neither did the radio work. Remnants of glass crunched in the runners as she forced open the ply-boarded patio doors onto the veranda. Few lights could be seen the the west where what was left of the city lay. In spite of everything, a lot of work had been done in an effort to return to something like normality.

She shivered in the cool wind and slid the door closed again before checking on the boys in the bedroom. They were sleeping peacefully. After a long time of quietly waiting at Rotterdam, a helicopter flight and meeting with aliens was too much for one day. Lack of real food may have reduced their strength, too.

Taking a spare blanket with her, she closed the door and unzipped her flight suit and stepped out of it. Checking to see if there was hot water, she ran a shower at low pressure to conserve water and power. She slipped her panties off and rinsed them in the basin before hanging them over the slightly-warm radiator to dry.

The shower was beautiful as she relaxed under it, using what was left of a small bar of white soap in the basin. As she was rinsing her hair, she heard a slight sound. She peered round the curtain but could see nothing. Turning off the shower, she waited patiently, listening, but the sound was not repeated. Shrugging, she dried herself off vigorously with the small hand towel and began to dry her hair. Then the noise came again—a popping sound.

She paused. 'Pierre, is that you? Jacques?'

There was no reply.

Wrapping the towel around her waist, she picked up her gun and carefully opened the bathroom door. 'Al, is that you?'

A strong hand grabbed her wrist and swung her into the room. Her arm was twisted farther than it was meant to go. As she pulled back, she could see two other figures in the poor light, all of them advancing towards her. She tripped over the table and fell in the open doorway of the spare bedroom.

Cat-like, she was on her feet but stopped, stunned. Her hand was covered in blood. She whirled round but it was obvious even from a quick glance that there was nothing she could do for the boys.

Before she could react, hands grabbed her arms and held her in front of the third man as he eyed her up and down. 'Where's the girl?'

Sarah frowned. 'What girl?'

'The one who was with the boys. Where is she?'

'I don't know,' said Sarah honestly.

He hit her, hard, across the face. She could feel her towel slipping but she reacted instinctively and he bent over, his hands to his crotch where her knee had landed. She struggled with the other two but they were strong and held her firmly as the towel finally gave up and fell to the floor.

The leader of the squad slowly straightened and faced her, clenching his fist. He was a big man and that fist looked huge as he drew back his arm and the men either side of her forced her bare body towards him.

He hit her with all his pent-up anger and Sarah dry-retched as her torso coiled from the vicious blow to her stomach. His left hand gripped her hair and jerked her head upward. The fist drew back again, aimed at her face and she closed her eyes and waited for oblivion to descend over her senses.

Suddenly, he stopped and grinned. 'Corporal, how many men we got back in the barracks?'

'Upward of a hundred, sir,' said the man on her right whose voice was vaguely familiar.

He nodded. 'Good. Take her to them. Perhaps when they have all given her a few hours of...personal attention, her tongue will loosen.'

The man on her left bent down to pick up her flight suit but the leader stopped him. 'No. Leave her as she is. She won't need clothing where she is going.'



Cassi brought the shuttle down as quietly as possible near the perimeter fence. Using parachutes and gas jets, she seemed to manage it without disturbing the peace. As she and her companion eased out of the airlock not a hundred yards from the largest of the barrack blocks, a dog barked somewhere off to their left. The two of them lay, flat on their stomachs on the damp grass, holding their breath, but no-one took any notice of the animal.

'You stay here,' whispered Debbie, taking the safety off her automatic. 'I'll try and find out what's going on.'

Cassi hated the use of weapons, even in such disturbing circumstances. But secretly, she was almost glad that Sarah's partner in her husband's security team had offered to come down to earth with her while Maggie stayed on Wayfarer to feed Roof high-protein food to try and bring the teenager's health back to something close to normal.

'Be careful,' she warned. 'Don't do anything rash.'

Debbie's smile was almost invisible in the near darkness. 'You're sure this is the place?'

Cassi nodded. 'The direction-finder in Sarah's wrist band took us to the airport. The staff were obviously reluctant to tell me anything but the manager did finally admit that she had been dragged away, stark naked, by a group of soldiers. This is the only place they would bring her.'

'There's something else you're not telling me, isn't there?'

Cassi paused then nodded again. 'A schoolgirl was raped to death by some of the colonel's men. Al Slazinski's future report shows that she was killed here.'

'Oh, well,' sighed Debbie, checking that she had a spare clip of

ammunition. 'Here goes nothing.'

Cassi held up the wire while the other woman rolled underneath, quite skillfully for her size, and began to crawl on elbows and knees towards what looked like a rubbish dump close to the perimeter road. She was twenty metres away when the headlights of an approaching vehicle swung round and lit up the large skip in front of her.

Debbie froze as the utility vehicle pulled up close to it and two men got out. She sighted along the barrel as they went round to the back and dragged a heavy burden out and, between them swung it up and into the skip. Then they did the same with a second item before driving off. Both women breathed again.

As the tail lights vanished into the thin mist which was rising from the nearby river, Debbie jumped to her feet and ran for cover behind the skip.

Out of curiosity, she leant over the edge and rummaged around in the rubbish before suddenly letting out a cry and sitting down heavily on the concrete. Cassi, watching, sensed something wrong and, rolling under the fence wire, ran over to her colleague who was crying.

Taking her torch in her hand, Cassi peered over into the skip to the two packages Debbie had torn open. Both were less than two metres in length and made of black plastic. Moving it aside, Cassi swallowed at the sight of a young girl of about fifteen years, naked and dead, the marks of terrible abuse on her naked form.

She held her breath as she peeled aside the other item. The contents were similarly clad and equally dead. The degree of abuse and mutilation which had been inflicted was horrendous but there was no doubt. It was Sarah.

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## 7

Sarah was dragged, stark naked, into the corridor with tears in her

eyes. Not tears of pain, but of frustration for not having foreseen that this could happen. Anger that she had trusted Al Slazinski when he was obviously one of them after all. Other doors opened but no-one came to her aid as the men started down the corridor with her until, suddenly, a harsh voice came from behind them. 'Halt!'

They paused instantly and Sarah looked over to see the major some way down the corridor. One of the men reached for his revolver but Sarah's leg came up and kicked it from his hand. She crouched and swung round, catching them by surprise as she lashed out in a karate kick which almost seemed to knock the man through the wall. The third man disappeared back into the room and came out seconds later holding Sarah's automatic. He glanced at it strangely for a moment then took off the safety and pointed it at the major. 'Sailor, you're dead.'

Several things happened simultaneously. The man yelled as if he had been stung and dropped the gun. Sarah rammed the other man's shoulder back against the doorway and was pleased to hear his arm snap as it was bent too far round the hard frame. The leader pulled out his own gun and fired towards Al who ducked into an open doorway and then turned it towards Sarah who dived awkwardly into her room. Moments, later, the men were gone and Al Slazinski was helping her to her feet and putting his coat around her shoulders.

'If you are going to have a party,' he said. 'You'd better keep your clothes on, or you could end up seriously damaged. That lot have only one use for women.'

'They killed Jacques and Pierre,' Sarah said quietly.

Al confirmed the truthfulness of her statement and then sat down opposite to her and took the unlit cigar from his top pocket and placed it in his mouth. He didn't light it and Sarah guessed it was used as a thinking aid rather than a means of getting lung cancer.

'Did you tell them we were here?' she asked accusingly.

'I only told Admiral Davidson. And I didn't tell him everything about you. I just said that we had brought back several survivors from Rotterdam and that they had witnessed the murder of the nurse. The only thing I can think of is that someone was listening in on the radio.'

'Do you often go to Rotterdam?' Sarah asked.

'Never. It was simply reported to me that something unusual had come down and I was sent to investigate.'

'Did you refuel here on the way north?'

'Of course. It's the only place north of the carrier with aviation fuel in the airport tanks. There was another airfield close to the city but that was destroyed along with all the fuel.'

'So would anyone know where you were going?'

He nodded. 'Of course, I had to file a flight plan.'

'And they could track you on radar?'

'Only so far. We go out of range near the Ardennes.'

'Then how did you know we had landed?'

He grinned. 'We have a secret weapon.'

Sarah shook her head. 'No, I think you have Princess.'

The cigar fell from his mouth as he gaped. 'What do you know about Princess?'

'Everything. And so do you, or you wouldn't know my name.'

'Are you related?'

'I am Roger's daughter. Suzette is my aunt.'

'I saw the family likeness. It is unmistakable.'

'Where are they?'

'Roger and Suzette? They are at Trévoux. Your mother runs the makeshift hospital there.'

'That's where all the survivors were taken, wasn't it? You said earlier it was the only source of clean water.'

He nodded. 'Where did your colleague take the girl?'

'Roof? Up to Wayfarer, I expect. We have extensive medical facilities on board.'

He stood up. 'I think we'd better get out of here. Those men could come back.'

Sarah reached for her knickers. 'Oh, they'll come back all right. I'd better get dressed.'

He smiled. 'I would advise it. If I wasn't happily married, you'd be a serious temptation.'

Sarah laughed but, within minutes, she was dressed and ready to go. Al peered out into the corridor. 'Let's go.'

'What about the scientists?'

'They are safer where they are for the time being. They didn't see anything, did they?'

'Not a thing. Only Roof can identify them positively. And me, of course.'

'You?'

'I recognised one of them.' She grinned. 'Though he was twenty-five years older when I killed him.'

The major stopped. 'You what?'

