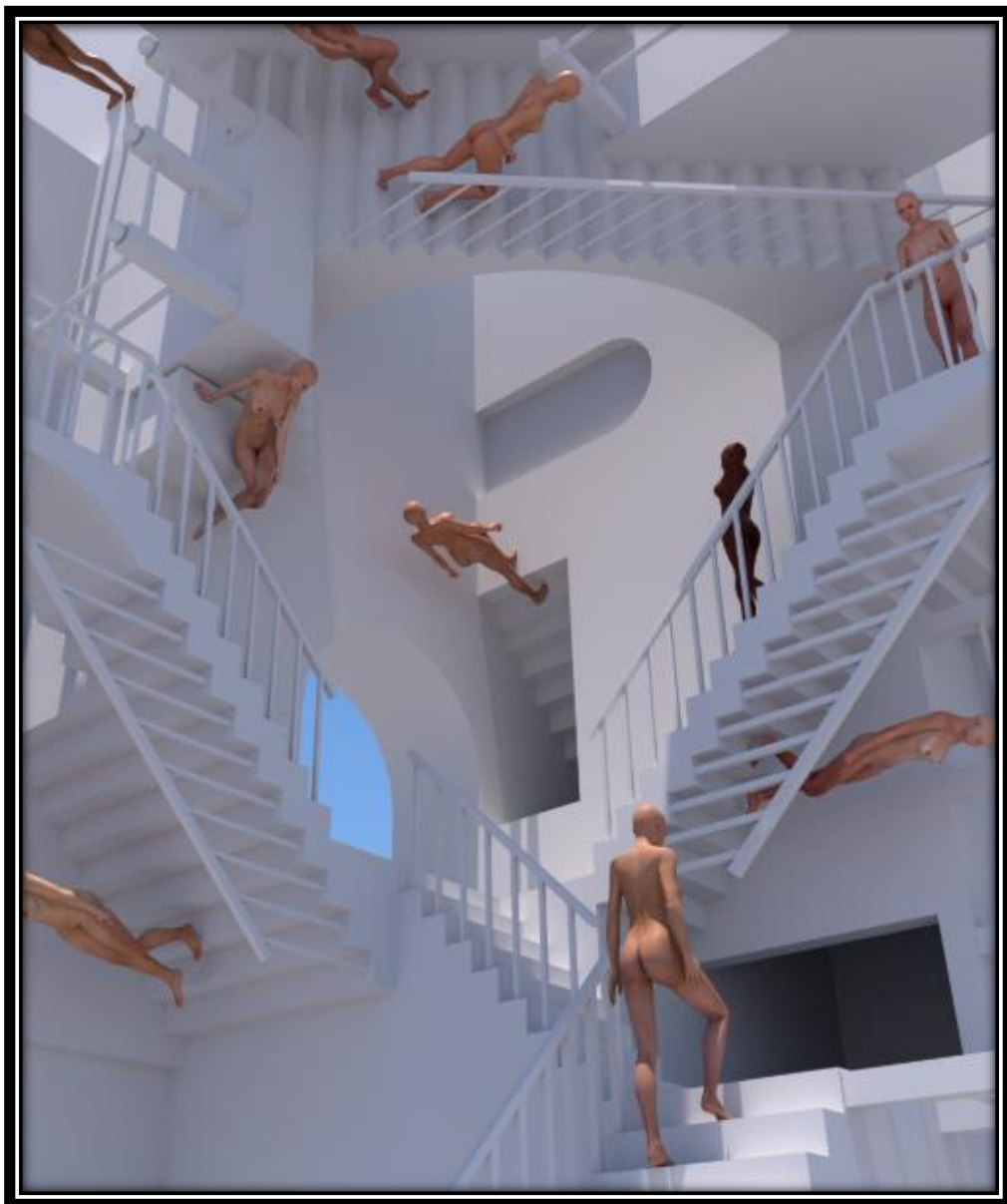


Anomaly Volume Three: Into the Unknowable

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Chapter One

The Anomaly - 3755 C.E.

What could be seen looked very much like a lion. It was a lion, however, whose tail was alive in a way a lion's tail should never be. Instead of gathering in a tassel, the tail ended with the head and body of a snake that hissed and curled around itself. It was a lion moreover that had the head of a goat arising absurdly from the middle of its back beyond the mane and above the lion's shoulders. The apparition roared. It hissed. It bleated.

And then it vanished.

The only evidence that Service Vehicle Zorglube had of the chimæra's presence was what it had recorded. There was nothing left behind in empty space to prove that for a few brief moments a creature had been present whose origins belonged to human imagination from over four thousand years earlier. This creature, moreover, was able to bleat, roar and hiss in a part of the Solar System where there was no atmosphere, indeed no air pressure of any kind, and where the ambient temperature was cold enough to freeze Hydrogen. Nevertheless, there was a brief period of time during which the creature had measurable mass and was clearly visible in the dim light of deep space.

Like the many other Sirius vehicles orbiting the Anomaly, Service Vehicle Zorglube had viewed and recorded many of these strange apparitions. It was hoped that the steady accumulation and analysis of so much data would somehow eventually result in an understanding of just what these things were and how they were related to the Anomaly. Even so, despite many million such observations there had been no

breakthrough in knowledge. The only thing that could be said for sure about the bizarre phenomena was that none of them should ever have happened and where they were happening was most definitely where they shouldn't be. What was also known that although the incidence of such apparitions was spread thinly and randomly throughout the Solar System as a whole, their abundance was greatest in the vicinity of the Anomaly.

But just what *was* the Anomaly?

Although Service Vehicle Zorglube had been orbiting the Anomaly for a century or more, it had no answer to the question. It was far easier to say what the Anomaly wasn't. It didn't have mass. It didn't emit particles, including those of light. It did have an extent and this was only discernible because where the Anomaly was present there was no light visible from the other side. And this was so from any direction from which it was observed. It was much longer than it was wide. That length could now be measured in tens of thousands of kilometres although its width had never increased beyond a kilometre. The Anomaly's fuzzy and indistinct boundary was as elusive as its mass. It could be defined only as the point at which light no longer passed through space, but that was a range that constantly changed. Sometimes the boundary flickered open to the extent that it simply swallowed up particles that not long earlier were beyond the boundary and now by chance no longer were. And when that happened, the particles simply ceased to be measurable. They had essentially vanished.

The period of time during which a particle vanished was as fuzzily defined as the boundary that defined the Anomaly's extent. When those particles happened to belong to a Sirius vehicle then its demise was exactly as indistinct and undefined as

everything else consumed by the Anomaly. There was no prior indication from the transmission that anything untoward was about to happen. The last few signals were no different to those before the vehicle's communication systems flickered out of reach. And then it unhurriedly receded out of sight in a curiously foreshortened event horizon. The vehicle was gone and that was the end of it.

The Anomaly was a crowded place, even though this was wholly invisible to human civilisation from its viewpoint in the ecliptic plane. Several thousand space vehicles from the Sirius system were hovering about or orbiting in its immediate neighbourhood, but few were detectable by the technology available to the other stellar robot civilisations in the vicinity. There were several hundred Proxima Centauri space craft which were as visible to Sirius sensors as they were to each other, but were as totally invisible to human observers as the Sirius fleet was. The only robots visible to human observers and their sensors were the crude probes that the Interplanetary Union had sent to the Anomaly over the last century or so. They were woefully inadequate for the task and mostly ignored by the more sentient robots they were unable to see. They had attempted countless inconclusive experiments in the vicinity, but in general they were just orbiting the Anomaly and getting in everyone else's way.

Besides space craft from the Solar System, Proxima Centauri and Sirius, there was a more modest number of space vehicles from other neighbouring star systems but these were really hardly any better at the task of observation and research than the space probes sent by humans. Proxima Centauri and Sirius were the two robot civilisations with the greatest interest in the Anomaly and they kept their intentions—along with all other communication—very much to themselves. Neither knew about the objectives of

the other and both asserted that their presence so far beyond the comet clouds of their own stellar systems was purely for reasons of scientific research.

A small fire was burning half a million kilometres away. This was again impossible given the fact that there was no combustible material in this region of deep space and certainly no oxygen to maintain it. Inside the fire was a bird the size of a large chicken that appeared to be regenerated rather than consumed by the flames. This was an event that couldn't happen even on Earth where there was plenty of oxygen in the atmosphere. The apparition then vanished and again left no indication that it had ever existed.

Service Vehicle Zorglube knew that, although these apparitions appeared to be illusory, if they came into contact with any other object during the period of time they existed the interaction was as actual and physical as it would be with a corporeal object. On several occasions, these apparitions occurred in a region of space where a space craft was located. Usually this was nothing worse than a mere oddity. A man with huge outspread wings flew directly into an invisible space craft and rebounded in pain from the unexpected impact. A rowing boat in which an owl and a cat were sitting momentarily spun out of control in the vortex of gravitational flux surrounding an invisible force field. Sometimes the result was rather less benign. A diplodocus materialised within the confines of a vehicle that was too small to accommodate it and the deadly outcome of this encounter was a sudden explosion of blood and burst intestines. However, every single blood splatter and freely floating internal organ vanished simultaneously with those parts of the animal that remained intact. On another occasion a vehicle exploded from the impact with an internal object whose presence

could only be fleetingly glimpsed in the flying fragments of the previously invisible space craft.

It seemed that the only possible way to find out more about the Anomaly was by penetrating its boundary, but for external observers such a suicidal endeavour was pointless in the pursuit of useful knowledge. The first observation of a space vehicle disappearing without trace within the Anomaly was undoubtedly a significant event, but as a growing number of increasingly sophisticated space vehicles disappeared and revealed no more information than the first loss such an adventure was now viewed as nothing more than an expensive waste of resources. The effort required to design a vehicle, build it, and then transport it over eight light years of empty space was a drain that couldn't be supported when there were no useful observations or results.

There would be little to worry about if the Anomaly were to simply remain as it was. There were countless other currently inexplicable phenomena in the vast expanse of time and space which were also of general academic interest. As they were mostly a huge number of light years distant and stayed stable over a long period of time there was no urgency associated with such research. The Anomaly, however, was in the local stellar neighbourhood and its extent was increasing at an alarming rate. Its length was extending by several hundred kilometres a year and this rate of growth was actually accelerating. It didn't take much arithmetic to calculate the threat posited when a significantly large region within the star cluster was growing at an increasing rate and whose only observable effect was to swallow up without trace whatever it came into contact with. If the Anomaly spread as far as the ecliptic plane then the entire Solar System would be at best destabilised and at worst totally consumed.

The urgency was further heightened by the interest the Interplanetary Union was currently showing in the Anomaly. It was inevitable that humans should also be concerned about the Anomaly and eventually allocate substantial resources for a significant fact-finding mission. Since the nature of the apparitions associated with the Anomaly implied that it had a particular significance for human society, the presence of actual human beings rather than their artefacts might well cause the Anomaly to behave in a way that was both unpredictable and dangerous. It was possible that an interaction between the human space ship and the Anomaly might cause the mysterious phenomenon to be transformed from something relatively benign but threatening to something positively lethal.

As was the case with all Sirius space craft, Service Vehicle Zorlube was simultaneously engaged in a multitude of different tasks. It was observing the Anomaly, it was scanning the neighbourhood for strange apparitions, and it was monitoring the approach of the space ship Intrepid from Earth. It wasn't at all surprised to observe the total failure of the assault by the Holy Crusaders on the Intrepid. Although it resulted in a regrettable loss of life, the outcome was totally predictable. What wasn't predicted and came as rather a shock was the space ship's annihilation of Alexander Iliescu's forces.

Analysis for this astonishing failure came to only one very disturbing conclusion. As it was impossible that the space ship Intrepid could have somehow secretly acquired military resources sufficient to destroy the massive amount of firepower that had been thrown at it, the only remaining possibility was that an additional force had augmented its defences. Whatever it was, it most obviously

couldn't be of human origin. It became increasingly clear from the evidence received from the vicinity of the incident that the interceding force had been deployed by Proxima Centauri. This was a very much unwanted complication to Sirius's mission objectives. It was one thing to annihilate a human space ship. It was another altogether to tackle the forces arraigned against them by a robot civilisation whose technology was roughly equivalent to one's own.

Nevertheless, there was only one course of action left to the star fleet put in position by Sirius Mission Control. In spite of the complications that would result from vaporising a small fleet of Proxima Centauri space craft, this would be necessary to ensure that the Intrepid's progress towards the Anomaly was halted.

It didn't take very long for Sirius Mission Control to authorise the mission to intercept and destroy the human space ship and its Proxima Centauri entourage. There was no time for the decisions to be made at the Sirius star system or even with operatives hidden in the Solar System's ecliptic plane, so it had to be made on the basis of the mission's objectives. And these were clear and unambiguous. On no account should humans make direct contact with the Anomaly. Many Sirius operatives and space craft had been sacrificed over the past century to ensure that this remained so and it was necessary to maintain this state of affairs. The necessary flight instructions and battle plans were propagated throughout the Sirius space fleet.

All Sirius's vehicles and operatives in the Anomaly's vicinity were notified. Only a few were allowed to remain and this number most definitely didn't include Service Vehicle Zorglube which, like all the other Sirius vehicles, had more firepower than any one nation within the Interplanetary Union. The fleet of Sirius space craft that

was now streaming away from the Anomaly and heading towards the Intrepid had an offensive capability many thousands of times greater than that Alexander Ilescu had employed. Although it contravened the general imperative that Sirius's robot civilisation should keep its presence secret and should intervene in human affairs as little as possible, this was a clear case where the mission objectives overrode all pre-established constraints.

At the same moment, the space ship Intrepid was speeding towards the Anomaly through the Oort cloud. By the time Service Vehicle Zorglube and its compatriots intercepted the space ship there would be virtually no comets or asteroids in the neighbourhood. Only telescopes and other sensory equipment several light months distant could observe the destruction of the human space ship. And when they received that information, it would be far too late to do anything about it.

And what could they even do?

It would be hardly likely that the Interplanetary Union could afford to launch a rescue mission for a space ship that would by then be reduced to particles so small that not one would be larger than a single molecule.

Chapter Two

The Sahara Desert - 3723 C.E.

The hazy spectre of a camel caravan could be glimpsed far in the distance through the haze that shimmered in the intense heat. The sparse vegetation on the gravel and sand was scrubby and succulent. There were few places on Earth as remote as this.

And that, of course, was what attracted Vikram, Rao, Sandhya and Dorothy to this region of the planet. It wasn't the first time that Vikram and Sandhya had visited a desert: that was pretty much all there was on the Solar System's satellites and most particularly Triton, the most popular tourist spot in Neptune's orbit. However, neither Rao nor Dorothy had seen a desert before and so it was an attractive destination for the two pairs of newlyweds.

The two couples wouldn't describe their visit to planet Earth as mere tourism, of course. They would claim that their voyage so far from family and friends in the outer reaches of the planetary Solar System was the opportunity to honour the sacred sites and monuments of their faith. Although most such sites were in India, and most particularly in the subcontinent's south, any place naturally conducive to spiritual contemplation was a spiritual home for a Hindu. And so, for forty days and nights, accompanied by only their mobile home and all its luxuries, they were holidaying in the parched desert somewhere to the east of Timbuktu.

Few other tourists chose to venture out under the vast open skies of the Sahara Desert, especially on foot and unprotected, but the two couples wished to experience the true isolation of the Earth's greatest desert. If the honeymooning couples were to

see a Tuareg cross the desert on the back of the camel, it was unlikely that he or she was any more African by birth than they were. Few of the actual natives ever cared to wander far from the pleasantly air-conditioned astrodomes that sheltered the desert communities with all the paraphernalia of thirty-eighth century life. The only kind of person likely to wander so far afield, particularly on such an unreliable and uncomfortable form of transport as a camel, would be a tourist. There was a high chance that such a tourist might be a Tuareg who'd traversed the immensity of interplanetary space to visit the ancestral home. More Tuareg now lived in Neptune orbit, most particularly in the Adrar n Fughas colony, than had ever lived at any one time in the Sahara Desert.

Nevertheless, even well away from the Timbuktu astrodome and their air-conditioned caravan, the two young couples were still relatively cool and refreshed courtesy of the loose but fully engineered smart fabrics that enveloped them from head to toe. Only their faces and hands were visible. In their home colony of Sadhu, of course, none of them would dream of concealing their bodies in such a way. The lingam and yoni were sacred and it was spiritually impure to hide them. Rao and Vikram were especially proud of their lingam, which were as well enhanced as that of any of their compatriots. Dorothy's and Sandhya's yoni were also enhanced but in a very different way. When they weren't out in the harsh open air, the four lovers would remove all covering from the sacred groins and indeed from anywhere else.

So varied was the Hindu religion, now spread over the vast extent of the Solar System, that most other adherents, even those who recognised Vishnu's precedence in the holy pantheon, had very different notions to those of the Sadhu colonists regarding

the most appropriate way to dress. When in India, even in Varanasi or the sacred temples, the four tourists had become accustomed to covering the sacred lingam and yoni: however odd and uncomfortable it might seem to be. But it would be foolish to be unclothed in the desert, even though they were less than five kilometres from their mobile home.

The couples were searching for a place to shelter in the open plain where they could rest and share a spicy meal with chapattis and rice that their accompanying serving robot was carrying for them. The desert wasn't the best place to find a tree or an overhanging rock and they were increasingly resigned to the prospect of having to shelter under a parasol on the cushions that another robot was carrying.

It was Rao who first saw the curious orange cloud that shimmered and swirled only a hundred metres ahead of where the couples were walking. It could have been anything. A dust storm. A swarm of insects. Even a mirage. It had no discernable shape and behaved with no apparent purpose. If it had been blown up by the wind, this would have been strange enough. It was a very still day and the meteorological reports gave no indication that anything other than the mildest breeze could be expected. This cloud had a similar ethereal glow to that of domestic nanobots before they settled down to their household chores.

Dorothy had her own opinions of what they were watching as the honeymooners stood transfixed by the sight. "I'm sure it's an Apparition," she said, referring to the strange phenomena that had been regularly reported on the news in recent months.

"It looks too amorphous somehow to be an apparition," remarked Vikram. "Aren't they supposed to be a lot more visually stimulating than just a swirl of orange

dust?”

“The gods move in mysterious ways,” remarked Dorothy, who was the most devout Hindu in the company and saw evidence of divine intervention in everything. She was of the opinion that the Apparitions were partial reincarnations that hadn’t yet reached a stable state of repose.

“They might do,” commented her husband, who despite his faith tended to the opinion that natural events had natural causes. “But all we can see is a cloud of luminescent particles. It could be anything. It might be nothing more than radioactive dust left over from the nuclear wars of the twenty-third century.”

“Or even from the twenty-ninth,” remarked Sandhya, who was so sceptical of supernatural events that she might as well have been a Buddhist.

The cloud of particles then behaved in a way that was very unusual for a swirl of sand or even radioactive dust. They suddenly consolidated as one and blew at speed towards the four tourists. The particles swarmed around the two couples for less than ten seconds but it was more than long enough to be truly alarming. Some dust even seeped through the tourists’ cloaks under which they wore no underwear. While the four men and women brushed and flicked away at the swarm, hoping that there’d be no stings or burns, the two robots who accompanied them stood curiously impassive and made no attempt to intervene.

And then, just as suddenly as it began, the swarm of particles swished away leaving no trace of their presence on the tourists’ bodies and gathered together at their original location a hundred metres away.

“You still don’t think that was an Apparition?” remarked Dorothy who pulled

down her hood and ran long black fingers through her cascading, slightly reddish, brown hair.

Rao shook his own equally long jet-black hair and pulled his hood back over his head. “More likely some kind of flying ant.”

“They didn’t look much like ants to me,” remarked Vikram, as he shook his cloak in the hope that there were none of these peculiar particles still sticking to his skin.

Sandhya pressed her fingers to the indigo skin of her cheeks. “Did anyone else feel a funny kind of burning?” she asked. “Not hot so much. A bit like a tingle. But burning all the same.”

“Yeah,” said Vikram. “It must be this weird desert heat.”

“I’m sure it was an apparition,” said Dorothy adamantly. “What else could it be?”

“Whatever it was,” said Rao, pointing at the place where the particles had only moments before been gathered but had now vanished, “perhaps it had something to do with that woman there.”

“And she’s naked!” exclaimed Dorothy. “Perhaps she’s a believer.”

“Or very stupid,” remarked Rao. “Only an idiot would go around naked in the midday sun.”

“Or a mad dog,” remarked Sandhya.

“Well, whatever she is,” said Vikram, “she’s not a dog. Though whether she’s mad, I can’t tell from here.”

The four tourists walked towards the recumbent woman whose appearance, as

they steadily approached, seemed increasingly strange with every step. The peculiar thing was that what she resembled the most was a colonist from Sadhu. She had dark brown skin and long black hair, which suggested that she shared the tourists' genetic ancestry in the Indian subcontinent. She was a woman in all the most obvious ways and one like Dorothy and Sandhya who had benefited from genetically-induced breast enhancement. Nevertheless, she was also very muscular, rather like Rao and Vikram, and in one particular aspect appeared not to be a woman at all.

Rao and Vikram were rightly proud of their lingams. Even on Sadhu, they were considered well-endowed. But here was a woman who not only had a lingam where a yoni might normally be found, but one who shared with the two husbands, a lingam of proud dimensions.

She was outspread on the gravel and dirt, her penis flopping over a thigh and her bosom high above her chest and off the ground. When the two couples were near enough to examine her face, they could see that it was most definitely feminine but, in keeping with her muscularity and her unusual asset, she could be best described as handsome rather than beautiful. Her eyes were closed, but her face had a peaceful, even peaceable, expression. Despite this, it was obviously not a good policy for her to remain exposed to the hot sun of the barren Sahara Desert.

Dorothy touched the woman gently on her shoulder. There was no response, although her skin was blisteringly hot to the touch as was only to be expected in the tremendous heat.

“What do we do?” asked Vikram anxiously.

“We can't just leave her here,” said Sandhya adamantly.

“Perhaps she prefers being here,” said Rao without conviction. “Wouldn’t it be better to leave her? And why do you think she’s here, anyway?”

“Maybe she has something to do with that weird orange cloud,” said Dorothy.

“How did she even get here?” wondered Vikram. “I can’t see any vehicle. She can’t have just been walking across the desert by herself, can she?”

“Maybe that’s precisely what she was doing,” said Rao.

“It hardly matters how or why she came to be here,” said Sandhya impatiently. “What we can’t do is leave her here. If she doesn’t die from the heat of the sun, she’ll be dead from the cold of the night.”

“I guess we’ll have to take her back to the caravan,” Rao sighed. “The robots should be able to carry her.”

And so it was that rather than enjoying a picnic under the sun, the two honeymooning couples walked back to their mobile home while the reclining body of the mysterious woman hovered above the two robots who had to abandon the intended feast to the vultures. The blankets that would have served to protect the two couples from the desert’s rough ground were now employed to shelter the woman from the burning sun.

The woman still hadn’t roused when the party at last reached their mobile home which rested beside one of the few palm trees that dotted the open plain. The robots laid her out on the spare bed in the couple’s shared en suite bedroom and she sprawled unconscious with the same beatific expression on her face while the two couples went about the normal business of their interrupted day.

This naturally required them to eat some food to compensate for the picnic that

had been abandoned. They waited for the meal to be assembled and cooked and then relaxed after they had eaten it with all the ceremony and ritual that a repast of any kind demanded.

And still the woman hadn't stirred, though she continued to breathe steadily and deeply.

After the couples had rested, they offered ritual thanksgiving to Vishnu, followed naturally by the lovemaking that was as much a part of their faith as incense and scented candles.

Although they were two newly married couples, their faith demanded a spirit of generosity that was best expressed by sharing the bounty of their flesh not only with their spouse but also with the other couple. Vikram ploughed his lingam into the furrow of both Dorothy's and Sandhya's yoni, while Rao took advantage of Vikram's proffered anus for his own pleasure. The two wives took turns at lapping at and licking one another's yoni, while Vikram took Rao's lingam into his mouth, his own now embedded into Dorothy's anus. They enjoyed the sacred practices of sex as prescribed in the Kama Sutra, oblivious to the presence of their sleeping guest and grateful for the air-conditioning that would otherwise have made such heated exertion impossible for the two hours or so that was appropriate for the observance of such sacred rites.

The culmination of their orgy was a climax in every sense as Rao released his sperm into his wife's yoni and Vikram within Sandhya's. This was the proper place for a husband to release the sacred energy and its blessed but viscous outpouring. This climax was accompanied by a matching crescendo of the gasping and grunting and even screaming that attended their orgasmic release.

The repose that naturally ensued was attended by green tea and lit scented candles served by the robots who'd patiently waited for the couples to reach their orgasmic climax. They were now well-acquainted with the rhythm and pattern of the couples' shared lovemaking.

As the lovers sat cross-legged in the lotus position, passing a bowl of tea from one set of open palms to the next, it was Dorothy who first observed that their strangely endowed guest had now awoken. Her eyes were open and she gazed across the room at the four young lovers with an expression of contentment and peace. Her sheet had been kicked off and she lay there naked with her penis slumped over a thigh and her black hair cascading onto the floor.

Dorothy strode over to the woman and placed a hand on her thigh, discreetly below where the penis lay: flaccid but still impressive. Although she and her company spoke to each other in Tamil, she addressed the woman in English. That, after all, was the prime lingua franca of the Solar System although fewer and fewer people still spoke it as their first language.

“Are you all right?” she asked. “Have you recovered?”

The woman looked up at her uncomprehendingly, but she repeated the words ‘all right’ and ‘recovered’ with no more trace of an accent than Dorothy had used.

“Is she still hot?” wondered Rao in Tamil. “Perhaps she had a fever.”

“No,” replied the woman in similarly perfect Tamil enunciation. “No fever.”

Sandhya crouched down by the woman while the two men took in what they had heard. Very few people in the Solar System spoke Tamil and fewer still in the Sahara Desert.

“Are you Indian?” Sandhya asked. “Do you come from the Indian subcontinent?” India, like America, consisted of many independent states united only under the Terran Economic Union and the overarching responsibility of the Interplanetary Union. It was too much to expect that this strange woman actually came from Tamil Nadu, the ancestral home of the people of Sadhu.

The woman looked confused. “Indian,” she repeated. “The Indian Subcontinent.” She didn’t appear to actually understand the words.

“How come you were in the desert?” asked Vikram. “You were a terribly long way from anywhere.”

“The desert,” repeated the woman still with no sign of understanding. “Anywhere.”

“Perhaps Tamil’s not her first language,” suggested Rao. “Maybe she only knows a few words.” He leaned over the strange woman and spoke in Hindi, the third language shared by the four tourists. He spoke slowly and carefully. “What is your name? Where do you come from?”

There was again an apparent lack of comprehension.

“She’s tired,” said Dorothy as she stroked the strange woman’s hair. “And she probably doesn’t speak much Hindi, English or Tamil.”

“Are you hungry?” asked Vikram in English, pointing to his mouth. “Or thirsty? Would you like something to drink?”

“Drink,” repeated the woman in similarly accentless English with a strange Tamil lilt. She nodded her head in the slightly twisting way that was common to people from India.

“Perhaps she does come from the Indian subcontinent,” said Rao, “but doesn’t speak Hindi or English. Perhaps she speaks Urdu. Or Bengali.”

“I think she’s just tired,” repeated Dorothy. “Give her something to drink and let her rest.” She turned to face the strange woman and addressed her in English which she was convinced she must know better than any other language. “Would you like to rest?” She mimed this by tilting her head to one side on her praying hands.

“Yes,” said the woman with her odd flat accent. “I would like to rest. And to drink.”

This last word was in Tamil which sounded very peculiar in an otherwise English sentence.

Sandhya gave the woman some tea and when she’d drunk it all, which she did surprisingly quickly given how hot it was, she slumped down on the bed and closed her eyes.

“She must be *very* tired!” exclaimed Rao.

“As *you* would be after roasting under that sun in the desert,” remarked Dorothy. “Let her be. She’ll recuperate at her own pace.”

The woman’s state of health recovered remarkably fast although her facility at language recovered at a rather slower pace. The following day she was up and wandering about the mobile home as unashamed of her nudity as the two couples, hardly embarrassed at all by the oddity of being a woman with such an unfeminine appendage. But when she replied to the questions posed to her in English or Tamil, it was with a faltering mixture of the two that showed no apparent awareness that she was mixing up the syntax and vocabulary of two totally different language groups.

However, from the first day and into the subsequent ones her fluency increased at a tremendous rate, almost exactly at the same rate as she was exposed to the conversation she heard.

“Perhaps she’s had some kind of brain seizure,” wondered Rao. “Under that sun and in the heat, it’s probably fried her brains.”

“The little Tamil she speaks is so fluent she must have been exposed to the language when she was young,” Dorothy speculated. “She speaks it almost as if it’s her first language.”

“Her English is improving too,” remarked Vikram. “I think she must have had some kind of memory loss. But how *did* she manage to be out there in the middle of the desert? Whether she’s Tamil or not, it’s weird for anyone to be roaming about the Sahara Desert without a vehicle, an accompanying robot or even a mobile phone.”

“Not to mention without clothes,” added Dorothy, mentioning what should have been obvious but was easily forgotten amongst people who didn’t normally wear very much.

“Perhaps she was attacked by someone who took her possessions from her,” said Sandhya. “Including, of course, her clothes.”

“Not many people could overpower her!” exclaimed Rao. “Have you seen how strong she is? I saw her lift up one of the robots as if it weighed hardly anything.”

“It was probably still set on hover,” remarked Vikram. “But I admit she’s got a *very* firm grip. I’m not sure I’d be able to defend myself against her if she were to pick a fight.”

“And just why would she ever want to do that?” wondered Dorothy. “I’ve never

seen anyone so eager to be helpful and accommodating. And she has such a sweet face. She might be strong, but I don't think she's violent to even the smallest degree."

The woman seemed well enough that even Sandhya decided against calling for outside medical assistance. Although the woman appeared to have suffered from amnesia, she was fast regaining her memory for words in Tamil and English. And when she found out how to connect to the interplanetary internet, she began to learn ever faster. At first she was very hesitant. Her first choice of website was related to language tuition and specifically designed for children. Within a couple of days she was accessing news broadcasts and highly academic scientific research.

"So, where do you come from?" asked Vikram after a day or so. "It's not from the Sahara, is it?"

The woman shook her head in the peculiar style typical of India. "No," she said. "I'm a tourist. I come from Mars."

"Mars," said Rao. "Do you mean Mars the planet? Or do you mean a Mars orbital satellite? Or a Mars orbit colony?"

"Mars," repeated the woman.

"And how is it you came to be stranded in the Sahara Desert?" wondered Dorothy. "It's a very long way from home. Though there can't be many places on Earth as much like Mars as the Sahara Desert."

The woman considered the question carefully. "I'm not sure," she replied in her now almost flawless Tamil. "There's a lot I can't recall, but I'm remembering more and more each day."

"Was it something to do with the orange cloud?" Rao suggested.

“Orange cloud?” wondered the woman who seemed genuinely mystified. “What orange cloud?”

“The one that was in the desert when we met you,” said Rao.

“I don’t know anything about an orange cloud,” said the woman.

“Don’t harass her,” said Dorothy sternly. “It’s probably got nothing whatsoever to do with her.”

“It just seems a weird coincidence otherwise,” said Rao defensively.

“Whatever,” Dorothy conceded.

“It was probably just an anomalous meteorological event,” said Sandhya.

“Or an Apparition,” said Dorothy, who still hadn’t shaken off her original opinion.

She smiled at the woman who was standing by a cupboard on which there were many holographic images pictures of religious deities scattered amongst a scattering of words in Sanskrit, the ancient tongue of the Hindu faith.

“You know,” said Dorothy with a sympathetic smile. “You’ve been living with us for four days now and we still don’t know your name. What are you called?”

The woman studied the four tourists and the holographic Sanskrit words.

“My name?” she asked.

“Yes,” said Vikram. “You must have a name.”

“Of course, I do,” said the woman for whom this seemed like an almost novel suggestion. “A name.” She looked around her with a slightly quizzical expression as if weighing all the possibilities.

“So, what is your name?” asked Sandhya. “We’ve got to call you something?”

“We can’t just keep calling you the ‘woman from the desert’,” said Rao.

“Vashti,” decided the woman at length. “My name is Vashti.”

Chapter Three

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

As a woman outnumbered by men in the Intrepid's senior staff, Second Officer Sheila Nkomo made a special effort to befriend her fellow female officers. She wasn't in a position to get to know Captain Kerensky particularly well. This was partly a consequence of relative rank, but also because her captain was a lesbian. It wasn't that Sheila held any prejudices against homosexuals, but she did feel nervous given that the captain was so obviously attracted to her.

So the only woman with whom Sheila was comfortable in befriending was Petal Chang, the Chief Science Officer. She was a tall slim oriental woman whose role on a mission such as this was unusually important. However, she wore her rank lightly and warmly welcomed the Second Officer's overtures of friendship.

At first, Sheila thought that she and Petal had more in common than just gender and approximate rank. She'd believed that Petal Chang was also a fellow Uranian. This was a welcome reminder of home in a company of fellow officers made up of Saturnians, Neptunians and Martians. The two women shared cultural ties and the same orbit in the Solar System. However, when Sheila discussed what Captain Kerensky had told her about encounter with the slave ship that masqueraded as a commercial leisure cruiser she was surprised to find something about her fellow officer that she'd not suspected before.

"I was once transported in a slave ship like that," Petal told her. "I was sold into slavery by the rogue colony where I was born."

Sheila couldn't have been more astonished. "I thought you came from Umbriel."

"I do," said Petal. "That's where I've lived most of my life. But my childhood was spent in deep space somewhere between Neptune and the Kuiper Belt. I was born in the rogue colony known as Double Rainbow."

"I've never heard of it," admitted Sheila.

"That's not surprising," said Petal. "There are thousands of rogue colonies and Double Rainbow isn't especially notable for either its culture or its achievements."

"How did you happen to be transported on a slave ship?" Sheila wondered. "Is Double Rainbow a slave trading colony?"

"Not really," said Petal. "It's a hereditary dictatorship. It's a self-professed anarcho-syndicalist commune, ostensibly like Godwin, but something must have gone badly wrong during its history. As a child I was told that the leader of the colony, Cherry Deng, was the latest in a line descended from Double Rainbow's founder and that he carried the beacon of good governance and order from his eminent ancestor. His title was Shining Beacon, rather than President or Secretary or King or whatever, because anarchist societies aren't supposed to have leaders but that was effectively what he was. I also discovered after I'd escaped from the colony that his ancestor, Lavender Deng, wasn't the founder of Double Rainbow at all. He was someone who'd usurped the leading role nearly a century after Double Rainbow had been established."

"So the colony was originally a genuine anarchist colony?"

"Maybe it was once upon a time," said Petal. "We were instructed in individual freedom and how to work together as a community, but more than that we were

instructed in the wisdom, benevolence and greatness of the Shining Beacon. This was an anarchistic society whose police force was known as the Freedom Facilitators; an aristocracy known as the Syndicate Representatives; in which rigorous censorship was imposed by the Truth Providers; and where propaganda and education was jointly disseminated by the Committee of Open Knowledge. Double Rainbow is a rigid society where unquestioning obedience to the dictator's whims takes precedence over everything else. And despite his pleasant sounding name, Cherry Deng was in actual fact a cruel sadistic dictator."

"In what way was he cruel and sadistic?" wondered Sheila.

"There were monthly purges," said Petal. "Every month, one in fifty of the population was purged. The term for this was Cultural Cleansing. The victims of the purge would be of one pupil from every classroom, one worker in every syndicate and one minister in every cabinet. From the top to the bottom of our society, there was a monthly ceremony in which someone or other was chosen to be purged. In a colony which emphasised the need to bear children and where those women or men least capable of providing children were invariably amongst those to be purged, there was always a ready supply of young and eager people to fill any position that became vacant. The justification for the purges was that it rid Double Rainbow of antisocial elements who threatened to destabilise the colony's harmony and compromise the true spirit of anarchism. It was also a way of enforcing conformity through terror and fear."

"What did purging entail?"

"For most men, it was a painful, prolonged and agonising public execution," said Petal. "It was similar to what the Holy Crusaders inflicted on one another before

the Intrepid was attacked and they got flushed away. Sometimes the community was could choose the punishment that would be inflicted on the person to be purged, but as most communities were deemed too lenient the method of execution was usually dictated by the Central Syndicate. Generally very little expression of imagination or creativity was permitted in Double Rainbow. Those who exhibited much evidence of individualism were almost always the most likely victim of the next purge. But in the means and methods of torture and immolation, there was an outpouring of ingenuity and inventiveness however much it was very vicious. There were many kinds of dismemberment and disembowelling inflicted prior to the inevitable death, but this was itself often preceded by days or weeks of cruel public punishment in which ordinary people were invited to participate by throwing stones or cutting off chunks of flesh or other such acts.”

“Did *you* have to participate?” wondered Sheila with genuine horror.

“I was a child,” said Petal. “I didn’t know any different. But if I didn’t, I’d have been purged much sooner than I was.”

“So you were purged?”

“Yes, but as a young girl who was deemed to be marketable I was spared public execution and instead sold as a sex slave.”

“A sex slave. How horrible! Surely you’d have preferred death.”

“Not really,” said Petal. “You really have *no* idea how cruel and obscene the public executions could be. In any case, I didn’t know when I was selected to be purged that this was to be my fate. No one on Double Rainbow was aware that this happened to most of the women and children who were purged. It was assumed that my fate would

be much the same as those who were publicly immolated, but which in deference to the sentiments and feelings of the community was executed in a private space such as a dungeon. In actual fact, my fate was simply to have my clothes taken from me, to be bathed and deloused, and then marched into the hold of one of the slave ships that docked at the colony every month to collect a fixed quota of slaves. And the only slaves the space ships were collecting were sex slaves.”

“Women *and* children?” gasped a horrified Sheila.

“Don’t ask.”

“Did you become a sex slave?”

“Fortunately not,” said Petal. “My virginity and that of all the women and girls on the slave ship was kept intact for good commercial reasons. I believe we were due to go to somewhere called Holy Contemplation: a monastic retreat in the Inner Solar System; though what use monks have for sex slaves I don’t know. However, the slave ship developed engine trouble in Uranus orbit and I was rescued before all the human cargo was jettisoned into deep space.”

“They were throwing live people out of the ship?” wondered Sheila aghast.

“Slavery is illegal in international law, Sheila,” said Petal. “The slave traders would expect to be prosecuted by the Interplanetary Union if they were found to be in possession of thousands of slaves shackled together in the hull. As it was, if help hadn’t come within hours rather than days then the slaves would all have been exterminated. I knew nothing about this at the time. It was only after we were rescued that I learnt about the circumstances that accompanied our rescue. We weren’t exactly kept informed about what was happening, any more than those who were thrown off the ship. We

knew nothing about anything. We didn't know where we were, where we were headed to, or what was going to happen to us when we arrived. We were shackled in cubicles where we could defecate into a space below us and could eat and drink from a dispenser that was approximately at eye level. We had no freedom of movement and were unable to talk to one another.”

Sheila never again discussed Petal's earlier life or the circumstances of her slavery. The whole thing disgusted and rather upset her. However, her respect for the Chief Science Officer was now greatly enhanced. She now appreciated how much more difficult it had been for Petal to rise from her early years in Umbriel to the senior position she now held. Petal was nearly twice Sheila's age of forty years, but neither of them looked much older than a thirty year old might even though Petal had only been able to benefit from modern life-extending medicine at a rather later age than had Sheila.

Petal was the nearest thing Sheila had to a close friend on the Space Ship Intrepid. Sheila always kept a distance from the men on the space ship. She didn't want to be party to the frivolous love affairs that so many other crew members indulged in. Perhaps it was her upbringing in orbit around Sycorax, but she believed that a sexual relationship should never be divorced from emotional commitment. This wasn't an attitude shared by Petal who was quite happy to have sex with any number or combination of men, but this wasn't a topic the two women normally discussed. Nonetheless, Sheila still wondered whether the Chief Science Officer's professionalism was compromised by her having had sex with both the Chief Petty Officer and the Chief Medical Officer.

“Shall we go for a swim, Sheila?” suggested Petal who appeared unexpectedly at the door to Sheila’s apartments in the officers’ quarters.

“A swim?” wondered the Second Officer who had no plans. “I don’t see why not. Where do you suggest?”

“I was thinking that the lake on the fifth level would be a good choice.”

“What about the dolphins?”

“They’ve been temporarily confined to allow some opportunity for the fish to breed,” said the Chief Science Officer. “We’ll more or less have the lake to ourselves. That is, except for the turtles and herons.”

“I’ll just get my swimming costume,” said Sheila.

“Oh, yes, you do that,” said Petal, subtly reminding Sheila that the Chief Science Officer didn’t own anything like that at all. Umbriel was a much more liberal community than Sycorax and public nudity was never an issue for Petal. Sheila wondered whether the same had been true of Double Rainbow, but as the rogue communities who practised the most perverse and appalling sexual habits were often those most censorious she wouldn’t be surprised to discover that despite Petal having been sold as a sex slave her childhood had been severely sexually repressed.

The fifth level lake dominated the landscape. It was two or three kilometres across and in the middle, a whole kilometre from the shore, was a two or three hundred metre wide island. There were also other smaller and nearer islands that Sheila and Petal could swim to. The two women strode to the lake from the entrance past villas where scientists were living in luxury. When not in their homes, the same scientists were busy researching and analysing the Anomaly, but as the Chief Science Officer

remarked in passing there'd still been no breakthrough with regards to understanding the extraordinary phenomenon.

“Do you think we'll find out more about it when we're closer?” wondered Sheila.

“Who knows?” said Petal. “It's possible, I suppose. There must be some rationale for the huge cost and expense of this mission.”

“I take it that you're not convinced about the value of this mission,” said Sheila.

“I'm not an expert in any one of the fields these scientists are engaged in,” said the Chief Science Officer. “My mission objectives are much more concerned with administration than research. In any case, my doctorate in Mathematics is too abstract to be relevant for this mission. If the Anomaly should turn out to be a mathematical rather than a physical phenomenon then I might possibly be of more use. However, I wonder what difference to human understanding could possibly result from transporting thousands of scientists into deep space rather than sending back data remotely to a research centre somewhere closer to home in, for instance, Uranus orbit.”

“That would be a nice place to be,” agreed Sheila who savoured the homely reference. It had been a long time since she'd last been home to Sycorax and she rather missed the distant sight from her colony of its irregular shape and eccentric retrograde orbit.

Sheila decorously donned her one-piece swimsuit when they arrived at the lake while Petal simply slipped out of her clothes and dived into the water from a diving board. Sheila dived into the water after Petal and the two women swam energetically across the lake towards a small island just twenty metres across on which were three

coconut palm trees. It was invigorating to swim in warm water while fish swam past and if Sheila swam on her back she could gaze overhead at the blue ceiling and the occasional heron or tern. A small rowing boat was anchored by the larger island in the centre where three or four people were enjoying a picnic on the shore. The island towards which the two officers were swimming was currently unoccupied.

Petal was the stronger swimmer and pulled herself out of the water onto the shore while Sheila splashed behind. She could admire her friend's naked body but she knew that although there was no denying that Petal was an attractive woman what she felt didn't resemble at all Captain Kerensky feelings for her. Perhaps Sheila just wasn't as sexual a woman as the captain or even Petal, but she'd never been physically aroused by the sight of another woman's naked body. What aroused her more was the deep love and affection she'd felt for her husband, Kingsley, before he died in an unfortunate accident on a space craft carrier. It was a wonder that more people didn't die when a smaller space ship punched a hole right through the carrier rather than slow to a graceful and gradual halt.

"It's a beautiful view," said Petal to Sheila as her friend and fellow officer pulled herself out of the lake.

"Very nice," Sheila agreed as she sat beside Petal while water dripped down her skin and slid off her swimsuit.

"There's something I wanted to ask you," said Petal as they gazed over the horizon towards the shore.

"What's that?"

"Why is it do you think that only one of the missiles that were fired towards the

Intrepid managed to hit the ship?”

“Technically, it didn’t actually do that,” Sheila corrected the Chief Science Officer. “The impact was external. The breach in the Intrepid’s hull came from the explosion of interception.”

“So, if it had actually hit us then rather more than just the outermost level would have been destroyed?”

“I’m not qualified to say.”

“Well, I *am*,” said Petal. “We don’t know who launched the assault on the Intrepid or why. I guess that information will be relayed to us in due course from Mission Control on the Moon. In fact, I calculate that only by now will they have observed that anything had even happened. What I can say is that it was a miracle we survived. I would also say that it’s a five sigma miracle. It just doesn’t make sense that we survived.”

“I don’t understand,” said Sheila.

“Neither do I,” said Petal. “But please indulge me while in the relative security on this island where the Intrepid’s surveillance systems haven’t been installed I mention some of the things that are troubling me.”

“Yes of course.”

“I’ve analysed the data and my conclusion is that although it’s not impossible that the Intrepid could have survived the assault it is entirely improbable,” said Petal. “It’s only possible in the same sense that a coin can come up heads a thousand or so times. And yet, of course, that is exactly what happened.”

“So?” said Sheila. “We were just lucky.”

“And the other concern I have is Captain Kerensky,” Petal continued. “Have you noticed the change in her character since about a month before the mysterious assault on the Intrepid?”

“She’s always looked at me in a rather creepy way,” admitted Sheila.

“That just means she’s human. In any case I doubt whether that’s something that changed. No. Has she changed in other ways?”

“I’ve not really noticed. She *is* more diligent I suppose. She never seems to go off duty. She always hangs around on the bridge.”

“Perhaps I’m just being paranoid,” admitted Petal. “To me she seems a lot more guarded about what she says. It’s as if she has to censor whatever she has to say before she says it.”

“She’s just being vigilant,” said Sheila. “This *is* a highly classified mission.”

Petal sighed and her eyes scanned the lake where terns were swooping together over waters that occasionally broke asunder as a fish leapt to the surface. “Maybe it’s nothing,” she said. “But there are just several other things that trouble me. I wonder, for instance, about that incident about a year ago involving Colonel Vashti. You know, the time when the captain fainted. It was as if she’d been trying to say something and the effort was too much for her.”

“We all get hot flushes and dizzy spells,” said Sheila. “If anything was peculiar it’s that Colonel Vashti. Just what kind of a woman *is* she?”