'His name is Stefan Whitaker and he will be responsible for the deaths of quite a few innocent people.'

Al jerked his head towards the bedroom. 'He is already.'

Sarah stopped in the foyer and pulled out a small unit. 'It's time I contacted Cassi and got the hell out of here.'

The major shook his head. 'For the time being, where you go, I go.'

'How do I know I can trust you?'

He grinned. 'Easy. They're army, I'm a marine. We may be on the same side in any war but we don't have to do things the same way.'

She touched his arm. 'I shouldn't tell you this but if you continue with any kind of investigation it will cost you your life.'

'Investigation?'

'Admiral Davidson is going to ask you to find out what's going on.'

'How do you know?'

'Your wife told me....twenty five years from now.'

He paused, deep in thought. 'He already has.'

'What?'

'On the radio. Those men must have overheard me telling him and put two and two together.' He picked up his handset. 'Martin, Frank, we're moving NOW!'



Advancing lights were already visible low on the horizon as the gunship rose into the air.

'They've got Apaches,' announced the pilot, Frank Gibson. 'Where do we hide, 'cos we ain't gonna outrun them?'

'Head south into the Rhône and announce a flight plan for Columbia. Then, follow my orders.'

The engineer and gunner, a young Irish corporal called Fisher, spoke

over the radio, laying down a course to take them to their carrier just off the Carmargue.

As they dropped over the rise in the almost complete darkness, the major had them drop into the narrow gorge and turn north instead of south, switching off all navigation lights. It was eerie, flying in that narrow chasm on the outskirts of Lyon and then flipping over the bridges in the pale moonlight. The river twisted left and tight right and then left again in a minute.

'Are they still with us, Frank?' asked the major.

'We lost them,' replied the pilot. 'Though when they don't catch up with us south of Vienne, they'll know they've been tricked and come a-looking for us. I reckon we got ten minutes tops before we gotta set down somewhere inconspicuous.'

'We'll be out of the air in less than five. See that bend ahead?'

'Got it. Neuville?'

'Yeah. Just above it, keep low and drop us in the water on the right just behind the iron bridge.'

'In the water?' He wanted to be sure he had heard right.

'Sure. If we keep flying, they'll catch us, sooner or later. If we set down on land, they'll pick us up with heat seekers. We got to find a way to cool the engines rapidly, hence the river. It's no more than a metre or so deep at the moment on the outside of the bends so nothing will be damaged. When we stop, both of you get out the pump and hose us down as quick as you can. I want to be dead in the water when they come looking for us.'

'Okay, you're the boss.'

The pilot was magnificent. No more than a foot or so was between the rotors and the steelwork of the bridge when the gunship set down in three feet of water. Al carried Sarah to the shore as the other men sprayed cold river water over the engine nacelles and cowling. After an initial flush of steam, the casing cooled quickly. They had hardly finished and stowed the gear when three Apache helicopters came upstream fast, roaring overhead in tight formation, their big searchlights flicking from side to side along the river. Sarah crouched against the stone wall under the old iron bridge and held her breath until, gradually, it became quiet again.

She jumped as a voice came out of the darkness. 'It's been some time since I've seen that trick done.'

Peering into the near blackness, she spied a man leaning over the bridge parapet. Her heart was beating double time as she took in the dark hair, muscular frame and smiling face.

She paused by the roadside and waited as he strolled towards her with his hands in his pockets, as always. He kissed her cheek. 'Hi, baby.'

Sarah threw her arms around his neck at the familiar term of affection. Behind her back, the man shook hands warmly with Al Slazinski and nodded to the crew who waded out of the water from the partly-submerged helicopter. 'You know they'll see it at first light, don't you?'

Al nodded. 'Sarah and I have something to discuss with you. It could be that we'll all have to move before daybreak.'

Sarah released her father and then tucked her hand in his arm as they walked along the river bank towards lights on what looked like a caravan site. 'Are mother and Suzette here, too?'

'Your mother is still at the hospital, but Suzette is at home cooking your supper.'

Sarah stopped. 'How did you know we were coming?'

Roger's teeth looked white in the darkness as he grinned. 'We have Princess.'

'Here?'

'No, but we are linked by microwave. The tracking station is at Laroque, of course, but your Aunt Suzette has her own link via her computer.'

'I'm puzzled. You seem to be taking all this so calmly. How come you so easily accept me?'

'Because we were told you would be arriving tonight.'

'But...you know where I've come from?'

'Of course. You've come back from the future.'

Sarah laughed. 'You speak as if this is something which happens every day.'

'No, not every day. But your friend Cassi was quite convincing.'

'Is she here?'

'Not any more. She arrived yesterday and dropped off the girls then...'

'Yesterday?' Sarah stopped dead in her tracks. 'Don't you mean earlier today?'

It was Roger's turn to look puzzled. 'No, I mean yesterday. She arrived mid morning, told us who she was, dropped off Maggie and Simone and then left with Andrei.'

This was too confusing. 'Andrei? Simone?'

They reached one of the largest mobile homes and Roger opened the door. 'Let's go inside and we'll swap stories.'

The interior was pleasantly warm and so was the greeting. Suzette smiled her welcome as she rubbed her hands on her apron while Maggie leapt up and launched herself at Sarah.

Sarah staggered back, laughing. 'Come on, we've only been apart a couple of hours.'

'No,' said the grinning Maggie. 'We've been away for weeks.'

'Weeks?'

'Cassi wanted Debbie to bring Simone back to normal.' She indicated a slightly older teenager who had her lustrous dark hair cropped short. This girl held out her hand to Sarah. Sarah peered at her and her mouth dropped open. 'Roof?'

The smart, healthy girl grinned and shook her head. 'Not any more. I have an identity.'

'Simone de Bosville,' Sarah said slowly as daylight dawned in her head. 'I thought you were killed by terrorists.'

'Almost,' she laughed. 'I spent several months in hospital. Granddaughters of resistance leaders don't kill easily.'

'But... You look....wonderful.'

Simone grinned. 'I feel it.'

Suzette coughed to gain their attention. 'I assume you want something to eat.'

'Aunt Suzette,' said Sarah apologetically.

'Good Grief,' the dark-haired young woman laughed. 'When you say it like that, you make me sound so old.'

They hugged warmly while Maggie laid out cutlery on the small table.

There were tears in Suzette's eyes as they broke apart. 'You've grown up into one hell of a she-cat if what Cassi tells us is true.'

'You and dad are going to teach me...' she hesitated. '...when I'm born. But that won't happen for another four years or so.' She stopped again, looking round. 'Where's Mike?'

'In the bedroom, fast asleep. By the time we've had something to eat, he'll be awake, I expect.'

Even though the mobile home was large, it was crowded with so many people in it, and it seemed all the more so when everyone was talking.

Sarah sat with Maggie. 'You knew I was coming tonight?'

The teenage nodded. 'Cassi arrived at Lyon tomorrow to pick you up but it was too late.'

'Too late?'

'You'd been killed.'

'Killed?'

'Debbie came down with us this time and Cassi dropped her off as close as she could to where your homing beacon said you were. She broke into an army base east of Lyon where some men had taken you. They'd done some pretty terrible things to you and then used you as a target.'

Sarah smirked. 'Put at the wrong end of a shooting range, eh?'

Maggie shook her head sadly. 'No, not guns-darts. Apparently you...you took quite a long time to die. They wanted you to tell them where Roof, I mean Simone, had been taken.'

'Presumably, I didn't tell them.'

'No. That's why they hurt you so badly.'

Sarah tried to push away the memory of being dragged, naked, from her room. 'So if I died, why am I here?'

'Cassi and Debbie went back to Wayfarer and we all went out into space again. When we got back, it was yesterday.'

'That's cheating.' Sarah suddenly grinned. 'But if the alternative is death by a thousand darts, I'm rather glad someone cheated.'

'Cassi then brought us here yesterday and Suzette's husband insisted on going with her to the airport so that they could save you. While Cassi collected the scientists, Andrei was going to warn Al so that he could go to your room in time to stop them taking you away.'

Sarah was not so unkind as to state the obvious—that if the major had arrived at the hotel five minutes sooner, he might have saved the boys as well.

'So where is Debbie now?'

'Helping your mother at the hospital. Having an improved range of equipment and drugs from the future is helping several people to recover who might otherwise have not done so.'

Sarah swallowed. This was the kind of interference in the past Cassi had been afraid of. She looked at her watch. 'So where is Cassi?'

Maggie shrugged. 'I don't know. Perhaps she decided to take the scientists straight back to Wayfarer. We've heard nothing since she and Andrei left earlier this evening.'



The meal was excellent under the circumstances and in view of the shortage of variety. They chatted about things they probably shouldn't have, all the time keeping an ear open for the return of the shuttle.

Afterwards, Roger took Frank and Martin off to show them a safer place to hide the helicopter while the girls tidied up and Suzette fed Mike in his high chair.

Al sat down opposite Sarah. 'Can I see your gun?'

Sarah smiled and pulled it from her overall pocket.

He took it from her and turned it over in his hands and grinned. 'Well I'll be darned. It's a toy.'

'Shoot me,' said Sarah suddenly.

'What?'

Suzette stared, open-mouthed, as Sarah leant back on the settee, offering Al a perfect target. 'Shoot me.'

The major raised it, still thinking it a toy but then paused. 'Am I going to get what that other guy got?'

Sarah grinned and nodded, reaching out and taking the weapon back from him. She pulled off the gun's safety, pointed it towards Al and pulled the trigger rapidly three times. The sounds were like the tapping on a snare drum as three shots pumped into the cushion beside him. He looked down at the three tiny holes in it and then picked it up and turned it over. The back of the cushion had ceased to exist. 'Holy mackerel!'

'A plastic gun fired by electronic percussion,' Sarah explained. 'It takes twenty bullets, also plastic, which fragment after puncturing the skin. Get one in the belly and your insides are shredded to pulp but there's hardly any blood loss. One shot is usually enough to stop an elephant in its tracks.'

'But what if I had shot you just now?'

She held up her arm and reversed the gun, showing him the butt. 'Those tiny metal sensors have to be within four inches of the transmitter in my watch strap. You've seen what happens if the wrong person picks it up and tries to use it. The lithium battery is connected to coil like that in a car and a thousand volts bites your hand. You usually drop the gun.'

Al grinned, remembering the soldier in the corridor. 'He did. Neat trick.'

'Some of the women wear a bracelet instead of a watch. Same result.'

'And the men?'

'Just a watch.' It was clear from her tone of voice that any man who would wear a bracelet, or any other form of jewellery, was quite definitely not Sarah's kind of man.

'You said earlier that you had contacted your Admiral. What did he say you had to do?'

'He recommended that I liaise with the local army commander to sniff out the offending criminals.'

'I wouldn't advise that. He's involved up to his bull neck.'

The major was astonished. 'But Colonel Phillips has a spotless record. He won several honours during Desert Storm and has the respect of Congress.'

'He also runs a child porn ring in Lyon.'

He looked shocked. 'You have got to be joking.'

Sarah shook her head. 'Unfortunately, no. The three men who came to my hotel room are working directly for Lieutenant-Colonel Dwight Phillips.'

He paused thoughtfully for some time. 'What happens to them?'

'He becomes responsible for the death of a teenage girl, but you expose him. However, you are eliminated before the evidence becomes public. With insufficient evidence to go ahead with a court marshal, he is replaced here and he and his cronies are whisked off back to the States and he is promoted to general. For security reasons, the whole affair is hushed up.'

'So I die, eh?'

Sarah nodded. 'Unless we change something here and now.'

'Perhaps we've done that already.'

'That's possible. They are brought to task eventually, but not until

they've wreaked havoc in all sorts of ways. They try to kill Cassi because she discovers the truth about them and they capture Maggie to hold her to ransom.'

The teenager, overhearing, turned and nodded to Al's look of query.

Sarah grinned. 'But we get them in the end.'

'You do?'

Sarah nodded. 'Our pilot, Janine, will kill General Phillips on Mars, though a verdict of suicide will be recorded.'

'And the others?'

'Cassi will ensure Greg Watson's death at Andromeda while he's attempting to kill her. Willi Humboldt gets shot by one of our security officers while trying to abduct Maggie.' She paused and grinned. 'And I get to toss Stefan Whitaker into a giant waste disposal unit.'

'So, sooner or later, they die anyway.'

'Eventually. But not until a lot of other people have suffered or died. He even tried to start World War Three.' Sarah explained about the General's attempt to eradicate Cassi and her family and the lengths he would go to.

'It sounds to me that he has to be stopped right now.'

'But he hasn't done anything yet. I might hate him but, without evidence, I cannot kill him for what he might do, however certain I am that he will do it.'

'What if we could link him with the death of the nurse at Rotterdam?'

Sarah glanced quickly at Simone to see what her reaction would be, but the stark fear was no longer in her eyes, just a look of sadness.

She turned back to the major, no longer smiling. 'Then I'll let you hold him down while I remove certain delicate parts of his anatomy.'



Suzette took Sarah to see her mother when they had cleared up. It was a short walk up the bank and across what had obviously been a main road. The town itself was terraced up from the river and there were steps through a pedestrian precinct. Near the corner was a large building which had lights at the window. Sarah held her breath as she was shown inside.

She spotted Debbie at once feeding a couple of children and her friend looked up and waved briefly. Her mother looked so different in her nurse's uniform. She remembered her red hair and her slim frame, but hadn't realised how beautiful she had been.

Liz Blackman smiled as she walked towards them and looked Sarah up and down. 'I see you get your father's hair instead of mine.'

Sarah laughed as she hugged her young mother. 'But I've got your eyes.'

They chatted about nothing in particular as Suzette wandered over to Debbie and sat down beside her. 'How does my Michael turn out?'

'He's my boss. He's great.'

'And Sarah works with him at Europoort?'

Debbie tucked the children into bed and nodded. 'We are a team of eight security officers who look after the launch complex. There used to be ten but two were killed recently.'

'Because of all this?' She gestured at nothing in particular.

Debbie nodded. 'Partly.'

'And what happens to me?'

Debbie hesitated for some time. 'You get killed in a car crash. So

does Mike's first wife.'

Suzette was silent for some time before asking: 'Is Cassi good for him?'

Debbie touched her arm. 'You've seen how she is with Maggie.'

'And what happens to Marianne?'

'Your cousin? She stays in Genève as UN Ambassador for several years. Just before we left to come here, she had been appointed as General Manager of ETA.'

'ETA?'

Debbie nodded. 'Extra-Terrestrial Agriculture. She has an office at Lascelles Base on Mars.'

Suzette gaped. 'On Mars?'

'A couple of Cassi's friends are helping her out for a few weeks, doing some research on the south pole.'

'But I thought Mars was barren. I saw the Explorer pictures on TV.'

Debbie grinned. 'Not any more. We built domes and grew trees under them. Within ten years, people should be able to live there without suits.'

'That sounds amazing.'

'It is amazing what can be done when you have peace.'

'Peace?'

'Of course. And you helped to bring it about with what you did with Princess.'

Suzette shrugged and smiled. 'I was just glad to help in any way I could.'

'How did you meet Andrei?'

'He was in charge of a Russian submarine. He saved my life.'

Sarah and her mother came across and sat down. 'How's Janine, Debs?'

'She's stable. I put her in a cryo unit, just in case. Carla is keeping her eye on her.'

'Did she ever come round?'

Debbie shook her head. 'She took one hell of a belt and really needs better care than I can give her. I just hope she can take the stress of revival when we get back.'

'If we get back.'

'What are you planning, Supergirl?'

'Nothing very practical, I'm afraid.' Sarah looked at her watch. 'I wish Cassi was here.'

'Perhaps she had trouble at the airport,' suggested Suzette. 'It can't be easy to land a space shuttle without people noticing, especially close to an army base.'

Debbie shrugged. 'The plan was for her to drop down on the edge of the devastation zone and Andrei was to go and collect the scientists. It all sounded so simple.'

'So did she say she was coming here first?' asked Sarah. 'Or taking them straight up to Wayfarer?'

'Coming here. Take-off weight isn't going to be a problem if we leave Simone here where she's safe.'

Sarah stood up. 'I'm not sure that I want to sit here, waiting, when something might have happened to them.'

'Don't do anything rash,' said Liz cautiously.

'That's great, coming from you.' Sarah grinned. 'What about when you and dad rescued Aunt Suzette from that hospital in Middlesbrough? And then got chased all over England by both the police and the baddies?'

Staff Nurse Blackman's mouth fell open. 'How do you know about that?'

'You told me. Or, at least, you will, one day.'

'What do you think we should do?' asked Suzette.

Sarah turned and looked straight at her. 'I have not the slightest idea.'



Due to space restrictions in Suzette's mobile home, Al and his crew were billeted in an adjacent unit while Sarah and Debbie stayed at the makeshift hospital with the girls. It was a long time before Sarah fell asleep but it seemed like only seconds before she was awake again and wary.

Without moving, her eyes roved around the poorly-lit dormitory but nothing moved. Then she saw it—Simone's bunk was empty. She was about to get up when someone else moved first. Maggie stood up and pulled on a sweater over her tee-shirt and a pair of borrowed shorts over her virgin white panties. She swore mildly to herself as she stubbed her toe on the bed frame and Sarah desperately tried to suppress a giggle as she watched her niece hobble out of the creaking main door.

Instantly, she was on her feet and pulling on her trainers. She hadn't bothered to get out of her flight suit as it hadn't been particularly warm when they had bedded down. The first faint tinges of dawn were visible above the pantiled roofs of the lower town and she realised that she must have slept for at least four hours.

From the doorway, she watched Maggie limp down the steps towards the iron bridge and only followed when she was at the limit of sight.

She heard Simone before she saw her, the sounds of her sobbing carrying clearly through the pre-dawn mist. When she reached the low wall of the promenade, the two girls were already embracing and in tears together. Satisfied there was no danger, Sarah sat on the damp wall and watched the water flow sluggishly past her feet.

The crying seemed to go on for ever and Sarah was so tempted to go onto the bridge and comfort them both but something told her to stay put and let them sort each other out.

The sky was becoming brighter when a faint sound made her turn. Sarah smiled. Having naturally wavy hair, she was always amused by the lengths her partner would go to in an attempt to achieve a similar result. The pink rollers looked incongruous in her bleached fair hair.

Debbie put her hand on Sarah's shoulder as she sat down beside her on the wall.

'It's someone called Mike,' she said.

Sarah frowned. 'I thought perhaps she was just upset at the death of the boys.'

'That was yesterday. She's been tossing and turning for the last hour, calling out for this Mike.'

'Mike? Not our Mike, surely. She doesn't know him, not as an adult.'

'No. I gather it's someone who thought she was dead.'

'She must mean Uncle Mike.'

'Who's Uncle Mike?'