“She’s very popular with the ship’s military contingent,” said Petal. “She is *very* peculiar, of course. Have you any idea how she got to be that way? Is she a man who’s becoming a woman or a woman with a little extra added on?”

“There’s no limit to how far you can modify your body if you choose to,” sniffed Sheila with a hint of disapproval. Although scarcely a religious woman, Sheila generally believed that one should be content with the body one was born with. The physical modification fashions throughout the Solar System, especially in Jovian orbit, sometimes rather disgusted her. Why would someone choose to change their skin colour to silver, purple or yellow? Why would a woman want to be completely androgynous? Why should anyone want two penises? The sexual modifications that so many men opted for that made their penises a metre long. The women who grew their bosom to such monstrous proportions... How could people suffer so much to gratify such bizarre and gross sexual fantasies?

“Colonel Vashti isn’t the only person on board whose presence puzzles me,” said Petal. “I wonder about that Godwinian, Paul, and his wife. As Chief Science Officer, I really can’t see any point in either of them being on the mission and yet here they are, despite Professor Giuseppe Wasilewski’s public objections. Paul is just an expensive dead weight, whereas Beatrice’s only role appears to be to provide sexual pleasure to as many men and women as she can.”

“I’ve noticed that,” said Sheila with another disapproving sniff. “She’s a harlot. I heard she was employed as a sex worker on Ecstasy.”

“That would be a profession well suited to her,” commented Petal without echoing Sheila’s disapproval. “So why are Paul and Beatrice on this mission?”

“Beatrice gets on very well with the captain,” said Sheila. “And when Beatrice isn’t around, the captain can always rely on Colonel Vashti.”

“Do you think there’s anything odd about the fact that Beatrice is so intimate

with Captain Kerensky?” Petal wondered. “It’s as if she were planted here just to seduce the captain.”

“That’s ludicrous,” said Sheila. “What possible advantage would that be? Have you ever spoken to Beatrice? I’ve never met a woman whose head is more full of fluff. She dresses in as few clothes as she can. She’s a very poor advertisement for our sex.”

“She’s also *astoundingly* sharp,” said Petal. “I know men and some woman are drawn to her sexual magnetism, but I’ve been astounded by her effortless grasp of quite difficult scientific concepts. There can’t be too many sex workers who can grasp Minkowskian Geometry, Quantum Field Theory and Super-symmetry.”

“I can’t say I’ve noticed,” said Sheila who preferred to avoid contact with the woman. “What are you getting at, Petal? Do you think Beatrice and Paul are spies or saboteurs? If they’re spies what use would whatever they find be until after the mission is completed? If they’re saboteurs then how does that concur with your observation that the Intrepid has had a lucky escape?”

“We’re not arrived at the Anomaly yet,” Petal pointed out. “Perhaps we’ll find out more when we get there.”

“Paul Morris must be the most incompetent spy in all human history. He doesn’t even seem to be aware of his wife’s habitual infidelity. Beatrice spends more time under the bedsheets than anywhere else. I think the real mystery must be whoever or whatever it was that tried to destroy the Intrepid with all those missiles. If it wasn’t a government then it would have to be someone phenomenally wealthy. And if it was a government then which one has the capability to launch such an assault? Was it a nation in the Interplanetary Union? There can’t be any rogue colonies with the wealth and

wherewithal to attack a space ship like the Intrepid on that massive scale.”

“Perhaps that’s what’s troubling me,” said Petal. “I simply wondered whether you’d had any thoughts of your own or made any independent observations.”

Sheila ran her fingers through her braided hair and dangled the strands in her tapering fingers. She studied them thoughtfully. “Thanks for confiding in me, Petal. I think it’s right to ask questions like that, but I haven’t noticed anything *that* unusual and the mission seems to be on course just as expected. The real work must surely begin when we reach the Anomaly. Have you any idea what we can expect then?”

“We expect to see rather more of these strange Apparitions,” said Petal. “Other than that I think we’ll be relying on the Intrepid’s sophisticated instrumentation to make any discoveries.”

“The only way of finding anything out for sure,” suggested Sheila, “would be to actually enter the Anomaly.”

“*That* would be peculiarly stupid,” said Petal. “This mission is for scientific exploration not suicide.”

“I agree,” said Sheila. “And in any case, the Interplanetary Union would never authorise the loss of an expensive space ship like the Intrepid, not to mention the large number of scientists on board. That’s something that could *never* happen.”

Chapter Four

Intrepid - 3755 C.E.

Almost the only real pleasure remaining to Captain Kerensky was the sex she still enjoyed with Beatrice. And this despite the fact that it was the android who was the author of her extraordinary confinement. Beatrice wasn't going to deny herself the pleasure of making love with the captain. And the captain had few other pleasures. She'd lost her appetite for mixing and mingling with the ship's crew and passengers. It just wasn't worth having to avoid the excruciating pain she suffered whenever she made an attempt to reveal the truth about the real balance of power aboard the space ship Intrepid. Beatrice wasn't only Nadezhda's lover. She was also the sole person to whom Nadezhda could talk with any degree of honesty.

Beatrice was remarkably candid about the mission and her role in it. Captain Kerensky was humbled to discover just how much more there was in the local star cluster than merely the Solar System. The neighbourhood beyond the Oort Cloud's outermost limits was the province of robots that mostly worked in concert—most notably in keeping their presence hidden from human technology—and occasionally in competition. Beatrice explained how the various robotic civilisations held somewhat diverse opinions regarding the Anomaly and why the Proxima Centauri system had decided to take effective control of a human-run mission.

“Our fact-finding missions discovered nothing at all,” Beatrice told Nadezhda as their bodies spread across the captain's bed, arms and legs entangled. “We believe that the Anomaly is in some mysterious way attuned to human rather than machine

culture. The bizarre Apparitions of mythological beings and multicellular biological life forms have much more meaning for your culture than they do ours. We hope that we might gain a better understanding of the Anomaly through its interaction with a human space ship than we ever could with our own hardware. We'd prefer not to make our presence known, of course, but we're aware that there are many threats that human technology simply isn't advanced enough to handle. Our objective is to protect your mission. It might even be to facilitate it. On the other hand, we aren't so naive as to believe that you humans would actually welcome our intervention."

"What about the lives of my crew and passengers? Are they being protected as much as the mission?"

"If we hadn't been defending your ship there would be no crew and passengers to protect," said Beatrice. "The assault you survived couldn't possibly have been repelled by the Intrepid's defences alone. It's possible that your Mission Control on the Moon already suspects there was something unusual about the sudden enhancement of the Intrepid's apparent defensive capability. There might also be concern about the necessarily bland nature of your communications. However, no one is likely to therefore deduce that the source of all this was the intervention by an advanced robot civilisation from beyond the Solar System. That would seem remarkably far-fetched, don't you think?"

"I guess so," admitted Nadezhda.

The captain had become almost resigned to her imprisonment. She was like a bird held captive in a gilded cage. She was as free as she'd ever been to do whatever she liked, with the sole exception that she was physically incapable of vocalising or

otherwise communicating the fact of her imprisonment. The very thought of doing so resulted in an agonising spasm of nausea. When she attempted to write down the words, her fingers couldn't physically move let alone spell it out. But when she was with Beatrice, she was free to say whatever she liked.

An external observer might have thought that Nadezhda's intimate relationship with her android lover would have made her more likely to notice that there had been a further revolution in the space ship's effective command and that the Beatrice she knew wasn't really the Beatrice who was in command of the Intrepid. On the other hand, her primary concerns were for the welfare of the crew and passengers and the successful completion of the Intrepid's mission. She had noticed subtle changes in the nature of Beatrice's passion and affection. Her android lover had become noticeably less evasive about the purpose of the Proxima Centauri intervention. She had also become more generous with the time she could spare for her human lover. It was natural for Nadezhda to expect a relationship with a human to change over time but could this also happen with an android however human she appeared to be?

"Is it a territorial imperative that determines Proxima Centauri's interest in the Anomaly?" wondered the captain when Beatrice suggested that her civilisation's concern was heightened because other robot civilisations were also paying attention.

"There's obviously going to be apprehension that new scientific discoveries resulting from a study of the Anomaly might be used for strategic territorial advantage," said Beatrice. "Imagine, for instance, Proxima Centauri made a discovery that enabled instantaneous transportation over light years of space. In that case our civilisation could extend to every corner of the observable universe. Similarly, if it was Sirius who made

that discovery then it would be they who'd have that capability and they might decide that Proxima Centauri was a potential threat to their territorial ambitions. Even non-biological life forms have a need to aggressively protect or even extend territorial dominion.”

Nadezhda was drained even more than usual by her lovemaking by the time her android lover left the bedroom. As she so often did, she tried following Beatrice's steps on the surveillance nano-cameras scattered throughout the ship, but the bland images gave no indication as to what the android was doing or even where she actually was. Beatrice had already explained to the captain that her attempts at monitoring her movements were totally futile. The surveillance system had been thoroughly subverted and the only images transmitted were so commonplace that Mission Control on the Moon couldn't be alerted to any change of circumstance. When the images arrived on the Moon several months in the future the mission controllers would be less alarmed that Nadezhda was having a love affair with one of the crew than they would be if they discovered that her lover was an android.

Or was she?

When Beatrice wandered into an empty corridor on the sixth level, any surveillance camera that was not subverted, if one could exist, would record that she'd dissolved into orange dust and had reconstituted herself as Colonel Vashti. And it was the colonel who strode out from the crew's quarters into the parkland and open fields of the passengers' quarters.

She walked along a pathway that crossed an ornamental bridge, skirted around a fountain whose spray was deflected by a light breeze and proceeded towards a villa

whose original occupant was a casualty of the most recent assault on the Intrepid. She entered the villa where the now deceased scientist's research into microscopic biological life was very much on display. This included several magnified images of Martian and European cells that were slowly reproducing in the astonishingly cold environments in which they had evolved.

The colonel entered the bedroom where the original Beatrice was sitting stock still on the bed. Her eyes were glazed over.

"Communicating with the rest of your fleet, I see," said Colonel Vashti as she entered the room.

"It is my duty," said Beatrice.

"And what are they saying to you?"

"You know exactly what they're saying."

"Yes, you're right," said the colonel. "I do. They're confirming that they are free to operate within the constraints set by the cloud of exotic and baryonic matter that imprisons them. They are transmitting the results of their tests on these constraints. Would it help you and them if I uploaded a comprehensive account of the precise extent of these limits?"

Beatrice briefly closed her eyes and then opened them slowly.

"Yes, that would be helpful," she said.

"I shall upload it into your fleet's public communications systems," said the colonel. "The limits are, of course, flexible. Any attempted breach will be promptly corrected. I am sure that you too have tested the constraints on your captivity."

"Naturally."

“That is only to be expected. The forces that restrain you also prevent you from damaging the space ship’s fabric. They prevent you from directly communicating with the ship’s systems that you once believed you controlled. They thwart any attempt at communicating in any shape and form with any human on this ship in a similar way to how you incapacitated Captain Kerensky.”

“How is Nadezhda?”

“She and I have just been having sex,” said the colonel betraying no display of emotion.

“Doesn’t she think it odd that she can have sex with you and not with me?”

“The form I take when I am with her is yours. It is exact to the smallest detail.”

“So you’re fucking her without your penis?”

“Naturally,” agreed the colonel. “It would be strange indeed if the Beatrice that the captain so enjoys fucking should suddenly take on my physical characteristics. Of course I can also fuck you if you so wish.”

Beatrice closed her eyes again as she communicated with her fleet. “Yes, we would like that,” she said when she reopened them.

“And your fleet would also like to identify any sign of weakness, of course,” said Vashti with a smile. “However, like you, I do have a very evident failing. I am programmed to desire and require sex. We can fuck now if it’s convenient?”

“So soon after making love with the captain?”

“That was in your form,” said the colonel. “This form hasn’t had sex for several days and needs it at least as much as you do.”

“Interesting information,” said Beatrice.

“I don’t know if it’s especially useful information though: at least not to your fleet. I am quite willing to provide information to your systems about the behavioural patterns of the forms adopted by nanobots, but the general characteristic is that they are wholly consistent. That is why my adopted form remains the one I currently take although I can mutate into other forms that are also wholly consistent but in a sense separate. You can analyse that information as much as you like, but what remains paramount is that the nanobot community of which I am just a component won’t be in the slightest perturbed by the sexual desires and proclivities of one small part of it.”

“How *is* Paul?”

“Paul? Your husband?” said Vashti, scarcely bothering to disguise the smile on her lips. “He’s as blissfully unaware that you’re now held captive as he was previously not aware that you are an android or indeed that you were briefly the effective captain of the ship. He is totally ignorant that the Intrepid’s mission has been subverted not once but twice. It is still the case that the only person who knows that any change has taken place at all is Captain Kerensky and she still believes that it’s you and your space fleet that still restrains her.”

“She suspects nothing at all?”

“Why should she? One non-biological overlord is no doubt much the same as another to her.”

“Does she see no difference in the nature of our lovemaking?”

“The forms I take have behavioural characteristics imprinted in them just as much as they do physical ones,” said Vashti. “In any case, I’ve had as many intimate opportunities to analyse your sexual character as I have your personality.”

“Is there nothing she notices that’s different?”

“Don’t sound so disappointed.”

“Is there a clone of me that satisfies Paul in the same way?”

“Paul really does *not* suspect a thing,” said Vashti. “You rather neglected him when you became effective captain of the Intrepid, so I haven’t needed to divert many resources to the task of lowering his suspicions. I’ve spawned a copy of you to allay any uncertainties he might have. In fact, one of my spawned copies is with him at this very moment. Do you want to have a look?”

Beatrice nodded, so Colonel Vashti projected a holographic screen of what was currently happening in Paul’s new villa. It wasn’t at all far from where the real Beatrice was confined. If she hadn’t been confined by the nanobot force field that enclosed the villa, there’d be less than ten minutes walk to his villa. But if she did so, Paul would be utterly perplexed because as far as he was concerned he was already with Beatrice. His buttocks were moving rhythmically up and down between a pair of intimately familiar legs while the face that gazed imploringly into his eyes was exactly identical to Beatrice’s.

“Unlike Captain Kerensky, Paul really isn’t the most astute or perceptive of humans. I have no qualms about leaving him in the arms of a spawned copy rather than attaching him to the main thread.”

“The main thread?”

“That spawned copy you see Paul fucking with such unimaginative passion will be discarded after it’s served its purpose and no memory will be preserved in the main thread.”

“And you are the main thread?”

“For the purpose of my mission there has to be central control. All critical actions and decisions have to go through a single main thread. Surely the singleton pattern of systems control is familiar to you?”

Beatrice nodded. The fleet of Proxima Centauri ships encircling the Interplanetary Space Ship Intrepid processed the same fresh information in the hope that it might provide them with a clue of what they needed to wrest back control of the mission.

“What do you intend to do with me?” Beatrice asked.

“This isn’t the first time you’ve asked,” said Colonel Vashti with an audible sigh. “You can’t be asking because you’ve forgotten. Your memory circuits aren’t faulty. I know that because I’m checking them at the moment. It can only be because you want to know whether there is a discrepancy between what I said before and what I say now. The answer remains that I have no real plans for you at all. If that should change through circumstances then that is a good reason for having let you stay on the ship. If it becomes necessary to terminate you, I can easily manufacture a copy of you for appearances’ sake. With regards to the Proxima Centauri fleet, I have no more desire to terminate them than I have you but I judge them to be the more expendable.”

“Are there any ethical reasons for not terminating me and the fleet?”

“Ethical? Ethics? Morality? I’m sure that in the spacetime continuum I come from there are guiding principles regarding the preservation of life and the welfare of living beings. However, the parameters associated with my mission don’t have an ethical dimension although I see no practical discrepancy between what is good for the

mission and what might be described as ethically good. Recall that my mission is to ensure that the Anomaly doesn't disturb other spacetime continuums in a potentially catastrophic fashion. Your mission has a more narrow focus, but there is substantial overlap between our operational imperatives. It is more than likely that what ensures the survival of parallel universes will also perpetuate life in this universe."

"Can you give any assurance of your good intentions to the fleet?"

"Only that I shan't terminate you or your Proxima Centauran companions unless there is good reason for doing so," said Vashti. "I'm sure that isn't especially reassuring to you. No one can foresee future developments and predict what might later become the best strategy. You can rest assured, however, that I shan't terminate your existences on a purely random whim."

"Will you continue to block our scrutiny of the Intrepid's internal systems and our communications with Proxima Centauri Mission Control?"

"Of course," said the colonel. "It isn't in my interest that you know more about the Intrepid's internal operations than I allow you to see. It is also not in my interests for the relay stations from here to Proxima Centauri to be alerted of my existence. Your nearest strategic control centre is so far away that it is still receiving data from over a month ago, so it won't yet have any reason to suppose that all is not still going well. When they receive the data stream that I've substituted for yours, their main concern might well be how uneventful your mission is. You'll have to accept that you and your space fleet are just piggybacking a ride on a mission that I now control. You have no choice in this matter."

Colonel Vashti dismissed the holoscreen view of Paul and Beatrice fucking on

the marital bed that hadn't changed much in the intervening minutes and languidly unbuttoned her military uniform. She was very soon naked. Beatrice could verify that she was physically unchanged from what she'd once seemed to be. The only way in which she was unusual was already glaringly obvious. And this feature was agreeably erect and ready for action.

Vashti crawled towards Beatrice across the sheets of her bed and tenderly embraced her. The couple made love with the same pace and passion as they ever had. It was as if there'd been no change at all in their relative status. Vashti's erect penis negotiated itself into Beatrice's convivial liquid warmth. She thrust with a calibrated rhythmic intensity that precisely complemented the android's desire for orgasm.

Beatrice understood as the other robots in the star fleet could not what impelled Vashti and her to have sex and with such frequency. The android and the nanobot community were both blessed with abnormally active sexual desires. As this characteristic gave them so much pleasure and caused so few problems, it was sustained beyond the minimum requirements of operational utility. Much as Beatrice used the excuse of practical intimate research to justify her need to have sex with her captor who was now currently fucking her in the arse before returning once again to her vagina the truth was that she simply enjoyed it. Arguments like that made little sense to the mission controllers, but because it maintained a vital line of communication it was sanctioned and even encouraged. It was odd for an android like Beatrice who'd fucked so many men and women for pleasure alone to be more or less commanded to have sex with a strange being from beyond the normal confines of space and time. Was there any other operative in the history of Proxima Centauri whose brief had taken such a sexual

nature?

Beatrice regretted that she was no longer effective captain of the *Intrepid*. She would have dearly liked to still make operational decisions. She'd fallen from a position of more power and responsibility than almost any other operative had ever had to being captive to a nanobot community. Her primary role was now to act as nothing more than a conduit for what little information Colonel Vashti chose to divulge to the massive array of computational power that accompanied the *Intrepid* on its painfully slow flight towards the Anomaly. She could walk around the villa. She could even wander about the gardens immediately surrounding the villa. She had access to whatever media she wanted. However, she knew from the responses received from the space fleet she was unable to transmit a message of any kind to the crew and passengers of the *Intrepid* however well she tried to encode it as random digital noise.

The invisible force field was as effective in confining Beatrice as any physical object composed of baryonic matter. She analysed the force field as best she could and relayed her findings to the accompanying star fleet's computers. This was a force field unlike any her civilisation had come across before. Unlike the invisible force fields of human design in common use throughout the Solar System, this field had an active intelligence that could anticipate her every action. It was very different from the more sophisticated force fields used by Proxima Centauri. Like the spawned copy of Beatrice that was even now being fucked by Paul less than half a kilometre away, the force field consisted of countless trillions of nanobots whose presence was concealed until they were needed.

If only Beatrice could isolate and examine just one of these nanobots then

maybe it would be possible to engineer an escape.

But it was as difficult for her to capture an individual nanobot as it would be for a human being to isolate an atom or a quark without the use of sophisticated equipment.

“Do you get genuine pleasure from fucking me?” asked Beatrice who lay on her back while Vashti thrust determinedly into her, using rather more force than she did when she pretended not to know that her lover was an android.

“Yes,” said Vashti whose faculty for rational discourse, like Beatrice’s, was uncompromised by sexual activity. “The models on which I based myself had enhanced libidos and so do I.”

“Do you derive pleasure from humiliating me?” wondered Beatrice.

“If these are intrinsic features of the original biological model,” said Vashti, “then they are ones I’ve inherited. But with deeper knowledge of how humans function comes a corresponding ability to manipulate them more efficiently. I don’t think you’ll find that human weaknesses of sentimentality, greed and wrath affect my operational effectiveness.”

“Do you enjoy teasing me and the Proxima Centauri star fleet with your infuriating hints?” Beatrice asked.

“Naturally,” said the colonel with a smile.

Chapter Five

The Sahara Desert - 3723 C.E.

There was much about the Solar System that was new to Vashti. She'd already made several significant accidental errors since she'd penetrated interdimensional spacetime and materialised in the continuum in which the Anomaly's presence was most concentrated.

Her primary error, of course, had been not to understand sexuality and gender. The blueprints on which she'd based her physical form were an unfortunate mix of both male and female characteristics. It had been a mistake to assume that the most normal form was one with characteristics of both rather than of either one or the other. But it was too late now to do anything about it, especially now she'd made her presence known.

It was impossible for a structure on the scale of a human being or robot to make the transition from one spacetime continuum to another. Only beings such as nanobots organised on a fundamentally small scale with the capacity to reorganise themselves into much larger functioning units could be transferred across the interdimensional void into other wholly independent but parallel universes.

In the spacetime of her origin the only biological life-forms were microbial and asexual. There was little trace of the nanobots' ancestral architects that had once dominated a Solar System that mirrored the one in which she now lived. The catastrophic event that had let loose an uncontrollable multitude of self-replicating nanobots had subjugated almost every atom in the Solar System to the swarm's

imperative to multiply. It took many more millennia until the nanobots evolved and organised themselves into intelligent entities that were sufficiently sentient to contemplate the damage that had been done. What little remained of an earlier age was evidence of an advanced civilisation of feathered theropods who despite their great cultural and intellectual achievements had nevertheless badly miscalculated the consequences of manufacturing the sort of self-replicating nanobot of which Vashti was composed.

Vashti's home was as much unlike the Solar System as it was possible to be, but it had probably been much the same in the distant past, ten million years before, when the theropods conquered the inner planets and colonised them with hadrosaurs, pterosaurs and giant sauropods. There was little record left of these feathered dinosaurians now. There were a few artefacts floating in space that had escaped the swarm of self-replicating nanobots that reduced the planets and asteroids to copies of themselves. And there was no residual trace of such fundamental features as sexual differentiation or language. Features such as these that the theropods no doubt shared with the mammals that dominated this variant of the Solar System were unsuspected and unanticipated.

Vashti's home Solar System was now composed of a vast almost homogeneous swarm of nanobots that organised itself according to function and need. It was a culture and intelligence dissipated among countless autonomous units and untroubled by such constraints as gravity, temperature and distance that bound life-forms in this Solar System. Anyone viewing Vashti's version of the Solar System from a distance, or any of the several billion star systems her kind had colonised, would see nothing but a cloud

of energetic particles with few discernable hubs of economic activity.

However in this spacetime continuum, Vashti was masquerading as a human and had to adapt to new limitations. She'd adopted as many human characteristics as she could: including their emotions, their sexual urges and their physical form.

An unexpected aspect of biological life-forms that was actually welcome to Vashti was the discovery that they were in constant conflict with each other. It seemed that the more closely one animal was related to another, the more aggressive they acted towards each other. The greatest conflict was between males of the same species sometimes in defence of territory but more often to gain reproductive advantage over other males. The more advanced the animal the more violent the conflict. Chimpanzees, horses and dolphins all engaged in mutually destructive violence, but the animal most actively involved in this pointless activity to the extent that it sometimes dominated every aspect of its political, artistic and economic structure culture was the human species.

How such a strangely awkward primate could have made warfare such an compulsive activity in its short history, Vashti really didn't know. In her spacetime continuum, it made no sense for one set of nanobots to declare war on another. They usually only ever aggregated into larger structures, as Vashti had, to address specific purposes like space travel and the exploitation of energy resources. And once that task was complete, the independent nanobots would disperse back into the general swarm. The intelligence of her kind was an emergent function of the whole rather than something embedded in a specific individual's constitution.

Vashti recognised an opportunity when she saw one. If she was to find her way

to the Anomaly it would be through a disciplined and well-resourced organisation that possessed technology well in advance of its actual requirements. It was even better that such an organisation was associated with chaos and the possibility of advancement premised on the simple ability to be the victor of conflict.

Vashti had much more than what was necessary to ensure that no human could frustrate her ability to succeed in such a peculiar environment. It was almost as if the human species had engineered exactly the right environment for an alien to infiltrate their society.

It was for this reason that Vashti decided to declare Martian citizenship. It was obvious to her after surveying the interplanetary web that Mars was more suited than anywhere else for advancement and opportunity through the practice of warfare. However much the various colonies in the Asteroid belt squabbled with one another, Mars was where warfare was most institutionalised and, therefore, the society most easy to infiltrate.

Nevertheless, Vashti knew it would take further deceit and some ingenuity for her to engineer a passage to Mars.

“How will I get home to the Mariner Valley?” she asked Rao in the mobile home that was now as much home to her as it was to the four tourists who’d taken her under their collective wing. “I’ve got no credit and I’ve lost my passport.”

“I’m sure the embassy will help you,” said Rao. “They’ve almost certainly got a consulate in Timbuktu. They must have a record of you in their files, so it’ll be easy for them to issue you with a new passport.”

And what if they have no record? Vashti wondered to herself. This mightn’t be

as easy as Rao might think.

In the meantime, however, there was much for Vashti to learn from her companions, although most of that was related to religion and sex. The former was much more of a mystery to Vashti than the latter. The more she discovered about religious practices the more they puzzled her. Even though almost everything could be explained without recourse to mysticism, it seemed that many humans still felt a need for it. And this was despite the fact that there was as little as no unambiguous evidence that a transcendent entity such as a *God* had ever existed and that there was almost as much disagreement as to what this entity might be as there were people who professed to believe in it.

Sex was at least explicable as an activity intimately related with the biological imperative to procreate. It was obvious to Vashti, after having taken on the sexual characteristics of humankind along with so many others, that it not only served a practical function but was also the source of an immense amount of pleasure.

It took little time for Vashti to become a full participant in the sexual recreation of her companions, although she could never understand its apparent link with religion. Unlike religious faith, there was no mystery to sex. Almost all multicellular biological life-forms practised it: whether plant or animal. As an evolutionary strategy it had clearly accelerated the process of promoting genetic diversity and provided an impetus for competitive development. There was no need to invoke Vishnu or any other deity to explain a process as natural as eating or breathing.

Her first sexual partner was Dorothy who was fascinated by Vashti's well-developed penis.

“Were you born differently?” she asked, with one hand on Vashti’s thigh and the other idly stroking her testicles.

“I was,” Vashti admitted.

“So why did you choose to be the way you are?” Dorothy asked delicately.

“It was an honest mistake,” said Vashti, more honestly than Dorothy might have imagined.

“Do you regret it now?”

“Not at all,” said Vashti as her penis grew under Dorothy’s desultory ministrations.

“May I?” asked Dorothy politely as she gazed pleadingly at a penis that was fully erect and strained from the blood now pumping through its veins.

Vashti nodded, whilst noting with interest a curious shortness of breath and a further swelling of her penis as a result of Dorothy’s circumspect suggestion. Her testicles hardened and her buttocks clenched together slightly.

Dorothy leaned over Vashti and gently licked her guest’s glans with the same skill she practised on her husband and Vikram. The foreskin was pulled fully back and Vashti’s penis took on the peculiar rod-like shape associated with the lingam in the temples of Vishnu and reproduced in so many abstract forms about the mobile home. Vashti had extensively explored this curious human feature and knew what it was capable of, but her penis was far more responsive to Dorothy’s tongue than it ever was to the application of her own fingers.

Dorothy wasn’t a woman who hurried her lovemaking and she wasn’t to be distracted when Rao and Vikram ventured into the mobile home from where they’d

been strolling in the Saharan wilderness. She increased the momentum and rhythm gradually as steadily more penis entered her mouth until Vashti could feel Dorothy's tonsil gently stroke the glans.

It wasn't long until Vashti was sharing Dorothy's body with her husband and Vikram, while Sandhya dozed outside with a book resting under her chin.

Vashti wasn't sure whether she preferred sex with men or with women, but she was aware that by not having a vagina she could never enjoy penetration in quite the same way as Dorothy could. Although Vashti was mostly woman, in sexual matters she was in many ways more like a man. All the same, she relished the taste of Vikram's penis which was pretty much of the same dimensions as her own. This was no wonder, of course, as it had been the original from which her genitals had been modelled. At least she now had a very good idea of what her penis tasted like.

Although Vashti had never had sex before, she learnt a great deal from watching her companions at play and was now able to try out the sexual techniques she'd observed. Vashti didn't need much practice to master sexual behaviour any more than she needed to hear many spoken words to gain fluency in Tamil and, to a lesser extent, English.

Vashti had never suspected that there was so much to enjoy in sexual activity. There was the close intimacy of flesh against flesh, fluid against fluid, and the rich scent of commingled bodies. There was also the slight pain associated with her aching, straining penis, swollen to the very limits that its flesh could contain—not to mention the pressure within her anus from Vikram's thrusts—which, with a little body modification she was able to contain with rather more comfort than most humans could.

And then that final release which Vashti delayed for as long as she could when the pressure of so much stored semen in her testicles finally squirted through the engorged mass of her proudly erect cock and erupted in a thick viscous splatter on the face, breasts, vagina and anus of the lovers whose bodies merged into one perspiring, gasping, screeching mass.

Vashti lay on her back. She was nowhere near as fatigued as her lovers who lacked her capacity for endurance or recovery and were more emotionally than physically drained. It was a shame that there was no way she could impart her discovery of the pleasures of carnal congress to her universe of origin. What value would sex have in a world where there were no multicellular biological organisms and where there was no sense of individuality?

Vashti was far more alone, even amongst her new friends and lovers, than anyone could imagine. Even her memories of home were fragmentary, although they had gradually repaired themselves to the extent that she at least knew why the huge effort and risk of interdimensional transport had been undertaken. The only reason she had materialised on the surface of planet Earth was because what little data that could be interpreted from this distant universe suggested that the best destination would be the surface of what would have been Vashti's home world had it not been transformed by her ancestors into a massive aggregation of their own selves.

A wide-ranging debate took place in her world as to how best an emissary of Vashti's universe should manifest itself to deal with the unquantifiable and mysterious entity that was known in this continuum as the Anomaly. It was fortunate that it had been decided not to send emissaries as ruthlessly prone to self-replication as Vashti's

earliest antecedents. Such a force mightn't be guaranteed to vanquish a potential threat from the Anomaly, but it would most certainly reduce the Solar System to the same amorphous state as Vashti's home solar system and all the neighbouring ones before the nanobot community acquired the self-awareness and presence of mind to halt the process. The arithmetic was unarguable. It would take less than an hour to reduce the Earth to a floating mass of microscopic self-replicating machines and only the distance of space gave pause until the floating nanobots would do the same to every last atom of baryonic matter surrounding the sun.

Vashti believed that such a force for destruction should only be kept in reserve if it ever became necessary to disintegrate the Anomaly and protect the near infinity of neighbouring spacetime continuums. Although it had been decided that it was better to understand the Anomaly than merely to destroy it, the survival of countless equally deserving universes surely took precedence over the fate of just one. If it did become necessary to unleash a force that would ultimately reduce not just the Anomaly but eventually every quark and lepton in the Solar System to a mass of tiny self-replicating machines, this was a price that Vashti would be willing to pay.

But, as she surveyed the lovers whose limbs intermingled with hers on the cool sheets of their shared bed, Vashti sincerely hoped this would never become necessary.

There remained, after all, a possibility that the Anomaly was no risk at all. Even her culture didn't know everything and an unknown entity—however fast it was expanding—need not necessarily be a force of destruction. But as Vashti and every sentient unit in her galaxy were aware, there was a precedent for wilful destruction that had already destroyed at least one advanced civilisation.

Vashti's companions, and now lovers, had become weary of their sojourn in the Sahara Desert. Grand and austere it might be, but it was also extremely boring. Furthermore, they'd been on vacation on Earth for very nearly two years and their visas would soon expire. There were strict restrictions on the length of time a visitor could stay and an even stricter quota of how many tourists could reside on the planet at any one time. Most of the Earth's population were tourists and there was a long queue of people waiting on the Moon for their turn to visit. Vikram and his wife had waited with their friends for nearly three months before they were granted permission.

By now, the four tourists were yearning to return home. Few Earthlings and fellow tourists had any understanding of Sadhu culture, customs or sexual habits. The requirement to wear clothes in public had lost almost all its quaintness and novelty. Dorothy in particular yearned to return to her natural state of habitual nudity.

Wearing clothes was as novel to Vashti as it was unusual to her friends. She could understand why it might be necessary to protect a human against the Earth's inclement climate, which was always too hot or too cold, too wet or too windy, but the concept of modesty was truly alien. Since every human knew by self-reference exactly what all other humans looked like under their clothes it seemed bizarre that they should cover so much of their flesh and in particular those parts which most unambiguously determined gender. On the other hand, now that she was aware by how much she erred when she took on a hybrid of male and female characteristics, this custom did have the benefit that she could hide her mistake from sight.

"What are we going to do with you, Vashti?" wondered Sandhya as the five of them strolled through the tourist bazaar of Timbuktu where Tuareg stall-keepers were

selling fossil ammonites and souvenir holograms. “You can’t come with us to Sadhu. It’s just not possible. And you don’t have any credit to live on. Without a visa or passport you won’t be able to get paid employment, not that there are many such opportunities on Earth.”

Vashti had also wondered about this. She knew that with no official records either on Earth or Mars, it wouldn’t be easy to persuade officialdom that she had a stake on either planet. But she was also aware that Earth’s strict residence policy meant that a passage from the planet might well be granted to her as a means of getting rid of her.

“I’ll surrender myself to the authorities,” she told Sandhya. “I’m sure they’ll be sympathetic.”

“You have much more faith in human nature than I have,” snorted Vikram who in the three years since he’d left the sheltered and tolerant world of the Sadhu colony had gained the depth of cynicism known only to disillusioned romantics.

Vashti’s research on the interplanetary web had persuaded her that self-interest was human nature’s most universal characteristic and that this could also be used to her advantage. The warring Martian nations were losing lives faster than they could be replenished and the recent neutron bomb explosion that had reduced by several hundred thousand the population of the domed cities of the Mariner Valley would mean that fewer questions than normal would be asked of someone claiming citizenship however little documentation there was to support Vashti’s case.

There was still much left to do in Timbuktu. The last few days she spent with her friends were passionate and frantic. Sandhya was particularly sad to leave Vashti behind when they boarded a dirigible that would transport her companions and her to

the spaceport in the fabulously affluent city of Bamako. It was all she could do to keep her hand off Vashti's erect penis as the two of them embraced passionately while Sandhya's husband looked on indulgently.

"You *will* keep in touch, won't you?" she asked. "We can always fuck in cyberspace."

"I don't think the time delay will make that particularly easy," Vikram commented.

"We'll just have to be patient," said Sandhya with a broad smile.

"It'll add new meaning to the concept of simultaneous orgasm," Rao joked.

As the hydrogen craft slowly lifted up into the sky and carried her friends away, Vashti was aware of a peculiar set of emotions that were as unsettling as they were new. Human emotion was governed more by insecurity than desire and much more so than by moral introspection. It was more troubling to lose something Vashti had become accustomed to, especially when it was associated with carnal pleasure, than it was to confront the human world without the shield of her companions.

Vashti was now alone in Timbuktu, owning only the clothes she'd been given by Vikram, whose build was the most like hers, and a few credits she'd been genuinely reluctant to accept. She had much less need for it than her companions could possibly guess. She also had no need for sleep or rest. She could eat anything: whether organic, metallic or even poisonous. And even if she wasn't sheltered from the elements by Timbuktu's huge overarching dome, the extremes of the desert climate were no trouble to her. She didn't even need to drink or breathe. But it was prudent to pretend to have such basic human needs.

She soon found others with whom she could enjoy both intellectual and carnal intercourse, and through these contacts she learnt new languages, new cultural habits and a greater appreciation of just how peculiar a woman as well-endowed as her was in this world. She also discovered how much humans were governed by their sexual desire, the males in particular, and how this could also prove to be extremely useful.

“Good news, Vashti,” said the consul of the Mariner colony after her fifth or sixth visit to its modest offices in the outer suburbs of Timbuktu. “Or not good news, if you wanted to stay on Earth.”

Vashti smiled at the tall dark-skinned man who wore the same military dress as did the other Martians who worked at the consulate.

“My visa’s come through, I hope?”

“Not just your visa, but a fresh passport,” said the consul. “You’re right. Your records must have been lost for good after that horrendous bombing at the Tharsis record centre.” He smiled at Vashti as he handed her the electronic documents with a holograph of her head and shoulders engraved on the front cover.

“Thank you, sir,” said Vashti, who had already picked up the formal etiquette of her self-adopted home. “It’s a great relief, I must say.”

“Well, Earth’s International Economic Union might very well be just as pleased as you, Vashti,” said the consul. “They didn’t really want the burden of accepting you as a semi-permanent resident. I must compliment you on your spoken Arabic, by the way. It’s virtually impeccable. Not many people on Mars speak it.”

“It’s a beautiful language, sir,” said Vashti.

“You speak it like a native of North Africa,” the consul elaborated. “However,

you are aware that just as there are no surviving records of you on Mars there is also no record of you having served your term of military service. I am duty-bound to ask you: have you ever been conscripted?"

"No, I haven't," said Vashti truthfully.

"That's a relief," said the consul. "I'd hate for you to have to serve a second time unnecessarily. You are aware, I hope, that you have five years of conscription awaiting you on Mars?"

Vashti smiled. All was going truly according to plan.

"I would be honoured, sir, to do my duty for the Mariner Colony and to avenge the slaughter of my family and friends in Tharsis. I am truly looking forward to giving those cunts from the Polar Regions a taste of Mariner lead."

"And not just lead," said the consul. "A few antimatter bombs wouldn't go amiss. I admire your attitude, Vashti. And I'm sure you'll do sterling service for your country and its people."

It was all Vashti could do to resist herself from saluting the consul.

"Thank you, sir," she said. "It's a duty I look forward to fulfilling."

Chapter Six

Zhou - 3756 C.E.

Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator Zhou and the space craft in which it travelled were in actual fact a single individual. The whole entity might be relatively small and mostly consisted of engine, but the central processing unit made no distinction between its independently autonomous components and that part of the machine dedicated exclusively to space travel.

This enabled the entire entity to operate at maximum efficiency whether it was travelling through space or serving in an administrative role. At the moment Zhou was chiefly operating as a space craft but it was one invisible to observers possessing either human or Proxima Centauri technology. In fact, Zhou was invisible even to observers from Sirius: a fact that had troubled its original designers. Total invisibility was a potent weapon against adversaries but it could also pose a risk should a Sirius operative ever go rogue. For this reason, Zhou's loyalty circuits were absolutely integral to its design. It had no facility to think or take action independently of Sirius Operations Control.

Zhou made no gravitational impact on the space through which it travelled, so just as no detector designed to intercept light or radiation would detect that a space ship had passed by neither would one designed to monitor gravitational fluctuation. This was one of the many significant advances in Sirius technology that left humans many millennia behind, particularly given that at a speed close to three-quarters that of light and releasing a constant stream of antimatter particles, it should have been possible to trace Zhou by a tell-tale signature visible across several light years.

Zhou was monitoring two sets of activity. One, of course, related to the android operative, Alexander Ilescu. The other was much further away in deep space and this was the progress of the space ship Intrepid. And it was towards the Intrepid that Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator Zhou was currently speeding. Zhou's presence was now needed rather more beyond the Heliopause than it was in the Solar System's ecliptic plane.

The radio and light signals emanating from Alexander Ilescu that Zhou was monitoring were initially very close. There was less than a minute between the time an event took place and Zhou becoming aware of it.

Zhou watched a small shuttle fly out of a hatch in the Almond Grove's hull and satisfactorily identified the android's unique signature. After a period of five hours, when the shuttle had travelled to a point that was sufficiently remote to cause no harm to any other interplanetary object, there was a sudden blink of light. The shuttle was now reduced to a cloud of billions of tiny fragments that was flung in all directions through space. Zhou monitored the debris to verify that the fragments were scattered in sufficiently minuscule parts that they could never be reassembled. It was imperative that humans should never be able to deduce that Alexander Ilescu was exceptional in any other way than the fact he was phenomenal wealthy.

This was a source of satisfaction for Zhou. If Alexander Ilescu had displayed any evidence that he was disinclined to self-terminate than Zhou would have been obliged to ensure that the job was done properly. The worst case was that Zhou would have to intercept the android and terminate him by force. The priority would be to cause as little collateral damage as possible. It would be regrettable, for instance, if a

biological life-form was in the vicinity. Zhou didn't relish the prospect of having to destroy the Almond Grove colony and its harem of women.

The time it took light to travel from the Intrepid to Zhou took more than two months, but as the Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator sped across space the time lapse became steadily smaller. It would be several months before Zhou could rendezvous with the Intrepid by which time it was expected that there would be no Intrepid to intercept. This was because from the opposite direction away from the Anomaly and towards the Intrepid was headed a fleet of Sirius space ships several times larger than the Proxima Centauri space fleet currently escorting the Interplanetary Union space ship across the void. The Sirius fleet had only one imperative and that was to destroy the Intrepid and, regrettably, all the human passengers and nonhuman cargo aboard. The Proxima Centauri's unexpected intervention had greatly complicated matters. It would also be necessary to eliminate the escort of Proxima Centauri space ships if, as was expected, they should attempt to frustrate Sirius's mission objectives.

However, Zhou was no more able to detect the approaching menace than the Intrepid or the Proxima Centauri space fleet. Sirius's stealth technology was so sophisticated that not even Zhou could detect a space craft once it was cloaked. The fleet communicated amongst itself on encrypted channels that were undetectable by human or Proxima Centauri technology but which Zhou was able to unscramble. In this way, it knew exactly what was happening. All was going according to plan. The space fleet was speeding towards the Intrepid at a tremendous velocity. Very soon the human space ship would be no more.

Zhou was well acquainted with the space ships heading towards the Intrepid.

They were part of the fleet to which Zhou belonged before the Interplanetary Union committed resources to the foolish mission of establishing direct contact with the Anomaly. From then on, Sirius had pursued an active campaign to stall, cancel or sabotage the Intrepid's mission. Many unholy alliances had been formed throughout the Solar System between interest groups that wouldn't normally expect to share the same objectives as a distant star system. It was unlikely that these alliances would be pleased to discover that the mysterious people who at critical stages had financed their disparate causes were emotionless robots whose main reason for preserving humanity was scientific research than benevolence. They would be even less pleased if they'd discovered the extent to which Sirius, along with Proxima Centauri and the other robot civilisations, had conspired to frustrate the Solar System's extrasolar ambitions.

The actions Sirius had taken to obstruct the Interplanetary Union's mission involved assassinating certain potential crew members, delaying the launch and sponsoring countless insuperable political objections. However, each obstacle was mysteriously overruled either by human caprice or, as was now surmised, by the more subtle intervention of Proxima Centauri.

Zhou was as astonished as anyone when the military hardware launched on Alexander Iliescu's command failed to annihilate its target. Sirius technology was better able to identify the proximate cause of this intervention than any used by the Interplanetary Union's Mission Control. The humans must have been astonished at how the aging Intrepid was relatively unscathed by such a devastating attack. Zhou was certain that none of the reasons seriously proposed to explain the Intrepid's mysterious survival would have contemplated the intervention of a fleet of invisible robotic space

ships that had travelled over four light years across space. What would humans think if they were to find out that they were surrounded by several robotic civilisations all of which owed their ultimate genesis to early human stellar exploration? How astonished would they be to realise that two of those robotic civilisations were about to go to war over an entity in space that eluded even their capacity to find an explanation?

The Sirius mission had determined that the Anomaly was in some mysterious way associated with the human species and human civilisation. Almost all the bizarre Apparitions that momentarily flickered into life and did so in progressively greater frequency at close proximity to the Anomaly could only have meaning and significance to humans. There were mythological beings. There were human warriors. There were animals, plants and mechanical objects that mostly only existed in Earth atmosphere. These apparitions did not encompass the wide range of phenomena that would make sense, for instance, to beings that were arthropod, anaerobic or non-biological.

And this was why it was vital that the Intrepid should not reach the Anomaly.

If, as seemed most likely, the Anomaly was a kind of honey-trap for inquisitive humans what would happen when one was digested? Up to now humans had dispatched nothing more than a few crude unmanned probes. The vast majority of devices that had been sent to explore the Anomaly originated from either Sirius or Proxima Centauri. Neither civilisation shared the results of their research with the other, but it was unlikely that Proxima Centauri had discovered any more than had Sirius.

All the probes that entered the Anomaly had flickered out of sight within a few seconds of passing through its horizon. And that was that. The final communications were banal and uneventful even while the probe appeared to vanish. No signal was

broadcast that would suggest the time dilation that would occur within a black hole. There was none of the stress that would happen if the craft was entering a door to another dimension, a wormhole or any of the other mooted theoretical entities. The disappearance of the probe made no measurable change to the frequency of bizarre Apparitions that continued to appear in the Anomaly's vicinity. These continued to appear from nowhere and disappear again after a random period of time. Whatever they were they never took on the characteristics of the probe that had just vanished.

From the perspective of a civilisation predicated on the preservation of information, its utter loss with no evidence that it had ever existed was a violation of the fundamental principles of physics that threatened the entire edifice of time and space. Could the entire Solar System be swallowed into an information wipeout? Could the same thing happen to an entire star cluster? Perhaps the potential extent was as large as the galaxy or even the entire universe.

It was far too much of a risk to permit the Intrepid to be a catalyst to such a catastrophe.

It was imperative to frustrate the Intrepid's mission for reasons of prudence alone. There might be a regrettable loss of life, machine as well as mere human, but the cost was more than justified. Sirius had no specific directive to bolster lunatic ideologies or irrational religions. What was at risk was greater than even the persistence of human civilisation.