'Technically, she's my dad's Uncle Mike.' Sarah laughed quietly. 'I've just realised. Suzette, she's twenty-four, is Maggie's grandmother.'

'And Simone?'

'She was the daughter of industrialist Emile deBosville who's mother was Suzette's mother's sister. Simone is my father's niece. I suppose Simone is a kind of cousin to me.'

'And this Uncle Mike?'

'My great uncle. I suppose he was no real relative of Simone, except by marriage. I think Simone had a crush on him.'

'But he must have been much older than her.'

'He was probably about forty when Simone was eighteen. If they were in love, did it matter?'

Debbie shrugged. 'I suppose not. It's just that it is not generally regarded as normal.'

'As far as I am aware, Uncle Mike didn't take advantage of the situation. He wasn't the type.'

'How do you know the type?'

'He was an SAS government assassin. He couldn't afford to have liaisons which could have been used against him. I suspect the feelings Simone had were a kind of hero worship. He was a kind of James Bond and she was a courier.'

'Simone was a British spy?'

'Don't underestimate that kid. She left college in Toulouse with an honours degree at seventeen and took over as director of one of her father's companies on her eighteenth birthday— one of the Guillemot Group.'

Debbie nodded in understanding. 'Guillemot Toulouse made sports shoes.'

Sarah frowned. 'How do you know?'

'Cassi told me about the tetramethyldiarsine. If Simone wasn't a chemist, she would have to be involved in the manufacture of something which used it.'

They both looked across at the girls who were still locked in embrace.

'I suppose she'll get herself together some time.'

Debbie looked at her watch. 'If am right about her state of mind, she will stop crying in precisely five minutes.'

Sarah smirked but remembered that her colleague did seem to have an extraordinary insight into youth psychology. 'And what will she do then?'

Debbie stood up as the sun rose. 'I think she will go out and buy a gun. A big one.'



## 8

An hour later, they were all gathered at the hospital. Al Slazinski was by the door, watching the sky.

'It's uncanny,' he eventually said.

Roger went and stood beside him. 'No visitors?'

'Not one. You'd have thought that at first light, they'd have been all over the state looking for us.'

Roger smiled. 'They call them departments in France. But I know what you mean.'

'It's as if they've given up.'

'They won't have done that. Having eliminated the boys, those men will be desperate to get their hands on Simone and Sarah. Simone can identify them as nurse Anna's killers. And my daughter was there when they shot the boys.'

'So why aren't they hunting for them? Colonel Phillips has a hundred men at his disposal.'

'What would you do?'

The major frowned. 'How do you mean?'

'If you were Colonel Phillips right now, what would you be doing? What would be your priorities?'

'Number one, find Simone and eliminate her.'

Roger nodded. 'Agreed. Number two?'

'Eliminate Miss Sarah. She saw the men who killed the boys.'

'Okay. Next?'

The major stuck the cigar back in his mouth. 'Get rid of me. I saw them trying to abduct your daughter from the hotel.'

'So why isn't he doing any of those things?'

'Perhaps he's waiting for us to go to them?'

'Why?'

Light dawned. 'Because he's got something we need?'

Roger nodded. 'That was the conclusion I came to. But if Colonel Phillips has got Cassi and the shuttle, where would it be?'

'At the barracks?'

Roger shook his head. 'From what Debbie told us, there are not many places to hide something as big as the shuttle. No, my guess is at the airport. Tell me, what happened when you were warned about Sarah's abduction?'

'We were at the hotel. Andrei came and knocked on the door. When I said I'd go and rescue her, he said he was going for the scientists and that we should all meet up here.'

'Where did she land?'

'I don't know. It wasn't near the hotel. But then it was pretty dark at the time.'

'You know the airfield. Could she have dropped the shuttle down near the perimeter? Behind one of the hangers, perhaps?'

'Oh, yeah. Piece of cake. It wouldn't take long for Andrei to cut across the field and then get back with the scientists. They would be in and out before anyone knew it.'

'Then why didn't it happen like that?'

'I guess something went wrong.'

'Okay, let's try a different tack. When Admiral Davison does his investigation, he finds that the Colonel and his men have been running a child porn ring in the Lyons area. Where would he do that?'

'At the barracks?'

'Would you?'

'Not likely. Out of a hundred GIs, not many are serious perverts.' He grinned. 'Even the army isn't that bad.'

'I'll go along with that. So where?'

'Not in the city, or I'd know about it.'

'You're probably right. How about at the airport?'

'There were no signs of anything like that at the hotel complex, or near reception.'

'Okay. So what about in one of the hangers?'

The major nodded thoughtfully. 'That makes a lot of sense. They could land a plane load of customers and take it straight to the hanger and no-one would suspect a thing.'

'I suspect that Cassi was extremely unlucky, and chose to land her shuttle behind the very hangar where it so happened they were up to their nasty little tricks.'

'Okay. So first, we gotta find that shuttle. Can Miss Suzette help?'

Roger looked over his shoulder to where the others were crowded round the computer. 'She's searching now.'

After several minutes, Suzette looked up. 'Nothing conclusive. I can't be certain till the shuttle moves.'

'Why not?'

'Princess picks up heat emissions and compares them with the ambient temperature. That's how I spotted you in the first place when you came down at Rotterdam. Princess spotted an unidentifiable heat source and I reported it to the navy. You know the rest.'

'So you would recognise the shuttle if it took off.'

Suzette nodded. 'Straight away. Every type of motorised vehicle has a unique signature. Are you sure Cassi is on the ground?'

Sarah looked thoughtful for a moment before taking out of her top pocket what looked like a mobile phone. She pressed keys and waited. Then: 'Hi, Carla. It's Sarah.'

'Ciao, Sarah,' came the reply from Wayfarer. 'Did Cassi find you okay?'

'When?'

'Yesterday.'

'Not personally. But she did get in touch with someone who helped me. Have you spoken to her since she left you?'

'No. She told me to keep radio silence.'

'Did she bring the scientists up to you?'

'No. Was she supposed to?'

'We don't know. No-one has seen her since she spoke to Al last night. Is her locator beacon functioning?'

'Nothing received. But then she'd only use it in an emergency. Do you want me to try and contact her?'

'Not till we have found her. We're not sure if she has been compromised in some way. She could simply be laying low to remain undetected.'

'Is she in trouble?'

'We don't know. Hold on a sec.' Sarah turned to Al. 'If you use the

radio in the helicopter, will the army pick it up?'

'Only if I transmit,' replied the major.

'Do you have any other means of communication?'

He shook his head. 'Only the radio.'

'There's a mobile phone shop down in the precinct,' said Liz. 'Perhaps they'll have something.'

Roger shook his head. 'The network is down.'

'What about satphones?' asked Sarah.

'What are they?'

'Satellite telephones. Instead of using ground-based cells, you use a satellite.'

Roger grinned. 'Not invented yet.'

Al coughed. 'Well maybe they're not in general use. But the military use them all the time.'

'Do you have any?'

'There's a couple in the gunship but the batteries are dead. We haven't bothered to use them since the ground-based transmitter was blown up.'

'But what if you were able to adapt batteries from cellphones?'

'But what would we use as a link?'

'We could use Wayfarer's main array. Just tell Carla the frequency and she'll get Iris to re-align the dish.'

'It cannot be that easy.'

'We won't know till we try.' She spoke back into the mouthpiece. 'I don't know if you got any of that, Carla, but we're going to try and set up a sat-link with the array.'

'Okay. Anything else?'

'Just let me know if you hear anything from Cassi. We're going to try and find her.'



Unsure of where to start, they decided on a plan to investigate the circumstances. Sitting on the wall outside, they talked in circles for an hour before Sarah made a proposal. 'What would happen if you put in an SOS to your admiral?'

'If it was serious, he could scramble a squadron of Hornets and they'd be here in half an hour. The gunships would take a little longer.'

'He'd do that for you?'

Al grinned. 'I don't cry "wolf" very often.'

'Do you think the army are monitoring local forces radio transmissions?'

'You bet. I would.'

'So if Colonel Phillips overheard you calling for assistance, what would he do?'

'Panic, I expect,' suggested Debbie.

Al shook his head firmly. 'He served in Operation Desert Storm. He don't panic easy.'

'But it would force his hand, wouldn't it?'

'I guess so.'

'Would he dig in and fight then?'

'No chance. He might be tough but he's not crazy. His men were sent here for relief work and are not well armed. A dozen McDonnell Douglas

F18s with laser-guided air to ground missiles would decimate his entire force in minutes. And when the gunships arrive, they would finish any survivors without any trouble. No, he won't fight.'

'So, if he has no idea where Simone is, nor Sarah, but he then picks up your transmission, what is he likely to do?'

Al rubbed his chin. 'He'd send a couple of apaches to dispose of me and then destroy the evidence at the airport.'

'How?'

'Semtex is pretty effective. He was supplied with plenty of that for demolishing dangerous buildings.'

'Okay, so we've got to make some assumptions. We have to assume that Cassi and Andrei have been caught and, possibly, the scientists.'

'And that they are in one of the hangers? But which one? There are quite a few as well as storage units on the perimeter.'

'We get them to show us,' said Sarah.

'How?'

'Debbie and I go to the airport as innocent charity workers and wait for Al to transmit his message. Then, we watch and see where they go.'

'I've got to go into town, as usual, for supplies,' stated Roger pulling out a map and spreading it on the grass. 'So I'll take the fourtrack as normal so as not to raise suspicions. I'll head down the west bank and take the route as we find it.'