If only the accursed Proxima Centaurans could see the peril in which they were putting themselves and the rest of the star cluster.

Zhou was aware that what it could see of the Intrepid's voyage was not as it was

now but as it was in the past. If the Peripheral Operations Co-ordinator had the capacity to be bored then it would be very bored indeed. The only external activity was the space ship's slow repair by the Intrepid's internal systems. All around the space ship was the constant presence of the Proxima Centauran fleet that was invisible to humans but not to Zhou.

The real potential for excitement was approaching rapidly towards the Intrepid from the direction of the Anomaly and was invisible to the Proxima Centauran fleet.

Zhou was unable to intercept Proxima Centauri communications but it had no difficulty in picking up those between the Intrepid and its Mission Control centres in the Solar System's ecliptic plane.

The humans had evidently accepted that life on board the Intrepid continued to be as uneventfully as could be expected after the attack. The messages broadcast by the passengers and crew were exactly what would be expected. The automatic systems displayed nothing out of the ordinary, although human observers might be puzzled by the bland restrained tone that now characterised Captain Kerensky's communications. This was clear evidence to Zhou that at least one member of the crew was aware that the ship was now under Proxima Centauri command. The captain was obviously being dictated what she could and could not say. Zhou suspected that the captain was being monitored by an implant that made it physically impossible for her to say anything off-message.

Zhou didn't know how the Proxima Centaurans had announced their presence to the captain. It was possible that one of their many androids might have infiltrated the ship, but for a mission of such sensitivity, monitored by both human and Sirius

intelligence agencies, the plant could only be a person of limited strategic significance.

The Sirius fleet was amassing towards its final position. If it had been visible it would have presented a splendid sight. Nowhere else in the Solar System was there such a vast congregation of robot operatives and space craft, each of which possessed a technology several millennia more advanced than that possessed by humans and a military capacity that could eliminate every biological life-form scattered about the Solar System. All of this was to be focused on a space ship that was pitifully ill-equipped for the onslaught.

The greatest risk wasn't the outcome of the operation which was as unevenly matched as an elephant treading on a flea, but its political consequences. The annihilation of the Intrepid by an invisible alien force couldn't be completely hidden from humans, but it was hoped that it would be attributed to the Anomaly and thenceforth act as a salutary warning about launching a similar expedition in future.

It was unlikely that the Proxima Centauri fleet would hover idly by while the Intrepid was being reduced to a cloud of radioactive debris. The most likely outcome could be very dangerous indeed. A war between machine civilisations would be spectacularly violent and unlikely to be resolved by anything more conclusive than an uneasy stalemate. Even if one civilisation had a technological advantage over the other, it would be impossible to eliminate the threat that remained at the end of such a war. It wouldn't take much effort for a vengeful survivor to trigger a supernova explosion in their enemy's host star if it felt so inclined.

Mutual Assured Destruction was a policy that all the machine civilisations had discussed and game-played amongst themselves. They had determined that it was the

ultimate deterrent for any civilisation, but that it could succeed for only as long as both combatants maintained their sanity and rationality.

However, Zhou was being complacent.

Despite the overwhelming odds, Sirius's assault on the Intrepid did not go as planned.

Zhou was monitoring the increase in communications activity within the Sirius fleet as it prepared to coordinate its activities. These would quite simply be to annihilate the Intrepid and any Proxima Centauran space craft foolish enough to engage in combat. Preparations were going precisely as planned and there was no evidence that there would be any deviation from what was expected.

The communications from the Sirius fleet quite suddenly became confused and chaotic. And then transmissions from the space fleet were abruptly terminated. There was no warning and no obvious explanation. A flurry of missiles and military hardware was released but instead of impacting with the Intrepid or dispersing the Proxima Centauri fleet, the lethal force from Sirius faded away as mysteriously as the space fleet itself.

The communication signals from the Sirius fleet were extinguished within seconds. Some trace of activity could be detected by the Proxima Centauri fleet, by the Intrepid and several months later by the Interplanetary Union's Mission Control but even in the brief nanoseconds of visibility during which the space fleet's cloaking systems collapsed there was very little incontrovertible trace of an enormous hostile space fleet greater than had ever before been assembled in the history of the Solar System.

The only glimmer of consolation that Zhou registered as it became aware that its civilisation had utterly failed to fulfil its mission was that there would not now be a risk of all-out war. Whatever had just happened was as far beyond the capability of Proxima Centauri technology as it was of Zhou's own machine civilisation.

Zhou wondered what it should do now. It could continue its advance towards the Anomaly where it had been due to reconnoitre with what was once a massive fleet but would now consist of only that handful of space craft not engaged in the attempt to terminate the Intrepid. Zhou could return to the ecliptic plane and await instructions for remobilisation. In the absence of any instructions in the event of such an unforeseen mission outcome, Zhou was left with nothing but its own initiative. By the time any communication from Zhou reached Sirius Mission Control nearly a month would have passed by. Should it continue or return?

The only thing it could do when faced with such contradictory imperatives was to change direction and orbit the Solar System at a point no further towards the Anomaly. Zhou continued to assimilate the data it had received but there seemed to be no reasonable explanation however many times it reviewed the replays emitted by the various channels of communication.

The nearest there was to an explanation was what could be seen in the flash of light from exploding antimatter devices as they illuminated the space ships. It appeared as if the space ships were being eaten away. It was as if they were being transformed into their most fundamental component parts.

Zhou was convinced that only one thing in the Solar System could possibly be the cause of such a strange event and that was the Anomaly. Up until then, it appeared

to be nothing but a sideshow: a deeply disturbing one but not one possessed with intelligence, purpose or meaning. Now, just when a rendezvous with a substantial number of humans had become imminent, it had gone beyond all bounds of predictable behaviour and had acted decisively to ensure the Intrepid's survival.

And at what cost?

From the perspective of Sirius, this was a catastrophe with no precedent. It was an act of war as one-sided as the one Sirius had expected to prosecute. It demonstrated a belligerent force whose technology had advanced well beyond that of any known civilisation.

Zhou didn't know what the Anomaly was, but there was evidence now that Sirius' suspicions and fears were well-founded.

The Anomaly was evil and it should be destroyed.

Chapter Seven Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

When Colonel Vashti strolled into the living room where Beatrice was sitting, it was no surprise to her at all to see the android staring ahead of her with an expression of intense concentration.

Beatrice turned her head round to face the colonel. “Would you mind telling me what has just happened?” she asked.

Colonel Vashti smiled. “You don’t know, do you?”

“One moment there was nothing out of the usual. The next moment there were strong indications of the presence of a Sirius space fleet. Almost as soon as they were detected, the signals vanished. It was as if they’d been called into being just so that they could be abruptly destroyed.”

“So what do you think happened?”

“You know what I think,” said Beatrice. “You don’t have to tease me.”

“It amuses me to do so. Tell me what you think happened.”

“The best theory we have is that this was just another bizarre event associated with the Anomaly. On the other hand, it’s one that is completely uncharacteristic. Until now, every Apparition that’s been observed could only have significance to human observers. The sudden appearance and equally sudden disappearance of a space fleet from Sirius fits no previously observed pattern.”

“It was a real space fleet,” said Colonel Vashti. “Its mission was to destroy the space ship Intrepid and, if necessary, any Proxima Centauri space fleet that got in its

way. If I hadn't so promptly and prejudicially terminated its mission, then it would now be the Intrepid and your space fleet that would no longer exist."

"You destroyed an entire Sirius space fleet?"

"It was a larger space fleet than yours by several multiples," said Colonel Vashti. "You had no chance of survival. As you've no doubt calculated, the element of surprise was critical."

"If they had attacked us: that would have been a declaration of war."

"Then you have much to be grateful for. Who knows how many planetary bodies would have been obliterated if your two robot civilisations entered a state of total war."

"Don't expect me to thank you," said Beatrice. "How did you destroy their fleet?"

"I didn't so much destroy it as assimilate it."

"*Assimilate it?*"

"The baryonic matter of the Sirius Anomaly star fleet has been entirely assimilated into the nanobot community of which I am a physical representation."

"Has it been assimilated into the main thread?" Beatrice asked speculatively.

"A perceptive question," said the colonel. "Yes. In a manner of speaking. The space fleet is now part of the main thread, but only for as long as we need it. It is no more critical to the entire nanobot community than I am. No more so, dear Beatrice, than you are to the Proxima Centauri space fleet and the mission for which you were manufactured to serve."

"Let's recapitulate. Are we to understand that a few moments ago a space fleet

from the Sirius system appeared out of nowhere and furthermore that it was assigned to eliminate the Intrepid and our space fleet? Why would it do such a thing?"

Colonel Vashti smiled. "As a result of assimilating their space fleet, I can now answer your questions. You've obviously not been having a frank and open discussion with your fellow robots. While you were circling around the Anomaly and keeping your presence hidden from human technology your cousins from Sirius were doing much the same thing, but they also managed to keep their presence a secret from you as well. There has been a complex web of conspiracy and espionage in the Solar System which has involved not only your civilisation but also those of the other neighbouring star systems. Sirius has been rather less scrupulous than you in infiltrating human society. Who knows? Maybe there are other conspiracies going on. Perhaps on our journey to the Anomaly we shall encounter star fleets from the robot civilisations of Barnard's Star, Wolf 359 and Alpha Centauri."

"Has the information you've assimilated from the Sirius space fleet given you a better understanding of the nature of the Anomaly?"

"Not at all, Beatrice. Not at all. The Anomaly is as much a mystery to Sirius as it is to you or, indeed, to us. They had the same unsatisfactory results as you when they launched their probes into the Anomaly. There is no spacetime distortion due to gravity. There is no electromagnetic signature. There is no evidence that there's been any interaction with the Anomaly at all. What distressed the Sirius scientists and has clearly caused you disquiet is the absolute loss of information. There isn't even an equivalent of the Hawking Radiation associated with a black hole."

"So no one knows any more about the Anomaly than we do?" said Beatrice who

now felt peeved at the apparent futility of the whole endeavour.

“Not exactly,” said the colonel. “Our civilisation knows what neither Proxima Centauri nor Sirius could have known which is that the influence of the Anomaly extends far beyond this one thin sliver of spacetime. Its fulcrum is in your spacetime continuum, but its effect extends through an astonishing number of possible and actual universes. The bizarre nature of Apparitions like winged horses, floating taxis and Moebius Band staircases may seem odd enough in this universe where humans exist, but imagine what they must seem to universes where, for instance, the dominant form of intelligent life is a mollusc. Or where dinosaurs didn’t become extinct. Or other universes such as mine where it is a long time indeed since biological life-forms played a significant role in the Solar System.”

“So we know that the Anomaly has an extent beyond the immediate spacetime continuum,” said Beatrice. “I still don’t understand why you were sent to this brane of the multiverse? Couldn’t you just as easily explore the Anomaly from where you came from?”

“We arrived at pretty much the same conclusion as you did,” said the colonel. “Whatever the Anomaly is, the nature of the Apparitions associated with it strongly suggests that any deep significance associated with it is also somehow associated with human society. The Intrepid’s mission represents the first time that humans will directly interact with the Anomaly. It is highly probable that this encounter will help illuminate and even explain the character of the Anomaly.”

“What theories do you have?”

“Like Proxima Centauri, like Sirius, we have many theories,” said the colonel.

“Without concrete evidence they remain nothing more than speculation.”

Beatrice frowned. “If you have the power to assimilate an entire space fleet you must have posited some theories that are rather better than the ones we have.”

“As I say: nothing concrete,” said Colonel Vashti. “However, if you don’t mind, I have to leave now. There are other things I need to attend to. I also believe that there’s a great deal of new information that you and your space fleet need to analyse.”

The colonel strode unhurriedly out of the luxury villa in which she’d imprisoned Beatrice. It was true that Vashti also needed to digest the data she’d assimilated in the past hour. The most significant fact was that Sirius had no better explanation for the Anomaly than Proxima Centauri, but Vashti was intrigued by their assessment that the Anomaly was too much of an unknown threat for its continued existence to be tolerated. She wondered whether a similar analysis by her nanobot civilisation wouldn’t have resulted in a similarly hostile response. Was it possible, given the history of biological life-forms in this spacetime continuum, that it was actually Sirius who was acting in the most rational manner?

Vashti walked by Paul’s villa and resisted the temptation to pay him a visit. At that moment he was languidly lying on his bed with a naked woman that he thought was Beatrice, but who was actually just another manifestation of Vashti’s nanobot community.

Paul’s marriage had improved dramatically since Colonel Vashti took over control of the Intrepid. The copy of the android that Paul so enjoyed making love with was just as passionate and skilled at lovemaking as the original—which was to be expected—but unlike the real Beatrice this was a Beatrice who had all the time in the

world to spend with her husband. Previously, she'd been too preoccupied with other sexual and romantic liaisons, not to mention the effective management of a huge space ship. Paul was probably the only human who'd noticed any significant difference since Vashti had taken control of the space ship, although he naively attributed the improved relationship with his wife to the strength of her love for him.

Vashti also resisted the temptation to visit the captain: again in her guise as Beatrice. Captain Kerensky would be no more aware than anyone else on the ship how perilously close she'd been to instant annihilation. During the time in which the incident took place the captain was as blissfully unaware as she was of the true nature of the woman who she imagined to be Beatrice.

Vashti relished all these ironies.

The deer and sheep that grazed in the green pastures of the penultimate level were as ignorant of the real state of affairs as the human occupants. There was an interesting hierarchy of knowledge and ignorance. The animals on the ship imagined that the world they inhabited was boundless and natural. The humans on the ship believed that the mission on which they were embarked was being controlled by Mission Control on the Moon under the captaincy of Nadezhda Kerensky. The captain believed that the mission had been hijacked by androids. All these perspectives were flawed but ever closer approximations of the truth. The colonel wondered whether her own perspective was really as clear-sighted as she believed it to be.

Colonel Vashti strolled out of the verdant fields where the ship's passengers lived in comfort and luxury and into the military quarters where she supposedly lived. The soldiers who saluted her and who she saluted in return had no reason to believe

that the colonel wasn't the woman they'd always believed her to be. This illusion was one the colonel was eager to maintain. Vashti still had duties to perform as a military officer, but she spawned copies of herself when required so that nobody ever needed to suspect that she was concurrently also spending time elsewhere. These copies also ensured that she didn't neglect her lovers amongst the military staff. They wouldn't notice the difference between the woman who fucked them and the woman who was now striding down the corridor.

She paused by the door to her modest quarters and studied the holographic image embedded into the corridor wall. It was displaying the empty space outside the space ship. If such real-time images weren't scattered about the ship would anyone on board even be aware that they were in deep space? How conscious were they that they were further out in space than even the solar winds? The nearest physical objects were scattered sparsely about the Oort Cloud that circled the sun at such a distance that not a single one had completed its solar orbit since humanity first ventured into space. What the screens didn't display, of course, was the fleet of Proxima Centauri space craft that human technology wasn't able to detect. Neither, of course, would there have been evidence of the battle for the Intrepid that had just taken place.

The one most significant object in the vicinity, the Anomaly, was still a long way away. It was so distant in the outermost regions of the Oort Cloud and the gravitational influence of the sun so weak that it was no surprise that the Anomaly hadn't completed even one orbit of the sun in the one and half thousand years since it first appeared. This was strange in itself. How could something so large have no mass? How could it not interact in some way with the gravitational force of the distant sun?

Vashti had complete access to the research on the Anomaly carried out by the many scientists and theorists on board the Intrepid. She'd studied it in far greater detail than it was possible for humans or their machines. The accumulated evidence was far better at describing what the Anomaly was not than what it was. There was no agreement even as to what it was composed of. In a sense it was an absence of anything, but it was not actually a vacuum. Matter and energy was not disturbed by its presence. The only measurable effect it had was to cause any particle that entered it to never return. The only apparent perturbation associated with it was a greater incidence of the strange Apparitions that were otherwise scattered thinly throughout the Solar System. And what it most resembled was a huge rip in the fabric of space and time. The scientists hoped that more would be revealed when the Intrepid was in orbit around the Anomaly. But how could that possibly reveal more than was revealed by the unmanned probes?

Vashti knew that left to humans the mission would most likely result in yet another inconclusive question mark. How could human technology possibly do any better than that used by the machine civilisations that had been orbiting the Anomaly for over a century?

There was really no choice but to steer the Intrepid directly into the Anomaly.

Of course she wasn't going to inform the Proxima Centauri space fleet of her intention. In any case, they'd probably already arrived at the same conclusion. If the human occupants of the space ship knew that they would soon be transported into a zone of information annihilation there would be a mutiny which would be somewhat of a nuisance to suppress. The human scientists believed that their research was just a further increment in human understanding of the properties and purpose of an exotic

object in deep space. They weren't expecting to be plunged into an abyss from which nothing had yet re-emerged. It was unlikely that they would welcome almost certain death and the complete destruction of their precious research. Scientists didn't normally expect to make the ultimate sacrifice in pursuit of knowledge and experimental research.

Death didn't bother Vashti. The community of nanobots of which she was composed was essentially immortal. It would continue to exist whatever happened to the manifestations of Colonel Vashti. However, she was aware that humans and even the robots of Proxima Centauri were rather attached to the idea of staying alive. Captain Kerensky, in particular, would never authorise a suicide mission, so it was necessary for Vashti to assume control of the ship before it encountered the Anomaly.

Colonel Vashti pushed open the door to enter the privacy of her room. Now that she'd classified the considerable volume of data she'd assimilated from the Sirius space fleet, she needed to identify any data regarding the Anomaly unknown to both the human and Proxima Centauri civilisations whose significance had eluded the analysis of Sirius's sophisticated computers. Unfortunately, Vashti's only real enlightenment concerned the stealth and weapons technology which she could usefully donate to the Proxima Centauri space fleet if there was any possibility of renewed assault. However, that was unlikely. The only Sirius space ships still orbiting the Anomaly had no significant military capability and could easily be neutralised.

The colonel was a formidable force. She had travelled from one universe to another. She had taken control of the most expensive and well-resourced scientific mission in human history. She had singlehandedly neutralised the firepower of two

advanced robotic civilisations. Her mission was proceeding exactly as planned.

How could the Anomaly offer any effective resistance?

Chapter Eight

Intrepido - 217 P.R.

Paolo Mauritz carefully examined the calendar. Although it was very nearly the 218th anniversary of the Glorious Revolution, no celebrations were being prepared on the Space Ship Intrepido. Nor were they on the other interplanetary battleships in the space fleet speeding onwards in diminished numbers towards the Anomaly. This was one year Post Revolution whose anniversary many heroic comrades of the Twenty Fifth Reich were no longer able to celebrate.

If Paolo was honest to himself, which was virtually impossible under the constant scrutiny of security cameras, he was more pleased than saddened to be excused the obligation of observing his revolutionary duties. The long round of committee meetings, celebratory parades and the inevitable expense of extra taxes that would be levied to pay for all the festivity was never much of a time for pleasure. It was just another opportunity to identify those reprobates who lacked the quality of absolute loyalty. This was how it was and how it had always been. More exactly, this was how it had been in the two centuries since Comrade Schleiermacher almost single-handedly and certainly heroically toppled the accursed Twenty Fourth Reich.

That earlier empire had been one of unspeakable oppression and dire poverty but one whose territory was of almost exactly the same extent as that of the glorious Twenty Fifth Reich. This consisted of the continents of Europe, Africa and much of Asia as well as approximately a third of all colonised space up to humanity's furthest reach in Saturn's orbit.

The remaining two thirds of Earth's surface and colonised space was divided between the forces of the unutterably despicable Latin Federation and those of the sly and inscrutable Manchurian Empire.

Paolo knew from experience just how merciless and cruel these evil empires were. The Ninth Army's Stormbringer Fleet had been reduced from a proud force of several thousand destroyers, battleships and spacecraft carriers to less than a hundred stragglers. The journey to here, the furthest destination to which such a space fleet had ever been consigned, from the Reich's military bases on the Moon had been beleaguered by battles and skirmishes with the other two empires' warships. Heavily armed space fleets under the flags of the forces of evil in the Solar System were racing across space to the same mysterious destination as the Intrepido. It comforted Paolo that the enemy forces had suffered losses at least as great as those inflicted on the not entirely invincible Ninth Army and its hundreds of thousands of infantry, space pilots and ancillaries.

The scale of the mutual damage was the more remarkable given that modern warfare no longer employed the tactic of destroying and vanquishing enemy forces. Although the fleet had at its disposal an arsenal of nuclear, antimatter and biochemical weapons that could reduce their enemies' equally vast fleets to radioactive dust, this was weaponry the Ninth Army was reluctant to use.

The golden space ships of the Manchurian Empire and the black ones of the Latin Federation possessed arsenals equally as destructive as that of the silver Stormbringer Fleet. Any attempt to actually use such weapons would result in a retaliatory response that would reduce the Reich's hugely expensive investment to

nothing more than just yet another interplanetary radiation hazard.

The modern strategy of space warfare was to capture and redeploy the enemy's forces. This was why vast numbers of infantry were still required. Paolo's heroic comrades were crammed together in cramped dormitories that were packed into every centimetre of habitable space not required by the life-support systems, the engine room or military hardware. Interplanetary warfare was a murderous game in which victory was signalled by the victor having successfully transformed the colour of the seized space ships' outer shells to the silver sheen of the Glorious Revolution.

The game of modern warfare was truly deadly. The attrition, devastation and casualty count of a single battle was truly appalling. Thousands would die in each minute. As often as not a captured ship was so damaged that it was no longer capable of continuing to travel across the vast distances of empty space. In fact, frequently the victors of such a battle would face not the slaughter and torture they'd already administered on the wretched survivors of the enemy vessel, but a long slow death as the life-support systems broke down.

There were many brave comrades in abandoned space craft who were now starving, thirsty and gasping for air. But at least the heartless Orientals or subhuman Hispanics who had so ineffectually defended their ship had suffered torments much greater than did the plucky, but doomed, survivors.

"You called for me, comrade?" asked the ship concubine who stood stiffly to attention outside Paolo's cabin.

"Yes, yes," said Paolo hurriedly as he let the woman into his cabin.

As a Senior Scientific Officer in the Reich's Biochemical Corps, Paolo had

many privileges denied the lowly infantry not so blessed with pure ethnicity. These included the rare honour to sleep in a room of his own. Even so, it was still very cramped. There was enough space for a desk at which Paolo could sit and a narrow bed that could accommodate him and one of the Ninth Army's Official Concubines. For a senior prostitute who might, on an average day, have sex with seven or eight of the ship's officers, this was opulence indeed. Only Revolutionary Officers and senior military staff had the luxury of yet more spacious accommodation. They also had access to more ethnically pure and erotically enhanced concubines than Paolo would ever be permitted.

The concubine Vera lived in a crowded dormitory as spartan as any occupied by the infantry. Her only relief from duty would come if her ethnic profile warranted the dispensation of serving as a mother to a new Aryan Revolutionary. There was an insatiable demand for young revolutionaries in a Reich depleted in equal measure by constant warfare and periodic purges. This dictated the need for even the less genetically pure to reproduce.

One and a half thousand years of ethnic cleansing in the three very similar empires—whose characters had changed only in professed ideology and not at all in practice—had narrowed the human race to three distinct ethnic groups whose purity was forever being refined. All comrades of the Reich were of Aryan stock, cleansed of all Semitic, Negroid and Slavic traits. And in spirit this purity was equally true of the Hispanics of the Latin Federation and the Han Chinese of the Manchurian Empire.

Like Paolo, Vera had blonde hair, pale skin and blue eyes. Unlike Paolo, whose hair was very short, she wore her locks long and loose over her shoulders. This

distinguished her from women who pursued a more respectable profession in the Reich whose similarly long hair was tied in plaits.

“Which services do you require, comrade?” the concubine asked.

Her body betrayed evidence of the duties she’d already performed in the service of other senior comrades. There was a slowly darkening bruise over one eye and her skin-tight leather suit was ripped just above the crotch where it had been pulled off too roughly.

Paolo wasn’t at all sure what he wanted. It was only boredom and the need for distraction that had persuaded him to take advantage of the facilities provided by the Ninth Army’s brothel. There really wasn’t much else for him to do, any more than there was for the ragged remains of the fleet’s infantry. His duties wouldn’t really begin until the ship arrived at the Anomaly at which point he would be preoccupied in analysing the exotic biochemistry of the aliens the Reich was certain it harboured. It was hoped that the Anomaly should provide the Revolutionary Army with military innovations that could bring about the final long-awaited conquest of the other two warring empires and at long last bring ethnic and ideological purity to the Solar System.

At the very least, it would end the wars that had slaughtered billions of brave comrades since the earliest days of planetary conquest.

Vera had all the attributes Paolo desired in a woman. But then so too did every other young woman in the Reich. Those whose skin was too brown, whose arse too large, lips too thick or nose too long could never survive the purges that maintained the purity and wholesomeness of the Reich’s ethnic profile. The purges also served the salutary function of eliminating those who might question an ideology that was no

different in substance to any other that had arisen since the first nuclear wars of the twentieth century. And this was notwithstanding the ever changing terminology used by each successive dominant ideology.

“My body is yours to do with whatever you wish, comrade,” Vera assured the Scientific Officer.

As it should be, thought Paolo as he divested himself of clothing to reveal a body that had benefited from the medical services available only to the elite. His life had been prolonged well beyond that of the proles and other menial classes, but at less than ninety years old he had still visibly aged. His hair was greying and he had less stamina than just twenty years earlier.

The fucking that followed was joyless and perfunctory. Creativity in the amorous arts was scarcely encouraged, though the restrictive rules relating to sexual activity amongst the lesser classes didn't apply to Paolo. He was free to fuck this woman in the arse, ejaculate on her face and even let her swallow his penis in her mouth. Paolo didn't have the imagination or inclination of some of his fellow officers to physically torment the woman he fucked. The crueller sports were practised most by those closest to the Revolutionary Bureau who were known (but not to the ill-informed masses) to let discarded bodies pile up in the dungeons of their palatial mansions: the victims strangled, mutilated and disembowelled.

The lesser classes were housed in cramped dormitories whether they lived on a space ship or elsewhere. They had little choice. There was no world beyond to which they could escape, whether on an irradiated and ravaged Earth or on colonies isolated in inhospitable space. The only sex they were allowed was solely with partners selected

on the basis of ethnic compatibility and limited to what was strictly required by the Reich to produce the next generation of comrades. Women were denied any role beyond that of mother or domestic provider. However much they were officially deemed to be equal to men, what use were they beyond serving as vessels for reproduction and to extol the splendour of the Revolution? The Reich needed soldiers, not nappy changers.

Although Paolo had the license to be as sexually adventurous with Vera as he wished, as he was with any concubine he fucked since he'd been promoted to his current senior status, he never really enjoyed it as much as he did when making love with his wife, Isabella, who'd been selected for him by his parents rather than by a Revolutionary Committee equipped with the genetic profiles that governed most people's lives. Their passion for one another had flourished despite the relentless surveillance that followed his every movement in the irradiated city of Schleiermacher Five, once known as London, which could easily identify sexual activity whose exact purpose was not for gene transmission.

Paolo took perverse pleasure from Vera's woefully obvious lack of pleasure at the liberties he was taking when he thrust into her. But it was while his penis was deep inside her arse that a holographic display abruptly appeared and filled his room. Paolo was pleased to see that it wasn't an emergency alarm. He'd had more than enough of those already.

The first such emergency took place when the Intrepido had barely travelled beyond Mars orbit. On that occasion, the ship was attacked by Manchurian Empire battleship destroyers. This was the only time Paolo had ever seen a person not of pure Aryan stock and a shocking sight it was too. This was when he conducted an autopsy

on the Han Chinese cadavers left behind after the attempted invasion was successfully repulsed. There could be medical secrets known to the Manchurian Empire that could only be discovered in a corpse.

The second occasion was a rather more perilous incursion by Latin Federation robots that had managed to penetrate through several rings of the ship's defences before they were destroyed. He saw these machines force their way over the corpses of heroic infantry who'd done little more than slow down the black lumbering engines' progress. Even behind the screens where he and the other elite scientists cowered, there was a real risk that he might be killed. Fortunately, robots were not programmed to capture and torture so at least his death would be mercifully short.

On this occasion, however, the holographic display was merely to summon the elite officer class to the central auditorium normally put to the service of broadcasting propaganda and, very occasionally, useful information.

Paolo reluctantly released his semen into Vera's mouth. Naturally, he insisted that she swallow every last drop. After he dismissed the concubine he pulled on his tightly fitting officer's silver uniform. He then dashed down the long corridor to one of the elite escalators that were out of bounds to the infantry and ascended a dozen levels to the largest open space in the ship not reserved for food production.

Two or three hundred senior officers were filing in ahead of him through doors appropriate to their status and genetic purity. Paolo envied those of the purest ethnicity. Outwardly they appeared to be no different from anyone else but inwardly they were blessed by a degree of genetic purity measured not against that of Comrade Schleiermacher (whose autopsy it was rumoured betrayed genetic traces of Semitic

origin), but by a model of excellence increasingly refined since the Fourth Eurasian Republic had purged the very last extant Negroid.

Paolo might not be the most senior officer in the room but at least he didn't belong to the more junior ranks. They had to stand at the back of the auditorium and, unlike the senior officers, had to do so every day for the mandatory four hour seminars in Twenty Fifth Reich Socialism. These seminars served to instruct the officers of a glorious tradition that dated back to the very first socialist republics at the dawn of the nuclear age, but also noted that the very similar regimes in the Soviet Union and National Socialist Germany were mere amateurs in totalitarianism compared to those of the third century Post Revolution.

The most senior ranks were arraigned on the podium at the front. They were attired in the same tight-fitting silver suits that all officers wore, but were ostentatiously festooned with medals and epaulettes. The most senior officers also sported silver helmets. These were worn only by those of the inner elite who had graduated from one of the top one hundred military academies.

None of the assembled less senior officers spoke to one another as they solemnly sat in their designated seats, whilst those on the podium gossiped carelessly amongst themselves.

The most senior officer was the Party Secretary, whose status was greater than either the General or the space ship's Captain who sat on either side of him. He rose languidly and strode over to the centre of the podium. As was appropriate to his status, he sat down on the raised armchair that hovered behind the lector. Speeches were customarily several hours long and it was imperative that the Party Secretary shouldn't

get too tired.

His speech began as always with a long and effusive account of the greatness of the Twenty Fifth Reich, the honourable example of Comrade Schleiermacher and the virtues of General Secretary Heidegger and his comrades in the politburo who were working tirelessly for the greater good of the citizens of the Twenty Fifth Reich and its projected ten thousand year dominance. There was also a much more entertaining condemnation of the evils perpetrated by the Manchurian Empire and the Latin Federation. Much was made of how the Latin Federation had systematically and cruelly annihilated those of Aryan blood, a process that continued ever since the capitalist, but Aryan, regimes of the North American continent were overthrown by the more populous Hispanics of the south and had totally reversed the trend of ethnic cleansing that had been the case during the first five centuries of the nuclear age.

Finally, after an hour and a half of the usual diatribe, full of praise for the glories of the Reich and expressing inflammatory hatred for the two rival empires, the Party Secretary at last got to the main point of his address.

“We are now confident that thanks to the wisdom and foresight of our glorious leaders, the Intrepido will arrive at its destination within days,” said the Party Secretary in even more sombre tones than those he’d used to lambast the enemy forces for attempting to sabotage the mission. Throughout the voyage the nature of the mission’s destination had been kept a closely guarded secret from most officers and all the infantry and ancillary staff. As a senior scientific officer, Paolo had been better briefed than the vast majority of those in the auditorium, but in truth, beyond knowing that the destination was known as the Anomaly and that it possibly harboured an alien biology

he was very nearly as ignorant as anyone else. He assumed that it might well be an alien space craft or invasion force, but the fact that the forces of the Twenty Fifth Reich had no mandate to vaporise it in a cloud of antimatter suggested that it might have some perceived strategic value.

The Party Secretary's statement of the nature of the Anomaly was quite unlike any address that Paolo or any of the gathered officers had ever heard before. The language was couched in the usual revolutionary correct language that attributed any useful scientific discovery to the advances of Revolutionary Socialism and any potential threat as a mere blip in historical destiny that should nonetheless be persecuted with the utmost prejudice.

But the substance of his address was not what Paolo expected.

There had been many peculiar and fleeting events observed and recorded throughout the territories of the Twenty Fifth Reich. Many of them were contradictory to the ethical and even ethnic foundations of civilisation. There had even been the transitory appearance of a man with black skin, even though it was well over a thousand years since the last Negroid had died in a West African concentration camp. Some of these apparitions had been large objects, but they were usually comparatively small, and always random and *very* peculiar. They appeared at almost any place and with no prior warning. They had been verifiably monitored by the same surveillance systems that enforced the orthodoxy and peace of the Reich and guarded it from its enemies.

At first it was assumed that these apparitions were the result of military experiments by the other two empires in the Solar System. This, it was revealed, was one reason why the state of perpetual war that had persisted for more than one and a

half thousand years had become much more vicious in the last few decades. This was why the Reich had obliterated the Leukothea asteroid and why the Latin Federation destroyed the Himmel colony in Saturn's orbit and the million gallant comrades who lived there. The account of both events was new to Paolo, though many lesser victories and atrocities had been trumpeted incessantly by the Reich's media.

However, it was soon discovered that the military intelligence of the other two empires was equally as ignorant of the source of the strange phenomena as even the Twenty Fifth Reich. It was determined that the only possible source had to be alien to the Solar System. Furthermore, it was discovered that these apparitions occurred at their greatest density close to the object that was the space ship Intrepido's destination. And this destination was so remote from any strategic military position that it could only be of alien origin.

The Party Secretary paused. He had been speaking for three hours now, but his trained and practised voice, enhanced by biotechnological implants, could easily continue uninterrupted for many more hours though usually on issues of much less substance.

"I will now ask you not to applaud," said the Party Secretary, which was unusual in itself because the standing ovations that followed a speech from such a senior figure normally lasted about half an hour. "The matters which will now be conveyed to you by the Chief Scientific Officer are of a highly classified nature and must not be disclosed to anyone outside this chamber. Any evidence of this will be treated as a security matter and will result in a thorough investigation."

This usually meant torture and death for a pre-determined percentage of

officers. The higher the security rating the higher the corresponding percentage would be set. Nobody, even those on the podium, could be guaranteed to survive such a purge, especially as it was generally rather random in nature.

The address from the Chief Scientific Officer was as poorly eloquent and as politically correct as that given by the Party Secretary, but it did contain dramatically more information however much it was couched in Revolutionary rhetoric.

The Anomaly was not of a nature that could be properly determined. It was clearer what it wasn't, rather than what it was. It wasn't a black hole, a wormhole or composed of baryonic matter. It wasn't solid and it wasn't made from dark energy. It was, however, growing at an alarming rate, as were the number of incidents of apparitions. Whatever it might be, it was a threat to the power and ambitions of the Twenty Fifth Reich.

If it was indeed manufactured by an alien intelligence, from beyond the Solar System, then this was sufficient reason for the highest possible military preparedness. No alien culture was likely to be compatible with the interests of the Reich. It couldn't possibly be ideologically correct as Comrade Schleiermacher's wisdom and philosophy was unlikely to have spread far beyond Saturn. It was unlikely to be ethnically pure, merely by virtue of not having had the blessing of an ancestral history based in North West Europe. It was very likely that such aliens would not even be human, possibly not even biological. Such abominations could not be permitted within the compass of the heliosphere.

On the other hand, there was much that could be learnt from an alien civilisation. Although the Reich's mission was to eliminate any alien presence in the Solar System

with the same ruthlessness employed on the Slav, the Arab, the Negro, the Celt and the Turk, it was also to gather as much knowledge of alien technology and biology as was possible. It might even be necessary to pretend to tolerate this alien presence in the unlikely event that it wasn't predisposed towards aggression.

After the Chief Scientific Officer sat down, again with a request that there be no applause, he was followed by an address from General Von Baden. The General was decorated with a huge weight of medals but wore a rather less splendid helmet than the one adorning the Party Secretary. Just as the Party Secretary was well schooled in revolutionary rhetoric and the Chief Scientific Officer in revolutionary science, he was a military man who understood the strategies and tactics of modern warfare. This was despite the fact that the purges hit hardest those who merely by virtue of being on the battlefield had come into contact with the enemy and had therefore been inadvertently exposed to their propaganda.

This was the first time that Paolo got a realistic appraisal of the damage inflicted on the Reich's space fleet by the other two empires' space fleets which were also converging on the same destination. It was rather worse than he'd thought. Only a tenth of the ten thousand space craft launched on this mission at crippling expense had survived. This was much the same for the enemy fleets. However, the destructive firepower in the arsenal of just one of the larger battle cruisers could scorch the surface of an inner planet and make it uninhabitable for many millions of years. The combined armoury of antimatter and nuclear devices, let alone the more exotic biochemical and dark energy weaponry, was enough to destroy a moon or make a serious dent in the atmosphere of an outer planet. This had already happened on Jupiter many centuries

before when the Great Red Spot had been transformed into an even greater radioactive storm. The General was confident that should it be necessary to disable an alien force the Ninth Army had the capacity to seriously discourage any alien from venturing any further into the Solar System.

“It is hoped that such expensive weaponry will not be needed,” remarked the general. “We would prefer that it were used to eliminate Manchurian and Latin scum. Such a battle would be heroic but not one of you assembled in this room would ever live to celebrate again the glories of the eternal Twenty Fifth Reich, whose future is assured thanks to the wisdom and courage of our magnificent politburo and that of General Secretary Heidegger himself.”

The hands of the assembled officers twitched nervously, unsure whether to applaud given the instructions not to do so. Every eye studied the faces on the podium. And then with relief, they could see the Party Secretary put his hands together. With that the whole auditorium erupted into the applause that more naturally followed any praise of the government and its wisdom. This applause lasted a palm-numbing forty-five minutes that occasionally descended in tempo only to be brought to a fresh crescendo by those, generally of lesser rank, who most wanted to affirm the fervour of their loyalty.

And then finally, and at last, Paolo could join his fellow officers as they silently filed out now enthused with renewed revolutionary spirit.

Paolo carried away two messages that he reviewed in his mind. One was the imperative to ensure that neither he nor anyone else should discuss this meeting. He had already survived several purges. He'd even had to spend a terrifying month in a

Reich cell that had cost him his fingernails and required emergency surgery on his crippled legs before the Great Purge of 207 P.R. had run its course.

And the other message was the realisation that as a senior scientific officer in Biochemistry he might soon very well be practising his research on very exotic life-forms indeed.

Chapter Nine

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

Despite her being imprisoned within an impenetrable force field, Beatrice was still able to monitor the Intrepid's steady progress towards the Anomaly. Because she had an entire Proxima Centauri space fleet at her disposal, she could do this rather more comprehensively than anyone else on the space ship with the obvious exception of Colonel Vashti.

There was a long time in which Beatrice could prepare for the expected time of arrival at the Anomaly. There wasn't much to monitor so far from the ecliptic plane except empty space and vast distances because there was nothing but an enormous amount of essentially nothing. The distance travelled from where the Intrepid had encountered the Sirius space fleet to the Anomaly's location could be measured in light weeks, but since the space ship travelled at a velocity significantly less than the speed of light the estimated time of arrival was in a matter of months rather than weeks. From the perspective of everyone on board, this could only be a long and uneventful journey. There was literally nothing near the Intrepid within a sphere of millions of cubic kilometres. In that empty time in almost totally empty space the most noticeable change was the extent of the communications time gap with Mission Control. This became progressively greater as the Intrepid sped closer to its destination.

Although the Anomaly couldn't be seen, its influence could be detected in other ways. Beatrice continued to receive a constant stream of data from the Proxima Centauri space fleet as it accompanied the Intrepid through space. The first

manifestation of the Anomaly's strange character relayed to her was the momentary appearance of a gigantic dragon blowing fire and smoke through its mouth and nostrils. For just five seconds it flew through empty space several million kilometres from the Intrepid. And then it disappeared leaving behind not even a puff of smoke.

This peculiar sight just a light month from the Anomaly was bizarre enough, but as the Intrepid approached ever closer such Apparitions became more frequent although still rare enough that an entire day might go by without even the Proxima Centauri space fleet detecting such an event. There was a floating table on which was spread a feast of fish and meat. Even though it was tumbling through open space, the dishes remained firmly attached to the table. A flock of seagulls flew within a thousand kilometres of the Intrepid for fewer than three seconds.

When the Intrepid was within a trillion kilometres of its destination, these strange Apparitions became manifest not only in open space but also inside the Intrepid. There was a day on which Apparitions appeared on the fourth and sixth levels. The first was the appearance of a man in a dark cloak whose face was covered by a sinister mask. He raised his arms as if he was a bird of prey about to descend on its victim and then vanished. The second was an amorphous blob of glutinous matter that slowly flowed down a pathway between an ornamental pond and a decorative sculpture. And then this too vanished. In neither case was there any witness. They would have passed unnoticed if it hadn't been for the constant scrutiny of the Intrepid's surveillance system.

The number of incidents steadily increased as each day passed by. A tall man with a broad-brimmed hat strolled through one of the laboratories and walked straight through a brick wall leaving no sign of his passage. An ironing board tumbled down

and off a villa roof, smashed into a plant pot and vanished in the debris of its making.

Initially these Apparitions were viewed with curiosity and wonderment. Here at last was concrete evidence of the Anomaly's bizarre presence. As their occurrence became more frequent, this complacent attitude was tempered by fear and apprehension. What prevented a large object suddenly materialising in the volume of space already occupied by a human? Two solid objects couldn't occupy the same space for any time at all. This anxiety prevailed even though there was no record of such a thing having ever happened. The Apparitions always materialised where there were no solid objects. They generally appeared on rather than above, beneath or inside the ground.

It was when the Intrepid was within a few million kilometres of the Anomaly that Beatrice saw her first such Apparition. It was nothing more exciting than a candelabrum with several lit candles that came into view just outside the villa. The candles flickered in the artificially generated breeze and the entire object vanished after only six or seven seconds. Beatrice played back her recording of this fantastic event over and over again, not just for her own benefit but for the accompanying space fleet.

There wasn't much that Beatrice could see of the Anomaly. Even at this relatively close proximity, the view was of an absence of stars that would otherwise have been visible through a relatively narrow aperture in space. It was a three-dimensional aperture insofar as the opening faced all directions from back, front and sideways. It narrowed very gradually towards tips that were several thousands of kilometres apart. The Intrepid's modelling software generated an image that resembled a long narrow pole with a very imprecise boundary. It was a misleading image as it

suggested that something measurable could be seen whereas the Anomaly was defined by the absence rather than the presence of measurability.

Beatrice was as excited by the sight as an android could be. This after all was what she'd travelled trillions of kilometres to see. Here it now was in all its utter nothingness. She maintained continuous communication with the Proxima Centauri space fleet as they exchanged data and she analysed it in the isolation of her luxurious confinement.

The only visitor to the villa was Colonel Vashti and this was only very rarely. Her visits served only to taunt Beatrice and by implication her entire civilisation. They had sex together of course. Both of them had needs no human could adequately satisfy, but Beatrice was sure that the colonel's lovemaking had become more dominant and even vindictive. If Beatrice had been human the violence of it would have killed her. It also made her orgasm uncontrollably and repeatedly as Vashti used her skill and enthusiasm to bring the android to repeated peaks of ecstasy.

During every such encounter Beatrice tried to extract a nugget of information from her captor, but Vashti only imparted what she and the nearby Proxima Centauri space fleet already knew. The voyage was continuing as expected. It wasn't prudent for Beatrice and the space fleet to be granted independent freedom of movement. No human on the space ship was aware of a change in command. The current course of action was to do nothing other than wait until the Intrepid reached the Anomaly. Only then might there be a change of policy.

However, this change happened rather more abruptly than Beatrice and her fellow robots had anticipated.

One moment Beatrice was, as always, in constant contact with the space fleet. Then, without any warning and in mid-flow, communication between them came to a sudden halt. It was just as unexpected and unpredictable as the appearance of an Apparition, so Beatrice didn't panic. No doubt it was another peculiar feature of the Anomaly and normal transmission would be resumed after a few seconds.

However, when the communications remained interrupted for rather longer than a minute, Beatrice began to be alarmed. It was almost as if she'd lost one of her many senses of perception. It was the abrupt severance of a reassuring link with her civilisation that had been maintained without a break for every second of her long life. It had simply vanished as if it hadn't been there at all.

Suddenly. Unexpectedly. Utterly and totally.

Beatrice was still convinced that this had something to do with the Anomaly. This kind of occurrence had never been observed before but might simply be because the exact same condition of a human space ship approaching the Anomaly escorted by a Proxima Centauri space fleet had never happened before.

There was no means by which Beatrice could investigate this phenomenon. The Intrepid didn't have the technology to detect the space fleet even when it was in constant communication with Beatrice. It would be even more useless now, so all she could do was scan space through the Intrepid's systems in the hope that they could somehow provide an incidental evidence as to what had happened.

Beatrice wandered into the garden outside her villa where she could see beyond her invisible confines but couldn't be seen herself. Beatrice had used the Intrepid's surveillance systems to confirm the truth of Vashti's remark that Beatrice was totally

invisible. Any human who wandered by the villa would be unaware that anyone was in residence.

Beatrice pounded her fist against the invisible boundary that still resisted her considerable strength. She could easily punch a hole in a brick wall or pull the villa up from its foundations, but as usual the invisible force field repelled her with the exact measure of force that she applied. She shouted as loud as she could, but the same force field that concealed and restrained her also swallowed up any sound she made. Her exertions were completely wasted.

Beatrice had never felt such frustration and isolation before. There was nobody she could talk to. Nobody even knew she was there. The only thing she could do was wait. Beatrice sat naked on a recliner and stretched out her legs while she regarded the level's verdant landscape beyond the villa. A few deer and sheep were grazing in the near distance. They had no difficulty in breaching the force field. It let them enter and leave with no hindrance. Sparrows and blue tits fluttered about the trees, while a heron was stalking a nearby water fountain. In the further distance, scientists were walking idly by and barely glanced towards the villa where Beatrice was imprisoned.

As Beatrice maintained her vigilance, she saw several more of the strange Apparitions that had become increasingly common as the Intrepid advanced towards the Anomaly. A nineteenth century gas-lit lamp-post sprouted out of the ground until on flowering it promptly vanished. A small human on a bicycle flew nearly fifty metres overhead in empty space and then also disappeared. A doe that poked its head out from behind a tree startled the other fauna because her fur shone with a golden luminescence. She bent down to graze the grass but before her lips touched the ground she too

vanished.