Debbie checked the action of her gun. 'I'll ride shotgun.'

'Shall I come with you?' asked Sarah.

Roger shook his head. 'We ought to split up.'

Suzette tossed Sarah a bunch of keys. 'Take my car. It's the white Ford in the garage down the street.'

Simone stood up. 'I'll go with her.'

Sarah opened her mouth to argue but saw the determination on the young woman's face. Maggie stood also. 'Me, too.'

'Take the east bank,' suggested Suzette. 'I'll follow you all on Princess and keep in touch by your satellite link to tell you all what's happening.'

'What about you?'

'I'll have to stay here with the computer. Liz can help me keep in touch with everyone.'

'What do I do?' asked Al Slazinski.

Sarah faced him. 'You get killed. Remember?'

The major stuck his cigar in his mouth and grinned. 'Over my dead body.'

'Okay. As soon as we get close to the airport, Suzette will notify you. As soon as you get airborne, send your message to Admiral Davison.'

'And then?'

'They'll pick up your message as soon as you transmit. Just try and stay out of their way until your mates get here.'

'I can't just run away and leave you to it.'

'You won't be doing that. Yours will be the most important act of all. You have to draw away the troops so that we can get in.' She looked around them all. 'And don't let's shoot anyone we don't have to. Remember that most of Colonel Phillips' men are not directly involved. They are just obeying orders without realising that he's corrupt. I don't know what kind of a tale he will have told his men, but believe me, he will have been extremely convincing.'



Sarah gaped, open-mouthed at the white car, registration number SMB 1. Suzette had described her car as a Ford, but Henry had had a very small part in the construction of this monster. Almost three hundred brake horse power of RS Cosworth engine roared into life as she turned the ignition key and she was careful to apply very little throttle as she backed it out onto the road. She waited while Simone and Maggie closed the garage doors and jumped into the car.

She followed Roger as far as Neuville where he crossed the bridge. Sarah flashed her headlights briefly and accelerated smoothly southwards. She passed only two other vehicles in the ten minutes it took to reach Caluire. Occasionally, she caught a glimpse of the fourtrack on the far bank.

'You'll be at the tunnel in a minute or so,' came Roger's voice on the satfone. 'I'll cross at Perrache as planned. There is only one road out of the city that's passable. You follow the Rhône north and then loop round the ring road to Cussel where you get on the D517. The army built a link road off it just after Pusignan to make it easier to get to and from the barracks. I'll approach from the A43.'

Sarah glanced sideways at Simone who had her finger on the map. The young woman nodded her understanding of the instructions.

'I'm airborne,' came the new voice. 'I'm heading west to gain height to make the transmission to Columbia in about ten minutes. When I've got through, I'm gonna swing round to the north and cross the marshes at zero. Hopefully, they won't pick me up on radar till I'm right on top of them. If I see the shuttle at the barracks, I'll try and let you know before they get me.'

'Stay alive, Al,' came Suzette's voice. 'Run and hide.'

Sarah sighed. They were a small group, virtually unarmed. They had no definite ideas where Cassi was nor the shuttle which was their only means of getting back to their own time. This was "best-guess" work.

The tyres squealed a little as she turned left at Pont George Clémencau and entered the Tunnel sous Crois-Rousse. It was only a kilometre, but the period out of contact seemed forever till the car erupted onto the bridge over the Rhône. The soldiers grouped around an army transport truck on the corner of the Avenue Grande Bretagne seemed to watch her very carefully as she pulled gracefully onto the ring road.

'I'm over the river,' she said into the satfone.

'So am I,' came Roger's voice. 'Heading for the autoroute now.'

'Al is in the mountains close to St Etienne,' interrupted Suzette. 'He should be transmitting soon.'

'Can you track him?'

'Yes. He's looping round to the north as planned. There is no-one else airborne, so they don't appear to have picked him up on radar yet.'

'No sign of the shuttle?'

'No signature. Cassi has to be still on the ground.'

'Turning at Cussel now,' announced Sarah. 'Where are you, dad?'

'At the Parilly interchange. We'll be at the airport in five minutes.'

Sarah put her foot down and the turbo dropped in. 'Me, too.'



## 9

The engine of the white Cosworth ticked over sweetly as Sarah passed slowly towards the airport reception area. From the loop road, she had a clear view right across the airfield. Her father had taken the trading access route which ran round the back of the hangers and industrial warehouses. They were watching for all hell to break loose.

All the units looked the same. It would take hours to check them all out and many looked seriously locked up as a result of the recent war.

'The scientists are no longer in the hotel,' Sarah announced from the entrance. 'According to the manager, they checked out last night in a hurry.'

'That puts them with Cassi, wherever she is.'

'I agree.' She paused. 'There are two army trucks and a jeep coming. I'm going to check it out.'

'Be careful.'

'I will try and be as inconspicuous as possible.'

'In a Cosworth?'

'It looks as if they are heading for the KLM hanger.'

'I'm onto it.' She heard her father use the sat link. 'Suzette. Where's Al now?'

'Close to the bird sanctuary with a couple of heat sources heading to intercept. I hope he makes it.'



Colonel Dwight Phillips was out of the jeep before it had stopped.

From the way his step never faltered, it was obviously that he had done it many times before.

'Get them into the empty truck,' he barked at two of the men as he strode in through the gap in the main doors. Inside, his voice echoed around the huge hanger. He pointed at the shuttle as the second truck backed carefully towards it. It was full of boxes marked " Danger- High Explosive."

'And set the charges for ten minutes,' he added when it was parked next to the shuttle. 'We don't have much time.'

Willi Humboldt patted one of the boxes. 'There's enough poke here to wipe out half the city.'

'Don't waste time. Take Stefan and get the others.'

He pushed open the office door and spoke to the men inside. 'We're done here. You'd better come with us.'

Doctor Martin nodded. 'I've made a list of what you will need. Bruce can help me finish off at the barracks.'

'Anything you need from the shuttle?'

He shook his head. 'It's all part of an integrated system. It's a shame we can't use it to get up to the mother ship. There is enough hi-tec equipment up there to set us all up for life.'

'We don't have the time. That fool Slazinski has called in the troops. The problem with Admiral Davison is that he has no sense of humour. He'll blow the whistle on all of us.'

'Where is the major now?'

'Flying about somewhere. But I've sent a couple of Apaches after him. Dead men don't tell tales.'

'Do you mind If I have one more try with my colleagues?'

The Colonel shrugged. 'Be my guest, but make it fast.'

Henri Martin got up and went to the store-room where Willi Humboldt and Stefan Whitaker was " helping" Andrei Narovic to his feet with their heavy boots.

He went to Doctor Schmidt. 'You don't have to go like this, Max. Nor you, Peter.'

The older man drew back his shoulders. 'I have told you my decision. What you propose is totally unethical.'

'But just think of the good we can do together. We could help mankind in ways unimaginable.'

'I have told you. No.'

'Too bad.' He turned and left Willi and Stefan to usher them into the truck loaded with explosives. Doctor Martin and Bruce climbed into the back of the jeep. The Colonel and left with them as Greg Watson loaded several young girls into the empty truck.

'What are you going to do with the young ladies?' asked the doctor as they drove away from the hangar.

The colonel smirked. 'What do you think? We'll hide them at the barracks and keep them for our personal use.'

'And the others back at the hangar? And the shuttle?'

'In five minutes, there will be no trace that they ever existed.'

The doctor laughed. 'We stand to make millions.'

The colonel shook his head as they drove away. 'Billions.'



Stefan Whitaker grinned at the tied up men in the back of the truck, sitting on the explosives. 'You had your chance. Too bad.'

Willi Humboldt laughed with him.

'Excuse me,' said the new voice.

The men turned to see the white car. Sarah was standing, arms folded, leaning her bottom on the bonnet.

'It's the bitch from the hotel,' said Willi Humboldt, reaching for his gun.

Sarah's arms unfolded faster, and the force of her bullet, which caught him high in the chest, sent him backwards, head over heels. The other two just gaped as Sarah sidestepped slowly towards them.

'There's a bomb in here,' called Cassi in a reasonably controlled voice. 'We need to get out of here quickly.'

'Can you fly the shuttle?'

'Not with my hands tied.'

At that moment, Roger drew up in the fourtrack. Debbie leaped out. 'Is everyone okay?'

'Cassi says there's a bomb. Can you cover these while I cut her free?'

Debbie raised her gun. 'You bet.'

In one bound, Sarah leapt into the back of the truck and quickly untied the ropes. She helped them all to the ground while Cassi ran to the shuttle. Maggie hopped from the car and followed her step-mother inside.

'Outside,' said Sarah, waving her gun at the men.

At that moment, Stefan Whitaker saw Simone near the car and dived towards her, a knife in his hand. He moved so fast that he caught her unawares and knocked her flying behind the truck. He raised his arm to stab down but a boot caught him in the throat. Andrei still had his arms tied so he only had his feet which he used effectively until the evil man lay still.

The shuttle's engine was warming up and the noise was reaching a crescendo as Sarah jumped to her feet and pushed and dragged the others out into the open. They clambered into the Cosworth and Fourtrack as the shuttle rose a foot in the air and began to move slowly sideways.

It was a race against time as the vehicles pulled away and the shuttle tried to nudge its way through the hanger doors. After several vain attempts, the noise rose to a roar as the shuttle went straight up, through the glass roof of the hangar. It was just clear when the explosives detonated. The hangar literally disintegrated, such was the force, and the shuttle was rocked round and round before stabilising and, finally, landing in the middle of the grassed area.

'Are you all right?' came Suzette's frantic voice over the satfone. 'I saw a massive heat output.'

Her brother picked up his unit. 'It's okay, sis. We got the shuttle out.'

'Thank goodness.'

'Where's Al?'

'Still racing around, evading the army.'

Sarah looked over to Cassi who had climbed out of the airlock and was walking towards her. 'It looks like we're on our way home.'

'What are you going to do about Henri Martin?' asked Doctor Schmidt.

'There's not a lot we can do. He'll be well protected at the barracks.'

'But we have to do something.'

Cassi frowned. 'Is there something we should know?'

Max nodded. 'Henri and I have worked together, on and off, for over

ten years.'

'In what field?'

'We have both been involved in gamma particle acceleration. However, we were each looking at the project for different reasons. A year ago, it became clear that Henri was more interested in the application of gamma particles in their use for triggering plutonium fission.'

'Weapons?'

The scientist nodded. 'The funding was better from that source.'

'But you refused to get involved in that aspect?'

He nodded again. 'There may be money in war but there is little future. Although I had less funding, I was able to apply the energy control for other purposes.'

'Hence the peace prize.'

'I didn't do it for a prize. I did it for mankind— all mankind.'

'Where did Bruce come in?'

'The security forces assigned him as minder. His knowledge of isotopic fission reaction is minimal.'

'What if they are allowed to stay in this time?'

'If your colonel is as evil and egotistical as you have made him sound, the combination of that and a greedy scientist would be a recipe for total disaster.'

'So what do you suggest?'

'Somehow, Doctor Martin must be persuaded to return to his own time.'

'And if that is not possible?'

'He must be...eliminated.'

'I thought you were a man of peace.'

'I am. But if Henri Martin and Colonel Phillips unite to devise a gamma weapon, there will never be peace again.'

'I still can't understand why they were panicked into trying to destroy the shuttle.'

'They didn't need it any more. They forced Peter to download all the data from the on-board computer.'

'But that's almost everything stored in Iris— thousands of gigabytes.'

'It took several hours. But with that, they are set up for an extremely profitable little venture.'



'I'm going to have to move the shuttle,' said Cassi as a trio of aircraft flashed overhead and peeled out of formation to split for landing.

'Must you go straight away?' asked Roger.

'We'd better,' said Cassi. 'Admiral Davison will be here soon and we could be held up while he asks a lot of questions.'

'What can I do to help?' Roger asked his daughter.

'Go home, father. If anything happens to you, I don't get to be born.' She smiled. 'You've done your part. Not only that, I need you to keep Simone hidden from the army until she is declared safe.'

'Then it's goodbye.'

Sarah grinned. 'Not for long. I'll be a sweet little baby, I promise. I may even let you and mum sleep at nights.'

They hugged briefly while Debbie helped Doctor Schmidt and Peter into the shuttle.

Simone walked up and threw her arms round Sarah's neck. 'Thanks for taking care of me.'

Sarah smiled. 'Are you going to be all right from now on?'

The young woman nodded. 'I've got a family now. See you in twenty-five years.' She calculated. 'I'll be forty-three but you will all be the same age as you are now.'

Sarah turned to Andrei, who was rubbing circulation back into his wrists, and smiled. 'We've never been formally introduced.'

The Russian grinned. 'We have the time.'

They shook hands but neither of them moved, even as the first F18 came in to land on the runway.

'What are we waiting for?' asked Cassi urgently. 'We need to leave, now.'

Andrei smiled at Sarah and spoke quietly. 'You and I are of the old school. The family are all right, your friend Cassi is safe to go home. But you and I have unfinished business.'

Sarah looked up into his blue eyes and knew why her aunt had fallen for him. 'Are you sure?'

'Of course. I am known at the barracks so they will let me in without question.'

Sarah nodded. 'You are right. Debbie,' she called over her shoulder. 'Look after Cassi and the others. If I don't contact you soon, leave me behind.'

'But I can't do that.'

'You have to.' She held out her hand. 'Lend me your gun and wrist band.'

'What do you hope to accomplish?' asked Cassi as Debbie showed Andrei how the gun and wrist strap worked together..

'Colonel Phillips still has those children stashed away,' said Sarah. 'Also, we cannot let the scientists stay here. We may have changed a few odds and ends in the short time we have been here but Doctor Martin has the knowledge to influence mankind in more ways than is healthy. Thinking about Dwight Phillips with twenty-first century technology frightens the life out of me.'

Roger hugged his daughter for the last time and roared off in the Fourtrack.

'How long do I give you?' asked Cassi, realising that Sarah was determined to put things right.

'An hour. If we haven't sorted something out by then, we are not gong to.' She picked up the satfone once more. 'Suzette?'

'Receiving you.'

'Dad is on his way back to you with Simone.'

'Is Andrei okay?'

'He's here with me. He says he'll bring your car back later.'

'Tell him if there's a solitary scratch on it I'll ration him to beans on toast for dinner for the rest of the week.'

Further communication was drowned out by the shuttle's vertical lift motor. Sarah and Andrei climbed into the Cosworth as the ship rose into the air and quickly disappeared from sight.

Sarah laughed as she started the engine. 'There will be reports of flying saucer sightings all over the Lyonnaise by tomorrow.'

Sarah looked at Andrei who had heard and was smiling.

The note of the Cosworth engine rose as Sarah changed down to round the left-hander and cross the narrow Pont de Jons over the Rhône. 'Any ideas what we can do when we get there? The colonel won't be expecting us because he thinks we were all blown up at the airport.'

'So what is he likely to be doing?'

'Finding out how much Al knows, for starters. He'll still need to eliminate Simone to be completely in the clear. Then he will have to hide the children they've been using.'

'The colonel doesn't yet know he's lost two of his men.'

'Full frontal attack?'

Sarah shook her head. 'We play it cool. And remember, to our knowledge, all the others are relatively straight. After all, we can't just shoot them all, can we?'

'I can,' said Andrei.

'Have you actually ever killed anyone before?' asked Sarah, looking sideways at him.

'A submarine commander has to be committed enough to inflict destruction on, possibly, millions of the enemy. When the signal came, supposedly from Moscow, Malinov One launched twenty of its thirty-six nuclear missiles each with eight independent warheads. Paris was totally obliterated.'

'That's different. Have you actually done it when you can see the enemy standing six feet away from you?'

He thought for a moment. 'No, not like that.'

'Even when he has committed numerous atrocities, it is never easy to kill a member of the human race when there is no personal threat.'

'Have you done it?'

'Several times, I'm afraid. But I still don't like it.'

Sarah slowed as they approached the entrance to the barracks area. The Cosworth, being a right-hand-drive car, allowed Andrei to be on the side where the guard leaned toward the window. The Russian smiled and held up his identity card.

'Good evening, Colonel Narovic,' said the guard, straightening and waving them through the gate. 'Have a nice day, sir.'

'Which way?' said Sarah when they were inside.

Andrei pointed. 'The main block.'

There were few soldiers about as the pair got out of the car and walked towards the glazed double doors. They had their hands and plastic guns in the pockets of their overalls.

They were not picked up on the metal detectors in the reception area.

The corridor beyond was empty.

## 10

There was total silence in the court room as Quentin Adams paused in the reading of Cassi's statement.

The judge looked down at him critically. 'I presume you don't intend to stop there.'

'No, my Lord. I was merely wondering if everyone is still with me.'

'I think we are, Mr Adams. Although I am somewhat confused. If Security Officer Blackman shot one man who was, allegedly, engaged in criminal activities, and another died by the hand, or should I say the foot, of Colonel Narovic, why has Mrs Hardy been... accused?'

'At her own insistence, my Lord.'

The judge leant back once again and stared at Cassi. 'Young lady, I think you owe us an explanation.'

'Is this wise, my Lord?' interjected the Prosecutor.

'This is not the Central European Court, Mr Adams. The purpose of our being here is merely to establish whether or not a crime has been committed and whether the defendant has a case to answer. To avoid wasting everyone's very valuable time, please indulge me if I take a shortcut or two in the process'

He gave in. 'Yes, my Lord.'

'Young Lady, why is it that you have pleaded guilty to these...alleged crimes in which you played only a relatively minor part?'

'I am responsible,' said Cassi soberly. 'I should not have agreed to undertake the mission in the first place.'

'But you did not actually kill those men yourself.'

'No, sir. Not personally.'

'Nor agree to their deaths.'

'No, sir.'

'But you still feel responsible.'

'Yes, sir. I will never be able to forgive myself.'

The judge sighed. 'It may be something you will have to live with, but this court has been convened to establish whether or not pre-meditated murder has been committed. So far, I have not heard anything which convinces me that any such crime has taken place.'

The Prosecutor cleared his throat. 'There is still the matter of the unexplained death of Colonel Phillips. Also, we need to know what happened to the scientists.'

'May I make a suggestion?' said the judge.

The Prosecutor was taken aback. 'That is your prerogative, My Lord. But it is most unorthodox.'

The judge smiled. 'I am most unorthodox, Mr Adams and, for the rest of today at least, this is my court. As you have no evidence other than the statements of the people who were actually there, I wish to interview them myself.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'Of all the persons directly involved in these deaths, who is in court today?'

'The accused, of course. And the security officer, Sarah Blackman.'

He turned to the Defence Council. 'Was Miss Blackman to be your witness, Mr Wilson?'