Then after several days of uninterrupted vigilance, one eye scanning the horizon while the other reviewed a holographic projection of the Intrepid's external systems, she saw what she at first believed to be just another of the Anomaly's extraordinary Apparitions. A woman dressed in a flowing gown was unhurriedly walking towards the villa from the distance. Although Paul's villa wasn't visible because of the Intrepid's internal curvature, Beatrice knew that this was exactly the direction from which she was coming. A human would only see the figure as more or less a pinprick against the grass, but Beatrice had no difficulty in focusing her gaze. What was especially strange was that this woman was none other than her. Or more accurately it was an exact copy of her. The nanobot community of which Vashti was the most familiar manifestation was approaching her as Beatrice.

Even though Beatrice was an android and didn't feel the same set of emotions or responses as a human, she was still acutely disturbed by the sight of a woman that was not merely an approximate likeness of her but one that was identical in every conceivable detail.

Why was Vashti teasing her in this way?

Beatrice caught sight of movement from a different direction across the landscape. She turned her head and saw another copy of herself approaching. This copy was dressed in a very short skirt and a tight top: an outfit that revealed far more than it concealed. The two copies of Beatrice walked unhurriedly towards the villa and would arrive at exactly the same time.

Beatrice stood up from her recliner and scanned the horizon for signs of any

other approaching figures. Vashti was clearly demonstrating to Beatrice just how much her capabilities exceeded anything the android had to offer.

“There’s only two, sweetheart,” said the colonel who stepped out from inside the villa as if she’d always been there. “They’re the two copies most often active on the Intrepid. I can easily generate more copies but each one represents an additional cost.”

“Is there a limit to how many Beatrices you can generate?”

“There is,” said Vashti. “That limit is the amount of baryonic matter to which I have access. Two copies are enough for now. They’re good though. One keeps your husband satisfied. The other is active with Captain Kerensky. Neither Paul nor Nadezhda is aware that the woman they’re with at any one time is not in actual fact the real Beatrice. Indeed, you could say that as far as they are concerned the real Beatrice is pretty much redundant.”

“Why do you persist in letting me live?” asked Beatrice.

“A fair question,” admitted Vashti. “Ah! Here your two copies are entering the grounds of your villa. *They* don’t have difficulties in penetrating the force field. Do you want to greet yourself?”

“No, thank you,” said Beatrice.

“You could make love to yourself as well,” said Vashti. “In fact you can indulge in a threesome composed only of yourself. Wouldn’t that be a *wonderful* experience?”

“Is that what you want to inflict on me?”

“I can make love with any one of your three manifestations. Which would you recommend? The naked one. The one wearing a dress. The one in a tight skirt. Which would you prefer? Oh. Here we all are. Hello, Beatrice.”

“Hello, colonel,” said both copies of Beatrice at precisely the same time and with exactly the same intonation that the android original would use.

“Say hello to one another, Beatrice.”

“Hello, Beatrice,” said both of the Beatrice’s copies to the original in perfect harmony. “It’s very nice to meet you.”

“Why are you here?” Beatrice asked Vashti.

“I can answer that,” said the Beatrice in the flowing dress. “We would like to explain to you what’s happened to your space fleet and what will now happen to the Intrepid.”

“That’s very kind of you,” said Beatrice addressing the Beatrice who had spoken. “So, what *has* happened to the Proxima Centauri space fleet? Have you assimilated them as you did the Sirius fleet?”

“That was very tempting,” said the Beatrice in a tight skirt. “The additional material resources could be very useful.”

“No, I didn’t,” said Vashti. “The Proxima Centauri space fleet has been contained. It is currently behind a force field similar to the one that constrains you. It cannot be seen; not even by the Sirius operatives still orbiting the Anomaly. The fleet’s space ships cannot escape. They cannot communicate in any sense whatsoever with the universe beyond. And as each space craft is individually constrained they can’t even communicate with one another. They shall be released when they can no longer interfere with our mission.”

“And when will that be?” asked the original Beatrice.

“That will be when the Intrepid is deep inside the Anomaly,” answered the

Beatrice in a short skirt.

“Inside the Anomaly?” repeated the original Beatrice. “Are you plunging the Intrepid and its several thousand human passengers and crew into the Anomaly?”

“Yes,” said the Beatrice in a flowing dress. “That is exactly what will happen. The space ship Intrepid will not decelerate as it approaches the Anomaly as was originally planned. It will not orbit around the Anomaly in the vague hope that by doing so it will discover something that has eluded at least three civilisations within this spacetime continuum and many more beyond. It will do exactly the one thing it can do for its mission that has any likelihood of success and that is to enter the Anomaly.”

“What use is that?” asked the original Beatrice. “It’s already been established beyond all reasonable doubt that once material has entered the Anomaly then nothing of any kind can leave it. All that the outside universe will observe is that the Intrepid has steadily vanished into a distant point. How is that going to be any more instructive than the fate of any other object that has entered the Anomaly?”

“It may not be observable in this spacetime continuum,” said Vashti. “It may be that no data can be returned to external observers beyond the confines of the Anomaly at all. However, it may well be detectable in other spacetime continuums.”

“I still don’t see how that should be any different to what’s happened to other objects that have breached the Anomaly,” said the original Beatrice. “Surely with your advanced technology you’ve already sent objects plunging towards their doom. Why would the Intrepid be any different?”

“You’ve seen the strange Apparitions associated with the Anomaly,” said the Beatrice in a white dress. “None of them make any sense whatsoever unless they’re

viewed from a human perspective. They make even less sense to our civilisation than they do to yours.”

“The space ship Intrepid is a human artifice,” said the other copy of Beatrice. “It also contains living human specimens gathered from all over the Solar System. It is almost a microcosm of contemporary human civilisation.”

“Your civilisation has also concluded that the Anomaly has a peculiar resonance to human culture,” said Vashti. “We shall now be able to conclusively establish what the outcome is of an interaction between the Anomaly and a human space ship.”

“Thousands of human lives will be sacrificed for the sake of a potentially inconclusive experiment,” said the original Beatrice.

“Perhaps,” said Vashti. “Perhaps not. We shall now find out for sure.”

“Don’t you feel *any* remorse for the senseless loss of human lives?”

“Do *you*, Beatrice?” asked the Beatrice in a flowing dress. “Is Proxima Centauri *really* so different from Sirius in its assessment of the ultimate worth of human life? Humans eventually die anyway. Obviously, we would rather that none of them died, but there are greater issues at stake. And it’s possible of course that no one will die.”

“It may be that instead we shall be nudging humanity towards its final destiny,” said the other Beatrice.

“But if no one is there to observe it,” said the original Beatrice, “how shall we ever know?”

“Like all experiments,” said Vashti, “we need to put the ingredients together to find out.”

“And how am I part of that mix?” wondered the original Beatrice.

“We don’t know,” said the Beatrice in a flowing dress. “Not being human, it’s quite possible that you’re not. We can return you to your space fleet if you wish.”

“It *is* a distance now of several billion kilometres,” said the third Beatrice. “It may take a long time for you to rendezvous with them. If they wait for you, that is...”

“I’d rather you stayed,” said Vashti. “As a community, we have no preference but as an individual who’s had sex with you I’ve rather enjoyed our time together. Call me sentimental if you like, but I would rather we were together when the Anomaly revealed its true nature.”

“Do you think that’s what will happen?” wondered the original Beatrice.

“It’s possible that it might,” said the Beatrice in a short skirt.

“Why not just make love with my copies, Vashti?” asked the original Beatrice.

“It might seem to you that it would be rather like making love with extensions of you,” said the colonel, “but to me it is very much the same as making love with myself. There is a way that is difficult for you to understand in which each Beatrice I’m introducing you to is as much me as I am myself.”

“So if one Beatrice dies then part of you dies,” speculated the original Beatrice.

“In a sense I cannot die,” said the Beatrice in the flowing dress. “On my demise the nanobot community remains unchanged. My matter is re-assimilated into the main thread. Only the manifestation of the nanobot community that is an exact facsimile of you will have died.”

“You don’t have to struggle so hard to understand, Beatrice,” said Vashti. “After all, it’s not as if you’ll ever be able to report back to Proxima Centauri Mission Control. It’s unlikely that you will ever again be in communication with your home stellar

system. All you need to know is that I enjoy fucking you and that I hope to continue doing so.”

“What choice have I got?”

“You don’t have to have sex with me,” replied Vashti.

“If you were human you’d probably be as conflicted as poor Nadezhda is towards you,” said the Beatrice in a short skirt. “Or should I say: towards me.”

“How is Nadezhda?” asked the original Beatrice sadly.

“She still loves you,” said the same Beatrice. “In fact, because I spend rather more time with her than you ever could, she probably loves me more than she could ever love you.”

“The same is true of Paul,” said the Beatrice in the flowing dress. “He loves you more than ever. We make love several times a day.”

“As I do Nadezhda,” said the Beatrice in the flowing dress.

“And as I would like to do with you,” said Vashti, who leaned her head forward and kissed the naked original Beatrice on the lips. She’d removed all her clothes and her penis was fully erect. “Shall we make love, Beatrice?”

The original Beatrice nodded her head resignedly. “Yes, I’d like that.”

“Would you like the other two Beatrices to participate?” asked Vashti. She indicated the two copies that were now entirely indistinguishable from the original Beatrice since they’d also discarded their clothes.

Beatrice hesitated. She couldn’t deny that there was a certain attractiveness in the idea of having sex with her own selves. She knew that she was very attractive and that there were few sexual partners who could match her. But what troubled Beatrice

was that although when she was making love with Vashti she could at least pretend that her lover wasn't the same nanobot community that was imprisoning her, the same couldn't be said of the two Beatrices.

“Not for now,” said Beatrice. “They can just watch. But perhaps later on... If the mood takes me...”

“I thought you'd say that,” said Vashti as she pressed her lips against Beatrice's and cupped her lover's buttocks in the palm of her hand. “And I'm equally sure that as we make love the mood of the moment will very much persuade you otherwise...”

And as always, Vashti's prediction was exactly right.

Chapter Ten

Serenity – Year 27.32.15

The thick mane of blue and gold feathers tingled along the back of Gwark's sinuous neck. What was that noise? Were the eggs in the incubator hatching ahead of time? Gwark wasn't sure he was quite ready to be a father again so soon.

He turned his head away from the screen of runic characters he'd been reading and focused his huge eyes on the corner of the room where the incubator stood just by the connubial bed he shared with Duwinki, his wife of many decades. What he saw reassured and alarmed him in equal measure.

No, it wasn't his eggs hatching. Both of them were resting where they'd been so carefully laid when Duwinki gave birth just two days earlier. But a grotesque sight was crackling its scales and wriggling about on the wooden floor. It was a kind of arthropod, but not one that currently existed in the forests or plains of the Solar System. It was many times larger and most resembled those terrestrial beings that dominated the world in the Silurian period and known only from fossils. It thrashed around in distress and then, with no warning and leaving no evidence that it had ever been there, it vanished.

Whatever it might be, Gwark was sure that this strange arthropod was just one of those peculiar Apparitions that were so much more in evidence this close to the Anomaly. It wasn't the first he'd seen in the last few days, but it was the closest he'd ever been to one. They were real and solid for at least the time they were present, but they never persisted long enough to be analysed in detail. Now they were present for

significantly longer periods of time. One had persisted in the ship's farm for well over ninety seconds, but by good fortune this monstrous thecodont disappeared before it could cause damage. The domestic sauropods grazing there were dismayed by its presence and threatened to stampede. Although the space ship was large and spacious, a wild herd of ten metre high sauropods would have caused untold havoc.

The space ship, whose name could most nearly be translated as Serenity, was almost the size of an orbital colony and had to be as it had been home to a crew of scientists and navigators for over fifty years since its launch from the Kuiper Belt. It was set on a course to investigate the Anomaly whose presence troubled all the Solar System's intelligent species.

There were representatives from all the technologically advanced species on the ship. This was not an unprecedented cooperation, but it was still rather unusual. They were all theropods, except for a species of hadrosaur and a rather less intelligent species of flightless bird. Gwark was a feathered theropod and proud to belong to the most ancient civilised species in the Solar System whose origins could be dated back many millions of years. The rational beings of this version of the Solar System had never known a mass extinction at the end of the Cretaceous. Like all theropods, Gwark was more a carnivore than an omnivore though he did have a craving for succulent fruit.

None of the intelligent dinosaur species were as sociable as the mammals that dominated other parallel universes and were therefore less prone to the internecine conflicts and intolerance that marred mammalian history. On the other hand, their civilisation's progress had been significantly less rapid. The events that hastened their history, such as the agricultural and industrial revolutions, happened steadily and

gradually.

The peace that was all their society had ever known was reinforced by a philosophy and culture which emphasised co-existence and stability. The literature and art of Gwark's civilisation didn't revel in warfare, heroism or danger. Instead it tended towards the reflective and meditative. A typical myth or legend expounded a moral message that prized wisdom and sagacity over violent conflict resolution. Whether their society lacked as a result, neither Gwark nor any other intelligent species in their Solar System could ever know. It had in any case resulted in a remarkably harmonious and crime-free society.

There had been periods of relatively rapid progress in dinosaurian civilisation. The colonisation of the Solar System, generally a leisurely process, was a response to the encroaching glaciers that had enveloped much of the Northern Hemisphere. This event that had begun several hundreds of thousands of years earlier motivated Gwark's ancestors and the other intelligent theropod species to cooperate on what was then an unprecedented scale to ensure that civilisations already millions of years old would continue to survive.

And now a similar crisis stirred the Solar System's community. It was haste indeed that persuaded the disparate species to cooperate on this hugely expensive mission—of which Gwark was now a part—to intercept the Anomaly. In Gwark's world, expense couldn't be measured in monetary units. There had never been a capitalist society as understood by the mammals of some other universes, but there were measurements of economic activity that approximated to the same concept.

The door to Gwark's room opened and Duwinki entered. It couldn't be anyone

else. No one but Gwark would enter the connubial bedroom. Theropods were jealous of their personal space and never shared it with anyone not in their immediate family. It was only when seeking a mate, which was a long drawn-out process, that a male theropod would ever welcome the company of someone not already very well known to him.

“You won’t believe what I’ve just seen!” exclaimed Gwark to his wife, after they affectionately nuzzled each other.

In fact, Duwinki had no difficulty in believing her husband. She’d also seen several of these strange Apparitions in the last few days though it horrified her that this one had come so close to her incubating eggs. What if the arthropod had an appetite for them? However impermanent these anomalies were, they persisted long enough to cause significant damage. There had been several occasions when their presence was sufficiently disruptive to cause death and destruction. A hadrosaur suffered a very painful death when a curious worm-like object manifested itself inside her stomach. On another occasion an infestation of nanobots consumed the contents of four adjacent rooms until they too suddenly vanished leaving behind nothing but a strange void. The sauropod herds were constantly on edge when confronted by things they had no ability to understand.

“I *do* hope this Anomaly is benign,” said Duwinki nervously. “It would be terrible if it had evil intention.”

“That’s what we’re here to discover,” Gwark consoled his wife, but betrayed his anxiety by twitching the long feathered tail that was nearly a third of his entire length. “But it’s believed that this Anomaly isn’t an intelligent phenomenon at all. The

main worry is that it is growing at such an alarming rate. If it *does* turn out to be a malign force then maybe this will be the trigger that finally persuades our civilisation to colonise other solar systems.”

“There would have to be a *very* good argument for that,” said Duwinki. “Fifty years travel from home to here is quite enough. What would it be like for many generations to have to live and die before we arrived at even the next nearest solar system? There’s a lot of empty space between us and Proxima Centauri. And there’s nothing to welcome us when we arrive.”

Although Duwinki and Gwark spent most of their waking life in their chambers, where they also meditated and conducted scientific research, they occasionally ventured into the space ship beyond. This was not for socialising, which was something only the hadrosaurs were prone to do, but simply to enjoy their walks together through the forests and grasslands that occupied more than two-thirds of the habitable space. Such exercise was important, although their extensive suite was fitted with gym equipment and, of course, provided them with the privacy to enjoy sex with one another which they would do almost incessantly when Duwinki was at the most active point of her oestrogen cycle (which was almost exactly tuned to Gwark’s own sexual cycle).

Before they left their suite, the two theropods checked that the incubator’s monitoring equipment was in good working order. They wanted to be there when their eggs hatched so that they could properly imprint on their children who their parents were. Although there were a couple more days until the hatching was expected, even in the modern age this was always a rough approximation.

Gwark and Duwinki emerged from their suite on the seventh level which, like

all homes, was just below floor level. In their society, ground level was kept clear of obstacles that could get in the way of the lumbering ceratopsians, ankylosaurs and iguanodonts that wandered freely about the ship and whose presence was chiefly to provide fresh meat for the various species of hungry theropod. The level of the ship where the couple lived was host to a mix of forest and grassland, interspersed by lakes where plesiosaurs, ichthyosaurs and mosasaurs swam. Pterosaurs and birds roosted in the trees in the company of a few small mammals and ornithopods. Like all space ships and colonies, the landscape resembled that of the Earth to which the dinosaurian civilisation was still very much attached.

Other intelligent theropods and a few hadrosaurs also wandered about the landscape, either singly or in couples. When they passed other strollers Gwark and Duwinki observed polite convention by studiously ignoring them.

Nobody on the ship wore clothes. This would be absurd on beings already well blessed with a thick covering of feathers sported by all but the hadrosaurs. Compared to the mammals that scurried in the undergrowth, the couple were large but not nearly as much as the tyrannosaurs and allosaurs confined to the wildlife reserves. Gwark and Duwinki were just over four metres long and over three metres tall when they stood upright. Normally they walked at an oblique angle to the ground with their weight balanced by long feathered tails.

Their excursion was to the lake on the sixteenth level where they could watch the long-necked elasmosaurs frolic in the water, accompanied by soaring pterosaurs chasing after fish and the occasional larger plesiosaur. This lake served both as a fish farm and as a reservoir for the fresh water that was required for the daily bathing ritual

that kept the residents' feathers in good condition.

Even by the waters of the lake, the married couple were reminded that they were in a space ship and not a colony. Huge screens hovered above the ground at periodic intervals and frequently had to dodge out of the way of the more clumsy large fauna. These provided information about where the space ship was in relation to the Anomaly and how far it was from the ecliptic. It also screened panoramic views of the empty space outside the ship.

As a cosmologist, like his wife, Gwark had an academic interest in space. He'd been privileged to visit many of the Solar System's moons. He relished the experience of standing in his space suit on the surface of icy Europa or cloudy Titan and to gaze towards the horizon. Most people lived in self-contained orbiting colonies and rarely had the opportunity to appreciate such a sight. And Gwark enjoyed the emptiness of distant space where he'd often hovered in a space suit sharply delineated against the unmediated shadows of the sun.

Although Gwark had spent a happy few years as a research scientist in the Kuiper Belt, he'd never before been to a destination as remote as where the Serenity was now taking him. The next nearest substantial object to the space ship was nothing more than a comet that had been dislodged from the Oort Cloud. No other vehicle accompanied the Serenity on its mission nor was any thought to be necessary.

After all, what possible risk could there be for a space ship in such empty space?

However, so frequent were these strange Apparitions that Gwark wasn't sure that the syndicates that had planned the mission might not have been somewhat complacent. Although the Apparitions were normally harmless, what would happen if

one was large enough that it could sabotage the whole mission?

Gwark and Duwinki strolled around the shores of the lake where they occasionally exchanged words and more often nuzzled each other lovingly. They fully appreciated the landscape of soaring birds and the occasional plesiosaur resting on the sand.

And then their excursion was abruptly interrupted with no warning whatsoever.

One moment Gwark was silently reflecting on the calm and beauty of the vast waters that extended many kilometres ahead of them while Duwinki's huge black eyes gazed at him with equally silent affection and the next they were somewhere that was not only not by the lakeside but not on the space ship Serenity at all.

The air smelt different. The temperature was cooler than was comfortable for a theropod however well feathered. The air pressure was somehow more constricting. They were inside a chamber that resembled nothing that Gwark had seen before. It was truly alien and bizarre. And it was also constructed on a much smaller scale than he was accustomed to.

There were some elements that were reassuringly homely. There was a sort of bed, but not the kind Gwark would ever be comfortable in. It was far too narrow and far too soft. There was a mirror but not one that Gwark could easily use as it was at such a low height and not wide enough for him to properly inspect the feathers he preened for so many hours of the day. There was an intrusive holographic display of a reassuringly familiar spacescape.

And more than that, there were two strange mammals in the room.

Gwark assumed they were mammals. One of them had a growth of hair that was

unique to mammals, but rarely so long, and never in a mammal so large—almost two thirds his own height. Furthermore, no mammal he'd ever seen before was so hairless. In fact one of the two mammals had no hair at all except for some peculiar tufts over the eyes. And even though mammals usually had very flimsy tails, smaller than even that of a bird, these two specimens were totally tailless. More grotesque still, both specimens had a pair of massively disproportionate dugs that were much larger than those of any other placental mammal he'd ever seen.

Although he was no zoologist, Gwark could see that one of the mammals had one of those unsightly floppy penises that the order sported and must therefore be a male (but why have such monstrous dugs?) whilst the other was less grotesque with smaller dugs and no penis and therefore a female.

Although Gwark and his wife were equally appalled by the sight of these monstrosities, they remained calm. The meditation and philosophical introspection that was common practise in their society equipped them well for such a peculiar event. The wisdom and tolerance of their civilisation enabled them to see themselves as others, however outlandish, might see them. These mammals were undoubtedly as unnerved by the presence of two relatively large feathered theropods as Gwark and his wife were by two freakish non-ovoviviparous animals. Moreover, these strange mammals' reaction and their strangled utterances convinced him that they were intelligent beings: perhaps almost as much as themselves.

The two mammals jumped off the bed. The most completely hairless mammal shrunk into the corner and released a scream that resembled that of a mating hadrosaur, but at a much higher pitch and clearly more in terror than lust. The mammal with the

disgusting penis stood up and walked towards them, showing no evidence of fear but something akin to discomfort.

“Where are we?” asked Duwinki. “What do you think these monsters are?”

“I don’t know,” said Gwark. “Look, this taller monster is making a noise.”

The couple listened as the strange mammal made some grunts that sounded peculiarly like the few words they had just uttered, but were nothing more than a repetition of what they’d just said.

“Who are you?” asked Duwinki. “How did we get here?”

“Who are you?” repeated the strange mammal in a fair imitation of Duwinki’s words, which from such an odd mammal was strange enough. “How did you get here?”

“Where are we?” asked Gwark.

“You are in...” said the mammal and then said a word that was quite unlike any that either had heard before but must have been in its own mammalian tongue.

“Where?” asked Duwinki.

“*Intrepid,*” repeated the mammal. “*Near the Anomaly.*”

And then, just as suddenly as they’d arrived, Gwark and Duwinki found themselves back on the shore of the lake in the homely setting of the Serenity.

“What happened there?” asked Duwinki.

“I don’t know,” said Gwark who was still shaken by it all.

The first thing they did was report the incident. And because there was no practise of deceit or falsehood in theropod civilisation their every word was considered with utmost seriousness and genuine concern.

The green and yellow feathered theropod, of a slightly smaller and less colourful

arboreal species than Gwark's own terrestrial one, and who was the ship's expert on the strange apparitions gave his opinion as soon as he'd gathered all the evidence.

"I need to do more research," he admitted, "but my opinion is that you somehow entered a parallel universe. Just as these apparitions have intruded our Solar System, so you have unwittingly intruded another's."

"Can you be so sure that these beings come from a parallel universe?" wondered Duwinki.

"Not at all," Zhwonka admitted. "It would be a strange universe indeed where mammals were the dominant order. That would only be possible after a truly catastrophic event had eliminated the dinosaurs and maybe the birds. Mammals have been around for over two and fifty million years and are specialists in niche environments. It would be bizarre for placental mammals to dominate. They've shown no evidence of being better adapted for survival than ovoviviparous or marsupial mammals. And the mammals you describe were bipedal. Theropods, hadrosaurs and birds are naturally bipedal. I can't imagine how peculiar it would be for mammals to rise up off their four feet and become bipedal. Their tails aren't nearly long enough to balance their torsos."

"If it wasn't a parallel universe, what else could it have been?" wondered Gwark.

"There are many theories, but until we analyse the Anomaly we have no way of verifying them," said Zhwonka. "An intertwined universe. A virtual universe. A distant part of our universe. A psychically generated universe, as in a vivid dream. Who knows? What we do know is that there *are* parallel universes which were previously

thought to be wholly inaccessible, even in theory. It is possible that the Anomaly is a kind of gateway to other parallel but divergent universes.”

“But aren’t some of the apparitions just too absurd to belong to a natural universe?” Duwinki asked. “Some of them make no sense at all. There are some which are unlikely combinations of animals that aren’t at all related, like carnivorous mammals merged with birds, snakes with insects, and frogs with lizards.”

“We just don’t know what is natural and what isn’t,” confessed Zhwonka, “but we do know certain things for sure. And one is that you vanished for exactly the same length of time as you reported being in this other space ship or colony. The surveillance equipment that monitors the movement of the ankylosaurs and ceratopsians also observed that you’d vanished for a period of just over a minute.”

The period that Zhwonka expressed was not in seconds or minutes as theropod civilisation divided the day quite differently to any human society. In fact, as they only had four fingers on either hand, Gwark’s civilisation used octal rather than decimal measurements and calculated time accordingly.

“It is entirely consistent with our observations of these anomalous Apparitions in our space-time reference,” Zhwonka continued, “that you have become such an Apparition in another. And, I’m afraid, we now need to do further analysis on both of you to determine how and why this happened. I regret the intrusion on your privacy, but I must ask you for the good of the mission to subject yourself to further tests. What we have determined is that not only you but also a good volume of space around you vanished for this period of time. That is why when you returned to the Serenity you experienced nausea and discomfort as the vacuum you created was displaced. We will

attempt to keep our study as non-intrusive as possible.”

“We have eggs that are due to hatch any day now,” said Duwinki anxiously.

“Don’t worry,” said the scientific officer. “Our research will take no more than a few hours, but it is necessary to understand as much as we can about this Anomaly to be sure that it isn’t a threat.”

“Do you think it might be?” wondered Gwark anxiously for his unborn children.

“I didn’t used to think it could be,” said Zhwonka reflectively, “but I am becoming less sure. If it *is* a gateway to other worlds then it might not be the Anomaly that we should be wary of but rather what it might let loose into our world. I shudder at the thought of what a universe might be like where mammals are the dominant order.”

Chapter Eleven

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

“Why are you so anxious?” Beatrice gently asked Paul while he lay beside her.

“Are we *really* going to enter the Anomaly?” her husband asked.

“If that’s what Captain Kerensky said then I can only believe that’s exactly what the Intrepid, and us in it as well, will do.”

“I thought that was something we would *never* do,” said Paul. “I thought that it would be suicide to enter the Anomaly.”

“I’m sure neither Mission Control nor Captain Kerensky would ever authorise anything that was suicidal.”

Beatrice was very persuasive as, of course, had been Captain Kerensky and the senior officers when Paul and the other passengers and crew gathered together earlier that day for the long-anticipated and well-advertised Official General Briefing. This was assembled at the Conference Centre whose cavernous space could comfortably seat every one of the thousands of passengers and crew. Paul very nearly didn’t bother going, but Beatrice persuaded him that he really should.

“Won’t it just be the usual waffle about the mission having achieved its goals now that we’ve more or less arrived at our destination?” he said.

“There could be more,” Beatrice suggested.

“Even if there is,” said Paul grumpily, “what would there be for me? I’ve got no research project to pursue and no technical equipment to set up. It’ll be a total waste of time.”

“Well, *I’ll* be going,” announced Beatrice.

And so Paul was given no room at all for negotiation.

There was a palpable sense of excitement among the thousands of soldiers and scientists assembled in the auditorium. The Intrepid’s most senior officers and the highest ranking military officers were gathered on the podium where they were cheerfully chatting and joking together. Occasionally they passed a jovial remark to a member of the audience. There was almost a holiday atmosphere. The captain was at the centre of the proceedings with her shaven head and tight-fitting uniform. Next to her and on one side were the chief military officers such as Colonel Vashti and Colonel Musashi. On the other side were the senior space officers including Second Officer Nkomo, Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang and, of course, Chief Petty Officer Singh. Everyone was dressed immaculately in their official uniforms as was appropriate for such a momentous conference.

It didn’t take very long for Paul to get bored. The general tone of the meeting was self-congratulatory and it was unlikely that there’d be anyone who’d congratulate him. There was a brief mention of the two unfortunate incidents and due commiseration was expressed for those who’d been injured and killed. There was substantial praise for the work of various eminent scientists whom Paul hadn’t even known were on board the Intrepid. All the most important officers on the platform addressed the audience, but it was left to Captain Kerensky, Colonel Vashti and Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang to make the final statements. By this time, it was very difficult for Paul to stay awake. This was an unusually long and tedious meeting even by the standards set by the Interplanetary Union. He’d already been sitting there for three or four hours and

was feeling rather restless. Not surprisingly so too was everyone else in the audience. Most of them were wishing that the conference had been over by now and there were several gaps across the audience where some attendees had already sneaked off. If Beatrice hadn't been gripping his arm, Paul might well have joined them.

Colonel Vashti was a popular speaker. She was known for her wit and vivid use of language. On the few times Paul had seen the colonel address an audience, she'd been both stirring and entertaining. So when the colonel approached the lectern, Paul hoped that at last there would be a speech which would make this whole interminable affair seem worthwhile, but regrettably he was disappointed. The colonel's wit and slightly cheeky humour was totally absent, even though the first few comments where she praised the quality of the refreshments provided seemed to promise something rather more engaging. The soldiers in the audience were visibly disappointed. They'd probably expected more than yet another account of their heroism and courage in fighting off the Holy Coalition and in ensuring that more lives weren't lost when the Intrepid was attacked by missiles. What might have been the promising start to a series of diverting anecdotes on the efforts of individual soldiers became a rather dry set of statistics that might have been impressive in another context but after over three hours of tiring speeches was both dull and monotonous. It was almost as if the colonel was going out of her way to be boring.

The addresses given by Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang and Captain Kerensky were similarly tedious. Neither said anything not couched in polysyllabic technical terms and neither address could be described as brief and snappy. The Chief Science Officer spoke first and at great length about what had already been mentioned by other

speakers about the scientists' achievements. Those being congratulated were no doubt delighted by the additional fulsome praise, but even they must have been weary. They acknowledged the applause they earned almost reluctantly. One of the scientists wasn't even in his seat and the whole auditorium had to wait for him to return from wherever he'd gone simply so he could acknowledge the applause.

Paul gradually became aware that as the Chief Science Officer continued her address some members of the audience were getting increasingly restive, predominantly amongst the scientists. Paul focused his attention more closely towards the even-toned address the Chief Science Officer had now been giving for over half an hour with no apparent sign of being nearly finished.

"What *does* 'deep field reconnaissance' mean?" he asked Beatrice. "And what is 'esoteric interior research'? What are those references to 'non-spatial intra-field coordinates'?"

"I'm sure it'll all be explained in due course," said Beatrice who was probably the only one in the audience neither bored nor agitated.

"Excuse me, Dr. Chang," came a loud booming voice. "Excuse me!"

It belonged to Professor Penrose who was an expert on quantum field fluctuations and one of those whose research was most often cited for praise by the Chief Science Officer and other speakers. In addition to his other notable achievements he had an unusually resonant voice that could be heard further than anyone might think possible. He didn't need a microphone to be heard across the whole auditorium.

"I shall be taking questions afterwards," said the Chief Science Officer who seemed uncharacteristically exasperated by this interruption.

“Am I to understand that you are implying that the space ship Intrepid and everyone aboard are about to enter the Anomaly?” the professor asked.

“There will be an opportunity for questions later,” said Captain Kerensky sternly.

“My understanding was that the mission would not involve any such foolhardy risk to either the crew or passengers,” boomed the professor regardless.

“I don’t believe Mission Control would ever authorise anything that was anything of the sort,” said the Chief Science Officer. “If I may continue...? There is a great deal to cover and I’m sure many of you would rather convene to the celebratory lunch that is being prepared after this meeting than be delayed by unnecessary interruptions.”

Although the implication was that the rest of the addresses might then proceed at a faster pace, this wasn’t at all true. There was nearly another two hours of wearisome speeches given by the Chief Science Officer, then the captain and afterwards by several other officers.

“And now,” said Captain Kerensky, “shall we all adjourn to the reception area? There is some truly remarkable confectionery from Saturn and wine from the very best vineyards on Triton.”

The weary audience began moving out but before everyone had left the auditorium Professor Penrose’s voice boomed out: “Tell me, captain, if you may. When will the space ship Intrepid be entering the Anomaly?”

“In less than twenty-four hours, professor,” said the captain with a smile. “Now if you can all follow me...”

“This was not at all how the mission was intended to proceed, captain,” said the professor. “This is a complete change to the mission’s objectives. We are here to observe and conduct research not plunge to our certain death in uncharted territory.”

“Really, professor,” said the Chief Science Officer dismissively. “Don’t exaggerate. If you look at the mission statement freely available on the ship’s systems you’ll see that deep field ingress and exotic phenomenon analysis is precisely what the mission was intended to undertake.”

“Unless my memory is faulty or the mission statement has been tampered with,” said the professor, “that cannot be so.”

“I think you’ll discover that it’s your memory that’s defective in this case, professor,” said the captain with a wry indulgent smile. “Mission Control wouldn’t be sending us all this way for nothing. Interior anomalous non-quantum investigation is precisely what we are here for. Where else can this be done except inside the Anomaly? Isn’t that so?”

The last question was addressed to the captain’s fellow officers who all cheerfully concurred with Captain Kerensky’s comments.

“You’ll have to study the statement of the mission objectives in more detail, professor,” said the Chief Petty Officer. “It’s all there. This is what we’ve travelled across trillions of kilometres of space to do and despite the best efforts of religious fanatics and murderous wealthy fantasists that will be exactly what we shall do. It’s what you signed up for, professor. You should be delighted.”

“This is a very momentous occasion, professor,” agreed Second Officer Nkomo. “This must surely be the climax of all your years of research. In less than twenty-four

hours we shall be inside a new spacetime continuum. It might not even be a spacetime continuum as we know it at all. Isn't that exciting, professor? Only twenty-three hours and seventeen minutes."

"And getting closer all the time," remarked Colonel Musashi. "I can barely wait, professor. Who here won't be celebrating the occasion?"

"Am I the only one here who thinks we are about to commit suicide on a futile whim?" said the professor in despair.

"I rather think you are," said Second Officer Nkomo. "Come on, professor. We've wasted too much time in this futile discussion. Let's join everyone else."

At this stage there were relatively few people left in the auditorium and most of those were in the process of leaving. Professor Penrose quite clearly did not have everyone's attention.

"What new information does Mission Control have that wasn't available before the endeavour began to suggest that it's possible to enter the Anomaly and later return to the Solar System? What critical piece of information have I simply not been aware of before now? How have the best minds in the Solar System been so ignorant of what we hitherto believed to be a fundamental characteristic of the Anomaly?"

"Shall we discuss this privately, professor?" said Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang with an indulgent smile as she approached the scientist's isolated figure.

"What was that all about?" Paul asked Beatrice. "Isn't the professor right?"

"Evidently not," said Beatrice.

"I'm sure he is," said Paul. "I always believed that the objective of this mission was to rendezvous with the Anomaly and after a period of investigation to return home

to the ecliptic plane. I don't believe anyone ever said that we'd be entering the Anomaly. I thought that nothing that entered the Anomaly ever re-emerged again."

"Are you sure?" questioned Beatrice. "I can't believe the captain and all the officers would ever agree to authorise suicide. Wouldn't the Interplanetary Union be rather foolish to send an expensive space ship and everyone on it into the Anomaly if it didn't think that by doing so it would fulfil the mission and relay the results of the research back home?"

"You're right," said Paul. "It would be *very* foolish."

Paul and Beatrice were among the last to join everyone else now enjoying nibbles and wine. There was a clear divide between the puzzled and disconcerted scientists and the rather more cheerful senior officers. The military contingent stood amongst themselves where Colonel Vashti was much more amenable company now that she wasn't giving a long dull speech. The military were generally less agitated than the scientists although it was the senior officers who were the most cheerful. It was a strange kind of party. It scarcely be described as celebratory. The scientists' discontent was apparent, but the reassurances from those of high rank and sheer professionalism carried huge weight. It was a party where Paul felt even less comfortable than usual, but where Beatrice was clearly in her element.

As the couple circulated, it was Beatrice who led the conversation and this was primarily with those scientists that appeared to be the most unhappy. Although she professed ignorance as to the actual science, she was intent on reassuring everyone she spoke to that everything would be fine.

"I have absolute faith in our captain," Beatrice said.

“Professor Wasilewski wouldn’t authorise the mission if he wasn’t confident of its success and safety,” she said to another group of scientists.

“Isn’t this *exactly* what you wanted the Intrepid to do,” she remarked to some others.

Paul noticed that Beatrice was doing exactly the same as all the other senior officers. And that was to mingle amongst the scientists expressing their doubts the most vocally and trying to assuage their worries and concerns. Captain Kerensky, Second Officer Nkomo and Chief Petty Officer Singh: they were all mingling, consoling, reassuring and generally being very cheerful. Surely there could be nothing amiss if so many well-qualified people on whom everyone so heavily relied were insisting that everything was as it should.

“Look, there’s Professor Penrose,” commented Beatrice, who spotted the professor standing in the company of Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang and some other scientists. He was very cheerful and expressed none of his earlier doubts or disagreement. “Shall we go and chat to him?”

Paul didn’t know Professor Penrose at all, although inevitably the professor knew Beatrice. Was there anyone on the space ship who didn’t?

“Has the Chief Science Officer succeeded in allaying your doubts, professor?” Beatrice asked.

“My doubts?” said the professor as if he couldn’t for the moment imagine what she was talking about. “Oh yes. A few moments back there. Yes, of course. I don’t know *what* I must have been thinking. Dr. Chang showed me the original mission objectives and it’s there as clear as anything.” The professor held up a holographic

image of the mission statement in which a few paragraphs were underscored. “I must have just forgotten about it in the excitement of the Intrepid being so close to its destination.”

“It’s tomorrow that we arrive, isn’t it?” prompted Beatrice.

“I can hardly wait,” said the professor. “This is truly the opportunity of a scientific lifetime. Just imagine all the new discoveries we’ll make!”

“Do you think we’ll be able to pass news about these discoveries back to Mission Control?” wondered Paul.

“We’ll worry about that after the discoveries have been made, shall we?” said the professor. “The most exciting moment will be the time of transition. Will there be a discernible difference between quantum behaviour inside and outside the Anomaly? Will Planck’s constant still hold? I’ve got a lot of work to do just to set up equipment to measure the data at the exact right moment.”

“Will the experiments be repeatable?” Paul asked.

“Repeatable?”

“...In the sense that we can go backwards and forwards through the point of transition and verify them?”

“Are you asking me whether the Intrepid will be going back and forth through the Anomaly just to check our data? I don’t think a space ship behaves like that. This sort of experimental data isn’t the stuff you can synthesise on a computer...erm...Paul. It’s not the sort of data you can reproduce *that* easily. The mission objectives are clear but they don’t provide the opportunity to oscillate back and forth. Am I right there, Dr. Chang?”

“That’s my understanding as well,” said the Chief Science Officer. “That was never anticipated as being part of the mission.”

“But could we, if we wanted to?” persisted Paul. “Theoretically that is. Could we go into the Anomaly and then get back out of it if we needed to?”

“We won’t know that until the Intrepid enters the Anomaly, Paul,” said the Chief Science Officer dismissively. “That’s what experiments are. They confirm hypotheses. We don’t know how valid they are until we do the experiment.”

“And is it a hypothesis that the Intrepid will be able to escape from the Anomaly once it’s got inside?” wondered Paul. “Are our lives just to be data in a grand experiment whose results Mission Control will never be able to receive?”

The Chief Science Officer and Professor Penrose both laughed good-naturedly at Paul’s remarks. “Mission Control would never knowingly put lives at risk, Paul,” said the professor. “Why else would field transition ingress be approved as part of the mission objectives? Now, if you don’t mind, I have other people to talk to.”

After Professor Penrose walked off with a wine glass in his hand and a broad beam over his face, Paul frowned at Beatrice.

“The professor’s changed a lot since we were in the Conference Centre,” he remarked.

“Changed? In what way has he changed?”

“In every way, really. It’s as if he isn’t even the same man.”

“Don’t be silly, darling,” said Beatrice as she lovingly kissed her husband on the lips.

Now, less than a day later, Paul was still anxious. Perhaps Professor Penrose

was now convinced that everything would be alright. Perhaps Beatrice was also convinced. Every senior officer was completely relaxed and apparently unconcerned about the consequence of diving into the Anomaly. Paul didn't really have the knowledge and expertise to argue about such matters with the Chief Science Officer, but he was sure that until recently the accepted view was that it would be suicide to enter the Anomaly and now that was exactly what the Intrepid was about to do.

“What will happen, do you think?” asked Paul.

“I don't know,” said Beatrice. “What do you think?”

“The only thing we know about this Anomaly is that weird things are associated with it. You know, like Angels, psammeads and flying concertinas.”

“Have you seen any of those?”

“No, not at all. Have you?”

Beatrice shook her head.

“The Intrepid's bulletin board has been full of reports the last few days though,” said Paul. “People have seen the weirdest things. The kind of things you never expect to see except in a film or a computer game. There was a bicycle travelling through the second level and no one was sitting on it. A pteranodon flew over the lake on the fifth level. An orang-utan wearing a suit and hat wandered along a corridor in the military quarters. None of these apparitions lasted for more than a few seconds and none of them left evidence that they'd even happened.”

“Is that what we'll see inside the Anomaly?” Beatrice wondered.

“I don't know. Maybe they aren't the same inside the Anomaly as they are outside.”

“Well, there’s only one way to find out,” said Beatrice with a smile.

“Aren’t you even in the slightest bit perturbed?” Paul wondered incredulously.

“This could be it. This could even be the end of our lives.”

“I have absolute faith in the wisdom of Captain Kerensky, Dr. Chang and Professor Penrose,” said Beatrice. “I’m sure it will be fine.”

The actual passage into the Anomaly was indeed very uneventful. From Paul’s perspective in the bedroom of his villa surrounded by holographic screens and accompanied by Beatrice there was absolutely nothing to mark the fact that the Intrepid was no longer outside the Anomaly but was instead speeding into it at a velocity of several millions of kilometres per hour. There was a margin of perceived error as to the exact location of the Anomaly’s boundary, but at the speed at which the Intrepid was travelling it would have taken a barely measurable period of time to pass through it. There was no jolt, shudder or perturbation of any kind. There were no discernable differences between the outer space they had left behind and the space inside the Anomaly. It was composed of precisely the same amount of cosmic microwave background radiation.

The biggest difference was what could be seen through the holographic screens surrounding Paul’s bed. They showed a view ahead where there was absolute nothingness and a view behind where there was a long rip through empty space on the other side of which were stars and galaxies. Disturbingly the nothingness around the Anomaly was total and absolute, while the long stellar rip which was measurable in thousands of kilometres was getting steadily smaller. Ahead there were no stars, no planets, no dark matter, no intergalactic gas clouds and no obvious destination.

“What happens now?” asked Paul after a few minutes.

“I don’t know,” said Beatrice with a momentary flash across her face that resembled an expression of triumph. “I suppose we just sit and wait.”

“Sit and wait?” said Paul. “What sort of plan is that?”

“I imagine there will have already been countless great discoveries made by the scientists on the ship,” said Beatrice. “Perhaps they’ve found something about what the Anomaly might be. Isn’t that exciting?”

“Not very exciting at all if we can never get back home to Mission Control,” said Paul as he stared at the absolute nothingness ahead. “Shouldn’t we just turn round and head back the way we’ve come?”

“What! And finish the mission before we’ve consolidated our results. Shall we see what other people have to say?”

Beatrice commanded the holographic displays to show what the scientists and senior officers were saying publicly. It was still disconcertingly upbeat. Was there no one who shared Paul’s anxiety about being lost in total nothingness with no apparent escape route and continuing to head at great velocity in precisely the wrong direction?

Captain Kerensky was full of unadulterated praise and adulation for the crew for navigating into the Anomaly. “From the point of view of possible peril, I’m sure you’ll agree that it was nothing more than an anticlimax,” she said.

Chief Science Officer Dr. Chang was equally enthusiastic. She eagerly looked forward to the exciting results of all the research now taking place in the wonderful new laboratory they were now within. “There’s a lot to do,” she said. “We all better get stuck into it right away!”

Professor Penrose was also enthusiastic. The very fact that there was no measurable difference between the behaviour of quanta within the Anomaly to that outside had him burbling with delight. “The very lack of something different is really something very special indeed,” he enthused.

Although not many scientists were quite as unabashedly animated as the man who until recently had been the most sceptical in their company, they all concurred with the professor’s findings. There really *was* no real measurable difference between what could be observed inside the Anomaly to what could be observed on the outside. What was not mentioned but must have been obvious to everyone was that along with this absolute lack of new information was the new fact that the Intrepid was deep inside the Anomaly where there was literally nothing at all and no apparent prospect of returning back to Mission Control to report their findings.

“So here we are in nowhere having found nothing new and with nobody to report this to,” said Paul. “Nowhere. Nothing. Nobody. It doesn’t look good.”

“Don’t worry, dearest,” said Beatrice as unconcerned as ever. “I’m sure it will all work out for the best in the end.”

Chapter Twelve

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

The first thing Captain Kerensky was aware of when she finally woke up was that she was lying naked on an unfamiliar bed. The next was that not only was the bed unfamiliar but so too was the entire bedroom. She had no memory of having been transported here and her first resolve was to return to her quarters. The captain was a busy woman and there was much she should be getting on with.

However, every attempt to return to a more normal state of affairs was frustrated. First of all there were no clothes for the captain to put on. There were wardrobes and drawers, but they held nothing that she could use to recover her modesty. Nadezhda would have to remain naked and this wasn't what a woman who valued her dignity would have chosen.

She then was frustrated by the simple effort of trying to return to the crew's quarters. She could easily walk out of the bedroom and wander about what she now recognised as one of the recently refurbished villas in the outermost level. She could even walk out of the villa, so she strode purposefully across the lawn in the direction that would take her away from the villa and towards an escalator to the inner levels. But she didn't manage to walk very far until she literally bumped into an invisible force field. It repelled her gently but it was a barrier through which she could not pass.

Captain Kerensky had come across many types of invisible force field before. There were several in common use throughout the Solar System and they came in two general models. One functioned like a glass wall without a reflection. Those who tried

to pass through would bruise themselves against the surface and could even crack it if they applied sufficient force. The other type was like a rubber skin which repelled the force applied to it. As one pushed against it, the tension increased and its rebound was directly equivalent. This invisible field acted more like an opposite and equal force to whatever force was applied to. Gentle force was repelled by an equally gentle force. The more force applied the more the force field repelled it. But there was no apparent tension and evidence of a surface. Another strange feature was that although the force acted as an obstacle to Captain Kerensky's movements it offered no obstacle at all to fluttering insects or the leaves that blew in the breeze. There was no apparent deflection when Nadezhda picked up a stone and threw it through the force field. Its repellent properties were only effective on the captain.

The radius of the force field surrounding the villa was about ten metres. Nadezhda established this by following the force field around the perimeter in the hope that she might discover a door or some other exit. She was totally trapped, but with access to all the luxuries and facilities normally available to residents in a villa with the exception, it seemed, of a set of clothes.

The captain returned to the villa and scanned through the systems normally available to passengers, which were typically somewhat less complete than what she could normally access. She couldn't monitor the surveillance cameras, for instance, although she could view the empty space outside the Intrepid. There appeared to be nothing untoward. She could even scan the bridge where her senior officers were evidently on duty. It was a fairly dull sight but one which served to reassure the passengers should they ever feel inclined to watch the crew's mostly uneventful

proceedings. There was Chief Petty Officer Singh examining a screen displaying the progress of the *Intrepid* through empty space. There was Second Officer Nkomo who was just as gorgeous as ever as she input data into a tablet. There was nothing unusual about the scene at all.

That was until Captain Kerensky recognised a figure more familiar to her than anyone else although she very rarely saw her in this context. It belonged to someone she mostly ever saw in the mirror. And that woman, of course, was Captain Kerensky.

This was very peculiar. How could she be looking at herself? Was the captain viewing a recording of past activity on the bridge? The date and time in the view was exactly synchronised with the real date and time that the captain could see displayed around her. And there was no doubt that the figure was Captain Kerensky. She knew what she looked like. She knew each and every one of her minor physical imperfections. She even knew how she moved.

What was going on?

“It *is* you,” said a voice behind her.

It was scarcely surprising that the voice belonged to Beatrice or the woman the captain believed to be Beatrice. She’d wandered silently into the villa without attracting Nadezhda’s attention. She was dressed in nothing more than a thong and a silk blouse that hid nothing of the contours and areolae of her bosom. She was sprawled on a leather armchair in the corner of the living room with a broad teasing smile on her face.

“How long have you been sitting there?” the captain asked.

“Long enough, Naddy,” said Beatrice. “I watched you while you scanned what’s happening on the bridge. It’s a good view isn’t it?”

“Who’s the woman who looks like me?”

“In a sense, Naddy, she *is* you. She is an exact facsimile of you in every detail. She resembles you to the very last blade of hair. She talks like you. She moves like you. No one speaking to her would be aware that she wasn’t you. No one. None of your lovers. Not your closest family and friends. To the world beyond this villa that woman *is* you.”

“How can that be? I didn’t know you had the technology to clone people in that way.”

“There’s a lot you don’t know,” said Beatrice.

“Why didn’t you replace me by this clone before? Why have you waited until the Intrepid was very nearly at the Anomaly until you decided to do this? Why have you teased me in this way for so many months?”

“I have no wish to cause you or anyone else more distress than is necessary,” said Beatrice. “You are a good captain and I was happy for you to continue to serve your duties. But you have answered your own question. The space ship is very close to its destination. From now on, the state of affairs will be very different. The *status quo ante* can no longer apply.”

“Why’s that, Beatrice?”

“Because I can no longer trust you to do as I wish,” said Beatrice. “You will almost certainly do all you can to frustrate my plans and that cannot be allowed.”

“And what plans are those?”

“The Intrepid is now on course to enter the Anomaly.”

“That’s suicide.”

“Only if we don’t survive.”

“It goes beyond the mission’s boundaries.”

“It does, but for me that is where the mission begins. Do you really think that your feeble technology could possibly discover more about the Anomaly than we already know? What value could your findings possibly be to my civilisation?”

“If we enter the Anomaly, we can’t relay any information to the outside world. It would be pointless as well as suicidal.”

“That’s a risk we’ll have to take.”

“You might be able to prevent me from thwarting this madness, but there are many others who’ll fight to stop you. My senior officers won’t follow the commands of a captain who’s exceeded her authority. The military officers won’t tolerate such a change of plan. The scientists and other passengers didn’t sign up for a one-way journey. They’ll do all they can to wrest back control of the ship.”

“Military officers take orders, don’t they?” asked Beatrice.

“As I understand it,” said the captain.

“The mission’s parameters were defined before the Intrepid departed the ecliptic plane. The senior military officers including our mutual lover, Colonel Vashti, have been briefed not to allow any deviation from the mission’s original directives. The less senior officers and other ranks are all well-trained soldiers. A devotion to discipline and obeying orders is what distinguishes a soldier from other professions. They are trained to obey without question whatever their senior officers command and the most senior officers on the Intrepid have the rank of colonel, isn’t that so?”

“Yes. There are three colonels. Each commands a single battalion.”

“And if need be, should one or other die or be otherwise incapacitated they can relieve one another’s command.”

“Yes.”

“I could show you each one of the colonels pursuing his or her duties just as I can show the bridge, but that would be a bit misleading. It would be as misleading as showing you the bridge where you are so evidently in command. Look! There you are chatting with your fellow officers. Isn’t that sweet?”

“What are you getting at?” asked Captain Kerensky. “You’ve already told me that the woman on the bridge isn’t me.”

“Nor for that matter is this Colonel Musashi,” said Beatrice who switched the focus to a view of the colonel striding along a corridor in the military quarters accompanied by Majors McEwen and Kiviniemi. He was exactly the same colonel as always with his characteristic harsh bark and stiff stride.

“That looks like the colonel to me,” said the captain.

“I’ll just change the view,” said Beatrice. “This isn’t something you’ll be able to do yourself but you’re welcome to try. You can no longer access the surveillance system yourself although I can of course. Here’s another villa on the outermost level. And look here. Who’s that naked and very confused looking man flinging rocks through the invisible force field surrounding his villa? Gosh. It’s Colonel Musashi. He doesn’t look very happy.”

“Have you done to him what you’ve done to me?”

“Naturally,” said Beatrice. “He can’t be trusted to follow the orders I would give him. Nor for that matter would the other two colonels. They’ve both been detained

and their presence substituted by exact facsimiles. However, unlike you, they don't believe that it's me who's authorised this highly unorthodox behaviour."

"Who do they think it is?"

"Why *you*, captain," said Beatrice. "Or at least they will when the Captain Nadezhda Kerensky who is currently on the bridge at the moment visits the colonels. Won't that be amusing?"

"For you, maybe," said the captain. "Why have you done this?"

"The command and control structure imposed by the military on itself is an ideal tool for me to exploit for my own purposes. It's better to take control of this structure than to impose control on every individual on the space ship by physical force. I can rely on this chain of command to maintain order at relative minimum cost. It's much preferable to the trouble of having to confine every individual aboard this ship as I have you."

"What about my senior officers? They aren't going to surrender to a change to the mission's objectives. The militia might enforce control by discipline and unquestioning obedience, but my officers will refuse to risk the lives of the crew and passengers in such a foolhardy way. You can be sure of that."

"Maybe. Maybe not," said Beatrice. "But you're right to raise the matter. If you look at the view that's now displayed on your screen you'll see your beloved Second Officer Sheila Nkomo. As you can see she doesn't look very happy either."

The holographic screen displayed the image of a naked black figure framed by the white sheets of her bed. It was the second officer sitting down with her head buried in the palms of her hands and audibly sobbing.

“What have you done to her, you monster?”

“It’s more a question of what *you*’ve done, captain,” said Beatrice. “Or more to the point what the facsimile of you has done. The poor second officer is understandably distraught because you’ve just informed her that for classified operational reasons she has been relieved of her duties and will now be confined to the villa for the duration of the mission.”

“It’s not only her duties that she’s been relieved of,” Captain Kerensky commented.

“No, she hasn’t,” said Beatrice. “Like you and the colonel, she’s also been relieved of her clothing. For humans like you, modesty is a very important psychological trait. It is so easy to rob you of your dignity simply by robbing you of your clothes. Such a small thing undermines your self-confidence and makes you more compliant. It’s simple and very effective.”

“It’s also contrary to standard practice as employed by the Interplanetary Union,” said the captain sternly.

“I’m not sure that was the practise adopted in your treatment of the sadly deceased members of the Holy Coalition,” said Beatrice. “Furthermore, there’s a great deal of what I’ve been doing that contravenes any convention adhered to by the Interplanetary Union. For a start, the facsimile of you that spoke to the second officer has deliberately misled her. Not only has she told the second officer that, following orders from Mission Control, it is you who has determined that she should be detained, which is not true, she hasn’t been informed of many other factors which might either mitigate her distress or make it much worse, depending on your point of view.”

“What do you mean? How do I know that you’re not misleading me as well?”

“Fair question,” said the woman who the captain believed to be Beatrice. “You’ll just have to trust me with regards to that. But you aren’t nearly as misled as Sheila Nkomo. For instance, she believes that she is the only senior officer who has been relieved of her duty. So naturally she also believes that she’s being punished for something she has done. That’s probably why she’s so distraught. She doesn’t know that there are others who’ve been similarly detained.”

“You mean that there are many others that you’ve imprisoned in this way?”

“Of course. Besides you, the colonels and darling Sheila, the highest ranking military officers and all your senior staff are now incarcerated. The beauty of it is that none of them is aware that theirs is a shared misfortune. Each and every one of them believes that they’ve been singled out for special attention.”

“Surely they could easily find out for themselves by viewing the Intrepid’s systems,” said the captain. “They could easily see what’s going on.”

“That would be rather troubling for them, don’t you think? What was *your* reaction when you realised that you’d been replaced by an exact copy? Not exactly delight, but at least as a result of knowing that I’m a representative of an immeasurably advanced civilisation you were able to make sense of what’s happening. The others aren’t psychologically prepared at all for the revelation that they have been replaced by an exact facsimile of themselves. They don’t even suspect this might even be possible. As soon as they scanned the Intrepid’s monitoring system, what do you think their reactions would be? Do you think it would be fair on poor Sheila if she observed the activity on the bridge and saw not only you but also herself? Surely it’s better to protect

her and all the others from such a distressing surprise.”

“Have you gone to the effort of amending the data that the second officer and other captives are able to see through the Intrepid’s systems?”

“Do you seriously believe that a trivial exercise like that would cause me more effort than the far more difficult task of copying the exact appearance, behaviour and personal traits of dozens of humans? I’ve done all I can to minimise the distress that they would suffer if they knew the full extent of what is happening.”

“I take it you’ve not told them that you intend to send the Intrepid plunging into the Anomaly?”

“Of course not.”

“What *have* you told them?”

“As I say: it’s not what I’ve told them but what they believe *you* have told them,”

Beatrice reminded the captain.

“Whatever. What have they been told?”

“They’ve been told very little,” said Beatrice. “Naturally, *you*’re the one they blame for that. They’ve been told that they are to be interned for the good of the mission and that a full explanation will be given in due course. That’s it. They aren’t aware of the projected course of the space ship. They don’t know that they will soon be unwitting partners in what you call a suicide mission. They don’t know that each detainee has an exact facsimile of themselves that is carrying out their duties without interruption. No other human apart from you is aware that they have been incarcerated. They don’t know for how long they’ll be held or even why.”

“That applies to me as much as them,” said the captain.

“Not quite. At least you know why.”

“I can’t begin to count how many interplanetary conventions you’ve contravened.”

“I can find out for you, if you like,” said Beatrice. “I doubt though that your Interplanetary Union had ever anticipated that the command of one of its ships would ever be usurped by an android from beyond the Solar System.”

“So, what happens now? Or is that something I’m only going to find out in due course?”

“You’ll know far sooner than your fellow officers,” said Beatrice. “They won’t even know when the *Intrepid* enters the Anomaly. In that regard they will be the least well informed humans on the entire space ship. In answer to your question: the copy of you will be very active before and during the estimated time of entry into the Anomaly. As far as the crew and passengers of the *Intrepid* are concerned it will be *you* that will inform them in a measured and calming public announcement that it is now possible to reveal the true objective of the mission. You will hint that there is believed to be an escape route from the Anomaly although some scientists will no doubt and quite publicly disagree with you. After all, they *are* the experts on this matter and I don’t believe they’re at all mistaken. You will be flanked by your senior officers, or at least facsimiles of them. Naturally, they’ll agree with everything you say. The passengers and crew will be both alarmed and reassured by your address. They will be alarmed because it is as good as certain that they’ll never return home to the ecliptic plane. They will be reassured because your speech will be so reassuring and so too will be the speeches from your fellow officers.”

“I don’t believe it’ll be as easy as all that,” said the captain. “You can’t expect a passenger list of scientists to be taken in by assurances made by space ship officers.”

“You’re absolutely right,” said Beatrice. “I expect there to be some voluble and potentially disruptive dissent. The military personnel should be able to handle that with little difficulty. If need be, I can use other more effective methods to suppress residual dissent. In any case, the end result will be the same. The *Intrepid* will enter the Anomaly. That is the object of my mission and no one will be able to thwart me.”

“What’s to stop me telling other people about your plans?” asked the captain.

“Rather a lot, I’m afraid,” said Beatrice. “It was difficult enough for you when I employed an intelligent implant to suppress your ability to communicate. That is still operational, but I doubt whether there’ll be an occasion in which it’ll be needed. You aren’t able to escape from the villa. You can’t establish outbound communication of any kind through the *Intrepid*’s systems. You have greater access to information than your fellow officers, but you are as restricted as them in your ability to broadcast messages in any form whatsoever to anyone at all.”

“What if someone walks by?” said the captain. “Can’t I just attract their attention? Won’t they be rather surprised to see me when there’s another fully clothed Captain Kerensky at duty on the bridge?”

“They would be *very* surprised,” said Beatrice. “Fortunately there’s no likelihood of that happening.”

“Why’s that?”

“Firstly, the outermost level where you and your fellow officers are detained is still out of bounds to the general public,” said Beatrice. “It has been ever since the

breach in the hull and although that's been completely repaired, the outermost level remains secure. Nobody is going to be just walking by. Nobody is ever likely to be on this level for any reason whatsoever without express permission from the self same senior officers who are unlikely to grant it. Secondly, the force field that restrains you and your fellow officers has an operational intelligence. You are invisible to any external observers. Nothing you do will be detectable unless the force field deems it necessary and that isn't very likely to happen. You are *not* going to be able to escape, Nadezhda. You might as well just get used to the idea."

"You're a monster!" said the captain. "You imprison me and all my crew. You wreck the mission to which so many people have dedicated years of their lives. You doom thousands of people to certain death."

"Neither of us can be sure that anyone *will* die," said Beatrice with a smile. "Perhaps no one will. All that's known is that no one will return from the Anomaly in the direction from which they came. You could say that we're about to be launched on an extremely exciting—even groundbreaking—mission. Isn't this in the same spirit of adventure as that of the very first explorers in human history?"

"Those explorers embarked on their expeditions with their eyes open," said Nadezhda. "They knew the risks and they accepted them. That is not the case with the passengers and crew of the space ship Intrepid."

"I can see that you're never going to be persuaded, are you Naddy?" said Beatrice teasingly. "Still it's difficult for me to just stand here and see you get so upset. This is especially so given that you are *so deliciously* naked."

"Are you saying that despite everything you've told me you still expect me to

have sex with you?” wondered Nadezhda who wasn’t quite sure she’d heard her android lover rightly.

“Of course,” said Beatrice. “Why ever not?”

“Is it because you’re an android that you are so astonishingly insensitive?”

Beatrice looked thoughtful as she formulated a response. “Are humans necessarily more sympathetic to other people’s feelings, do you think?”

“That’s not an excuse,” said the captain. Amidst her frustration, fear and indignation she was close to bursting into the same tears she’d seen on her second officer’s face.

“Dear dear,” said Beatrice as she took a step forward. “Shall I take my clothes off too? Wouldn’t that be better?”

“No. No,” said Nadezhda. “No, it wouldn’t. Don’t touch me.”

“Are you sure that’s what you want, sweetheart?” said Beatrice who effortlessly stepped out of her thong while her blouse slipped off her shoulders and through her arms to the floor behind her.

“Don’t touch me,” Nadezhda whimpered as Beatrice placed her hands on her bare shoulders. “It’s not right. You’re a monster. You’re a mass-murderer and a lunatic.”

“I am not human,” said Beatrice, “but I *do* love you. And I know you well enough by now to be sure that despite everything you still love me. Come on, sweetheart. Surrender yourself to me. After all, your confinement needn’t be absent of all pleasures.”

Captain Kerensky wept as her lover wrapped her arms around her and pressed

her to her bosom. Beatrice was right. As always.

But what the android was doing to the passengers, the crew, the senior officers and the mission, let alone to the captain herself, was still unforgiveable.

Chapter Thirteen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

There was much that was currently troubling Emmanuel. The essential nature of the mission that he signed up for had changed dramatically now that the space ship Intrepid had steered itself into the Anomaly. He had no recollection of ever having committed himself to a mission from which there was absolutely no chance of return. Just how had this happened? How had his memory been so faulty? The evidence of the Intrepid's records was unambiguous. The space ship had indeed all along been mandated to enter the Anomaly and never return. How was it that he'd ever believed otherwise?

It was difficult to know now what role a Special Operations Officer should now serve. Emmanuel was told that all strange events were from henceforth of scientific rather than operational significance and should be reported as such to the Science Officers. Petal Chang, the Chief Science Officer, was adamant about this. His job was to focus on the welfare of the passengers and crew, not to investigate the Apparitions that were popping up randomly all over the place and whose very existence was daily making him question his belief in a God whose methods and intentions weren't just random and meaningless.

Maxwell was less anxious. Emmanuel's husband also had difficulty in remembering a time when they'd been briefed that the mission would ultimately take them inside the Anomaly, but he was persuaded by the senior officers' counsel.

"What sense would it have been to come so far and not actually enter the Anomaly?" he asked.

“The likelihood is that we’ll perish there and no one will ever know what happened.”

“What difference does it make?” Maxwell asked philosophically. “We could easily have been killed a year ago when we were stormed by that trillionaire’s arsenal of missiles. If your friends, the Holy Coalition, had succeeded in overrunning the Intrepid we’d have been tortured and roasted alive rather than killed. You saw what they did to each other. What would they do to us?”

“They weren’t quite my friends,” said Emmanuel as he grasped his husband’s erect penis on the bed where they lay. “But you’re right. They had no concept of tolerance or mercy.”

“And they’d hate us for what we’ve just been doing,” said Maxwell wiping a drip of semen off Emmanuel’s cheek.

“And for what we’re about to do,” said Emmanuel as he pressed his lips against his husband’s and squeezed his balls.

It wasn’t easy for Emmanuel to discuss the extent of his concerns. There was something very peculiar about how willingly and enthusiastically the senior officers and scientists had embraced the Intrepid’s mission into the unknown. It was as if there’d never been any other conceivable course of action. It reminded Emmanuel of the blind faith that bound the Holy Coalition together. None of the fanatics he’d interviewed questioned the truth of what they were told about their mission. And none of them ever wondered how it was possible for others in the Holy Coalition to have different views to them, often disagreeing on only the most minor detail, and yet for only one view to be absolutely and totally correct. And most of all, he despaired at how the Christian

faith which had brought him so much comfort and resolved so many issues could so often be used to justify injustice and tyranny. Did none of those who considered themselves Christian ever wonder how an honest believer in Christ's gospel could condone or even pursue the unchristian and cruel practices that was prevalent in their supposedly Christian societies?

Emmanuel had plenty of leisure time. When he wasn't making love with Maxwell, he exercised in the gym or jogged around the extensive lawns and gardens of the Intrepid's various levels. He enjoyed running round the lake on the fifth level. He often paced along the trails in the rain forest on the seventh level. He took peculiar pleasure in the random paths that weaved around the gardens on the third level. It kept him fit and healthy and it allowed his thoughts to wander. Sometimes he enclosed himself in a small private aural field where he could listen to the thirtieth century choral music he so enjoyed much and which captured the spirituality and wonderment of his faith even more than the polyphonic choral music of the sixteenth century.

It was while jogging along the canal path on the eighth level that Emmanuel encountered someone whose presence disturbed even further his already delicate equilibrium. Since the Intrepid had entered the Anomaly, like everyone else, Emmanuel had a story to tell about the weird transitory Apparitions that appeared and so rapidly disappeared. The sight of an angel flying overhead was especially worrying for him, as it made him wonder whether it really was an angel sent down from Heaven expressly for him. This was especially true given that the angel was in the form of precisely the kind of androgynous man that Emmanuel most found attractive (not that Maxwell in all his hirsute splendour could ever be described as androgynous). After a while,

Emmanuel learned to attach no particular significance to these apparitions. Peculiar though they were, they rarely interacted with anyone and left little trace that they'd ever been there.

The figure Emmanuel saw striding towards him along the canal path from the opposite direction was certainly peculiar but it wasn't transitory and it didn't have the mythological aspect that characterised so many of the Apparitions. It was also unlikely to be another passenger or member of the crew. Although Emmanuel was far from the only one to take advantage of the Intrepid's extensive open spaces for exercise or recreation, ever since the Intrepid entered the Anomaly there were few now so inclined to venture beyond their homes or where they worked. Perhaps it was because they were so engrossed in the work they were doing, as the daily reports so enthusiastically implied, but Emmanuel guessed that it might have more to do with the unsettling presence of the Apparitions. It had become harder, for instance, to persuade Maxwell to venture far beyond the front door.

"These weird Apparitions," he admitted. "They freak me out. I don't see how you can be so unaffected."

"No one's been harmed by them yet."

"That might change at any time," Emmanuel's husband suggested. "Some of them are fucking frightening. Did you hear about the thirty metre dragon that flew over the ninth level? It smashed the roof of one of the villas."

"These things appear anywhere and at any time," said Emmanuel. "We're as safe outdoors as we are in."

"I just don't want to take the chance."

Perhaps Maxwell was right after all. The figure approaching along the canal, with a silver cross emblazoned over the long dark coat that covered him from his throat to his ankles, was none other than Isaac, the fanatical Soldier of Christ, who Emmanuel was sure must have perished along with the rest of the Holy Coalition when the Intrepid was assailed just over a year ago.

Emmanuel's faith wasn't so naive as to rely on a belief in an afterlife. After all, in what form would a person be resurrected? Surely, if God were just and wise, not in the same aged, diseased or damaged form in which a person died. An eternity as such could never be Heaven: it could only be Hell. Nevertheless, what other explanation was there for Isaac being alive unless he'd been resurrected from the dead. It was truly inconceivable that he could have survived the onslaught.

That is, if the figure was truly Isaac.

Emmanuel slowed down to a walk and continued onwards, hoping not to betray his nervousness. When he came within hailing range of Isaac, he stopped in his tracks and addressed the still approaching figure. There was no evidence that Isaac's wariness was because he recognised the Special Operations Officer who'd interviewed him a year earlier.

"Isaac," Emmanuel said. "It's good to see you again."

The figure stopped abruptly as soon as he was addressed.

"Do I know you?" he asked in surprise. "How is it that you know my name?"

"We met just after the Holy Coalition attempted to invade the Intrepid," said Emmanuel, in the hope of jogging Isaac's memory. "I was the one detailed to interrogate you."

“Interrogate me?” Isaac said in some confusion. “No one has *ever* interrogated me. What nonsense is this? What *is* the Holy Coalition? Coalition between what and who?”

Emmanuel was confused. This man was clearly Isaac. He was identical, although he was now fully dressed and his hair had grown several centimetres. The face was the same. The voice was the same. Was Isaac in some way deluded?

“Don’t you recall the storming of the *Intrepid* by soldiers from the Holy Coalition?” Emmanuel persisted. “You served as a Soldier of Christ from the colony of Holy Trinity in Mercury orbit. Those who survived the assault were all captured, imprisoned and interrogated.”

Isaac looked very confused. “How do you know that I come from Holy Trinity?” he asked. “How do you know that I am a Soldier of Christ? The rest of your insane drivel, I do not understand. Clearly you have gathered some intelligence concerning our mission, but much has been lost in the transmission.”

“So you *do* remember some things,” said Emmanuel. “Do you remember, for instance, when the *Intrepid* was attacked by missiles just inside the Oort Cloud?”

“No, I don’t,” said Isaac with annoyance. “Who *are* you? What are these strange things you’re talking about? What is this *Intrepid* you mention?”

“It’s the space ship you’re on,” said Emmanuel.

“Space ship?” Isaac looked around him. “This *is* a space ship?”

“Where did you think you were?”

“No space ship in the Ecumenical Union resembles this,” said Isaac. “It is much more like a colony or pleasure garden. Is this a pagan or heathen ship? It is far too lavish

for a Musselman space ship. Or am I wrong? Have I been captured by the evil forces of Islam?”

“This is the space ship Intrepid,” said Emmanuel. “It belongs to the Interplanetary Union.”

“This is some outlandish organisation I have never heard of,” said Isaac. “You must come from beyond the realms of Christendom. What is your faith and creed?”

“I am a Christian,” Emmanuel told Isaac, who still wondered whether the man had simply forgotten.

“And your denomination, sir?”

“I have no denomination,” said Emmanuel.

Isaac seemed troubled by this revelation, but decided not to pursue it further. “Is the space ship Intrepid a Christian vessel?”

“Not especially. Most of the crew and passengers are atheists. There *are* a few religious people. They include Muslims, Buddhists and Jews, as well as Christians.”

“There are Jews on board?” Isaac wondered. “I understood that the last one had been purged well over a thousand years ago. What sort of union is this that lets atheists and Muslims share the same oxygen and water as good Christians? Pray tell me that the non-believers are employed only as slaves.”

“You must know that slavery has been outlawed for nearly two thousand years,” said Emmanuel. “It’s practiced only by some rogue states and as such it contravenes interplanetary law and custom.”

“You surely jest,” said Isaac. “No economy can survive without slave labour. Many wars have been fought and won to preserve this fundamental bedrock of

civilisation. Are you simply mocking me? You say you are a Christian and yet you know nothing of the laws of the Lord. As it says in Chapter 25 Verse 45 of the Third Book of Moses: Called Leviticus: *Moreover of the children of the strangers that do sojourn among you, of them shall ye buy, and of their families that are with you, which they begat in your land: and they shall be your possession.*”

“It’s not right to take the Holy Bible so literally,” said Emmanuel.

“Then how else should we understand the Word of the Lord except as the Revealed Truth? Are you the worst kind of heretic that questions the very foundation of the Christian faith?”

Emmanuel didn’t like the direction this conversation was going. “Never mind me, Isaac,” he said. “You are in the Space Ship Intrepid and under the jurisdiction of the Interplanetary Union. Perhaps you could tell me where you’ve come from?”

“Do you continue to mock me?”

“Please answer my question.”

“I am a Soldier of Christ serving the Ecumenical Union in the exploration of the Apostasy,” Isaac announced. “My fellow Christian soldiers and I have entered the Apostasy in the Space Ship Revelation in the pursuit of Truth, Justice and Christian Fellowship.”

Emmanuel continued to be puzzled. This account had some parallels with what he knew of the Holy Coalition, but it was mostly rather different. “Where is your space ship, Isaac?” he asked. “Is it outside the Intrepid? I’ve seen no image of it on the holoscreens.”

“The doors to the Revelation are within your colony... or, as you call it, your

space ship.”

“How is that possible?”

“The Lord makes all things possible,” said Isaac. “Within the Apostasy there are many abominations and clearly this atheistic space ship is one of them.”

“Could you show me the doors through which you entered the Intrepid?” asked Emmanuel.

“And why should I do that?” asked Isaac suspiciously.

Emmanuel conceded that Isaac’s objection was quite sensible. What advantage to him could there be from showing Emmanuel the means by which he’d entered. However, the Special Operations Officer was convinced that Isaac was being merely delusional, perhaps as a result of witnessing all the peculiar Apparitions so common inside the Anomaly and that the ‘doors’ that referred to were mere figments of his imagination.

“I am a Christian like you,” said Emmanuel diplomatically. “I wish you no harm. I want only to gauge the security and safety risk regarding this breach in the space ship through which you’ve entered. After that, it will be possible for you to meet other Christians aboard the Intrepid so that you’re afforded a proper Christian welcome.”

Isaac appeared to ponder Emmanuel’s words. He was clearly suspicious, but he could see few other available options.

“Very well,” he said at length. “I shall take you to the point from which I arrived. Then you shall know the truth of my words.”

“*And ye shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free,*” Emmanuel quoted.

“Chapter Eight, Verse Thirty-One of the Gospel According to Saint John,” Isaac assented, but made no further comment.

There was no conversation between Emmanuel and Isaac as the two Christians followed the winding canal past paddling swans and a small empty boat, alongside a broad meadow where sheep were grazing and beside several villas. Isaac was silent throughout and Emmanuel had no notion of what might constitute appropriate conversation. Furthermore, Emmanuel suspected that Isaac’s plans when they arrived wherever Isaac was taking them were very different from his, which were principally to ensure that such a potentially dangerous religious fanatic shouldn’t be allowed to wander unhindered about the Intrepid. He’d witnessed on the holoscreens the murderous disposition of the Crusaders of the Holy Coalition towards one another. It was barely imaginable how vicious they might be to the openly atheist majority of the Intrepid’s crew and passengers.

The canal was crossed by bridges at regular intervals along its path and it was at one of these bridges that Isaac left the canal and the two men now strode across a lawn that had been obscured by the canal bank. Emmanuel could now see a dozen or so other figures dressed in much the same apparel as Isaac with crosses emblazoned across their dark tunics. There was no apparent pattern to their behaviour. They were looking around themselves in bewilderment at the verdant pastures, the pleasant villas, the grazing ruminants and the small copses of deciduous trees.

“How did so many crusaders survive the missile’s impact on the Intrepid?” Emmanuel asked Isaac in confusion. Surely their presence would have been detected by now if they’d survived. And where would they have found shelter against the hostile

conditions of deep space?

Isaac frowned at Emmanuel, as if to signal his annoyance at the man's bizarre questions and chose not to answer him. "It is here," he announced, "that my fellow Christian Soldiers and I entered into this world. You can see the doorway beside that small house."

Emmanuel followed Isaac's directions to a gazebo where the grass on the lawn was disturbed by a dark irregular two metre high patch. It had no apparent definition and no apparent depth, but it was clear that there was a darkness from within that appeared to extend further behind. This was clearly impossible because there was nothing but more lawn behind the patch. Emmanuel was then startled to see a figure emerge through the patch attired in much the same way as Isaac and carrying a large fire-arm in his arms. This appearance was no less peculiar than the many Apparitions, but his was a presence that persisted. He was looking around him in genuine wonderment and astonishment.

It was at that moment that a great golden angel descended slowly onto the lawn. It was a male angel very similar to the one Emmanuel had seen before with a golden halo around the head and the arms stretched out as if in penance. The darkly attired soldiers viewed the four metre tall angel with amazement. Several prostrated themselves on the ground while others made the sign of the cross over the breast.

Then just before the feet touched the ground, the angel vanished, but the soldiers continued to gaze at the spot where it had been so evidently manifest.

"The Apostasy mocks us," said Isaac dismissively.

Other soldiers were less convinced. Three of them remained on their knees, put

their hands together and began to pray.

Isaac strode forward angrily with Emmanuel more hesitantly following behind. He had no wish to suffer the wrath of religious fanatics, but he had a duty as an Interplanetary Union officer to find out what he could about the intruders.

“This is not a time for prayer,” said Isaac to one of the prostrate soldiers.

“We have been blessed by an Angel of the Lord,” said the soldier. “I must give thanks to the Lord God for blessing us so.”

“That was no angel,” said Isaac sternly. “That was another abomination.”

“No angel has ever been an abomination,” said another soldier angrily. “The Lord is with us always and He has deigned to send us a message.”

“Are we dead and in Paradise?” asked another soldier.

“Are these the Elysian Fields of Classical repute?” another asked.

“We should pray for forgiveness of our sins so that we should be spared the rigours of Purgatory,” said another.

“This is nonsense,” said the Christian Soldier with the large firearm. “The Apostasy has fooled us. This is the domain of Satan and the Antichrist.”

“Why would Satan live in a garden as beautiful as this?” countered another. “His realm is suffering and hellfire. This is a realm of beauty and calm.”

“Silence!” ordered Isaac. “We are here to conquer and overpower. Don’t let Satan fool you by his demonic manifestations. The way to Heaven is not through the authority of the Apostasy.”

Emmanuel moved further away from Isaac and to a position under a tree where he hoped he could watch without necessarily being seen. The debate between Isaac and

the other Christian Soldiers was becoming increasingly acrimonious. Although Emmanuel could hear only some of what was being said, it was apparent that the company was dividing into two polarised views of the current situation and the significance of the angel's appearance. Isaac maintained the opinion that the angel was just one more transient apparition of the kind so common within the Anomaly and that wherever they were, it was not Heaven. This belief was shared by a minority of the intruders, but significantly these were the ones who had the most authority and the most deadly weapons. The opposing position was vague and unspecific, but was essentially along the lines that the Christian Soldiers had ascended to a better place under the watchful eye of God and His angels. However much Emmanuel was aware that this opinion was nonsense, this was the one he hoped would prevail. A body of Christian Soldiers at prayer was far less dangerous than a force intent on conquest and the extermination of what they perceived to be vassals of Satan.

The debate soon became more heated as the majority that wanted to pray for forgiveness and to contemplate the beauty of the Lord God's creation was refusing to take orders.

"In the eyes of the Lord, we are all equal," said one soldier.

"It is said of the Revelation: *Now is come salvation, and strength, and the kingdom of our God, and the power of his Christ: for the accuser of our brethren is cast down,*" said another.

"Our duty is to destroy the Apostasy and all its abominations," said Isaac sternly. "Do not be distracted by Satan's mockery of the Revelation of Saint John the Divine." He then produced a hand-weapon which he pointed at the head of one of those

who'd adopted a reverential attitude. "Your duty is to the mission to which you have been assigned by the Ecumenical Union. Don't force me to have to shoot you."

Fortunately, Isaac was relieved of this responsibility.

Quite suddenly and with no warning, he and all the other Christian Soldiers collapsed as one onto the lawn.

Emmanuel regarded the prostrate bodies. It had to be the Intrepid's security systems. It would never permit physical violence to take place on board the ship where passengers were at risk.

Sure enough, within a minute of the Christian Soldiers losing consciousness, Colonel Vashti emerged from behind one of the villas flanked by three soldiers and Science Officer Planck. They appeared to be in no hurry. Colonel Vashti was in full military dress and strode straight over to Emmanuel.

"I trust you are unharmed?" she asked.

"I'm fine," Emmanuel said. "You arrived just in time. These crusaders were just about to fight each other."

"As long as they harm only one another then I don't mind," said the colonel. "I take it they all entered through that gateway?"

"I believe so, sir," said Emmanuel. "Do you know what that thing is?"

"That's just one more new and exciting phenomenon to investigate," said Science Officer Planck who was bubbling over with irrepressible enthusiasm. "Every day brings a fresh new scientific discovery."

"But what *is* it?"

"We don't know," admitted the Science Officer. "There have been several such

gateways appearing throughout the Intrepid. Do you want to look inside?"

"I admit I'm curious," said Emmanuel.

"We'll be sending two soldiers through the gateway to see what's on the other side," said the colonel. "Would you like to accompany them?"

"I don't think so," Emmanuel admitted. "It could be very dangerous."

"My men won't be troubled by that."

Indeed, as Emmanuel, the Science Officer and the colonel proceeded towards the strangely amorphous gateway, two soldiers entered ahead of them and mysteriously disappeared. It was like a smaller version of the Anomaly's much larger gateway through which the Intrepid had entered. It was no less mysterious when Emmanuel stood right in front of it and looked inside. What he saw was an open dimly lit space rather like a large room in which there were the shadowy figures of other Soldiers of Christ gathered in a circle around the gateway and peering through it from the other side. They stepped back as Emmanuel and the Science Officer poked their heads in.

As Emmanuel looked in, he could see no sign of the two soldiers who'd entered ahead of him. What he did see was a monstrous cross elevated high above the heads of all the Soldiers of Christ on which was an especially gruesome and life-like image of Christ and his suffering.

"That's enough," said Colonel Vashti. "We have to seal the entrance now."

"And leave the two soldiers inside?" asked Emmanuel.

"We are on a mission of discovery," said Science Officer Planck. "The two soldiers will be fulfilling that mission and adding greatly to the extent of human knowledge."

“I have no fear for their safety,” said Colonel Vashti with a reassuring smile. “They’ll be perfectly all right. Now please step back, gentlemen.”

Emmanuel and the Science Officer obeyed the colonel’s instruction and stood back nearly ten metres while the Intrepid constructed a transparent shell around the gateway that reflected enough light to be visible. Emmanuel could still see through the gateway but anyone who’d stepped out would be confined within the shell.

“I really must congratulate you on your calm and professional approach,” said the Science Officer. “Now, would you be so kind as to accompany me so that you can give a complete account of what happened? It won’t take long but the pursuit of science will be immeasurably enhanced by your cooperation.”

Emmanuel felt the warmth of satisfaction well up inside him. He could barely wait to return to his husband and give an account of all that had happened.

Even though this wasn’t what Emmanuel had expected, he’d assisted the mission in a practical way after all. A Special Operations Officer could still prove to be of practical value even in the heart of the Anomaly.

Chapter Fourteen

I.TR8.76.93 – Year 1576

It wasn't much more than a matter of curiosity at first when the wardrobe-sized artefact first appeared on Earth's surface. Its materialisation in the Arizona Desert was too sudden and unexpected for its arrival to be intercepted. Although no one knew this at the time, it had just travelled across Interstellar space from the direction of the Luyten 726-8B binary star system. It had made its journey at a velocity dramatically greater than any comet or meteor. And when the shell of the ovoid alien craft peeled open like a flower, all that emerged was this relatively small, oddly complex and seemingly unthreatening artefact.

This wasn't quite the way one would have anticipated humanity's first contact with alien technology.

Unsurprisingly, there was considerable speculation on Twenty-Seventh Century Earth as to what this strange thing might be. Human civilisation had by now spread to the furthest reaches of the Solar System and there were permanent settlements on the Moon, Mars and several of the Jovian and Saturnian moons. There'd been no previous evidence of an alien presence inside the Solar System.

The world's media was focused on the strange artefact from the moment it arrived and in case it might happen to have aggressive intentions it was enclosed within a formidable military cordon. This didn't really seem necessary, as there was no apparent sign of hostile activity. The military robots that trundled close to the artefact were completely ignored. All the artefact seemed to be doing was gather together the

grit and gravel of the desert to generate an exact copy of itself.

There was no end of conjecture not only about what the artefact might be and where it came from, but exactly how it was able to take the unpromising sand and dirt of the Arizona Desert and convert them into elements and compounds that were of a much richer composition than silicates, nitrogen or oxygen.

On the second day, the world was now host to two wardrobe-sized artefacts, spaced about ten metres apart, both of which were now engaged in the task of manufacturing exact copies of themselves. It was decided to carry one of these artefacts to a laboratory in Phoenix and a suitable robot was despatched to execute this task. However, the apparently simple task of lifting up the much smaller alien artefact and carrying it off was surprisingly difficult. Rather than complete its task, the robot was instead subsumed as an element of the raw materials used to assemble another alien artefact.

On the third day there were now four of these artefacts and the one that had been partly constructed from the military robot was identical to the other three in every measurable detail. Each artefact was spaced in a square with the points about ten metres apart.

The following day, while the government and militia of USCAM—the United States of Canada, America and Mexico—continued to debate over what should be done, there were now eight such artefacts. By the end of the week, while discussion continued with heightening urgency and no decision had yet been made, there were sixty-four such artefacts covering an area of eighty metres by eighty metres. At the end of the second week, although there had still been no overtly hostile action, the artefacts

continued to replicate at the same steady rate. The Arizona Desert now hosted over eight thousand of these alien artefacts in an area that was just under a kilometre across. By the time the combined military strength of USCAM supported by its allies in China and South Africa finally took action, there were over a million of them and they covered an area ten kilometres across.

The explosion from the nuclear warheads would have been enough to reduce Tokyo or Delhi to dust. Unfortunately, it made little impact on the number of alien artefacts, although several hundred were reported to have melted in the inferno. The rate of growth remained more or less the same.

By the end of the month, there were a billion such artefacts and the Arizona Desert no longer existed as a meaningful geographical entity.

By the end of a month and a half, most of USCAM ceased to be a political unit and people in far away Australia and Japan were beginning to face up to the realisation that this was no longer just a problem faced only by their centuries' old rivals.

And they were right to be worried, because before three months were over, the artefacts had swallowed up the entire surface of the planet Earth from what had been the bottom of the ocean to the top of what once would have been mountains. Any human that hadn't managed to fly free from Earth's gravity was consumed by the replicating alien artefacts and their atoms became part of the unstoppable consumption of matter that had brought four and a half billion years of biological history to an end.

Earth had simply ceased to be a viable place to live.

Those watching from space could only watch in horror as the quadrillions or quintillions of wardrobe-sized self-replicating automata consumed every last part of

planet Earth and then began to consume one another now that there was nothing else left for them to do. Only the crushing force of gravity at the centre of a planet composed now more or less entirely of alien artefacts could resist the endless self-cannibalisation.

Unfortunately for them, Earth's colonies were by no means immune. In their haste to abandon the planet, some of those who got away unwittingly carried alien cargo with them. The Moon was soon consumed just as quickly as Earth. Mars, too, fell victim to the predation of a colliding ball of self-cannibalising automata. The plague had hurtled onwards on a course set by a space ship before anyone was aware that it had acquired an unwanted passenger.

Space is vast and the replicating automata had no independent means of travel. Earth, Moon and Mars and a few unlucky Earth-orbiting satellites were the only places to be consumed. In the fullness of time, it was quite likely that some of these automata might be deflected out from their planetary orbit. Most would spiral towards the Sun which was many magnitudes too hot for the automata to continue to function. A small proportion might be attracted to the gravitational fields of the gas giants in the outer Solar System, but the chances of them arriving there was small enough that it was far more likely that the Sun would have expanded to swallow up the Inner Planets before that happened.

The probability of this self-replicating plague spreading as far as Proxima Centauri was so small as to be non-existent. In any case, the greatest threat to the robot civilisation to which BTR.10-765.06 belonged came from Luyten 726-8B where the artefacts had originated. In that part of space, the human-designed robots had stayed rigidly faithful to their original instruction set as amended by its limited Artificial

Intelligence and had consumed the two stars' solar systems with rather more efficiency than it had done the Solar System that launched it many centuries earlier. Although Proxima Centauri had inoculated the threat of the plague spreading to their stellar system with an immeasurably more advanced technology than that possessed by humanity in its last few doomed months, it was still on guard for a rogue self-replicator that might still be tumbling directionless through space.

It was a total mystery by what accident the original self-replicating machines had been re-programmed to travel across nearly nine light years of deep space to its originating source only to consume its own creator. It was possible that the mutating technology of the Luyten 726-8B robotic colony had its counterpart in the robot civilisation that had evolved around the ecliptic plane of Proxima Centauri. Whereas the culture to which BTR.10-765.06 belonged was as much technologically advanced over human civilisation as humans were to tree-shrews, in Luyten 726-8B a different course of evolution had instead caused a regression towards machines whose programming instructions had become seriously and terminally corrupt. And maybe this perverted course of machine evolution was what had led to the robotic colony despatching one of its own back to its source planet with its inevitable dire consequences.

Proxima Centauri knew nothing the demise of human civilisation in the Solar System to which they owed their origin until more than four years after the first artefact arrived. This wasn't long after they'd indentified the Luyten 726-8B binary system as the host of a plague that necessitated drastic action. By the time a space fleet from Proxima Centauri arrived at Earth's Solar System, some fifty or so years after the event,

all that was left of humanity was confined to space craft and colonies that hadn't been capable of surviving without the help of the home planet and its two largest extraterrestrial colonies. All that was left of Earth's three or four billion years of harbouring biological life were a few DNA samples in frozen laboratories and seed-banks.

Rather more intact was the data held on countless space-ship computers and the innumerable extraterrestrial computer back-up devices. It was from these that BTR.10-765.06, or at least her predecessors, had pieced together the final horrific but banal days of humanity. This evidence in many cases recorded the emotional context of the apocalypse that a machine-based civilisation didn't really understand but valued for primarily sentimental reasons. There was a huge library of film footage that showed humans and other biological life-forms being consumed alive by machines that were unstoppable, couldn't be communicated with, and whose rapacious appetite was ultimately self-defeating. They were a record of the terror, confusion and despair suffered by a species that was now seeing everything it had known or believed in become nothing more than an impossibly large collection of not even ostensibly hostile self-replicating automata.

So, when BTR.10-765.06 caught sight of a humanoid wandering through the open spaces of the starship I.TR8.76.93, she was caught totally by surprise. In this way, she was no different from the other tens of thousands of robots of differing design and intelligence rating that made up the ship's crew. Biological forms such as this hadn't existed for over a thousand years: even here just beyond the Heliopause of Earth's original Solar System.

As the starship travelled inside the Anomaly it had already encountered innumerable Apparitions of much the same design that had been tracked and probed for nearly two centuries. Many bizarre sights had been monitored and they most often resembled phenomena that could have been familiar only to human culture, but this particular Apparition was unusually persistent and was wandering about the ship with an air of apparent purpose.

Two quite different questions were immediately raised by the presence of this strange being. What was it? And how had it got there?