'Yes, My Lord.'

'Then have her sworn in so that I may speak to her.'

'Yes, my Lord.'

The clerk ushered forward Sarah, resplendent in her formal dress uniform. She affirmed the truthfulness of the statements she was about to make and was seated in the witness box.

'You have heard the statement which has been read out. Is there anything you would like to add to the events which have been discussed so far?'

Sarah was adamant. 'No, my Lord.'

'And you were present at the death of Colonel Phillips?'

'Yes, my Lord.'

'And was the accused present or in any way involved?'

There was no answer.

It was the judge's turn to be taken-aback. 'Are you telling me that she was there?'

'I have been instructed not to comment.'

'By whom?'

'By the defendant.'

'Do you realise how serious this matter has become?'

'Of course,' said Sarah. 'But, reluctant though I am, I will not go back on my word, whatever the consequences.'

'I admire your loyalty, Miss Blackman. But is there no-one who can confirm the truthfulness or otherwise of what has been said?'

The defending council stood up. 'Herein lies the difficulty, my Lord. I have been unable to confirm or disprove any of the statement.'

'And there is no-one else?'

The council shook his head. 'I have not been able to locate and interview anyone who was actually present at the events in question and willing to speak.'

The judge sighed and then turned back to Sarah. 'I'm afraid that things are against you, young lady. I must insist that you reveal what you know about this case or be imprisoned for perjury. Do you understand?'

Sarah nodded sadly. 'Yes, my lord.'

'Then perhaps you will begin where my colleague left off.'

She glanced briefly at Cassi who eventually nodded her assent. 'Yes, my lord.'



**SARAH** Sarah and Andrei had heard the whimpering first. The corridor was long and deserted, through heavy doors which bore the clear sign "out of bounds to military personnel." The sign carried a name and signature which meant it was intended to be obeyed without question.

Sarah and Andrei, not being normal military personnel, chose to ignore it.

At the far end was the Officers' Mess and, beyond, the door to a store room was open. Sarah peered round the doorframe, drawing in her breath at what she saw.

Andrei kept a look-out while, with heart in mouth, Sarah eased inside and tiptoed across to where a dozen young teenager girls sat on the floor, bound hand and foot and in their underwear.

Sarah put her finger to her own lips to advise silence and bent down to cut them free.

'You like my little collection?' said the menacing voice from the shadows in the corner. 'Perhaps you would like to join them.'

Sarah started to bring up her gun arm but found herself looking down the silencer of Greg Watson's machine carbine. As she hesitated, a hand from behind her took the gun from her hand and looked down at it.

'Clever weapon,' said Colonel Dwight Phillips, turning it over in his hand. 'So that's how you got it through the metal detectors.'

Hearing the voices, Andrei rushed in, gun in hand. Colonel Phillips nodded. Greg Watson opened fire. Three shots from the semi-automatic hit him full in the chest and he spun round and collapsed without a sound. All the girls were screaming, terrified. Sarah stood, shocked at the suddenness of events.

Doctor Martin and the Aussie Bruce entered, smiling their approval. Bruce stopped in front of Sarah and took the zip tag to her flight suit in his fingers. 'I've been looking forward to this for a long time. I'm going to really hurt you bad.'

'Do we have time for this?' asked the practical scientist.

The Colonel shook his head and pushed Bruce aside, facing Sarah. 'Where is the girl from Rotterdam?'

Sarah said nothing.

'I have less than twenty minutes before Admiral Davison gets here. Before you die, you will tell me where she is so that I may...eliminate her.'

'I am saying nothing. So why don't you just shoot me and get it over with.'

Doctor Martin bent down and picked up Andrei's fallen gun. Before Sarah could smile at the belt he was about to get, he lifted the Russian's arm and slipped off the wrist band. So he obviously knew about the weapon.

'You will tell us now,' he said over the Colonel's shoulder as he slipped it around his own wrist.

Sarah shook her head but couldn't prevent herself swallowing at the thought of the damage just one projectile could do to her insides.

'This is a superb weapon,' the scientist was telling the soldiers. 'We must find a way to mass-produce them for your own use.'

The Colonel frowned his lack of understanding.

Pierre Martin stepped to the side and smiled. 'It can kill, of course, but it has the best effect on soft human tissue.'

Sarah held her breath as the sadistic man suddenly sidestepped away from her and stood beside the nearest girl. Without hesitation, he touched the barrel to a point just below the girl's navel and simply pulled the trigger. The plastic shell made a tiny entry hole and passed cleanly through her abdomen, stopping only when it struck her spine. The doctor deftly stepped backwards just in time as the girl arched her back, her mouth wide open in a soundless gurgle, as the shell exploded, each of the thousands of fragments shredding her insides before

erupting through the skin and showering the other girls with her blood.

Sarah's hand went to her face in horror as the thrashing body gradually became still and lifeless.



**IN** all her career as security officer, Sarah had never seen so much blood, and the thought that it had all come from a young and innocent teenage girl horrified her.

'Where is the girl called Roof?' asked the sadist, moving towards the second girl who was frantically shaking her head and pleading with Sarah in French.

The doctor raised the gun and placed the barrel against the girl's left breast. 'I will ensure that this one dies much more slowly.' He grinned. 'And a great deal more painfully.'

Sarah knew she had to act fast. It was risking the lives of the girls who had suffered terribly already, but it was a chance she would have to take.

She faked her reluctant agreement and then, without warning, dropping to her bottom, she kicked out at Greg Watson's legs. The bullets from his machine gun sprayed the wall just millimetres above her head as he started to fall, but Sarah was already rolling clear and then was back on her feet, crouching like a big cat, before the others could move.

The Colonel pointed his own gun at her and the scientist called his warning just before the man yelled and dropped the gun which had stung him. Sarah caught it in mid-dive and fired upwards three times, still rolling.

She lay on the blood-stained floor, struggling for breath, as footsteps came down the corridor. Sarah swung round but the newcomer held up her hands.

'It's me,' said Debbie. 'You left your fone channel open and we heard what was going on. So I came back for you.' She suddenly grinned. 'But I guess you managed all on your own.'



**THE** judge sighed. 'So you killed them all?'

Sarah nodded.

'With some justification, if what you say is correct.'

'I believe so, my lord.'

'And Andrei Narovic?'

Sarah shook her head. 'I cannot say.'

The judge realised he had met a blank wall again and tried another tack. 'Is Miss Clark in Court today?'

Debbie was and said so. She took the stand and confirmed the details Sarah had given.

'So when Colonel Phillips was killed,' said the justice to Sarah. 'Mrs Hardy was, in fact, nowhere near him.'

She nodded. 'That is correct.' She looked straight at Cassi. 'I am the one who is totally responsible.'

'That is not strictly true,' said a new voice from the back of the court.

Everyone turned as the door closed and in walked an elderly black man

with a military bearing, striding till he was at the front of the court.

The judge looked at him over the top of his glasses. 'And who, sir, might you be?'

'I am Major Alphonse Slazinski, UN, retired. Would you like to hear how it really happened?'



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'I don't think so,' said the voice in the doorway.

'Al,' said Sarah instinctively.

Greg Watson started to swing his machine gun round but Sarah kicked out at his arm and the bullets shredded the ceiling instead.

Al Slazinski saw the young girl's plight and fired instinctively. Doctor Pierre Martin was spun round by the force of the bullet entering his head, and collapsed in a heap between the screaming girl's feet.

Greg Watson's gun was already swinging back towards Sarah when she kicked out at his face, sending him sprawling backwards over the table.

By the time he was ready to get up, the Major's gun was at his head. 'Okay, fellers, let's call it a day.'

The Colonel grinned. 'You think so?'

He raised his arm but, before he could shoot, Sarah had retrieved her own gun and fired twice. Big Bruce went for her but Al Slazinski fired again and it all went quiet but for the whimpering of the imprisoned girls.



**THE** judge sighed once more and looked long and hard at Sarah. 'You seem to have missed out the odd detail or two.'

Sarah smiled sheepishly. 'I guess I must have done. Sorry.'

'So do we now have all the truth?'

'Almost all,' said another voice.

'And who are you?' asked the judge as a slim young woman strode forward.

'I am Pilot Officer Janine Hunt.'

'The one who was almost killed on the journey?'

The skinny girl grinned. 'That's right.'

'You seem to have made a full recovery.'

'Eventually, yes. Next month, I'm told I will be allowed back into space.'

'And what part did you play in this sad tale?'

'I arrived just before the Major. I didn't know, of course that he was on the side of the angels.'

'But I thought you were seriously ill.'

'I had recovered a little by the time Cassi brought Doctor Schmidt and Peter up to Wayfarer and she was ready to return for the others. I hi-jacked the shuttle when she wasn't looking and Debbie and I went down instead.'

The judge leant forward over his desk. 'So let me get this straight. When Colonel Phillips died, Mrs Hardy was not even on the planet.'

Janine nodded. 'That is correct.'

'But you were?'

Janine nodded. 'That's right. I set the auto pilot to rerun the sequence and landed just outside the barracks.'

'Were you armed?'

'Yes, I had the blaster from the shuttle. When I got to the Mess, Sarah was struggling with one soldier and the Major with another and I was confused as to who was on whose side. But I did know the Colonel, and he was about to shoot Sarah.' She shrugged. 'So I shot him instead.'

'Just like that?'

She grinned at the thought that she would have killed him later anyway. 'Yes, sir, just like that.'