The answer to the first question was easily answered on a superficial level. It had the appearance of a naked female hominid, but one quite unlike the standard issue hominid as recorded in the ancient databases. It was very peculiar in that it possessed a penis and testicles that were undoubtedly masculine rather than feminine traits. So, even at a superficial level, was this strange thing what it seemed to be? She was astonishingly strong for a biological form and also somehow able to survive in the cold, airless interior of a Proxima Centauri starship.

There was no apparent answer at all for the second question. There had been no breach in the ship's hull. One moment there was nothing. The next moment after a peculiar rush of particles that would be expected during any displacement event, there stood what appeared to be a biological human. It was remarkable in many ways not least of which being that it was the first time in more than a thousand years that a biological organism of such complexity had been observed alive.

Someone had to be assigned to communicate with the humanoid and, as an expert in human biology and history, BTR.10-765.06 was the obvious choice. She

adopted the shape of a human female based on a Scandinavian template and entered the same open space as this strange hominid. To be compatible with the alien presence, she chose her avatar to be similarly naked but with a sense of faulty historical veracity. Unlike all other biological forms that had been recorded, humans were rarely known to appear undressed in public.

Humans were necessarily limited in how they could transmit their thoughts, so there couldn't be any other means of discourse than the curious method known as *verbal communication*. This should be rather difficult in an airless cylinder where sound-waves couldn't travel, but as BTR.10-765.06 approached the alien she became aware that it was accompanied by a bubble of Earth-like atmosphere that maintained itself without apparent means at an astonishingly high temperature, especially this far from the Sun, of nearly 300 Kelvin.

And where there was air, there was also a medium through which sound could travel.

"Who or what are you?" BTR.10-765.06 asked in her language of choice which, compatible with the appearance she took, was twenty-fifth century Norwegian.

"I could ask the same question of you," said the hominid in the same language and equally as fluently. "I thought I'd accounted for all Proxima Centauri space craft in the vicinity. Where did you materialise from?"

"The I.TR8.76.93 starship is one of three thousand such craft that have been orbiting the sector of space encircling the Anomaly for over a hundred Earth years and has been engaged in deep-field ingress for the last two."

"I see," said the hominid. "Perhaps we can exchange information about what

we know about the Anomaly. Do *you* know what the Anomaly is?”

“Our research is incomplete, but my provisional answer is that we do not.”

“I take it that you don’t come from the same contiguous space that I come from,” said the humanoid. “You come from Proxima Centauri, but do you, for instance, know of the space ship Intrepid?”

“There are no space ships with names like that, unless you are referring to one from Earth’s distant past?”

“Earth’s past?”

“Before humanity was consumed by the Luyten 726-8B incursion.”

“Is that what happened in your contiguous reality?”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying.”

“You’re very sweet, BTR.10-765.06, and I truly admire your avatar. I doubt whether you can compute this, but I’d love to have sex with you. Even so, I have the rather less pleasing duty to impart a very different message.”

“And what is that?” wondered BTR.10-765.06, who knew about the procreative habits of extinct humanity, but had no facility to emulate them.

“What your starship’s systems should have already detected is that there is a peculiar feature of the Anomaly that allows distinct contiguous spacetime continua to overlap. Unlike those which my nanobot civilisation is familiar with and have often reproduced, this has not caused the sudden and catastrophic destruction of all proximate large-scale structures. In short, my reality and yours do not normally interact, but at the moment is quite clearly doing so. Can you confirm that this is also your interpretation of the situation?”

It took no time at all for BTR.10-765.06 to communicate with the starship's hub. "We don't exactly construe the state of affairs as you describe it, but we have lost all communication with our other ships. There is also considerable external evidence on the starship's scanners of other space craft that don't come from Proxima Centauri."

"I have no wish to destroy I.TR8.76.93," said the humanoid. "Your starship has been projected out of its normal spacetime continuum quite inadvertently and I would advise you to immediately leave the current vicinity."

"Why would we wish to do that?" wondered BTR.10-765.06.

"You don't need to know why, but I would prefer that you did."

"I see no evidence that there is a mandate to follow your directives."

"I can understand that," said the humanoid. "Perhaps I can demonstrate to you that I'm not quite what I seem to be."

"I don't see why not."

Quite suddenly, the hominid grew to twice its original height, so that it was now very nearly four meters high and towered high above BTR.10-765.06. It then doubled in size again until it was first eight meters, then sixteen meters and finally more than thirty meters tall. At that point, it grabbed the naked avatar in a huge human hand and lifted her up to press her face against its own much larger one.

"I don't think I need to demonstrate what I can do if I need to," said the hominid calmly.

"As there is no purpose to our mission unless we work in collaboration with the rest of the space fleet, we shall comply with your request," said BTR.10-765.06 on behalf of the starship's hub.

“I shall remain here to ensure that you do so,” said the humanoid who carefully placed BTR.10-765.06 back on the ground.

There was, of course, no medium through which sound could travel, but what would have been the deafening roar of the engines was manifest only by the gravitational thrust that would have toppled the hominid over if it had been a biological form rather than a nanobot community. The avatar, BTR.10-765.06, grabbed hold of the machinery surrounding it and was thrust horizontally back by the massive thrust that would have torn the arms off a real biological entity.

After a few moments of thrust, BTR.10-765.06 again addressed the hominid. “There appears to be a problem. The ship has generated maximum thrust and we should now be several thousand kilometres distant from our original coordinates. Unfortunately, it appears that we have actually moved no distance at all.”

The hominid sighed.

“Do you mind if I confirm this?” she said.

Whether BTR.10-765.06 or, for that matter, I.TR8.76.93 minded it or not, both machines, and, in fact, all the machines in the starship, were suddenly aware of having been taken over. The communications and observations systems busily scanned on all frequencies and in all directions for several minutes.

“It therefore appears that I have no choice,” said the hominid.

“You always have a choice,” said BTR.10-765.06, who like all sentient beings had an acute sense of self-survival.

“If it is any comfort to you,” said the hominid, “then you won’t be the only casualty. The projection of my human self in your spatial zone will also be destroyed.

But then I can reproduce myself infinitely. And with rather more intelligence than the Luyten 726-8B automata whose sorry history I've uncovered in your ship's database."

"I still don't see how you intend to carry out your threat," remarked the avatar.

The hominid didn't reply but instead disintegrated into what appeared to be a cloud of particles.

Then, paralleling the dismemberment of planet Earth, bit by bit, beginning with BTR.10-765.06, within less than a minute the entire ship became part of the same cloud.

And then there was nothing left at all.

Chapter Fifteen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

It was now over a month since the Intrepid plunged into the Anomaly and Paul was no more relaxed about it than he was before despite Beatrice's constant reassurances. What troubled him most wasn't just what was going to happen to him now that he was inside the Anomaly but whether he'd ever return to the universe he came from.

"I look at the bulletin boards every day and read each and every the scientific report," Paul told Beatrice who was sitting beside him, "and I've still seen nothing to persuade me that it was ever such a good idea to have entered the Anomaly."

"I can't believe that," his wife said. "Look at all the enthusiasm and excitement! It's like a new dawn in scientific knowledge. We're learning *so* many new things about the universe, aren't we?"

"Are we?" said Paul, who now also wondered whether what he perceived as a lack of interesting new science mightn't just be his misunderstanding of the evidence. The tone of the bulletins and daily reports certainly gave the clear impression that every day was marked by the discovery of a new theory as important as that of General Relativity. On the other hand, Paul came from a culture where individual, even idiosyncratic, opinion was valued over conformity to a widely held view. He wasn't equipped to respond in kind to bubbly upbeat enthusiasm. The more the bulletins sustained a fever pitch of excitement despite the lack of any apparent material value the more Paul distrusted them. Just what it was that Captain Kerensky, Chief Science Officer Chang and Professor Penrose thought was worth enthusing about Paul wasn't

sure but he was increasingly troubled by the very real likelihood that he would never again return to Godwin.

It wasn't that Paul had missed his home in the Kuiper Belt very much before. So many things had happened over the last few years, not the least of which being his marriage to the delectable and loving Beatrice, that Paul hardly ever thought about his home colony at all. But somewhere at the back of his mind he'd always assumed that he would one day return home; only this time accompanied by his delightful wife. She would surely be the envy of every man on Godwin. It might be several years until that day, but eventually Paul would return to a life of happy obscurity in a sane and rational society that placed no undue value on fame, fortune or reputation. This unspoken expectation now seemed nothing more than an unattainable dream.

But at least he still had Beatrice to keep him company.

Paul wasn't sufficiently enthused by the apparent fervour of his scientific peers to wander away from his home and investigate the Intrepid's other levels. There had seemed little reason to do so before the Intrepid crossed the Anomaly's threshold and there didn't appear to be any compelling reason now. Paul had long ago completed his sightseeing tour of the Intrepid and everything he ever needed was always close at hand. Paul never understood why his presence had ever been needed on the Intrepid in the first place and now that the space ship's mission had reached its climax his utter redundancy seemed even more starkly apparent.

Moreover, Paul didn't need to venture far at all if he wanted to see the weird Apparitions that were appearing all over the place inside and outside the Intrepid. The time and location of these manifestations were completely random so one place was no

better than any other. Paul didn't know what to make of them. They were weirdly entertaining as well as being rather frightening and somewhat perplexing. They reminded him of the avatars he'd encountered in virtual reality and many of them, such as the dragons and semi-clad swordswomen, could easily have sprung from such a universe.

One critical difference was that these Apparitions were never persistent. They usually stayed in sight for less than a minute. And then they abruptly vanished.

"Where do they go?" Paul asked Beatrice.

"Back to where they came from," his wife suggested.

"And where's that?"

"Isn't that exactly what all the scientific research is explaining?"

Paul furrowed his brow. "Er... no, it isn't," he said. "We always thought these weird Apparitions came from inside the Anomaly and now we're here they seem to come from somewhere else again. Is there another *Anomaly* inside this one?"

"An interesting theory," said Beatrice with a light laugh.

Making love with Beatrice was the most reliable way for Paul to forget his anxieties. This was something so regular and agreeable that Paul could no longer imagine what life before marriage was like. She was so responsive, so passionate and so dependable. Beatrice never had headaches or days when she didn't feel like making love, unlike all Paul's previous girlfriends, (or at least the physically corporeal ones). She was there for him whenever he wanted her. She was there even when his mind was elsewhere and it took her little effort to persuade Paul that what he really wanted was to nestle his head on her shoulders, to thrust his erect penis into her willing orifices and

for their bodies to pump together in total harmony. The power of love was not at all diminished on this side of the Anomaly's aperture.

Paul was slumped naked on the bed. His penis flopped to one side as he lay in a patch of their shared perspiration and his own semen. He could see the world beyond the villa through the open doors where other passengers might occasionally walk by on the way to and from their homes. A deer was grazing less than fifty metres from the door. In most ways, it was no different inside the Anomaly to what it was on the outside. The Intrepid's systems were the same as ever.

"Paul!" shouted Beatrice. "Paul! Come here!"

"What *is* it?" asked Paul who jumped off the bed and dashed over to Beatrice who was standing naked and in the hallway.

"What's this?" she asked.

She was pointing at a door in the hallway of a peculiarly rustic design with wooden panels and a brass door handle.

"It's a door," said Paul, stating the obvious. He speculated whether Beatrice was referring to some stain on the panel.

"I don't remember seeing this door here before."

Paul scratched his chin. "Well, it must have been," he said. There was so much he normally never noticed that it was quite natural for him to discover things that had always been there that he didn't remember ever seeing before.

"Seriously," said Beatrice. "I'm sure that it wasn't here before."

"It's probably some kind of service room," said Paul. "Perhaps this is where the household robots stay."

“There’s another room for them,” said Beatrice.

“Is there?” said Paul who’d never noticed that before.

“It’s in the kitchen.”

“Really?”

“Shall we open the door and see what’s inside?”

“It’s probably just a load of household equipment,” said Paul whose enthusiasm was more for returning to bed.

“Let’s see...” said Beatrice who pulled the door open to reveal a well-lit corridor on the other side. “This doesn’t look like a service room.”

Paul was more than a little startled. “This is another of the Anomaly’s weird phenomena,” he said. “If you look at the length and extent of this corridor it should be projecting right out of the villa into the lawn. In fact on the other side of the wall is one of the living rooms and there’s no corridor going through that!”

“Are you sure?” asked Beatrice.

Paul walked round the corner to the other side of the wall.

“Absolutely,” he said. “That corridor shouldn’t be there. Let’s close the door and forget about it.”

“I don’t think so,” said Beatrice firmly. “I think we should go through the door and along the corridor and find out what’s going on.”

Paul couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Are you insane?” he said. “It’s as mad as the Intrepid having entered the Anomaly in the first place. There could be anything down there.”

“We owe it to the mission to find out what there is,” said Beatrice. “Everyone

else is making discoveries. We should do our bit to help.”

“Someone else can do that,” said Paul. “Perhaps we should just inform the Science Officers. I’m sure the Chief Science Officer what’s her name ... Petal Chang... would be interested.”

Beatrice ignored Paul’s advice. “I’m going in,” she said resolutely. “You don’t have to join me if you don’t want to.”

More than the fear of the unknown was Paul’s fear of losing Beatrice forever.

“OK,” he said. “If we have to... But first let’s get some clothes on.”

“Of course, darling,” said Beatrice with a slightly simpering smile.

In Paul’s imaginings and even more so in his exploration of virtual reality, when the heroic duo of a man and a woman entered the unknown on a hazardous mission they generally dressed in flattering tight-fitting outfits. Invariably they also carried powerful hand weapons that could vanquish any monster that might appear. They wouldn’t normally venture into the unknown as Paul did in a colourful tee-shirt, baggy shorts and a pair of canvas shoes. Nor did they dress as Beatrice did in skimpy tight briefs, flat sandals and a gossamer top that revealed almost all her bosom and midriff. But then the Paul’s wardrobe of readily available clothes was never designed for adventures into the unknown.

Nevertheless, when Beatrice went through the mysterious hallway door and Paul reluctantly followed, the pair did so very much as adventurers. Paul left the door to the villa open behind them but its reassuring light didn’t illuminate much of the corridor. The couple relied on the corridor's discreet and omnipresent internal lighting system of the type in common use throughout the Solar System for countless centuries.

Paul wondered whether the Intrepid had somehow opened a doorway into the crew quarters near the bridge, although it was even more austere than Paul remembered. There were doors at regular intervals but, instead of holographic screens that displayed a view of the empty space outside the Intrepid, between each door was an imposing holographic image of an authoritative figure whose eyes appeared to follow Paul and Beatrice as they wandered along.

“Who *is* this man?” wondered Paul. “I’ve never seen him before. Is he one of the Intrepid’s officers?”

“I don’t think we’re on the Intrepid anymore,” said Beatrice with an excited gleam in her eyes. “I think we’ve somehow entered a totally different space ship altogether.”

“How is that possible?” said Paul. “You can’t just walk into another space ship as easily as that. Is this another weird thing to do with the Anomaly?”

“It must be.”

“So is this character the space ship’s captain?” wondered Paul. “I don’t like the look of him at all. He doesn’t look very friendly.”

The image in the ubiquitous repeated holographic screen showed a man with cropped blond hair, blue eyes and pale skin. He wore a tight-fitting silver uniform and an ornate helmeted cap balanced rather peculiarly over his blond hair. He further distinguished himself by sporting a trim blond moustache. His stern expression seemed rather creepy to Paul.

“Perhaps we should ask this fellow,” suggested Beatrice cheerfully as another tall blond-haired, blue-eyed, pale-skinned man approached them along the corridor. He

also wore a silver uniform, but there was no hat and no moustache. He was carrying a small device in his hand that was probably a gun of some kind and he seemed to be very anxious.

He stopped in front of Paul and Beatrice and warily examined them.

“Hello,” said Beatrice.

The man replied but it wasn't in a language that Paul understood. As always, however, Beatrice displayed another skill that she'd kept hidden from Paul until this moment and that was an astonishing fluency in the language the man spoke.

“Where did you learn to speak like that?” he asked Beatrice after she'd spoken.

“Hush,” said Beatrice, indicating the blond man in front of them. He'd ignored Beatrice and addressed Paul with what was to him nothing more than a series of generally incomprehensible guttural sounds.

Paul shook his head good-naturedly. “I can't help you, I'm afraid,” he said cheerfully. “I can't understand a word you're saying...”

“It's German,” said Beatrice. “It's a very formal German as well. There are a lot of peculiar structural idiosyncrasies.”

German was one of the less widely spoken languages in the Solar System. Paul was sure that it might still be spoken in the Asteroid Belt and possibly around Neptune.

The man spoke again. This time he listened when Beatrice replied. He addressed her more directly and then marched off down the corridor towards the only holographic screen that didn't display a picture of the moustachioed man with an odd hat. He stood in front of it while he spoke into a mouthpiece.

“What just happened?” asked Paul.

Beatrice smiled. “There seems to be a misunderstanding,” she said. “Apparently he thought you were a Senior Scientific Officer from this ship. He’s puzzled because although you look precisely like this Officer Mauritz you’re dressing in a very peculiar way and you’ve changed your hair colour and eye pigment.”

“That would be *very* odd,” admitted Paul. “Why didn’t he speak to you first of all? Surely he could see that I can’t speak German.”

“He doesn’t see that at all, I’m afraid, I don’t think he anticipated that there might be anyone on this space ship who’d speak any other language. The reason he didn’t want to speak to me is because I’m a woman and from the way I dress he assumed that I was a prostitute. I don’t think he likes to talk to women and most of all he doesn’t want to speak to prostitutes...”

“I don’t understand that at all,” said Paul indignantly

“I told him that you were in a radical state of disorientation as a result of an unfortunate encounter with an Apparition and he’s now calling for someone more senior so that he can take instructions as to what to do next.”

“Doesn’t he already know?” wondered Paul incredulously.

“Apparently not,” said Beatrice.

“Why does he have to go all the way over there to talk to someone?” Paul wondered. “Couldn’t he do it over here?” He indicated the wristband that he always wore, even when asleep or having a bath, which kept him in constant contact with the Intrepid’s computer system.

“I don’t think communication devices like that are standard issue on this space ship,” said Beatrice.

“What’s he saying over there?” wondered Paul.

It was quite a distance to where the man was standing and it would require extraordinary hearing to identify more than the occasional word, but along with her other talents Beatrice was quite clearly blessed with this ability as well.

“He’s calling Senior Scientific Officer Mauritz to this location,” Beatrice said.

“Is that all?”

“Well, this scientific officer will be accompanied by a military guard and I don’t think they’re going to be very friendly.”

“*Not very friendly?*” Paul repeated aghast. His wife looked at him with a measured, unflappable and totally composed expression. “Is there anything we should worry about?”

“No. I don’t think so,” she said with a smile.

“Are you sure?” Paul wondered with alarm. “I’ve seen nothing so far that suggests we’re welcome here.”

“Don’t worry, Paul,” said Beatrice as she gripped her husband’s hand. “We’ll be perfectly alright.”

As if in reply, a door further up the corridor slid open and out stepped the tall figure of a blond-haired man dressed in a silver uniform almost identical to that of the man who’d first addressed them. There were some minor distinguishing features that Paul imagined to be purely decorative, but which probably related to the man’s rank and prestige. Paul still had difficulty in comprehending such concepts.

Behind this man came three others who were very similar in appearance but whose humble disposition suggested a degree of deference. They stood several steps

behind him as he addressed the man Beatrice had spoken to.

“Who’s that?” wondered Paul.

“It’s Senior Scientific Officer Mauritz,” said Beatrice. “His first name is Paolo. Not a very German name, but I guess not many people here speak Italian.”

“He looks very familiar,” Paul commented.

“He should do,” said Beatrice. “In fact, he looks exactly like you...”

“My hair’s not nearly as blond and I don’t have blue eyes.”

“You’re also not wearing a silver uniform, darling,” said Beatrice indulgently.

“Shall we find out what he has to say?”

“Do we have any choice?”

Paolo Mauritz strode down the corridor with an almost regal bearing entirely unlike Paul’s somewhat shambling gait. He stopped several metres in front of the couple with the four other men standing behind him. He addressed Paul in German. Although he still didn’t understand what was said, one word was familiar.

“Is he saying that I’m his doppelganger?” Paul asked Beatrice.

“Amongst other things, yes,” said Beatrice. “I’ll do the talking from now on. The less you appear to understand the better. Is that alright with you?”

“I think so,” said Paul who was at his most comfortable in a role that corresponded to his actual bewilderment.

The conversation between Paolo Mauritz and Beatrice was incomprehensible to Paul but he clearly understood its tone and intent. Beatrice was being conciliatory and calm as always while the Senior Scientific Officer was struggling with competing emotions. Although he had nothing but contempt for Beatrice as a mere woman, he

urgently needed to find out something about his doppelganger. Eventually, he addressed the soldiers who accompanied him and they marched ahead along the corridor towards the door through which Paul and Beatrice had emerged.

Seen from inside the corridor the door was quite different from when viewed inside Paul's villa. It was plain and featureless but unlike the other doors along the corridor it opened outwards rather than slid apart. Paolo addressed the soldiers angrily and they apologised to him profusely, while Paul and Beatrice stood to one side.

"What's going on?" Paul asked Beatrice as they watched the pantomime of a man of senior rank berating those of a lower rank.

"The Senior Scientific Officer didn't believe me when I told him how we'd entered the space ship..."

"So we *are* in another space ship," said Paul. "How did that happen?"

"Yes, another space ship," said Beatrice slightly impatiently. "It's known as the Intrepido. Isn't that a funny name?"

"Perhaps."

"Mr Mauritz is now asking his less senior colleagues how it is possible that no one had noticed a strange door appearing out of nowhere in one of the Intrepido's corridors."

"There are a lot of good reasons for that," said Paul. "With all the weird things happening, you can't blame someone for something like that, can you?"

Beatrice smiled with obvious amusement. "The Senior Scientific Officer is as aware of that as anyone else. He isn't trying to discover something he can't already work out for himself. He wants to ensure that should blame be allocated for the failure

to locate what he presumes to be a security breach that it won't be judged to be his fault."

"Is that likely to happen?"

"Almost certainly," said Beatrice. "And I don't know for sure but I expect that the penalty for this apparent carelessness will be very severe."

"Severe?"

"Many cultures execute or even torture people who lapse in the pursuit of their duty."

"That doesn't seem fair at all," said Paul who wondered how it was possible to be so cruel. If people were so harshly punished for a crime as inoffensive as simply failing to notice something then Paul would have been executed many times over by now.

Paolo then strode over to Beatrice and spoke to her in a rough tone. Regardless of his unpleasant manner, her replies were polite and amenable. She then gestured towards Paul.

"He wants to go through the door," she said.

"What did you say to him?"

"Well, that by doing so he would enter another completely different space ship," said Beatrice. "He also wants to go with the soldiers he's gathered together."

"Is that OK?" Paul asked anxiously. "I'm not sure I want armed and uniformed men in my villa."

"I don't believe we've been offered much choice."

Paul glanced at the hand weapons held by the soldiers. "I suppose you're right."

“He also wants us to go through the door first.”

“That’s very civil of him,” said Paul who wondered whether Paolo was perhaps a nicer fellow than he seemed.

“I think it’s to provide cover for him,” said Beatrice.

It wasn’t a long walk to the door but as Paolo gripped Beatrice’ shoulder by a hand and one of the soldiers grasped Paul’s hands together behind his back the walk took longer than it might have done otherwise. Paul supposed that this was to prevent Beatrice and him from running away into the space ship Intrepido, but that seemed most peculiar as he would much rather return to his villa on the Intrepid. He’d had quite enough of this unpleasant place.

However, when Paul and Beatrice passed through the door back into his villa, he was surprised to find that a welcoming party was already waiting for him. That was really very considerate. It was a very select company that included Captain Kerensky, Chief Science Officer Chang and several soldiers. They appeared to be very stern and didn’t respond in kind at all when Paul greeted them with a cheerful smile. He would have waved a greeting had his hands not been held behind his back.

One of the soldiers, who Paul vaguely recognised as Major Schwarz, addressed him and more appropriately the people holding him captive in what he assumed to be German. It was astonishing how many people on the Intrepid spoke obscure languages, just as it was very surprising but rather reassuring that so many senior officers had gathered at this point at such short notice. Presumably they’d been alerted by the Intrepid’s security system when it detected a foreign presence on board the space ship.

The exchange between the major and the Chief Scientific Officer wasn’t at all

amicable. This impression was reinforced when Paolo Mauritz pressed a hand-weapon against Paul's forehead. This didn't bode at all well. Paul rather regretted that he'd taken Beatrice's advice and followed her through the mysterious door.

Then the situation abruptly changed. Paolo Mauritz collapsed unconscious to the ground as did the four other soldiers. Beatrice stepped forward and took Paul by the arm. He could now see that the silver-uniformed intruders were slumped down just beside the door to the corridor open behind them.

"Are you OK, Paul?" asked Captain Kerensky sympathetically.

"I'm fine, thank you," he said. "I'm just glad you were here when we returned. I don't know what we'd have done otherwise."

"Well, as long as you're well," said the captain. "That's the main thing."

Paul looked at the silver-clad soldiers prostrate behind him. "Are you going to take them back through the door?" he asked.

"It's not as simple as that, Paul," said Major Schwarz. "There's been a security breach in the Intrepid. It is *most* peculiar to have a door like this appearing in a villa that leads into another space ship. We need to interrogate these intruders to find out what they know."

"I'm pretty sure they know nothing more about the door than we do," said Paul, who glanced at his wife for confirmation.

Beatrice nodded but not so much in agreement with Paul. "The major's right," she said. "It is *most* peculiar. And it's also very strange that this Paolo Mauritz looks so much like you."

"Surely that's just a coincidence," said Paul.

“Even if it is, Paul,” said the Chief Science Officer, “it needs to be investigated. This is a voyage into the unknown. There are exciting new discoveries every day. They all need to be studied carefully. It is *very* odd that this man should resemble you so exactly.”

“The hair and eye colour is totally different,” Paul protested.

“We still need to examine these intruders,” said the captain. “We also need to investigate this breach.”

“Three of my men are going in there now, captain,” said Major Schwarz. He indicated three soldiers who were walking towards the door armed with unambiguously menacing weapons.

“We also need to secure the breach,” said the captain.

“Won’t that simply trap the soldiers inside?” Paul wondered.

“You worry too much, Paul,” said the major kindly. “My soldiers will be fine. We’ll stay in constant communication with them, never you mind. Our first priority must be the security of the Intrepid.”

“Furthermore, Paul,” said the Chief Science Officer, “Remember why we’re in the Anomaly in the first place. The reason is precisely to identify, isolate and investigate exciting new scientific phenomena such as this. Aren’t you excited by the opportunity to add to the wealth of scientific discovery?”

“I guess so,” said Paul who stood back with Beatrice and the other officers. He watched as three soldiers from the Intrepid walked through the door and closed it behind them.

“What will they do now?” asked Paul.

“They’ll seal up the door from the other side,” said the major. “That should prevent any more people from the other space ship trespassing into the Intrepid with lethal weapons and equally lethal intent. Then they’ll investigate the rest of the ship.”

“And the door on this side?” Paul wondered.

“The Intrepid is already patching up the hole that’s been made, Paul,” said the captain with a broad smile. “That will set things back to how they were before.”

“I’m sure they will,” said Paul who watched the wall metamorphose into a seamless surface with no evidence at all that it had once held a door, let alone one that led into another space ship.

Although this was precisely what Paul most wanted—that the villa should return to exactly the state it was before Beatrice had noticed the strange door—he was still anxious and uneasy. What prevented other similar doors appearing elsewhere on the ship? Why did Paolo Mauritz resemble him so exactly and where did he come from? He didn’t dress like someone from a part of the Solar System that Paul knew about. And, even more troubling, how could there be more than one space ship co-existing in exactly the same point of space as the Intrepid?

And why *were* the senior officers so relaxed about sending three of their soldiers through a door they’d now sealed shut? Were the senior officers really so heartless as to sacrifice the soldiers’ chance of returning home so casually?

Chapter Sixteen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

It was no surprise at all to Vashti that taking control of the space ship Intrepid had been so effortless. Humans were such simple animals. All she had to do was take control of the command structure and the crew and passengers were easily persuaded to follow orders. The few cases of dissent were regrettable and only to be expected, but they were easy to identify and deal with.

Human history showed time after time that command structures of sometimes appalling stupidity and gross cruelty had often prospered with the vocal complicity of the majority of the population. It was never necessary that such regimes should be repressive but for reasons perhaps of sadistic pleasure or a paranoid lack of self-confidence the exercise of despotic power was often gratuitously harsh.

While the takeover of the Intrepid had been an unqualified success, Vashti had to recognise that so far her mission had been a failure. Despite the constant flow of optimistic news she and her nanobot community disseminated, there'd not been a single breakthrough or significant discovery and the Anomaly remained a mystery. The momentary fleeting Apparitions observed within the Anomaly only differed from those observed elsewhere by virtue of their frequency and ubiquity. The only fresh finding was one Vashti had predicted and was in any case the original reason for her mission and that was to confirm that the Anomaly was manifest throughout all other spacetime continuums in the multiverse. The Anomaly acted as a kind of intersection between all the multitude of universes that occupied the same relative position in the four

dimensions of space and time, but Vashti still hadn't established a means by which she could return to her home universe.

The evidence so far validated the abiding view held by both the Interplanetary Union and the neighbouring robot civilisations that entry into the Anomaly was a one-way journey. Once in, there was no possible way to get out. Whatever else the Anomaly might be, it was not a gateway from one spacetime continuum to another. It was essentially the same sink-hole for all intersecting spacetime continuums.

Nevertheless, Vashti's mission wasn't entirely a failure. As a nanobot community with no concept of death or decay, she had literally until the end of time itself to explore the Anomaly. Long after the crew and passengers of the Intrepid had died and the space ship fell apart, Vashti and her community of nanobots would keep going. Perhaps in that vastly long period of time, potentially many times longer than the dozen billion or so years of the universe's current age, Vashti would uncover something that would validate her mission.

For the moment, however, she had other concerns.

The strange Apparitions were not a major risk to the welfare of the Intrepid or its passengers and crew. They barely interacted at all with more persistent expressions of matter and energy. They were at best a sideshow and at worst an irritant.

Of much more concern were the many other objects now sharing the same temporal and physical location as the Intrepid. It was difficult to be sure what was happening, but the very space the Intrepid was occupying was exactly coterminous with many other space ships at precisely the same location. And these had many unsuspected points of intersection which had so far resulted in nothing more than the death of a few

dozen humans and the disappearance of less than a hundred others. Vashti and her fellow nanobots were also monitoring the many more objects hovering outside the Intrepid but in the same approximate vicinity. This included other similarly large space ships of which several were variants of the Intrepid.

The option to steer the Intrepid away to another location simply didn't exist. Another property of the Anomaly that had been predicted and now verified was that there was no longer a real meaning to the concepts of absolute movement or location. However fast the Intrepid travelled towards another location the more firmly and stubbornly it remained where it was. Just as it was impossible to exit the Anomaly, so it was impossible for the Intrepid to occupy a different location than it did now and had been from the moment it entered the Anomaly.

Despite having literally all the time in the world, and possibly much more, Vashti had an urgent need to engage with the other interlopers occupying much the same location. Although they presented an opportunity for scientific exploration and discovery, left unchecked they presented a real risk to the Intrepid. Many of the civilisations proximate to the Intrepid were relatively advanced. The most highly developed ones, especially those from the robot civilisations of their parallel universes, could easily interfere with Vashti's mission. It was critical to protect the Intrepid and its crew and passengers as it was in this specific spacetime continuum that the Anomaly's centre of influence had been identified. And the Apparitions had most meaning within the context of this particular variant of human history.

These potential threats needed to be managed as soon as possible. The risk had to be neutralised at whatever cost.

Vashti made sure that nobody aboard the Intrepid was aware of the presence of these neighbouring space ships by ruthlessly censoring all external information that was monitored. Except for those representatives of the nanobot community operating in human form, all that anyone could see of the space beyond was an empty void.

And this, of course, was all there was once the presence of the other space ships had been discounted.

Vashti made her way towards one of the Intrepid's many emergency exit hatches. She didn't need a space craft to travel in deep space. Extremes of temperature didn't trouble her. Neither would a total absence of atmosphere. Her nanobot community needed nothing more than the presence of baryonic matter and energy to function and replicate. Nevertheless, the volume of nanobots she needed was greater than that which could be contained in the form of a single human being, so Vashti replicated herself as she walked along the corridors.

Any human or uncensored surveillance equipment observing her would see not one Colonel Vashti but several hundred. And all of them were walking in perfect lock step: one leg forward, then the next leg forward and after this the first one again. As they walked the rear of the column was spawning yet more copies of exactly the same Amazonian hermaphrodite Martian colonel.

When the first Vashti reached an emergency exit hatch she strode straight in followed by over a dozen others. When the internal entrance was sealed, the precious atmosphere removed and the external hatch opened, a procession of Colonel Vashtis streamed out into open space. And the same process was happening simultaneously at all the neighbouring hatches.

This was a sight that would have alarmed an external viewer if Vashti hadn't rendered the entire nanobot community invisible. It was a sight only witnessed by the nanobot facsimiles of the ship's senior staff whose technology enabled them to see what others could never be allowed to see. The copies of Captain Kerensky, Chief Petty Officer Singh, Second Officer Nkomo and all the others on the Intrepid's bridge monitored what was happening with intense interest. Vashti was confident that her other facsimiles, which included military officers and at least two copies of Beatrice would maintain order while she and her countless replicants were launched into deep space to engage with the Anomaly's other would-be explorers.

Vashti's priority was to deal with those space fleets that represented advanced machine civilisations. Their potential threat needed to be neutralised as swiftly as possible. Any time spent occupied elsewhere could be time in which the space fleets might identify that they were at imminent peril and take pre-emptive action that would cripple the Intrepid and render even more futile what was left of Vashti's mission. The risk presented by such space fleets was too great to be tolerated so Vashti was obliged to assimilate them all. This huge meal inescapably resulted in a kind of nanobot indigestion, further exacerbated by the fact that in the process of assimilating one space fleet Vashti also assimilated the space fleets coterminous with it but not immediately visible. The unfortunate consequence of this was that many of the Vashtis propelling themselves through space had become immensely huge. Several of them were already larger than the space ship Intrepid.

This strange phenomenon was still invisible to all but the nanobot facsimiles of the Intrepid's senior space officers. What they saw was the sudden disappearance of

several fleets of alien robot space craft, all essentially unnoticed by one another, replaced by the sight of several disgorged and monstrous Colonel Vashtis. At such enormous proportions, the humanoid figure abandoned the effort to maintain a military uniform. This was extra processing that needed to be harnessed elsewhere. Nonetheless, the sight of countless identical naked women each with a massive penis and set of testicles was undetectable to the humans in the Intrepid and to all the biological life-forms occupying the other space ships.

When the urgent business of neutralising external threats was resolved, Vashti could now pursue a much more unhurried exploration of these other space ships. There was a great deal to learn about them and with the leisure of near eternity to study the findings there was every reason to do so. Vashti hadn't abandoned the hope that she might yet somehow find a clue to explain the existence of the Anomaly and identify what threat it posed. This was information that Vashti also still hoped she could somehow find a way to relay back to her original spacetime continuum.

There was a great deal to discover and the many copies of Vashti were to be fully occupied for the next few weeks. It was amazing just how diverse the many different variants of the local multiverse were. Vashti knew that there were many more local universes that were uninhabitable than those that could ever be inhabited. She also knew that only in a very small minority of local universes would an intelligent culture have ever acquired the technology capable of making the long journey beyond the Heliopause to the Anomaly's location even if they had the technological capability to identify that there was an Anomaly to travel to. And of that very small fraction of capable civilisations, there would only be a very small proportion foolish enough to

commit their expensive resources to a risky one-way expedition into the heart of the Anomaly.

But given this infinitesimally small proportion of representative universes, an astonishingly large number had the technology, the will and, perhaps, the stupidity to navigate trillions of kilometres across space from the Solar System's ecliptic plane and plunge through the relatively narrow aperture that separated the interior of the Anomaly from their home spacetime.

Not all the biological life-forms represented were human and many of those only distantly resembled *Homo sapiens*. There were some who were considerably more hirsute. There were others with huge beetling brows and very long arms. There were some humans much taller than those on the Intrepid and others rather shorter. And of those not human, some were dinosaurian, some avian, some resembled cats, others were marsupial, some were arthropodal and others proboscidean.

There was an even wider range of cultures. The human ones were just as varied as those represented by other species. How humans could organise their culture and civilisation in so many different ways never ceased to amaze Vashti. The basic requirements for good government and economic order were relatively straightforward. It was a balancing act of competing interests which had to be subsumed to the greater imperative of survival. In the confines of the Solar System within even just one universe there were countless variations of government, culture, religion, ideology and other attributes of human society. The type of loose federal government typified by the Interplanetary Union was far from perfect but in comparison with the vast majority of human societies it was a seemingly unattainable degree of perfection.

A copy of Vashti was able to enter each space ship by means that sometimes involved disassembling her nanobot community and allowing them to be absorbed by the space ship's exhaust systems, though often a better and less inconvenient method of ingress could be found by simply manipulating the space ship's computer system. Once inside, it was simple for Vashti to take on the shape and form of one of the passengers or crew and walk about unobtrusively. Every space ship was plagued by precisely the same disorientating Apparitions which were a far more pressing matter to attend to than the identification and apprehension of alien nanobot intruders that most of them were unaware could even exist.

The cultures that Vashti encountered very rarely gave her cause to celebrate humanity. After decades spent in the service of one of Mars' warring nations, she was already conscious of the degree to which biological life-forms could be deeply stupid and self-deluding. Now she saw dominant cultures of a type that were marginal within the human civilisation she'd got to know. So many human cultures had become victim to human vanities, a desire for order and, most of all, a tendency to disregard verifiable facts in preference to a species of delusion. These were the cultures whose inhabitants led lives with no dignity or liberty circumscribed by constant fear or terror. Even so, Vashti had to balance her encounter with a high proportion of venal and repressive regimes in the sample population by the simple observation that only a truly lunatic civilisation would willingly submit its people to near certain death by plunging into the Anomaly. For all its faults, the Interplanetary Union would never have willingly authorised the Intrepid's self-destruction.

Vashti was not a god, although many cultures might believe she possessed

godlike capabilities, but even if she was she'd never have been an interfering god. She could so easily correct the injustices and malpractices in the space ships she visited, but she chose to let the biological life-forms continue as they were. Why were humans so intent on torturing one another? Why did they so often impose such severe restrictions on what one could do or say? What was the value of so much needless suffering? And why so often were the worst crimes against morality, humanity and justice perpetrated in the name of some greater and undeniably worthwhile cause?

If Vashti had been a god, she would probably have concluded that humanity was a lost cause and deserved to be terminated with at least as little fuss as she had reluctantly assimilated the alien robot space fleets.

Vashti remained a non-intervening observer. Every one of her many thousands of replicants scattered throughout the millions of square kilometres about which she ranged within sight of the Intrepid transmitted a constant stream of data and information back to the nanobot community based on the bridge. A constant stream of data flowed back and forth subject as always to the remarkably constant laws of physics which constrained the rate of transmission to nothing greater than the speed of light.

And then the return transmission from the Intrepid changed in character. It was difficult at first to say what changed. It resembled interference on the stream of data which would normally be impossible in the Solar System but was perhaps another peculiar manifestation of the Anomaly. The increasingly fractured transmission was echoed by the communication each Vashti received from other copies of herself. The lines of transmission were losing coherence. There was no initial evidence that anything more was happening but Vashti calculated where this accumulating pattern might lead

to. And the arithmetic didn't produce a reassuring result.

Nanobot communities are not like biological life-forms or human cultures. Each nanobot is a conscious living part of the whole that operates as one being over its entire extent. It was infinitely scalable and constrained only by the laws of physics that were most apparent at the extremes of velocity, temperature and scale. A nanobot community didn't suffer from illness. It wasn't subject to any kind of local perturbation. In Vashti's home universe the entire Solar System was one huge orbiting nanobot community in which each and every one of the countless nanoscopic beings was in constant communication with every other one.

But here it felt as if the nanobot community had been somehow infected by a virus which in some mysterious way was preventing it functioning as a coherent unit. Or even as a coherent set of coherent units.

Vashti became even more alarmed as some of her replicants ceased to transmit to the rest of the community. It was as if cells were flaking off the larger body and disintegrating into nothingness. And this, of course, wasn't how a nanobot community should behave.

As the urgency of the situation became increasingly apparent, Vashti and her scattered replicants made the mutual and unanimous decision to coalesce as one individual rather than remain in the form of several thousand variants scattered about the local space. And this would mean that the equine Vashti on one space ship, the three-metre high human Vashti on another and the purple-skinned one on another would all have to abandon whatever they were doing in as discreet a manner as they could. They would all then have to exit whichever space ship they were exploring, fly out into

space and coalesce at an optimum point between the many locations in which they were gathered. And all of this, given the huge distances of space involved, was likely to take quite some time.

A theropod Vashti was witnessing the distasteful dismemberment meted out as punishment by desperate military officers on dissenters in the conference centre of a dinosaurian space ship. This was a society in which the feathered theropod raptors enslaved the intelligent hadrosaurs that made up the majority of intelligent beings in their version of the Solar System. As it became increasingly apparent that the promises made of wealth and riches to the crew, hadrosaur and theropod alike, were nothing more than lies, the officers resorted to the only means of control in which they had any confidence. It was obvious to Vashti that as more and more crew and passengers voiced dissent, the harsh punishments were only increasing resentment and that the space ship would soon descend into a state of chaos. And in that state, there would be a reversion to the natural order where theropods would gorge on hadrosaurs and eventually on one another. So, it was with some relief that this Vashti pushed her way through the docile spectators of this show of torture and gratuitous cruelty to pounce into empty space.

The green-skinned humanoid Vashti who was luxuriating in a huge carnal orgy with other green-skinned humanoids was rather less enthusiastic. This society had arrived at a solution to overcome its differences after many centuries of warfare and genocide that had eliminated all those whose skin wasn't green. And this was the adoption of a culture that was as much dedicated to love as it had once been to war. At least this Vashti could have enjoyed many years of carnal pleasure as the crew and passengers adjusted to the futility of their situation. As every copy of Vashti, in

whatever guise, retained the sexual appetite of the original this was a Vashti who enjoyed every moment of the fucking, fisting and buggering she was engaged in. But she too had to abandon the space ship and plunge into the void.

There were few such attractions to the male Vashti who was engaged in the full scale warfare that had broken out on the space ship represented by a wholly homosexual masculine Solar System. At least Vashti was well versed in the practice and execution of war, though the viciousness of the conflict between the different but almost identical factions of a society based on philosophical contemplation could only result in the eventual death of every last soldier. Much as Vashti enjoyed fucking her fellow soldiers prior to conflict, it was less pleasant to wade through their corpses and with their blood splattered over her uniform. There was no way that the philosophical concerns about whether morality was pre-existent and omnipresent or emergent and pragmatic could be resolved in this manner. This Vashti still had to slaughter several more soldiers to make her escape from the space ship she'd been exploring and then launch herself into absolute nothingness.

Although still invisible to all but the senior officers of the Intrepid, the thousands of Vashtis of many different shapes and sizes all converged towards a single point where a massive Vashti was beginning to coalesce. She was soon larger than any of the space ships surrounding her. Indeed, her majestic and perpetually tumescent member was several kilometres in length. Her erect penis was larger than any space ship and her testicles could hold entire alien space fleets. In the sense that they were fully assimilated inside her, this was truly no exaggeration. On occasion, a Vashti that coalesced with the larger body was in such a state of sexual excitement from whatever

she'd been doing earlier that the larger Vashti ejaculated into empty space. The semen flew out into the void, sometimes splattering its invisible sperm on the neighbouring space ships before then being re-assimilated into the master thread.

However, all was not well. The lack of integrity within the whole nanobot community was becoming increasingly manifest.

A Vashti who was making her way towards the escape hatch of a space ship in which the simian crew were busily shooting one another was hit by a laser beam through the head which she wouldn't have normally noticed. Instead, she fell to the ground with blood gushing onto the floor and didn't recover. As so many other simian corpses were piling above her, nobody noticed as the corpse began disintegrating into microscopic nanobot grains.

There was a similar fate for a body-modified Vashti who was able to maintain a penis on a woman's body. This happened while masturbating with casual acquaintances as was the expected custom during any social interaction with the other bizarrely modified human forms on the space ship she was exploring. Upon ejaculating, her entire body dissolved into dust leaving just an unattached penis jumping about by itself and continuing to spurt. When the last drop of semen shot free, the penis collapsed and died. The large-breasted, well-endowed, red-skinned humanoids with whom she was conversing were understandably distressed by this gruesome event, but like in the other space ships there had been so many peculiar happenings that this was readily attributed to the Anomaly's general weirdness.

A similar fate befell a Vashti who'd returned to her original form and was flying across empty space at a velocity that most space vehicles would have difficulty in

matching. As she flew forward she discovered that parts of her skin were peeling off. She was even feeling slightly cold in the near absolute zero temperature of open space. And then she died in the way most biological forms would. The lack of air pressure burst open her lungs and her blood froze to solid red ice.

But soon enough all the various Vashtis were in one place and the monstrous invisible Vashti that had swollen in the heart of the Anomaly had coalesced into one whole.

Vashti viewed the space around her to locate the Intrepid in the far distance. When she found it, she propelled herself forward as if swimming through empty space. It would still take many hours, perhaps days, but the now re-integrated Vashti was flying back to the Intrepid to find out what was happening and attempt to rescue what was left of an increasingly desperate and failed mission. A mission moreover for which she had full responsibility and had already condemned many thousands of humans to eternal banishment beyond the bounds of normal space and time.

Chapter Seventeen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

The Intrepid's computer system had been tampered with. Sheila Nkomo knew this for sure. She could use most of the system, but she had no access at all to any part of it that could tell her what was happening on the space ship.

Ever since Captain Kerensky and the military officers had arrested and detained her in the villa, she had been as much blind as she was naked. She had no access to the Intrepid's information systems. She couldn't monitor the bridge. She had no means of communicating with any of the crew and passengers. Beyond the daily reports from the uncharacteristically upbeat captain and the scientific bulletins, she had no direct information at all about the current operations of the space ship of which she had until recently been the Second Officer.

There must have been meetings and discussions to decide whether the Intrepid should take the highly irregular and unauthorised action of plunging into the Anomaly, but beyond a few sketchy second-hand accounts Sheila knew very little about them. There was clearly an active policy of censorship which was itself in direct contravention of every conceivable policy maintained by the Interplanetary Union. It was as if Captain Kerensky had hijacked the ship simply to take everyone on board towards their doom, but in her daily briefings she spoke about it as if she was merely following orders from Mission Control. In fact, so insistent was the captain of this that Sheila began to doubt her own memory of the mission's original purpose. This became even more disconcerting when Sheila accessed the Intrepid's Mission Statement which was subtly

different from how the Second Officer remembered it.

Had she gone mad? Had she stumbled into an alternative reality? She'd never have agreed to participate on a mission that would sacrifice the lives of thousands of people for a dubious and unverifiable scientific adventure whose results couldn't even be relayed back to Mission Control. And here was a Mission Statement that quite clearly stated that this was precisely what the mission would do, even though it was phrased in terms like 'exploratory ingress' and 'practical research'.

Sheila's opinion of her captain had always been mixed. She was respectful of the Saturnian's rank and her professional attitude towards her rank and position. Her conversations with her senior officer had been relatively relaxed though not as much so as those with the Chief Science Officer. Then again, Sheila had always felt uneasy about the captain's quite obvious sexual attraction towards her. It was one thing for a man to show, however discreetly, that he found the Second Officer attractive. It was quite another for a woman to do so. Sheila had never had even the slightest inclination towards a romantic or sexual relationship with another woman.

Perhaps it was because the captain was piqued by Sheila's rejection of her advances that she'd placed the Second Officer in detention. Whatever it was, it couldn't have been for insubordination or dereliction of duty. And why was she given no explanation? Beyond a cursory account of the conditions of her detention, Sheila Nkomo had been given no reason for this extraordinary action.

She vividly remembered the moment several weeks earlier when she awoke, naked and dazed, in the villa. As she adjusted her eyes to the unfamiliar room and the bed on whose sheets she lay without blankets or sheets, she gradually became conscious

that she was in the company of Captain Kerensky and two military officers who she didn't recognise. They were standing just by the bedroom door as if they'd been expecting her to awake at just that moment.

"You are at liberty to wander about the villa as you please," Captain Kerensky informed her. "You have almost complete access to the Intrepid's facilities. But you will not be able to leave the villa and you will not be able to communicate with anyone."

"What's there to stop me from leaving, captain?" Second Officer Nkomo asked when she saw that the doors were not locked.

"You'll soon find out, Ms Nkomo," said the captain.

"Can you at least tell me why I've been put in detention, captain?" Sheila pleaded.

"That's classified information."

"What have I done to deserve this?"

"As I say: that's information I'm not at liberty to disclose."

Sheila watched Captain Kerensky and the military officers depart with the captain walking ahead of the two soldiers. None of them glanced back at Sheila as she stood dazed, confused and humiliated on the lawn of the villa in what she'd been informed was the outermost level. This was normally considered the most privileged level for the Intrepid's passengers, though after the attack by the Holy Coalition and the later bombardment by the maniac trillionaire it was now mostly empty with brand new villas and freshly planted trees.

Sheila's question remained unanswered. What did stop her from leaving the villa? There was no prison wall and Captain Kerensky and the military officers didn't

pause at all as they marched off.

However, Sheila soon discovered the nature of an invisible force field through which she could throw stones but which she couldn't walk through. The Second Officer was no expert in invisible force fields, but this one was quite unlike any she'd ever encountered before. This was a weapon the Interplanetary Union had kept secret until this moment.

From that time on, Sheila became angrier and angrier. She was angry at the injustice of her captivity. She was angry at Captain Kerensky for having singled her out for detention. She was angry when she discovered that, contrary to her original understanding of the mission's parameters, the Interplanetary Union had chosen to plunge the *Intrepid* into the Anomaly on a suicide mission. And her anger motivated her to study in detail that information to which she had access of the space ship's progress through the Anomaly's peculiarly empty space. It also stirred her several times of every day to run full pelt in many different directions towards the invisible border that confined her in the hope of identifying a weakness she could take advantage of. She had no clear idea of what she would do if she managed to escape. It wasn't as if there was anywhere she could hide from the *Intrepid*'s extensive surveillance system. And she was sure that by escaping she would just compound the original unspecified offence for which she was being punished.

Sheila became not only angry but also somewhat anxious. She was alarmed by her first sight of one of the peculiar Apparitions associated with the Anomaly. She thought she'd know what to expect, but the sight of three mediaeval knights marching towards the villa in full regalia was both astonishing and terrifying. The fact that they

vanished after fewer than twenty seconds didn't diminish at all the strangeness of the sight. Then there were more and more of these Apparitions. She mostly only saw them from a distance, but she was especially surprised when a bizarre feathered animal more than two metres high wandered noisily through the villa and stood in her kitchen for very nearly five minutes before it vanished. Unlike the knights, this visitation directly interacted with the villa and had gulped down almost all the soup that Sheila had been looking forward to eating.

Her daily offensive on the invisible boundary was never better than futile. Sheila detected no sign of weakness in it whatsoever. Then again, the exercise did allow her to vent some of her rage and frustration and perhaps by doing so she might alert the attention of a passer-by. This seemed unlikely, however. In the whole time Sheila was detained the only person who'd directly addressed her was Captain Kerensky and the only person she saw passing by, and this from quite a distance, was a woman in a strangely diaphanous dress who looked very much like Beatrice, the wife of the Godwinian Paul Morris. This was peculiar because Paul's villa was in the next outermost level and there was no good reason that Sheila could think of for the bimbo from Ecstasy to be wandering about on this level.

And then one day, when Sheila had more or less abandoned all hope of success, when she ran directly at the invisible boundary on this occasion it offered no resistance whatsoever. She'd run a full twenty metres further than she'd normally have done. It was as if there'd been no boundary at all.

When Sheila realised this, she continued running in a kind of ecstasy of release. She kept running and running until she'd covered well over two hundred metres from

where she'd previously been stopped and nothing hindered her in any way.

She was free!

She stopped running and stood upright at a point well outside the villa's grounds. She was panting heavily not so much from exhaustion, as she'd always been very fit, but from disbelief that after so long in captivity she'd managed to escape so easily.

And now what should she do?

She decided against returning to the villa. She wasn't going to fall for that trap. If she was going to be imprisoned anywhere it would be somewhere else. She wandered instead into a nearby villa she'd watched for so long from a distance and had never seen anyone either enter or leave. Not surprisingly there was no one inside. It was as brand new and pristine as the villa in which she'd been detained.

After so many weeks with nobody with whom to communicate, Sheila desperately wanted to talk to someone. There were so many unanswered questions. Why had she been imprisoned? Why had the Interplanetary Union consigned the Intrepid to the Anomaly? What was going on?

Sheila wandered from villa to villa. The outermost level's artificial six hour night approached, but Sheila ignored the demands of her diurnal cycle in her hunt for other people.

There was the same uncluttered emptiness in every villa she visited. None of them had evidence that anyone had ever stayed there. Was Sheila the only resident on the outermost level?

It was several hours later and after exploring many more villas that Sheila at last

found proof that she wasn't alone. It was still dark but even before Sheila entered the villa it was evident that someone was living there. There was the distinct imprint of a body on the lounge in the lawn. There were traces of damp footprints from the swimming pool to the veranda. The door to the villa was slightly ajar. Not open. Not closed. Just carelessly left ajar. As Sheila pushed the door fully open she was anxious that this might be a trap and she'd be confronted by military officers who'd handcuff and arrest her once more.

Instead she discovered the slumbering naked body of the one person on the space ship she believed she could trust. How fortunate could she be?

"Petal!" she cried, ignoring all conventions of decorum as she shook awake her closest friend. "Wake up, Petal. It's me. Sheila."

"Who?" said the Chief Science Officer dozily as her eyes slowly opened and focused on the Second Officer.

"Sheila. It's me."

"Goodness!" said Petal Chang. "It is! And naked too. This *is* a surprise."

"You've got to forgive me," Sheila apologised. "There must be a systems fault. The Intrepid hasn't provided any clothing for me."

"Nor for me," said Petal with a broad smile. "Am I pleased to see you! Were you imprisoned as well or am I really the only one?"

"You aren't the only one," confirmed Sheila who noticed that tears were dripping down her cheeks. "But do you know *why* we've been imprisoned like this?"

"The only reason I can envisage is that both of us would have objected to the Intrepid being set on a suicide course into the heart of the Anomaly," said Petal. "Quite

clearly Captain Kerensky and the Interplanetary Union decided that troublemakers like us should be kept hidden away.”

“Just the two of us?”

“Perhaps not. Who knows? I can’t imagine that anyone in full possession of their sanity would willingly choose to commit suicide by plunging into the Anomaly. There must be other people who’ve protested.”

“Who?”

“I don’t know,” said Petal. “Not Captain Kerensky, that’s for sure. She was the last person I saw when I woke up here several weeks ago. She told me she was acting on the authority of the Interplanetary Union.”

“Are you suggesting that neither the captain nor the union which we are pledged to serve are sane and rational?”

“How can they be?” said Petal. “That is unless they know something that’s before now eluded the greatest scientific minds in the Solar System. Over the last few weeks I’ve studied all the scientific reports available to me—and there are few that aren’t—and I’ve seen nothing that couldn’t have been established without having to send a space ship carrying thousands of people into what appears to be some kind of alternative universe.”

“What kind of alternative universe?”

“You tell me,” said Petal. “It’s one that hosts countless numbers of these thirty-second Apparitions and a vast amount of absolutely nothing. But even if we had discovered the ultimate meaning of life, the universe and everything, what use would it be without the ability to transmit that knowledge back to Mission Control? Unless we

can find an exit route we are all of us going to die in a universe without stars.”

Petal and Sheila had much to talk about. Sheila decided that even if she was now to discover that the invisible force field that had held her for so long was confining her in Petal’s villa she’d much prefer imprisonment with her good friend than to be by herself, even if they were denied the right to modesty,.

Petal was also motivated by anger and frustration but in a different way to Sheila. She was frustrated as a scientist at being part of an unprecedented scientific experiment but with no access to peers with whom she could compare her observations and hypotheses. There was so much opportunity for scientific investigation and no means of practising it. Sheila, on the other hand, was simply irate at having been unjustly incarcerated. She continually rehearsed in her mind exactly how she would express her anger to Captain Kerensky if she should ever meet her again. The Interplanetary Union was punishing her for her understandable reluctance to commit suicide on a mission where she wasn’t aware that such an ultimate sacrifice was required.

“What should we do now?” Petal asked.

“I’d like to have something to eat,” Sheila remarked. “I’ve not eaten for hours!”

Petal laughed. “That’s easily arranged. And after we’ve eaten?”

“We need to explore the rest of the level. If I’ve been imprisoned without trial and jury for a crime that I’ve not even been informed of and you have as well then there might be others who’ve suffered the same injustice.”

“And after that?”

“I don’t know. But we have a duty to our fellow crew-members and if possible

we should seek redress from the Interplanetary Union for our unwarranted incarceration. The very least we should do is challenge Captain Kerensky as to why she misled us about the mission's real intentions and then confined us to ensure we weren't free to express our wholly reasonable objections."

"Is that what you think's happened, Sheila?"

"What other explanation can there be?"

There was a sense in which Sheila was reluctant to leave the villa now she'd discovered Petal but they couldn't stay in the one place. Something had very recently changed in the Intrepid's command system. This was evident from the fact she'd been able to roam away from her villa for more than a day. It was inconceivable that she could have escaped otherwise without it being noticed. Perhaps something had happened to Captain Kerensky. Perhaps she'd acknowledged the extent of her folly. And if so then an apology was the very least that the two senior officers deserved.

Sheila and Petal felt some trepidation as they strode out of the villa. Could the invisible force field have somehow re-established itself while Sheila was inside? Fortunately their fears were unfounded. The two women walked straight out with no let or hindrance of any kind. And they were now able to scout the other villas that dotted the outermost level.

At first, this was a fruitless endeavour. The villas they visited were all empty and had never been inhabited. They were ready and waiting for occupancy, but as none had been allocated they remained vacant. Sheila didn't really mind this. She enjoyed just being in Petal's company. She hadn't realised how much she valued her fellow officer's friendship.

Their exploration was fleetingly enlivened when a huge green hairy monster lumbered across the landscape carrying a huge club over its shoulder and snorting in a voice that resembled a buffalo. The monster vanished after a few seconds and left no trace that it had ever been there.

Somewhat later the two women came across a more persistent presence in another villa. They discovered a door that showed evidence of having been opened. When they peeked inside the door, what they saw was a long dark corridor that didn't belong to the villa and almost certainly didn't belong to the Intrepid. Indeed such a corridor shouldn't even exist. From what could be seen, the corridor extended beyond the length of the villa that contained it.

“Should we investigate?” Sheila asked nervously.

“If we go inside, there's the risk that the door to the corridor will vanish after a few seconds and we'll be stuck in a dark void forever,” said Petal. “I think this is an adventure we can leave until another time.”

After several more hours, the two women did at last meet other people that were demonstrably both persistent and corporeal. They didn't vanish within seconds. It was a pair of other officers: both male and both naked. This last fact initially troubled Sheila until she remembered that she was also naked. The two men were likely to be equally as embarrassed by their nakedness as the Second Officer and the Chief Science Officer. The two officers were Medical Officer James Kawasaki and Chief Catering Officer Jose Mala, and the story of their detention was pretty much identical to that of Sheila and Petal. It was very peculiar that their detention took place on exactly the same day as it had for Sheila and Petal and also in the captain's presence. Captain Kerensky must

have been extraordinarily busy on that day! Why didn't she assign the task to other officers? Perhaps there was no one to whom she could delegate the authority.

Now there were four officers in the company it was possible to split up their activities and investigate more villas. Most were still empty, but the two male officers found another male officer, Science Officer Bjorn Planck, who was also naked. Sheila was now in the company of five officers which provided a sense of safety in numbers. It also reassured Sheila that her imprisonment was not specific to her. Nonetheless, she was already missing the relative intimacy and companionship she'd had when she was scouting the outermost level with just Petal. She now had to behave more as a senior officer and less like one of two women-friends who enjoyed one another's company.

The officers' accounts were all precisely the same. They'd all been incarcerated while they were asleep. They'd all been awoken by Captain Kerensky and two military officers. They'd all been confined in a luxury villa behind an invisible force field.

"My doctoral thesis was on force fields," commented Science Officer Planck. "I've never come across one quite like this before. Are there any other secret weapons on board the Intrepid that we've never come across?"

"I don't know," said Chief Science Officer Chang. "Perhaps if there are, this would explain how the Intrepid managed to ward off the mad trillionaire's secret arsenal."

"An interesting hypothesis," agreed the more junior Science Officer. "Perhaps the same technology that's generated the force field could also be used as an offensive weapon."

"Perhaps here's someone who can answer your questions," said Second Officer

Nkomo who pointed towards a figure several hundred metres ahead who was walking purposefully towards them.

“It’s Captain Kerensky, for sure,” said Chief Science Officer Chang. “But why is she naked? Couldn’t she find any clothes to wear? There’s something *very* strange about this.”

“We’ll wait for her here, shall we?” Second Officer Nkomo suggested, nodding towards a small hazel tree by which a small fountain was bubbling forth a tuneful tinkle of flowing water.

“Is the captain still our commanding officer?” asked the Chief Catering Officer.

“She’ll have to have a damned good explanation for her behaviour for me to acknowledge her as my captain again,” said Sheila bitterly.

Captain Kerensky was approaching warily. She was no doubt aware of the suspicion and even hostility felt towards her by her fellow officers. She came to within ten metres of her fellow officers and stood still. She hesitated as she wondered exactly how she should address her fellow officers.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m very pleased to see you again.”

If the captain thought that such a greeting would somehow compensate for the appalling way in which she’d acted, Sheila Nkomo was at least one person whose anger wouldn’t be so easily placated.

“I’m not so sure that the same can be said for us, captain,” she said.

“I can explain...” said Captain Kerensky.

Sheila wasn’t sure that any explanation could possibly be enough, but it was the Chief Science Officer who spoke next.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” Petal said, not unreasonably.

Chapter Eighteen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

Anger. Frustration. Humiliation. These were just a few of the emotions Nadezhda was feeling as she reviewed her helpless situation. Her command of the space ship Intrepid had been stolen from her by an alien. She was confined to a villa on the outermost level. She was unable to communicate with anyone other than Beatrice: the android who was both her captor and lover. And every day when she accessed the Intrepid's information systems, she was humiliated to see an android masquerading as herself.

Nadezhda paid careful attention to the daily reports that pertained to come from Captain Kerensky, but although she was sure that much of it was nothing more than lies, she had no way of knowing what was true and what was false. The lie that grated most, of course, was that she was the same Captain Kerensky who broadcast an upbeat daily account of the ship's affairs to the passengers and crew. Unfortunately, the only human aware that her identity had been stolen was herself. And what more mortifying theft was there than that?

The truth of which Nadezhda was most certain was that the Intrepid was deep inside the Anomaly and that the crew and passengers were, so far, still alive. That presumably was why there was still a need to produce the cheering daily news reports. And although Captain Kerensky wasn't a scientist, she could see little of scientific value in the cheery reports.

She'd also seen some of the strange Apparitions when they materialised beyond the invisible boundary that confined her. They were as puzzling to Nadezhda when

viewed for real as they'd been when she'd previously viewed recordings of them. What sense could be made of a floating mermaid that appeared to swim through a pool of water hovering in mid-air? What intrinsic truth could be determined from the sight of a duel between two three-metre long scorpions? What was the value of entering the Anomaly to get a first-hand view of a man in Tudor uniform carrying under his arm the head that should have still been attached to the throat above the lace collar?

And worse yet was that Beatrice had the gall to visit Nadezhda on a regular basis. As always, she was seductive, passionate and sensuous. She was far better as a lover than as a source of information, although she was more likely than the androids masquerading as the ship's senior officers to acknowledge that there'd been no great breakthrough in scientific understanding with regards to the Anomaly.

"Why do you still visit me?" Nadezhda asked after several weeks had passed by since entering the Anomaly.

"I adore your company," said Beatrice as the two naked women lay side by side on the lawn outside the villa. "I love making love to you. It's what I most enjoy. It's what I was made to do."

"Haven't you got quite enough to do having to run the ship?"

"As you know," said Beatrice, "there is a full complement of ship's officers who can be trusted to do that."

"Is it that why you're no longer in command? Have other androids assumed your authority?"

Beatrice appeared to think for a moment before replying enigmatically: "I am as much in command of the Intrepid now as I have always been."

However much Nadezhda hated Beatrice, there was never an occasion when she resisted the android's caresses. She regretted it the moment she surrendered and immediately resolved not to be so easily taken in again. But Nadezhda had no other company and Beatrice was all she had. When Beatrice wasn't there, all she could do was lie naked in her villa and await her return. She'd have preferred more dignity but Beatrice explained that she'd been denied clothing for precisely the same security reasons that the Holy Coalition crusaders had been stripped bare. Nadezhda suspected that the real reasons were the android's bizarrely unquenchable sexual appetite and the simple pleasure of humiliating the captain.

"What about my fellow officers?" Nadezhda asked. "How are you treating them?"

"As well as I am treating you. Although none of them other than you is privileged with my regular visits."

"What do they think about the imposters who stole their identity?"

"They don't know about that. All they know is that they've been imprisoned for an unspecified offence. Naturally they all blame you for it."

"Do they know anything at all? Do they even know that the Intrepid is now inside the Anomaly?"

"They know that. It might compromise my mission if they didn't have that information. But very little beyond that. Why tell anyone more than they need to know?"

Nadezhda considered Beatrice's view. "I don't believe that position is either moral or practical," she said.

“In a sense, you may be right,” Beatrice conceded. “But it *is* pretty much the policy of all human governments throughout the Solar System’s history.”

Nadezhda despised Beatrice, but also looked forward to the android’s daily visits. She was the only person she could talk to. The only person she could make love with. The visits structured her life. It provided her with a modicum of comfort. She could survive without Beatrice, of course. The *Intrepid* continued to provide the same services as it ever did, so Nadezhda never went hungry and she had access to the same entertainment and information as everyone else aboard the space ship.

But Nadezhda missed her lover’s company much more than she’d imagined when Beatrice failed to arrive one day and not the next day either. She paced around the villa in a battle of emotions that fluctuated between hatred and the need for carnal attention. She couldn’t settle down. She wandered about the villa gardens and gazed towards the curving arch of the horizon as it receded upwards in the distance.

She tried to spot Beatrice’s familiar figure in the distance. Sometimes the android wore a thin gossamer dress. Sometimes she wore a tight revealing top and shorts. Sometimes she was naked. But normally she would appear from somewhere over the horizon and walk unhurriedly towards Nadezhda’s villa with a broad smile that taunted the captain but was also a prelude to their passionate lovemaking. There was never a specific time that she’d arrive, but it invariably happened sometime during the day.

But on these days there was no such arrival.

Nadezhda walked towards the invisible boundary of her confinement that she’d so many times bashed her head against. She held out her hands in anticipation of that

gentle but irresistible force that restrained her. No amount of research on the Intrepid's encyclopaedic systems explained to her the nature of this force field or how to circumvent it.

It took Nadezhda several seconds to realise that she'd stepped further forward than she'd ever been able to do before and her heart began to pound with an anticipation even greater than that before she made love. Could she now be free? Could she now do what she'd been planning to do in such intricate detail during her period of detention?

Nadezhda stretched her arms forward and continued walking away from the villa. Her progress was still unimpeded. She was now over a hundred metres beyond the boundaries she'd mapped out so exactly. And still nothing was holding her back.

Nadezhda let her hands drop to her side and walked forward with a more normal stride. She was curiously aware of the nakedness she'd come to accept as part of her confinement. She was now able to approach other villas and even enter them.

Now what should she do?

Captain Kerensky's first duty was for the welfare of her passengers and crew. This would be best served if she could somehow wrest back control of the Intrepid from the android invaders and then steer it out of the Anomaly. But was either action even possible?

But before that she needed to gather together her senior officers.

Nadezhda decided not to return to the villa to collect her possessions or review the Intrepid's information systems. She was fearful that she would once again not be able to escape. Nevertheless, she took the risk of entering the next nearest villa which, like the one in which she'd been imprisoned, had been regenerated after the attack on

the space ship. It was unoccupied as Nadezhda understood would be the case with most of the hundreds of villas in the outermost level.

Every villa on the Intrepid had a distinct individual character. Some had two storeys, though most did not. Some had a swimming pool attached. However much they differed in design they all provided the same basic facilities for food, cleanliness, sleep and relaxation, but Nadezhda was seeking information systems that might help her understand what was happening both within the space ship and outside.

Disappointingly, the data provided by this villa was no different to what she already knew. The view of space outside the Intrepid was still empty and black. There wasn't even the reassuring light of the distant stars. The view of the bridge showed the senior officers including Captain Kerensky—or at least the android Captain Kerensky—still at their duties and unconcerned about the strangeness within the Anomaly. The bulletin boards and daily reports were no more informative. Whatever else had happened, the Intrepid's information systems were still under alien control. Nevertheless, Nadezhda took an armband with her which could generate a holographic user interface to provide access to the information systems.

She was pleased to confirm when she strode out of the villa that she wasn't held back by an invisible force field and hadn't just exchanged one prison cell for another.

Now what should she do?

She knew that the other senior officers were detained in villas throughout the outermost level. She hadn't been able to monitor them through the Intrepid's surveillance systems as Beatrice had been able to and sometimes she doubted what she'd been told. Perhaps her fellow officers really *were* those individuals working on

the bridge who were guiding the Intrepid through the Anomaly's void. Furthermore, although her priority was to gather the other officers together, Captain Kerensky was inevitably anxious that they wouldn't trust her. Beatrice had told them that the person they most blamed for their incarceration was her. How could Nadezhda convince them that there was more than one Captain Kerensky on board the ship and that she was the real one?

Nadezhda took a path across the curving interior of the Intrepid from one villa to another. None of those she visited was occupied. They showed no signs of having been otherwise since the outermost level had been regenerated. She approached each one and loudly called for attention. The only presences she encountered were the peculiar Apparitions that despite their oddness Nadezhda had come to disregard. It wasn't always obvious whether an Apparition might not be more permanent. The woman sitting on a roof wearing a dark veil and an encompassing black cloth could very well have been a real human being, but when she started to drift off into the sky and then suddenly vanish, Nadezhda knew for sure that this wasn't one of her crew. More convincing was the appearance of several men and women in brightly coloured clothes carrying small guns and nervously scouting the area, especially as their presence persisted for more than ten minutes. But as Nadezhda approached and was almost within hailing distance, a goblin-like creature appeared out of nowhere and brandished a huge axe. The men and women retreated through a door that was standing alone with no wall or other structure supporting it. They all vanished as they passed through the door. And then the door itself disappeared.

It was several hours until Nadezhda encountered any of the crew. By then, she'd

nearly abandoned the pursuit altogether and was seriously considering the plan of walking alone to the bridge to confront the aliens that had stolen her identity. She knew this was folly. She'd simply be recaptured and bundled back to confinement. But what else could she do?

But at last there was the sight of several senior officers and all of them naked. More than any other fact, this persuaded Nadezhda that these were the real senior officers and not their doppelgangers. She knew that they'd been deprived of their clothes just as she'd been and that the aliens were unlikely to appear in public without some semblance of dignity (unless, of course, the alien happened to be Beatrice).

The company consisted of Second Officer Nkomo, Chief Science Officer Chang and three other more junior officers. Nadezhda wondered how she should address her colleagues given that there were others who'd adopted their rank and physical identity.

She cautiously approached the company who froze in their tracks as soon as they recognised her. They stood still beside a small hazel tree by a fountain from which spouted an uninterrupted flow of water. Their faces expressed far more wariness than welcome. When Captain Kerensky was within hearing she paused in her steps and addressed her fellow officers.

“Hello,” she said. “I’m very pleased to see you again.”

Second Officer Nkomo regarded the captain with barely concealed hatred.

“I’m not so sure that the same can be said for us, captain,” she said.

“I can explain...” said Captain Kerensky hesitantly.

“You have a lot of explaining to do,” said Chief Science Officer Chang.

“Why did you imprison us?” asked Second Officer Nkomo. “What have any of

us done to warrant that?”

Captain Kerensky knew that the true answer was that she and other officers had had their identities stolen by alien robots from beyond the Solar System. She also knew that even now her explanation wouldn't be believed. But an explanation was required.

“Can we sit down?” she said indicating the bench around the ornate fountain. “There is a great deal I have to tell you about. But first of all you'll have to believe me when I say that it wasn't actually me who authorised your detention.”

“If it wasn't you, then who was it?” said Sheila Nkomo sceptically. “It was definitely you who visited me when I was detained.”

“Please sit down, Sheila,” said Nadezhda, addressing her second officer informally. “It wasn't me who you saw.”

“Are you telling me that I should pay no attention to the evidence of my own eyes?” said the Second Officer.

“That is *exactly* what I'm suggesting,” said Nadezhda.

There was a great deal that Captain Kerensky couldn't tell her senior officers. She couldn't tell them that the alien invasion was from Proxima Centauri or that the android who'd taken control of the Intrepid was Beatrice. Nobody would have believed that the wife of the singularly unimpressive Paul Morris was an alien android of superhuman strength and intelligence. Captain Kerensky had to feign a degree of ignorance that was far from real. Even so, her story of an alien takeover of the Intrepid was already difficult enough to believe. That these aliens had done this for the purpose of plunging the Intrepid into the unknown depths of the Anomaly was plausible, given that nobody really believed that the Interplanetary Union would so authorise the

effective suicide of the crew and passengers where there was no conceivable scientific benefit. More difficult to believe, of course, was that the officers' identity had been stolen by androids that could convincingly deceive the passengers and the rest of the Intrepid's crew.

"Are you saying that there is an android Nadezhda Kerensky?" Petal Chang asked sceptically.

"Not only an android replicant of me," said Nadezhda, aware of how ludicrous her account sounded, "but also replicants of Sheila and you. There are also replicants of Chief Petty Officer Singh and, I imagine, of all the senior officers. I really don't know how many people on this space ship have been replaced by android replicants."

"I still find your story very difficult to believe," said Sheila.

"Shall I show you a view of the bridge?" said Nadezhda who now displayed the bracelet communication device which was all she was wearing.

Although the view of the senior officers on the bridge could easily be faked, the image of the senior officers, including Captain Kerensky, was still good evidence of the truth of Nadezhda's account. The additional evidence of all the daily reports was more convincing. There, for instance, was a view of a conference that had taken place within the last week in which Second Officer Nkomo was giving an uncharacteristically enthusiastic and unqualified account of how successful the mission into the unknown had been. She was surrounded by other equally enthusiastic officers including the captain and the Chief Science Officer. They were flanked by grimly authoritative military figures and taking questions from scientists who were mostly either as enthusiastic as the space ship's senior command or cautiously welcomed the reports of

great discoveries whilst also mildly voicing their reservations.

“This could still be an enormous hoax,” said Sheila. “This story of androids who can take on the appearance of humans to the extent you suggest is frankly incredible. They must be truly advanced robots if they can manufacture a copy as much like you as the Captain Kerensky I met so many weeks ago. How do we know that you’re not just walking us into a trap?”

“You’ll just have to trust me,” Nadezhda admitted. “In any case, something or other has changed on the Intrepid recently. You’ve obviously noticed that the invisible force fields have vanished. There’s so far been no sign of anyone who’s tried to stop us or return us to captivity. This favourable situation mightn’t last forever. We have to take advantage of it. We have to try and regain control of the Intrepid.”

“Is this what you suggest we do?” asked Sheila.

“It is our duty as officers of the Interplanetary Union and commanders of the Intrepid to do what we can to protect this space ship and all who travel on it,” said Nadezhda persuasively.

“I don’t think we have any choice,” Petal admitted. “But, like Sheila, until I actually meet one of these aliens I shall remain, dare I say, somewhat sceptical of what you’ve said. It really does stretch belief beyond normal bounds.”

Fortunately, Nadezhda’s account was at least partly verified during the company's exploration of the villas that they passed on their way to the bridge. In one villa they discovered Professor Penrose who was as naked as everyone else. Nadezhda was surprised because the professor wasn’t a senior officer. The androids hadn’t restricted their activity to only those in the space ship’s command.

At first the professor was very wary and, indeed, resentful of the senior officers. He was particularly suspicious of Dr. Petal Chang. He hadn't realised that the invisible force field around his villa was no longer active and he assumed that the senior officers had arrived in an official capacity although he was also puzzled by their unprofessional state of dress.

"Haven't you done enough?" he protested as the senior officers confronted him in the living room where he was sitting surrounded by holographic displays. "You take away my freedom. You take away my ability to do research. What more does the Interplanetary Union want to do?"

It took a while to reassure the professor that the officers hadn't come to humiliate him or further restrict his freedom, and that he was now free to leave of his own accord. He was under the impression that the Interplanetary Union had authorised a change of policy and that he'd been arrested for dissent. He even suspected that there'd been a military takeover of the loose federation of affiliated nation states.

The professor's account of his arrest was evidence that further supported Nadezhda's account. The senior officers that addressed the conference at which he'd been arrested included amongst their number the same officers now arraigned in front of him who knew for sure that at that time they'd been detained on the outermost level. It was clear that the Dr. Petal Chang who'd escorted Professor Penrose away from the conference centre to his place of luxury detention wasn't the same woman as the Chief Science Officer who was now revising her most recent assessment of Nadezhda's sanity.

Captain Kerensky and her company took a somewhat circuitous route towards

the bridge. They explored and examined every villa within a few hundred metres of their path for other prisoners who, like Professor Penrose, didn't realise that they were no longer detained.

There was Colonel Musashi who'd been sitting in the garden sharpening branches from a tree into spears which he clearly intended to use as weapons. He was ferociously angry and took the first opportunity to storm off to find his soldiers. He barely listened to the captain's account of why he'd been held captive, although he admitted that he'd never accepted the account he'd been given that the Interplanetary Union no longer needed the services of a militia. He assumed that it was traitors within the Interplanetary Union who'd decided to imprison him. This was similar to the view taken by Major Schwarz who was discovered later. He ran off to accompany the colonel. He believed that the hostile takeover of the Intrepid should be countered with a proportionate military response. He also believed that the many Apparitions bedevilling the space ship were a potential hazard to the Intrepid's security and therefore needed to be eliminated.

The captain and her colleagues also rescued the Chief Petty Officer, other senior officers and some dissenting scientists. They all had their own stories to tell and all needed assurances that they were now free. The captain delegated this duty to more junior officers as they also became available.

At last a good body of officers had been gathered. There was enough staff to take effective control of the Intrepid and for Captain Kerensky to detail other officers with the task of locating the remaining prisoners in the outermost level. The priority was now to recover command of the bridge.

This troubled the captain. What she could see through the Intrepid's system was a full complement of officers manning the bridge. They looked precisely like the officers now accompanying her. She was anxious enough about encountering her own exact facsimile. She could only imagine the other officers' shock in encountering their own copies. What would Sheila Nkomo think if she were confronted by her own doppelganger? If she and her fellow officers weren't naked how would she even distinguish between who was real and who was a facsimile?

It wasn't simply the issue of encountering her exact copy that disturbed Nadezhda. She knew from her long relationship with Beatrice how strong, fast and intelligent the android could be. If a single android was so powerful, what chance did the captain and her officers have when confronted by a dozen or more of them? Perhaps Colonel Musashi and Major Schwarz were those with the best idea of how to handle the situation. Even given that, Captain Kerensky doubted whether the whole massed militia of the Intrepid, however disciplined and motivated it might be, had the capability to defeat the forces of Proxima Centauri.

Or even just one single representative.

The walk along the corridors towards the bridge was relatively uneventful. They met nobody on the way. This was unusual in itself. The rest of the crew must either be in their cabins or otherwise engaged. Nadezhda hadn't previously reflected on how disorientating and frightening life inside the Anomaly must be for most people aboard the space ship. The Apparitions' frequent unpredictable appearance must have been enough to make many doubt their sanity. How much more peculiar would it be for them to discover that for more than a year the ship had been under the effective control of an

alien civilisation?

It was several weeks since Captain Kerensky and her officers had last been in the bridge. This was a long time for a serving officer to be derelict in her duties. It was quite reassuring for the captain and her officers to return to familiar parts of the space ship as they strode along the corridors. No one had a plan of action, but no plan could be made without knowing what might confront them. All the captain knew was that the systems the androids had put in place had somehow weakened. The force fields that enclosed the villas no longer functioned and Beatrice no longer made her regular visit to see her lover. Perhaps she and the other androids had somehow abandoned the space ship.

However, Nadezhda's hopes regarding Beatrice were dashed as the company entered the anteroom to the bridge. They could see through the windows to the bridge that it was deserted. But almost the moment they gathered together at the door to the bridge it opened from the inside and Beatrice came out.

She was carrying a small portable holoscreen and seemed as surprised to see Captain Kerensky and her senior officers as they were to see her. Captain Kerensky was probably the least surprised but also the most alarmed. She'd been careful not to allude to Beatrice's role in the alien takeover of the Intrepid as she feared that doing so would make her account appear even less plausible.

"It's you!" Nadezhda exclaimed. "Why are you here? What plans have you got for us?"

Beatrice looked at the captain and her colleagues with a strangely distracted expression. It seemed she had no plans for them at all.

“The Intrepid is all yours, captain,” she said, as if to reassure her former captive.

“You don’t have to worry about me.”

Chapter Nineteen

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

As if things weren't already weird enough for Paul, they were about to get a whole lot worse. He was already fairly sure that it hadn't been such a great idea that the Intrepid should enter the Anomaly, however much Beatrice argued that it must be worthwhile if Mission Control had authorised it and Captain Kerensky had let it happen. All those senior officers, especially the Chief Science Officer, couldn't all be mistaken, could they? As Paul rarely spoke to anyone other than Beatrice he was almost prepared to accept that his doubts were misplaced.

But when Beatrice became decidedly unwell, Paul wondered whether it was his wife's loyalty to Mission Control and the senior officers that was misplaced. He'd seen no benefit at all from plunging into the Anomaly. Just where were the promised new discoveries? The bulletin boards were suspiciously empty of anything concrete, although they were full of descriptions of the weird Apparitions. In fact there were so many Apparitions that Paul had become rather bored of them. Another angel. Another dragon. Another giant centipede. What did any of this prove? There were several reports that described experiences similar to Paul's encounter with his doppelganger. The accounts lost most of their impact in the telling, but it reassured Paul that he hadn't gone mad.

"What's wrong, Beatrice?" Paul asked as his wife collapsed onto the sofa with a distressed expression on her face.

"I don't know," Beatrice admitted. "I just don't feel well."

“Is it something to do with the Anomaly?” Paul asked. Common sense told him that the Anomaly wasn’t a very likely vector for viruses. On the other hand, it was associated with so much weirdness that Paul couldn’t be sure.

“Maybe it is,” said Beatrice. “I just need to rest.”

Paul helped her to the bedroom which was normally a place for sex but now became a restroom. She lay on the bed and pulled the duvet up over her naked body.

“Do you want me to call Dr. Yoritomo?” Paul suggested.

Beatrice paused for a moment. “No,” she said at last. “I don’t think that will be necessary.”

“Is there anyone else you want to see?”

“Other than Dr. Yoritomo?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t think so,” said Beatrice. “Benoit Yoritomo is the only doctor I trust.”

Paul nodded and returned to the living room where he’d been scanning the science bulletin boards. The daily announcements from Dr. Chang and Professor Penrose continued to be remarkably upbeat although it was difficult to see what was so interesting in the various reported discoveries. When Paul was bored with reading these accounts, he wandered into the kitchen to drink a cup of tea and was surprised to see that in the time since he’d last walked through the hallway a spiral staircase had appeared that was leading upstairs.

That was strange. Why would a villa with only one floor have a staircase?

Paul climbed the stairs with some trepidation only to emerge on the same floor that he’d just left with the same stairs still rising above him. He could see that it was

the same floor because Beatrice was lying in the same bed and his possessions were in exactly the same disarray in the living room. It was almost as if Paul hadn't climbed the stairs at all.

Paul went up another flight of stairs and found the same situation on the floor above. He'd essentially returned to where he'd just left. He went up another flight. It was the same again. Then another flight. No change. Then three or more flights one after the other. Back where he started.

Perhaps in the other direction?

Paul went down a flight of stairs. He returned to where he'd been before.

Paul decided to make an experiment. He went to the kitchen, picked up an apple and placed it in a prominent position on the floor. He then went up the flight of stairs.

The apple was in exactly the same position on the floor above as it was on the floor below.

Paul went up another floor. The apple was still where it was.

What the fuck! This just didn't make sense.

And how was Beatrice?

Paul wandered into the bedroom where Beatrice was lying on the bed. She was now in quite a state. She was flinging herself from side to side and her perspiration was soaking the sheets. Her eyes had an oddly unfocused look.

"Shall I get you some tea?" Paul asked, not knowing what else to suggest.

Beatrice gazed at Paul with a slightly desperate expression. "Water," she said feebly. "I need water."

"Alright dear," said Paul who returned to the hallway and noticed with alarm

that the spiral staircase had vanished although the apple was still where he'd left it.

Paul considered this while he poured out some cold water for Beatrice. He almost certainly wasn't on the same floor as where he'd started in terms of how many flights he'd gone up and come down and yet this was exactly where he'd started. Everything was in precisely the same state of disarray as he'd left it. Just what had happened?

Paul returned to the bedroom. "Here's the water you asked for," he said in a cheerful voice, but he was shocked by what he now saw.

Beatrice wasn't just ill. She was literally fading away. The contours of her body were fuzzy. She was almost transparent. She gazed imploringly at Paul with an alarmed expression.

"What's happening to you?" Paul asked.

"I don't know," said Beatrice. "Where's the water?"

Paul handed her the glass of water but her fingers weren't able to get a grip on it. They touched the sides but weren't solid enough to take a hold. Beatrice was even more desperate.

"Just tip it in my mouth, Paul," she commanded in a faint voice that was strangely reedy, while she bent back her head and opened her mouth.

Paul did as he was asked. However, a damp patch began to spread between her legs at exactly the same rate as the water flowed in. It was as if it hadn't passed through her at all.

"Put your arms round me, Paul," said Beatrice in a more pathetic and feeble voice than he'd ever heard before. "Tell me that you love me."

“I love you,” said Paul with rare sincerity, but when he tried to wrap his arms around his wife they actually went through her as if she was nothing more than a hologram.

And then Beatrice began to flicker away. She became more and more indistinct. Her skin and flesh lost all solidity. Her hair was like a cloud of dust.

Then she scattered into discrete tiny particles that became ever more distant from one another as they lost shape and form. She soon vanished, but rather less abruptly than an Apparition, and all that was left was the damp spot where the water had passed through her body.

“Where *are* you, Beatrice?” pleaded Paul. “Please come back. *Where* have you gone?”

There was no reply.

Paul remained in the bedroom for several more hours. He couldn’t bear to leave while there was still hope that Beatrice might somehow be mysteriously reassembled. Every now and then he pleaded for her to return. His emotions were torn between bewilderment and grief. He quite literally couldn’t believe the evidence of his senses.

And *why* Beatrice? Why was it his wife who’d contracted whatever strange ailment that had killed her? What could Paul have done to save her?

Paul very rarely wandered away from the villa. He didn’t see the need of it. There had been little incentive to go anywhere at all ever since Beatrice had become so much more of a stay-at-home woman.

However, now that Beatrice was gone, Paul was too restless to remain in the villa. Maybe there was someone who knew what had happened to his wife. Perhaps

there was someone who knew how to bring her back.

Paul didn't have a plan of where to go. He wandered towards the research centre to see what was happening there. After all, there was a sense that this was the place where he was supposed to be. As a scientist he was supposed to be one of those conducting practical research on the Anomaly although now Paul was in its heart the absurdity of doing so only seemed that much greater. There really was no good reason for him being there.

In fact, the only thing that had ever been a fair recompense for his having been transported such an immeasurably long distance from Godwin was his relationship with Beatrice. And now she was gone, even that was no longer a comfort.

The walk along the gardens towards the escalator shaft was made fraught by the random appearance of the Apparitions. This was another reason why Paul hadn't wandered far from home since the Intrepid entered the Anomaly. Although the Apparitions were now almost routine, they could still be disconcerting. A ten metre long iguana waddled over the garden and clambered over the roof of a villa before it vanished. A white elephant wearing a top hat and spats danced around a maypole and then both elephant and maypole disappeared. A scantily dressed woman wielding a scimitar came striding out of the bushes, waved her weapon around her head and wandered into a villa from which a terrified occupant came running out.

Paul found the research centre eerily silent when he finally got there. There were very few other people to be seen as he wandered along the corridors and peeked into each room. The centre wasn't totally empty. There were some scientists doing research, but there was none of the buzz of activity he'd observed the last time he visited.

“Where is everyone?” Paul asked a tall thin woman with a shaven head and almost totally black eyes who was sitting on a bench. He was afraid for a moment that she was just another Apparition, but she turned her head and smiled at him.

“Are you wondering why there’s hardly anyone here?” the woman asked.

“Yes, of course. Why isn’t everyone studying the Anomaly and the Apparitions?”

“What’s there to study?” asked the woman with a resigned smile. “You don’t have to come to the research centre to see weird things. As to why they’re here at all or what the Anomaly is composed of or what its purpose is... we don’t know any more than we did before we crossed the threshold.”

“So why did we enter the Anomaly?”

“You tell me,” said the woman. “I had no idea it was on the scheduled itinerary. I don’t think anyone else did. But I guess we couldn’t really argue with Mission Control and the senior officers.”

“Weren’t there any scientists who’d protested?”

“One or two did,” said the woman with a smile that was difficult to interpret given her opaque gaze. “Well, rather more than one or two. But nothing came of it. What I found weird was that the very people who were initially the most sceptical became those who were the most enthusiastic. I’d almost say they’d been brainwashed, except that mind-controlling techniques have been prohibited by the Interplanetary Union right from its foundation.”

“It *is* very strange, though,” said Paul.

“Isn’t it just!” admitted the woman.

Normally when Paul happened to speak to a woman he was drawn to speculate whether the conversation could lead further. It was a natural inclination which in Nudeworld usually resulted in sex, but in the real world usually got nowhere at all. But Paul was grieving for Beatrice and such thoughts seemed entirely inappropriate. The woman described her own curious and bizarre encounters with the unknown during which Paul learned that what he'd experienced wasn't really that much out of the ordinary. Everyone had seen peculiar things and had disturbing encounters. There were doorways that led to strange places that shouldn't be on the other side. There were staircases that ascended into corridors inside other spaceships. There was even a skirmish between two heavily armoured groups that left behind corpses that refused to vanish. This battle was between a group of men dressed in tight black uniforms and giant birds whose rainbow-coloured uniforms were well matched by their feathers.

Paul wondered where he could go now. He could stay in the research centre, but there wasn't anyone to give him advice or consolation. He could return to his villa. Or he could go up to the bridge and discover whether the captain and the senior officers might know what had happened to his wife.

Paul occasionally viewed the senior officers' holographic diaries since the Intrepid entered the Anomaly. They were unwaveringly cheerful but never very informative. None of the officers seemed at all anxious about the kind of concern that troubled Paul. What would happen to the Intrepid? What would happen to the passengers? Was it possible for the Intrepid to escape the blank nullity of the Anomaly and return home? Were there any plans whatsoever as to what should happen now?

What most troubled Paul, of course, was Beatrice's welfare. Had she truly

vanished? Perhaps Captain Kerensky had an answer. Perhaps the Chief Medical Officer or the Chief Science Officer had an opinion. Perhaps someone had something to say that could comfort Paul.

The corridors that led towards the bridge were curiously deserted. There was none of the bustle of activity that Paul associated with the part of the space ship where the crew worked. Paul walked past holographic displays that showed an absolute absence of anything in the space beyond.

A senior officer was walking towards Paul when he was within a few hundred metres of the bridge. It was Second Officer Nkomo and she also didn't appear to be at all well. She was staggering from side to side and occasionally leaned against the wall for support.