The judge sighed again. 'I am increasingly finding these events more and more difficult to believe. I have no record of the killing of any scientists but I have to follow up the alleged deaths of Lieutenant Watson and Colonel Phillips. I also need to be sure of what happened to the body of Andrei Narovic as there is no record of his death. And, as there seems to be more than a little dispute over the details, I need further clarification.'

He looked around the court room. 'Is there anyone else wishing to add their four-penneth?'

His answer was a squeak, then another. Down the aisle walked a very attractive woman of around forty years. She had long dark hair and walked with a slight limp. She was pushing a wheelchair in which sat a man of a similar age.

'Name?' asked the judge wearily.

The woman held her head high. 'Je m'appelle Simone de Bosville, la Comtess de Ramsden.'

The judge simply blinked as the man spoke.

'And my name is Commander Andrei Narovic.'



**SARAH** Sarah and Andrei had heard the whimpering first. The corridor was long and deserted, through heavy doors which bore the clear sign "out of bounds to military personnel." The sign carried a name and signature which meant it was intended to be obeyed without question. Sarah and Andrei, not being normal military personnel, chose to ignore it.

At the far end was the Officers' Mess and, beyond, the door to a store room was open. Sarah peered round the doorframe, drawing in her breath at what she saw.

Andrei kept a look-out while, with heart in mouth, Sarah eased inside and tiptoed across to where a dozen young teenager girls sat on the floor, bound hand and foot and in their underwear.

Sarah put her finger to her own lips to advise silence and bent down to cut them free.

'You like my little collection?' said the menacing voice from the shadows in the corner. 'Perhaps you would like to join them.'

Sarah started to bring up her gun arm but found herself looking down the silencer of Greg Watson's machine carbine. As she hesitated, a hand from behind her took the gun from her hand and looked down at it.

'Clever weapon,' said Colonel Dwight Phillips, turning it over in his hand. 'So that's how you got it through the metal detectors.'

Hearing the voices, Andrei rushed in, gun in hand. Colonel Phillips nodded. Greg Watson opened fire. Three shots from the semi-automatic hit him full in the chest and he spun round and collapsed without a sound. All the girls were screaming, terrified. Sarah stood, shocked at the suddenness of events.

Doctor Martin and the Aussie Bruce entered, smiling their approval. Bruce stopped in front of Sarah and took the zip tag to her flight suit in his fingers. 'I've been looking forward to this for a long time. I'm going to really hurt you bad.'

'Do we have time for this?' asked the practical scientist.

The Colonel shook his head and pushed Bruce aside, facing Sarah. 'Where is the girl from Rotterdam?'

Sarah said nothing.

'I have less than twenty minutes before Admiral Davison gets here. Before you die, you will tell me where she is so that I may...eliminate her.'

'I am saying nothing. So why don't you just shoot me and get it over with.'

Doctor Martin bent down and picked up Andrei's fallen gun. Before Sarah could smile at the belt he was about to get, he lifted the Russian's arm and slipped off the wrist band. So he obviously knew about the weapon.

'You will tell us now,' he said over the Colonel's shoulder as he slipped it around his own wrist.

Sarah shook her head but couldn't prevent herself swallowing at the thought of the damage just one projectile could do to her insides.

'This is a superb weapon,' the scientist was telling the soldiers. 'We must find a way to mass-produce them for your own use.'

The Colonel frowned his lack of understanding.

Pierre Martin stepped to the side and smiled. 'It can kill, of course, but it has the best effect on soft human tissue.'

Sarah held her breath as the sadistic man suddenly sidestepped away from her and stood beside the nearest girl. Without hesitation, he touched the barrel to a point just below the girl's navel and simply pulled the trigger. The plastic shell made a tiny entry hole and passed cleanly through her abdomen, stopping only when it struck her spine. The doctor deftly stepped backwards just in time as the girl arched her back, her mouth wide open in a soundless gurgle, as the shell exploded, each of the thousands of fragments shredding her insides before erupting through the skin and showering the other girls with her blood.

Sarah's hand went to her face in horror as the thrashing body

gradually became still and lifeless.



**IN** all her career as security officer, Sarah had never seen so much blood, and the thought that it had all come from a young and innocent teenage girl horrified her.

'Where is the girl called Roof?' asked the sadist, moving towards the second girl who was frantically shaking her head and pleading with Sarah in French.

The doctor raised the gun and placed the barrel against the girl's left breast. 'I will ensure that this one dies much more slowly.' He grinned. 'And a great deal more painfully. So where is she?'

'I am here,' said the voice in the doorway.

Everyone turned to find Simone in the doorway, an automatic pistol in her clenched hands, moving her aim from one to another of them.

'Don't move,' the teenager commanded sharply. 'My father taught me to shoot and I never miss.'

'This will do you no good,' said Colonel Phillips quietly.

Simone ignored him.

'You,' she shouted at the scientist. 'Get over here with the others.'

The doctor sneered and chose to ignore her. There was a loud bang and the blood from his fatal head wound splattered all over the girl before he slid slowly to the floor. 'I warned you.'

Sarah tensed herself as she saw the movement in Greg Watson's eyes. As he swung his machine gun round, she kicked out at him with all her strength as bullets spewed toward Simone. Simone's gun was still pointing at him.

'You killed Nurse Annie,' she simply said and pulled the trigger.

His body jerked backwards a step but she fired again and again until he fell down.

The Colonel made a grab for Sarah's gun but yelled as it bit him.

Simone smiled at him. 'And this is for Uncle Mike.'

At that second, three figures arrived together. Debbie and Al fired at the same instant as Simone and the body of Colonel Phillips was literally lifted from the floor by the number of bullets thudding into him before crashing back, dead before he hit the floor.

Sarah was already launching herself at Bruce but he was stronger and warded off her initial blows, drawing a long-bladed knife with one swift action as they fell to the ground. None of the others had a clear shot as the two of them rolled behind some cabinets.

One of the cabinets fell and pinned Sarah's right arm while she tried to fend off his knife with the other. He stabbed down several times but Sarah managed to squirm away but eventually, he had her trapped and sliced down at her exposed chest.

There was an almighty explosion and, just as the tip of the blade touched her skin, half his face vanished.

Sarah felt the blade sink into her but the power of the stroke was gone and the knife stopped at the ribs as the Aussie rolled from her.

She looked up and Janine was grinning down at her, the shuttle's blaster in her hands. 'He won't be booby-trapping any more doors.'

The only sound was the whimpering of the remaining girls who were still terrified out of their minds. The sound was, however, joined by the noise of rotors.

The Major stood up from checking the non-existent pulse of Colonel

Phillips as the roar reached their ears. 'That'll be the Admiral. I think it's time you lot got the hell out of here.'

'But we can't just leave you with all this.'

'Yes, you can. Get back to your own time and I'll try and forget you were ever here.'

'How can we thank you?' asked Sarah.

'You already have. Now, it looks as if I get to live with my Bettina to retirement age.'

Sarah grinned. 'I'll never forget you, Al Slazinski.'

He grinned. 'See you in twenty-five years, kid. It's been great working with you.'

She shook his hand then kissed his cheek. 'Janine, where's the shuttle?'

'Round the back, out of sight.'

'Okay, go and get the engine fired up. We're leaving.'

'Sarah,' said Debbie suddenly. 'This one's not dead.'

The security officer swung round to find her colleague bent over Andrei Narovic. 'How bad is he?'

'Internal bleeding. He needs a medlab, now.'

Sarah looked at Al.

He shrugged. 'Nothing clever here. If we could get him back to Columbia...'

'How long will that take?' asked Debbie.

'Two hours, three.'

The paramedic shook her head. 'He won't make it. We need to get him up to Wayfarer.'

'But Debbie....' protested Sarah.

Debbie shrugged. 'It's his only chance.'

Sarah hesitated for only a second. 'Can he be carried?'

'We have no choice.'

Sarah hugged Simone again. 'You came back.'

'I felt I had to.' She laughed. 'I'm afraid your poor father will be hopping mad when he sees me. On the way back, I pretended I desperately needed the loo and, when we got out of the fourtrack, I pinched it, and his gun.'

Sarah also laughed. 'Simone deBosville, you are going to grow up into one hell of a woman, you know that?'

The Countess of Ramsden blew the smoke from the end of her barrel and then grinned. 'You bet I am.'

Al hurried them along. 'Okay, people, let's go.'



**THE** judge looked down at Andrei Narovic in the wheelchair. 'Is that about how it happened?'

The ex submarine Commander shrugged. 'I was unconscious all the time. But I do remember finding the teenage girls and then getting shot. The next thing I know is being inside the space ship, coming home.'

The justice moved his viewpoint to Simone. 'But you stayed on earth and grew up gracefully.'

She nodded. 'More or less. With my knowledge of chemistry, I have helped clean up many of the rivers of Europe.'

'And what are you doing now?'

'I am a teacher.'

'A school teacher?'

Simone held her back straight. 'I am Senior Professor of Sciences at the New Sorbonne.'

'Were you hurt in the incident?' asked the flustered judge. 'I couldn't help but notice the limp as you came in.'

She smiled for the first time. 'No. I received this knee injury in a car crash on the Autoroute d'Europe only ten years ago.'

'A road accident?'

Simone nodded. 'Some lorry had a blow-out and it ran into us. My Aunt Suzette and her daughter-in-law were unfortunately killed outright. I was the sole survivor.'

'I'm sorry.'

'Cela ne fait rien,' said Simone, glancing at Cassi and then at her husband, Mike. 'Accidents do happen.'

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