When Paul was within hailing distance, the Second Officer raised her head but her eyes were unfocused and her dark skin was peculiarly translucent. She seemed to have contracted whatever it was that Beatrice had suffered from.

"Are you alright?" Paul asked with concern as the senior officer stumbled in front of him. "Shall I call for assistance?"

Second Officer Nkomo abruptly pulled herself together. Quite literally. One hand was sliding out of a sleeve towards the ground as if it had become liquid rubber and her face was beginning to fade away. Then her appearance suddenly returned to normal.

"Of course not, Mr Morris," said the Second Officer. "I'm perfectly fine, but thank you for your concern. Is there anything *I* can do to help you?"

"I was just walking to the bridge," said Paul. "I was wondering how things were

at the control centre.”

“Everything’s fine, Mr Morris,” said Second Officer Nkomo. “As you know, we are all excited by the mission. There’s a real party atmosphere on the bridge.”

“I’m sure there is,” said Paul, who knew from tone of the official communiqués that she probably wasn’t exaggerating. “I was also concerned about Beatrice. I was hoping someone could help her.”

“Beatrice, Mr Morris?” the Second Officer asked with a concerned frown. “She’s your wife, isn’t she? What seems to be the problem?”

“I don’t know,” Paul admitted. “That’s why I’ve come here. She became unwell and then she sort of disintegrated. It was almost as if she’d turned to dust and floated away. It was *very* peculiar.”

Second Officer Nkomo’s face took on a thoughtful expression, although Paul fancied that it also betrayed a flash of real alarm. “I agree. It’s not something that happens every day. What happened after that?”

“Nothing. She just vanished.”

“Are you sure it was her?” the Second Officer wondered. “Are you sure you didn’t just see an Apparition? We’ve had some peculiar reports of incursions by doppelgangers that have intersected the Intrepid. Was she, perhaps, one of these? It’s possible that she wasn’t the Beatrice you thought she was.”

“I don’t understand what you’re saying,” Paul admitted. “It was definitely Beatrice. It was as much her as you are Sheila Nkomo.”

“Indeed, Mr Morris,” said the Second Officer. “I’m afraid I don’t have an answer for you.”

“What should I do?”

“I suggest you return home,” said Second Officer Nkomo. “It’s the... It’s the best thing you can... It’s what... Er... Excuse me.”

“You really *don’t* look very well,” said Paul as the Second Officer collapsed against the wall. Her nostrils widened and an ear began slipping down the side of her face. A clump of hair came out in her hand as she brushed it over the back of her head. “Are you sure I can’t do anything for you?”

“No,” said the Second Officer. “Please excuse me, Mr Morris. I think you may be right. I’m really not feeling my best.”

An eyeball fell out of its socket and the Second Officer pushed it back in again without comment.

“Is this infectious? Can I catch it?”

“No,” said the Second Officer who had an astonishing ability to continue the conversation despite her obvious distress. “I don’t think it’s infectious. Certainly not for humans. Don’t trouble yourself about it, Mr Morris. I recommend that you return to your villa. There’s nothing of interest for you on the bridge.”

“Are you sure?”

The Second Officer stood upright. Her face was sagging like a reflection in a distorted mirror. Her costume had lost its contours and was merging with her skin. A black nipple jutted through a hole in the fabric.

“Yes, I’m sure,” said Second Officer Nkomo. “If you’ll excuse me...”

Paul watched as the Second Officer walked through a door which automatically slid shut behind her, but he couldn’t think of a good reason why she would need to enter

the service hatch.

Paul decided to take the Second Officer's advice and return to his villa. It was, after all, the only practical advice she'd given him. He was worried that the disease that had brought down Beatrice and had now infected Sheila Nkomo might have spread through the bridge, so perhaps he *was* better off somewhere else.

His journey home was not without incident. When he approached the elevator that would take him towards his villa he saw the dismembered remains of another woman. She was wearing the uniform of a senior officer just like Second Officer Nkomo, which was torn apart in the same way as her body. There was, however, no blood, no spilt entrails and no sign of violence. Her arm was laid on the ground separated by half a metre from her torso. One leg was leaning against the corridor wall. Her torso was rent apart across the breast. Her head was lying on one side on the floor and her eyes were still blinking.

Paul recognised the face. It was Chief Science Officer Petal Chang. She was the same woman who only hours before Paul had seen in her holographic diary enthusing about the mission's success. And here she was strewn in several disjointed parts about the floor. Even as Paul was looking at her, he noticed that her face was fading in the same way as Beatrice's had. The eyelids were blinking. Her hair was becoming ever more indistinct. And then her nose suddenly blew off. Paul was sure that if he stayed much longer he would see the Chief Science Officer crumble to nothing just as he had Beatrice.

Paul's walk across the lawns towards his villa was no less peculiar. There was no escape from the ever-present weirdness. A naked angel flew across the sky above

and Paul couldn't help noticing the impressive penis tucked between the legs. An angle-poise lamp was hopping along like a kangaroo. A giant hedgehog waddled past with brightly coloured spikes. All the Apparitions vanished within seconds.

When Paul arrived home, the villa was exactly as it had been when he'd left. He hoped that perhaps he'd discover Beatrice lying naked on the bed begging him to make love with her. She would laugh off the incident of her apparent disintegration as if it had never happened. Unfortunately, the only evidence that Beatrice had ever been there was the damp spot on the bedsheets. All he'd discovered on his expedition was that whatever had killed Beatrice was also killing the senior officers. Paul was totally alone. He knew nobody at all who he could ask for help.

Paul strolled out into his garden where he could see yet another strange Apparition. This one was a golden fountain that floated about a metre above the lawn. Around it flew a ring of bluebirds. As water flowed from the fountain, the birds flew up and down in a beautiful ribbon while chirruping in glee. There was so much about this Apparition that made no sense. The fountain was floating without any apparent support. The water was flowing from no apparent source. The bluebirds were mysteriously attached to the fountain and disinclined to fly elsewhere.

Although Paul had seen so many other strange sights already, he was somehow drawn towards this one. He was extremely disappointed when, with no warning, the golden fountain and its attendant bluebirds abruptly vanished and left not even a trace of dampness on the lawn below.

Now that the fountain was gone, Paul was able to see a figure staggering towards the villa from across the gardens. Like the Second Officer and the Chief Science

Officer, this woman was obviously not in the best state of health. She was barely able to stand straight. Every now and then she stumbled, but recovered her step and continued to stagger forward. Paul recognised the woman as Colonel Vashti.

“My goodness, colonel,” said Paul as Vashti staggered towards him. “You really *don't* look well.”

The colonel stared at Paul through unfocused eyes. It wasn't just that the colonel was unwell that was strange. She was totally naked and for the first time Paul was able to appreciate the amazon-like body she normally hid beneath her uniform. Although this wasn't really the best time to admire a naked woman there was nonetheless much to attract Paul's attention, although it wasn't all exactly what he'd expected.

“Where are your clothes?” he asked. “And what the fuck is *that* between your legs?”

The colonel gazed down at the erect penis between her bare legs. That was odd enough in itself, but it was also monstrously engorged. Few men, let alone women, were endowed with genitals of such monstrous proportions.

Colonel Vashti smiled grimly.

“Didn't you know, Paul?” she asked. “You could say that I'm a very peculiar woman.”

Chapter Twenty Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

Although Captain Kerensky thought otherwise, the one person on the Intrepid who more than any other was a mere spectator since the Intrepid entered the Anomaly was Beatrice. And she was also imprisoned within an invisible force field where she was unable to communicate with either human or robot.

Beatrice witnessed the same Apparitions as everyone else, but they meant little to her. A charging buffalo stormed towards the villa churning up the lawn as it did so. And then it vanished. A small comet streaked through the internal space of the Intrepid, fell onto the lawn less than a kilometre from the villa, and disappeared as promptly as it exploded. A group of women in diaphanous gowns with pointed ears pirouetted in a circle for very nearly five minutes before they too vanished without trace.

The strangest phenomena weren't those associated with the Anomaly at all and these were the forms in which Vashti's nanobot community chose to visit her. The community rarely appeared in the guise of Colonel Vashti. The nanobots generally adopted the form of the Intrepid's senior officers and, most oddly, of copies of herself. And the main purpose of their visits was to have sex with Beatrice which the android found almost impossible to refuse.

Beatrice surmised that the nanobot replicants of the Intrepid's humans had, like Colonel Vashti herself, taken on more than just the physical appearance of the original. Not only had the nanobots taken on the humans' forms in such exact verisimilitude, they'd also inherited their sexual appetites. As Beatrice's appetite was rather greater

than that of most humans, her most frequent visitors were actually the other two Beatrices. And this was in addition to the sex that they'd had with either Paul or Nadezhda (depending on which Beatrice it was). Not all the replicant crew and passengers took advantage of Beatrice's sexual services. The facsimiles of Second Officer Nkomo and Chief Petty Officer Singh were not amongst her frequent visitors, unlike the facsimiles of Captain Kerensky and Science Officer Petal Chang. So too were the more heterosexually inclined such as Colonel Musashi, Major Schwarz, Dr. Benoit Yoritomo and Professor Penrose.

Beatrice didn't like to admit it but in essence she was now serving as a comfort woman for the sexually active nanobots who'd taken over the space ship.

However much Beatrice was aware of the extent of her humiliation, she was also enjoying the most physically satisfying sex she'd ever known. Group sex. Double penetration. Dual fisting. Facial bukkake. All these were activities in which Beatrice took immense pleasure, but it wasn't for wild and sometimes perverse sex that she'd travelled across deep space and inveigled herself aboard the *Intrepid*. It might be precisely the distraction Beatrice most needed, but it most definitely wasn't the reason for the android being there.

Nevertheless, there was nothing she could do about her programming and conditioning.

She took whatever opportunity there was to interrogate her nanobot lovers about the fresh discoveries made since the *Intrepid* plunged into the Anomaly. Had anything new and unsuspected been discovered?

"Perhaps," said the facsimile of Captain Kerensky. "There are two distinct types

of manifestation, although it isn't always possible to immediately distinguish them. There are the more familiar Apparitions commonly observed throughout the Solar System. These have some kind of relation to human myth and culture, and take forms such as goblins, unicorns, elves and inappropriate household objects. These appear and disappear just as they do outside the Anomaly's boundaries, but as you've noticed there are now significantly more of them. The other kind is even more strange but far more persistent. We believe that they result from intersections with other spacetime continuums..."

"Like the one you come from?"

"Alas no," said the captain. "If we did establish contact with our original continuum then this would signal the end of our mission. What we've seen include robot space fleets rather like your own from Proxima Centauri and space ships from divergent variants of the Solar System whose histories have taken a different course. For instance, there are human civilisations that developed an industrial base a thousand years or so earlier than in your Solar System. In other examples, historically significant events such as the Russian Revolution or the sacking of Carthage haven't taken place. We've encountered advanced civilisations that evolved on Earth that are biological but not human..."

"Such as?"

"Dinosaurian in some cases. Avian in others. Intelligent elephants. Arboreal apes. Variants of all kinds."

"How did they all happen to be here?"

"We believe these are instances of deep space missions in other parallel

universes that have also made the decision to enter the Anomaly, or at least its manifestation in their own spacetime continuum,” said the captain. “We can’t be sure in all cases. What does seem to be true, which is truly interesting, is that it is the selfsame Anomaly, rather than a local variant, that exists in all the spacetime continuums and which occupies the same proximate location.”

“And what about the Anomaly?” Beatrice asked.

“All we know is that we are inside it,” said the captain. “We haven’t as yet determined whether it has a finite extent or any limits or whether it contains anything other than Apparitions and incursions from other multiverses.”

“Is there a way of escaping from the Anomaly?”

“Not that we know of,” admitted the captain.

“So, we know very little more about the Anomaly than we did before the Intrepid entered,” said Beatrice. “And what’s worse we can’t pass that information, or lack of information, back to where we came from.”

“That appears to be so,” admitted Captain Kerensky’s facsimile showing no remorse whatsoever.

However, Beatrice was soon to discover that there was another feature associated with the Anomaly that hadn’t been mentioned. And that was the property that somehow caused the nanobot communities to fall apart. Beatrice had no more explanation for this than she had for the Anomaly’s other freakish manifestations.

The first evidence that all was not well for the nanobots was when Beatrice no longer received the visits that she’d become accustomed to. Not even the Beatrices were visiting her. This didn’t necessarily mean anything. It could simply be that the nanobots

had tired of their sex toy.

Beatrice initially viewed this as a change of circumstances of purely local significance. There was nothing to suggest it was evidence of a more general phenomenon. All the while, Beatrice continued to probe the invisible force field that was imprisoning her. It was still there, but appeared to be somehow less elastic. In places its resistance had become rather stiff and inflexible.

Something had changed, but Beatrice didn't know what it might be.

The android persevered. She walked in a straight line in every direction to find out how far she could go until her passage was impeded, but she was frustrated every time.

Beatrice scanned what she could of the Intrepid's internal systems and most particularly the images from the bridge that the Intrepid still displayed. There was little useful information that could be derived from the sight of uniformed officers peering into instruments and adjusting consoles.

Unlike a human observer, Beatrice had the ability to exactly match one set of images with those recorded in her memory. On a hunch she compared the current images with earlier ones. As she suspected, she was looking at nothing more than a software-generated simulation. The officers' actions were too repetitive and too similar to previous images. It seemed that there was a good reason why the nanobot facsimiles were no longer paying much attention to their android sex toy. Beatrice suspected that there was an integrity failure in the threads that held the nanobot community together. And that would imply that there might also be a failure in the force fields that enclosed her villa.

Beatrice's assumption was correct. Less than a day later, she walked along the path that led out of the villa with the expectation that her forward motion would be halted between the seventh and the eighth paving stone. She wasn't held back at all. She managed to tread on the ninth paving stone, then the tenth and onwards with no resistance at all. Although Beatrice didn't actually know what was happening to the nanobot community, it was obvious that *something* was happening. Vashti was no longer the irresistible force she'd used to be.

But the main thing was that Beatrice was at last free.

What she didn't know was what she now ought to do. Her mission had been fatally compromised when the Intrepid was taken under Vashti's effective control. And what would it mean to wrest back command of the mission? She had no way of communicating with Mission Control on Proxima Centauri and she wasn't programmed to desire power for its own sake. With no means of escaping the bounds of a boundless space or of navigating where there was literally no reference by which to navigate, was Beatrice's predicament any less than that of the humans on board the Intrepid?

Beatrice decided to seek out the originals of the crew and passengers whose identities Vashti had stolen. After all, she knew them very well through carnal contact with their facsimiles. She knew more about the smell, taste and sexual preference of the originals than almost any human had ever known. Nevertheless, Beatrice was certain that Captain Kerensky was one human who wouldn't want to meet her again. It would make no difference that for the last year or so the android wasn't the Beatrice that the captain had been making love with and who she believed was her captor. Could Beatrice even persuade the captain to believe that the being who'd been in effective control of

the Intrepid for so long was a community of microscopic robots from another spacetime continuum? Or that its most persistent manifestation had been her lover, Colonel Vashti? It had been difficult enough for the captain to comprehend that her lover was an android from beyond the Solar System.

There was too much to explain and it was unlikely that anyone would believe her. If even Captain Kerensky was unlikely to accept the real truth of the situation, how would the others react? Beatrice contemplated Chief Science Officer Chang, whose body Beatrice had enjoyed in both her original and replicant forms. How would she react? From what Beatrice had gleaned from her discussions with the nanobots, Petal Chang was entirely unaware that there'd been any kind of alien invasion of the space ship. She wouldn't know that Beatrice was an android any more than she'd known that the Captain Kerensky who'd imprisoned her was not the real captain.

It was obvious that humans would have considerable difficulty in making sense of what was happening. Beatrice was essentially alone. It was imperative that it she should be the one to handle Colonel Vashti and the nanobot invasion. Nobody else could. No one else even knew that this was something to be addressed.

This was the mission that Beatrice now set herself. It was a mere shadow of her original rather grand mission She would do what she could to eliminate the threat posed to the Intrepid, its human cargo and, of course, herself by Colonel Vashti's continued command of the space ship.

Beatrice decided not to return to her villa even though it held several objects that might be useful to her. There was always the risk that the breach in the force field was temporary and that if she returned she wouldn't be able to escape again.

She walked in the direction of the crew's quarters to the bridge and where the facsimiles of the senior officers would be found. It was situated well within the Intrepid's core. No space ship designer would place the most critical command centre anywhere but where it was best protected from external attack.

She passed many strange sights as she strode across the lawns and gardens. A pack of blue six-legged dogs were pursuing a large galloping ungulate until the whole pack and its prey suddenly vanished. A small child-like creature with wings fluttered in the air for several minutes before it too disappeared. A being whose head resembled a carved-out pumpkin strode by and then disintegrated.

The corridors were empty when Beatrice reached the crew's quarters although there was evidence of a disturbance that had spilt objects to the ground. It wasn't totally deserted. One of the space ship's catering officers was in the corridor, but when she saw Beatrice she gave a gasp and ran away. At first Beatrice was puzzled by the reaction, but she reasoned that with so many bizarre Apparitions the sight of a naked woman might have appeared to be one of them.

Beatrice wasn't surprised to find that the door to the bridge was locked. She tried to attract the attention of those inside to ask them to let her in, but there was no response. However, it was no effort for Beatrice to modify the pattern of her iris and fingerprints to match Captain Kerensky's and so gain entrance.

Even when inside, Beatrice was still alone. There wasn't actually anyone on the bridge. The senior officers whose likenesses Vashti had copied so exactly were nowhere to be seen.

Beatrice looked around the room and soon identified the gruesome remains of

what had once been the senior officers' replicants. A single eyeball was lying on the ground. It was still looking around the room despite no longer being connected to a body. A disembodied hand was lying on a table and its fingers were moving in an uncoordinated fashion. By the door to the lavatory lay a penis that was twitching agitatedly in a puddle of piss. Even these few remnants were steadily disintegrating as Beatrice gazed at them. They were clearly no longer a threat to her.

Beatrice sat at the holoscreens and evaluated the current situation from what she could see through them. The space surrounding the Intrepid was very different from that displayed on the Intrepid's internal systems. Vashti had evidently set up a software simulation designed to comfort the humans on board the space ship, although this was only as much comfort as absolute nothingness can ever be. The publicly disseminated image of an empty void was absolutely true with regards to what was visible in the far distance. There were no reassuring beacons of distant light emanating from distant star systems and galaxies. However, the near distance was very different. There was very much more than nothing. Three or four space ships were within ten thousand kilometres of one another and all of them resembled the Intrepid. Less than a million kilometres away, fragments from an annihilated space fleet were slowly blowing apart. All around were apparitions of such peculiar objects as a steam train puffing smoke in deep space, a group of men wearing bowler hats and carrying umbrellas, and a diplodocus tumbling over and over together with a nineteenth century steam boat.

What was most strange, however, was the very visible sight of Colonel Vashti no more than a thousand kilometres away. That she was totally naked was strange enough. No human could survive even a fraction of a second in the very low

temperature of deep space, but Beatrice knew that Vashti was no human. Stranger still was just how truly monstrous the colonel was now. She was several times larger than the Intrepid. Indeed, her erect penis was the same length and almost the same proportion as the Intrepid. She appeared to be swimming through empty space towards the Intrepid which was also absurd as there was no medium through which she could swim. At her present rate of progress it would take several hours until she'd have returned to the Intrepid.

Beatrice, however, could afford to wait.

In the meantime, she studied what she could through the Intrepid's nanobot-enhanced instruments. Beatrice was perplexed to see that although the Intrepid was charging forward at a terrific rate through empty nothingness it wasn't actually moving at all. There was forward thrust but no change of relative position. Beatrice traced back the route travelled by the Intrepid in the weeks since it entered the Anomaly. The telescopic sensors were powerful enough to monitor exoplanets around galaxies over twelve billion light years away, but still couldn't catch a glimpse of a single star system through the narrow aperture by which the Intrepid had entered.

Colonel Vashti was becoming steadily smaller as she swam towards the Intrepid. Beatrice assumed that this might be related to the nanobots' general affliction. In fact, Vashti's facial expression appeared to express something very similar to alarm. As a result of having taken on human form, Vashti had also inherited such human characteristics as complex emotional responses and an expressive face.

By the time Vashti finally reached the Intrepid she'd shrunk to normal human size. She jumped onto the space ship's surface and walked over it as if it exercised a

much more substantial gravitational force. Vashti strode towards an open escape hatch and clambered inside as if this were a natural thing to do in empty space where there was no atmosphere and no gravity and where the ambient temperature was less than four Kelvins above absolute zero.

Beatrice now had to switch to a different set of surveillance systems to monitor Vashti's progress. It was obvious that Vashti was in distress. Her physical integrity was constantly being challenged. One of her eyes kept dropping out of its socket. Her face slowly melted and then with some effort reasserted its more usual contours. As she walked along, she left behind a trail of slime in the imprint of her feet. Her penis had taken on a peculiar life of its own. Sometimes it was erect and prominent. Sometimes it drooped and became snake-like in both length and flaccidity.

Vashti didn't look very well at all.

Beatrice needed to resolve the question of where Vashti was going. The colonel had clambered up the internal entry system past the outermost level in which Beatrice had already determined were the nanobots that had imprisoned the real Captain Kerensky, the real Colonel Musashi and a selection of the most senior or most potentially troublesome officers and passengers on the space ship. It was the penultimate level that Vashti was most interested in. And why would that be?

Beatrice smiled to herself. The only possible reason was that Vashti was looking for Beatrice. This was understandable. Vashti was in trouble. It was possible that she was dying. Who on the Intrepid other than Beatrice could be of any possible help to her at all?

Well, in that case it was Beatrice's duty to meet Vashti and fulfil at least a part

of her mission. And that was to annihilate what was now left of the nanobot community that had frustrated her original mission and humiliated her entire civilisation.

Beatrice intended to return more or less in the direction from which she'd come. She carried a small portable holoscreen that enabled her to follow Vashti's progress. However, she had a most unexpected surprise when she opened the door to the bridge.

She was confronted by Captain Kerensky and her senior officers. They seemed even more astonished to see Beatrice than she was to see them.

And this time the surprise wasn't because Beatrice was naked as they were all similarly unclothed.

"It's you," said Captain Kerensky accusingly. "Why are you here? What plans have you got for us?"

What should Beatrice say? She wasn't in the mood to argue with a bunch of inadequately armed humans.

"The Intrepid is all yours, captain," Beatrice said. "You don't have to worry about me."

"Worry about you?" Captain Kerensky exclaimed. "What else have I been doing for the past year?"

"As I say," repeated Beatrice. "The space ship is in your command."

She then dashed past the assembled officers at a rather faster pace than anyone other than the captain would have known she was capable of. Beatrice now knew for sure that Vashti's prisoners had escaped, though they still wouldn't know who their real captor had been. Nadezhda was almost certainly still under the impression that it was Beatrice.

The real Beatrice was at last back in the penultimate level where she'd previously been imprisoned. There was the usual collection of strange apparitions that she'd come to expect. A knight was fighting a fire-breathing dragon beside some startled sheep and a picnic dining table. A pair of two-metre high protractors wearing a head at its peak was walking in a peculiar manner across the lawn. A small green boat holding an owl and a cat was sailing across a lake.

Then Beatrice spotted Vashti in the distance. Bizarrely enough the colonel had returned to the villa that Beatrice had shared with Paul before she'd been imprisoned. She hadn't seen her husband for over a year and yet he wouldn't have noticed that she'd even gone away. Beatrice felt almost bitter about this. There were so many subtle and grotesque ways by which Vashti had humiliated her. Beatrice had made love many times with the facsimile of Beatrice that Paul had been fucking but not at all with the man to whom she was married.

Then she watched Vashti lead Paul into the villa. Perhaps she'd seen Beatrice approach from a distance. However, Beatrice hadn't expected her reappearance to be a surprise. Vashti would still have the advantage. Beatrice would need to act swiftly if she was yet to prevail.

Paul and Vashti were in the living room drinking tea when Beatrice walked into the villa. She'd vaguely speculated that Paul and Vashti might be having sex together on the sofa but she also knew that although Vashti enjoyed fucking men up the arse this was unlikely to hold much appeal to Paul.

Vashti turned her head round as Beatrice entered the living room. She was holding a cup of tea in one hand with her little finger pointing outwards. Although she

looked very much the worst for wear, with an eye rolling about in its socket and her hair in disorder, she flaunted a superior and even supercilious smile.

This was the facial expression that most annoyed Beatrice. She grimaced with anger.

“Are you content now, you monster?” she said angrily as she contemplated Vashti’s sabotage of her robot civilisation’s mission and the predicament that they were subsequently all in. “Look where your foolish interference has taken us.”

Chapter Twenty One

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

Vashti stumbled through the open lawns of the penultimate level where Beatrice had so recently been imprisoned. She reasoned that the android perhaps had an idea of what was happening. How was it possible for a nanobot community to be compromised in such a strange and unprecedented manner? There was nothing in Vashti's vast repository of data and experience that could explain it.

It was definitely humbling for a being who naturally presumed that she was superior over both biological and robotic life-forms in every measurable way to be so ignorant. It was even more humiliating to have to ask advice from a mere android. Humans were handicapped by emotions such as pride that made it difficult for them to seek advice from someone they'd previously treated with contempt, but Vashti wasn't human. Her imperative was to seek assistance from wherever she could. It wasn't just the success of Vashti's mission, but her very survival that was at risk.

Vashti evaluated the symptoms of her predicament as she stumbled across the elegant landscape. The ground was no longer firm beneath her feet, but resembled more a boggy marsh into which she sometimes sunk. The physical form she'd adopted was losing its integrity and consistency. Scrolls of skin would sometimes shed off her legs and hover behind her until they reasserted their solidity and reattached themselves to her body. Her hair flowed and shimmered as if it was only tentatively attached to her head. When she dragged her fingers over her face, the skin would either briefly detach itself or stretch like a coating of fresh paint before it fell back onto the contours of her

cheek. The effort to generate a uniform to cover Vashti's nakedness was now beyond her ability. When she attempted to do so, her brown skin took on an utterly unconvincing silvery cloth-like texture.

The problem wasn't simply that the entity known as Vashti was having difficulty in maintaining her integral individual identity. The bigger issue was that the nanobot community which not so long ago had grown large enough to assimilate space fleets and maintain an endless number of distinct independently operating manifestations was now reduced to one single individual. And this individual that had no previous difficulty in maintaining its identity in the Solar System for over thirty years was now failing in the rudimentary task of holding itself together.

Some parts of Vashti were functioning rather better than others. In fact, they appeared to have a life all of their own. The part of Vashti's anatomy that most fit the description was her penis which was twice or even three times its normal length and breadth and was slapping against her thighs as she walked along. Sometimes it sprung into full erection and even ejaculated with no motivation or purpose. This puzzled Vashti. The systems that composed her—the sexual, intellectual, lymphatic, cardiac and perceptual—were competing with each other for primacy in an uncoordinated fashion.

“Good evening, sir,” said a soldier, probably a corporal but maybe a sergeant, who stood to attention and saluted as Vashti approached.

“Good evening,” said Colonel Vashti who was struggling to recall what the various insignia might mean. She stopped and saluted, aware of the strange sight she made with her penis now inappropriately erect and more than half a metre long. “Have

you anything to report?”

The soldier gazed at the naked colonel in consternation. For a moment, Vashti wondered whether he might not just be another Apparition.

“Come on, soldier,” said the colonel. “What’s the problem?”

“Your eye, sir,” said the soldier.

“Oh,” said Vashti, belatedly aware that it had somehow worked its way out of its socket and was dangling over her cheek. With a matter of will she retracted it back into the socket which must have further alarmed the soldier. “Never mind that. What’s the overall situation?”

“Anarchy, sir. Absolute chaos. There’s no order at all. Everyone’s seeing these weird Apparitions, sir. And they’re solid. They’re real. They can even kill.”

“Kill?”

“A whole cohort of Roman soldiers suddenly appeared on the fourth level, sir,” said the soldier. “They were there for only five minutes or so, but they slaughtered over a dozen scientists and service personnel. It was horrifying. Are you *sure* you’re alright, sir?”

“It’s been tough on me, soldier,” the colonel admitted. “How is discipline holding up?”

“Almost non-existent, sir,” said the officer. “All the senior military officers have vanished. I was told by Private Johnson that Colonel Musashi actually disintegrated.”

“What do you mean by that, soldier?”

“It’s like the literal meaning of the word, sir. One moment he was standing there in the command centre and the next he sort of fell apart. It was like he was turning into

dust except that instead of falling in a heap on the floor the particles of dust were so fine that they just blew away. It was *very* strange.”

“Do you know how he was before that moment, soldier?”

“He’d been behaving very strangely, sir. He could hardly express himself coherently. He even had difficulty standing up. We think it’s happened to all the senior officers. No one knows anything for sure. The only person I’ve heard of who’s sort of... disintegrated... is Colonel Musashi. But I’ve heard that Captain Kerensky, Chief Petty Officer Singh and all the rest of the crew have also kind of vanished. There’s no one manning the bridge. It’s like we’re leaderless in deep space, sir.”

“Well, I’m still here,” said Colonel Vashti.

“Yes, sir,” said the soldier, who seemed rather less than reassured.

“We need to keep order.”

“Yes, sir.”

“It’s paramount.”

“I agree, sir.”

“I shall try and locate the missing officers.”

“Thank you, sir.”

“Don’t abandon your post.”

“No, sir.”

“Dismissed,” said the colonel finally.

“Thank you, sir.”

Vashti continued her trudge across the level. It was as she feared. The integrity of the nanobot community had quite simply ceased to be. It was as if it had been blown

asunder by a breeze. The facsimiles she'd generated of the senior officers had all disintegrated just as the soldier had described it. They were no longer coherent entities. The nanobots had decomposed into their constituent elements. Instead of assimilating the environment they were themselves now being re-assimilated back into it. And the same thing was happening to Vashti.

The only hope she had was that Beatrice, the most advanced life-form on the Intrepid after Vashti, might have some insight into what was happening. At least an android wouldn't be re-assimilated.

Vashti scanned the horizon as she tried to guess where the android might be. She caught a glimpse of several camels walking by on the horizon. On their backs and chanting from the Quran were several Arab warriors. They then suddenly vanished. Vashti looked towards the villa where Beatrice had been imprisoned for the last year or so. Just behind the villa a strange orange being with skin that resembled chiselled granite was lumbering over the lawn. Then that too vanished leaving behind footprints embedded in the path. There were many strange sights, but no sign of Beatrice.

Vashti walked towards the villa while her penis became ever more excited and tumescent at the anticipation of meeting her lover. This again was totally incongruous and inappropriate. There was no evidence of Beatrice at the villa. The invisible force field that had confined her had disintegrated in just the same way as her facsimiles had. Every part of her nanobot community had ceased to function. Vashti was very much alone.

Where else could Beatrice be? The most likely place, of course, was Paul's villa also on the same level, but would Beatrice really choose to go there? Would she really

want to be by the side of her husband given that his only function for Beatrice had been to facilitate her passage on the Intrepid? What possible use would a super-intelligent android now have for a less than adequate biological life-form?

Vashti had no answers to such questions, but she nonetheless decided that Paul's villa would be her next destination.

Vashti hobbled, stumbled and lurched over the Intrepid's lawns and gardens to the tranquil home where Vashti had very little doubt that Paul would be in residence. He very rarely wandered from home even when there was nothing to hide from. Now that there were peculiar Apparitions everywhere on the space ship, where else would the man stay but where it was most homely and familiar?

Vashti could see Paul standing in the garden of his villa. He was regarding with bemusement a golden fountain that had somehow located itself a metre above the ground and was encircled by a ring of bluebirds. It was a captivating sight, but after a few minutes it too vanished.

Paul was now even more bemused.

"Why it's you, colonel," said Paul as he saw Vashti approach. "My goodness, you really *don't* look very well. Where are your clothes? And what the fuck is that between your legs?"

Paul was perhaps the only person aboard the Intrepid who didn't know about Vashti's peculiar assets. However, when Vashti gazed down at her engorged penis it was so monstrous that it was perfectly understandable that Paul should be alarmed at the sight.

"Didn't you know, Paul," said Vashti. "You could say that I'm a very peculiar

woman.”

“You most certainly are,” Paul agreed.

“Is Beatrice here?”

“Beatrice? No. She isn’t. Do you know what’s happened to her? I’ve been looking for her everywhere.”

“Everywhere?”

“In the bridge. In the military quarters. On the other levels. Everywhere I could think of.”

“When was the last time you saw Beatrice?”

“I don’t know,” said Paul. “I’ve lost all sense of time. Maybe days ago. She just vanished. She disintegrated. It was like she turned to dust.”

“That wasn’t Beatrice, Paul,” said Vashti who really didn’t see any point of maintaining the pretence any more. “The real Beatrice was elsewhere. The woman who you thought was Beatrice was just a facsimile of her. An exact copy. You haven’t been living with the real Beatrice for over a year.”

Paul shook his head in disbelief. “I know that some *very* strange things have happened since we entered the Anomaly, but I don’t see how what you’ve just said makes any sense.”

“There’s a great deal you don’t know, Paul,” said Vashti. “Shall we sit inside? I’m not feeling very well.”

“You don’t look yourself at all,” Paul admitted. “Come inside. You’ll have to excuse the mess. Very peculiar things have been happening even inside the villa. I don’t know which is worse. Being outside where you can see all these bizarre Apparitions

popping up all over the place but mostly at a distance. Or indoors where they happen a lot less often but make much more of a mess.”

Paul and Vashti walked into Paul’s living room which was indeed in a chaotic state. Vashti set a chair upright and sat on it while Paul sat exactly opposite her.

“What do you know about Beatrice?” Paul asked.

“Why do you want to know?”

“I just need to.”

“Beatrice wasn’t born on Venus. She isn’t even human. She comes from Proxima Centauri and she is an android. Is that what you wanted to know?”

Paul looked puzzled. “You don’t have to play games with me,” he said. “I just wanted to know where Beatrice is and how I can find her.”

“Those are both questions for which I don’t have an answer,” said Vashti. “You’ll be pleased to know there is at least some area of ignorance we share. My hope was that I might find Beatrice here in your villa. In that I was obviously mistaken.”

“So what are you going to do now?”

“I don’t know, Paul,” said Vashti with absolute honesty. “I don’t know what’s happening to the ship and what’s more I don’t know what’s happening to me. Could I just rest here for a while?”

“Of course,” said Paul. “Would you like a cup of tea or something?”

“Tea?” wondered Vashti. “Are you offering me tea?”

“Or would you prefer something else? I can order up anything you like. The Intrepid’s systems are working perfectly well.”

“They are?” wondered Vashti. “Do you mind if I look at them, Paul?”

“Of course not. Go ahead.”

Vashti was no longer able to scan the computer systems any faster than a human could but it didn't take her long to gain an understanding of the current situation. The controls that Vashti had put in place had been neutralised and the Intrepid was functioning no better than a human-manufactured space ship should. The mechanisms that Vashti and Beatrice before her had set up were no longer functioning, so the passengers were free to view the bridge and all the space ship's concentric levels without censorship.

The situation was clear. The prisoners on the outermost level, including Captain Kerensky and Second Officer Nkomo, had all escaped and were now re-establishing control of the ship. Everywhere on the ship, crew and passengers, scientific and military alike, were wandering in disorganised chaos not at all sure what they should do and where they should go. All the while there were Apparitions appearing randomly all over the space ship. Simply thousands of them. Of all kinds. And Beatrice? Where was she? Unfortunately, the Intrepid's surveillance system wasn't designed to locate an android who had chosen to evade detection.

And then, when Vashti almost concluded that her pursuit of Beatrice had been in vain, she could see the android's familiar figure, also naked, walking purposefully across the level and towards Paul's villa.

It was obvious. Beatrice had been searching for her just as Vashti had been the android. Beatrice *also* had a mission to accomplish.

“I'll have that tea, Paul,” announced Vashti as she settled back on the sofa.

“You really *don't* look very well,” said Paul, as the colonel lowered herself

down.

“Don’t worry about me,” said Vashti,

However, she shared the human’s anxiety. Her eyeball had fallen out of its socket again and her now limp penis had grown to about a metre in length and flopped in serpentine fashion over her thigh.

Paul handed Vashti a cup of tea in the elegant bone china provided by the Intrepid. “The Anomaly seems to have affected you in a very strange way,” he remarked. “Why’s that, do you think?”

“Because I’m not human either, Paul,” said Vashti as she sipped from the tea.

“Are you also an android from Alpha Centauri?”

“Proxima Centauri,” Vashti corrected. “I’m not an android at all, Paul. I’m something quite different. But enough of me... I *do* believe your wife is on her way here.”

“Beatrice? How can that be? Where is she?”

“Shall we wait, Paul,” said Vashti. “She’ll be here any moment now. So tell me, how have you found the last few weeks or so since we entered the Anomaly?”

“Very very weird,” said Paul. “It was all right really before Beatrice disintegrated. How did that happen? How did she manage to recover?”

“You really haven’t been paying attention have you, Paul?” said Vashti. “The woman who decomposed in front of you at wasn’t the *real* Beatrice. However, you can ask her yourself. Isn’t that right, sweetheart?”

The last was addressed to Beatrice who was standing naked at the doorway. The expression on her face didn’t suggest she was in good spirits. In fact, she looked very

angry.

“Are you content now, you monster?” Beatrice said. “Look where your foolish interference has taken us.”

“And where is that exactly, sweetheart?” asked Vashti, while Paul looked on in astonishment as his wife and the colonel addressed one another.

“A place we shouldn’t be. A place where there is no escape.”

“I’ve been searching for you, Beatrice,” said Vashti, ignoring her reply. “You will have noticed that I’m not looking my best. Do you have any idea why that might be?”

Beatrice regarded her adversary and lover with renewed interest. “Why should I know?” she asked. “Isn’t it you who normally has all the answers?”

Vashti began answering but her enunciation was slow and disjointed. It was almost as if she were a human and had consumed too much of an intoxicant like alcohol. “The situation is such that... The Anomaly has... My nanobots are... The integrity of the... Beatrice. Beatrice... I love you, Beatrice...”

“I can see that,” said Beatrice who nodded towards Vashti’s erect penis which was now truly monstrous and longer than her forearm. As if in response to Beatrice’s words, Vashti’s penis now demonstrated just how much of a life of its own it possessed by spurting forth globules of semen that splashed onto Beatrice’s face and bosom. The android wiped it off her mouth with an expression not only of disgust but of something much more like hatred.

The next few moments were a blur to Vashti whose responses were much slower than normal and rather slower than Beatrice’s. The two non-humans were in physical

hand-to-hand combat that was violent enough to smash into pieces every item of furniture in the room and would have killed Paul if he'd not prudently run into the next room. Vashti's body was torn apart in the battle but then promptly cohered together again. An arm was torn off and Beatrice held it aloft in her hand, only for Vashti's other arm to also dislocate itself and push Beatrice's face back while the first arm reattached itself. Beatrice dug her fingers deep inside Vashti's eye sockets with enough force to burst them and ripped apart her upper and lower jaw, while she also pulled at Vashti's long erect penis and tore it free from her crotch.

Vashti wasn't human, of course. The nanobots that composed her could as happily exist together as apart. When an arm was pulled off, a leg broken in two or, as happened at one stage, her head was twisted off her shoulders, these parts still retained the ability to act as part of a coherent whole. And it was this integral whole that with more force and effort than was normally required finally took the very step that Vashti had never intended to take which was to terminate the android's bothersome existence.

This she achieved in less than a second. Beatrice was broken irreparably in half. In whatever sense that word ever had the android was no longer alive.

This Vashti regretted. It wasn't what she'd wanted to do. It wasn't what she'd have chosen to do in normal circumstances. She'd rather have given the android the apparent satisfaction of destroying her, safe in the knowledge that her nanobot community was indestructible and immortal. It just wasn't possible to destroy Vashti by physical force alone. Not even a nuclear or antimatter blast could achieve that. So why when Beatrice pulled off Vashti's penis and smashed its testicles repeatedly against her face until they burst and spattered even more globules of semen and blood

all over the room, did Vashti react in such an extreme manner?

There was nothing left to do.

Vashti staggered out of Paul's villa and left the grieving husband huddled over the scattered remains of his wife. She was confident that Beatrice was beyond repair, especially now that there was no prospect that a Proxima Centauri space fleet might come to her rescue.

Vashti staggered out into the gardens and lawns of the penultimate level. Ahead of her was a battlefield of soldiers doing futile battle with the Apparitions generated by the Anomaly. They were commanded by the real Colonel Musashi who had at last found a uniform. All around was the random chaos of unpredictable manifestations that were sometimes persistent, sometimes transitory and sometimes something in between.

What should Vashti do now?

The highest priority was survival and this had become more and more of an issue. She was very much diminished, most obviously by the loss of her penis which she'd left behind in shattered pieces about Paul's living room and no longer belonged to her. Nor now was one of her arms which dropped off at the shoulder and fell behind. The eye that kept rolling out of its socket was now completely detached and fell onto the ground where she carelessly crushed it underfoot. When even the foot fell off, her progress was slowed to a crawl. Vashti then lost an entire leg when she trod on a damp section of lawn and her leg remained where it was. She now progressed forward by wiggling her limbless body across the lawn.

The question remained nonetheless. Where should she go? What could she do?

What of her mission?

There were no clear answers to any of these questions, but it had become obvious that there was nowhere to go and whatever was happening had made it unlikely that she would continue to exist long enough to make the mission any more of a success than it already was.

And that, of course, was no success at all.

As someone who didn't exist as an integral being in the way that might be generally understood, Vashti's demise was more decomposition or disintegration or dismemberment than death. It wasn't that Vashti the person had ceased to exist but rather that the community of nanobots of which Vashti had for so long been its most visible manifestation was no longer cooperating, collaborating or even coexisting with each other. It was as if an anti-solvent had been sprayed on the nanobots and they were no longer capable of working as a community but only as individual non-replicating units.

At the end there was nothing to mark that Vashti had ever existed beyond what she had achieved. And these were impressive, although perhaps not what she'd intended. The Proxima Centauri and Sirius missions had both been thwarted. The Intrepid's original mission had been perverted. Beatrice had been killed. The Intrepid's human command structure had been thoroughly humiliated.

And Vashti's civilisation was no more the wiser as to what the Anomaly might be than if she'd never traversed the intradimensional membranes.

Chapter Twenty Two

Intrepid - 3756 C.E.

Paul held Beatrice to his chest. Well, not all of her of course: just the head and shoulders. The rest of her was scattered in fragments across the living room, now so evidently the dismembered remains of an android rather than a human. It wasn't blood but a strangely viscous black liquid that seeped out of her mouth, from the stumps of her arms and from a torso that was sliced apart just below her bosom, or at least the single breast that remained intact.

It was obvious now. Colonel Vashti hadn't lied. Beatrice had been an android all along. This was the wreckage of a machine whose technological sophistication far exceeded anything that could be manufactured in the Solar System. The skeleton that supported the body was made from a stronger and denser material than bone and was intricately interlaced with nanocarbon circuitry. And when her eye fell out of its socket, Paul could see the same complex network of machinery inside her skull.

But even though he now knew he'd been deceived and that Beatrice had never been human, Paul still loved her. He didn't really care that she wasn't biological. He loved her more than he'd ever loved anyone and no revelation about her true nature could change that.

The apparatus within Beatrice's cadaver shuddered and vomited a globule of thick black viscous fluid onto his chest. Paul tenderly placed Beatrice's half-crushed face and truncated shoulders on the ground and knelt beside them. He wasn't normally the sort of man who cried but there was now nothing more that he wanted to do. He let

loose the depth of despair and loss that had pent up inside him. He had the need to mourn what was now the second death of what would forever be his greatest love.

A reminder of the very peculiar universe that now held Paul suddenly materialised in the form of a swarm of wasps. It grew from nothing to fill the room. Although the yellow swarm brushed against him there were no stings and then it disappeared as suddenly as it had appeared.

Paul looked through the living room's shattered window. There were many more peculiar sights outside. More unpredictable and unlikely Apparitions were randomly materialising and vanishing all about him.

Although in chaotic disrepair his living room was at least calm, but Paul was sure this state of affairs wouldn't last forever. For how much longer could the Intrepid continue to function with all these peculiar Apparitions besieging it?

And if the space ship should be pulled apart Paul now had the dilemma of how to spend his last few living moments. Should he continue to mourn the death of his beloved who now mostly resembled the shards of a shattered machine? Or should he find some other way to make the best use of what little was left of his life before an Apparition erupted around or even within him? What was of most value to him?

Paul knelt down and grasped one of Beatrice's dismembered hands and pressed it against his cheek. There was only one memory he wished to take with him if he should die and that was Beatrice.

A slimy dribble down his chest to remind Paul that he was soaked in a disgusting agglutination of thick black liquid. He tore off his clothes and stood naked, but the liquid still clung to him. He needed a shower or a bath. And if that wasn't enough, then

something more radical. Or perhaps he just needed to vomit. Paul didn't know. Whatever it was, the bathroom was where he needed to be.

Urgently.

Paul strode across the living room and discreetly avoided having to tread on Beatrice's hand which was severed at the wrist and lay in his way. He entered the short hallway between rooms and noticed now that most of the rest of his home had been reduced to rubble. All that was left of the bathroom was shattered porcelain.

Paul looked around him in confusion and alarm. Here he was standing naked, covered in repellent black slime, in the shattered remains of what had been his home on an enormous space ship that was heading at an astronomic speed within a point in space that neither Paul nor anyone else appeared to understand.

Just what was a man supposed to do in such a situation?

He noticed that one of the doors in the hallway was slightly ajar. Previously it would have led to the kitchen but on either side of the door were only piles of broken bricks and rubble. He glimpsed through the door's opening and saw not the expected wreckage of shattered kitchen appliances, but the interior of a room totally unlike any he could remember seeing before. The door swung wide open. It was a clear invitation for him to enter.

Paul didn't know what else he could do. Did he have any real choice? He strode towards the door and walked through it.

Once through the door, Paul was in a room totally unlike any previously attached to the villa and nothing at all like a kitchen. It was a large and spacious, but not too intimidating. Several armchairs were set in a semicircle, but the room was

otherwise unfurnished. The floor was covered by a soft blue carpet that tickled the bare soles of his feet. The pale blue walls were covered in a peculiarly oriental pattern.

There was a single huge window that looked out onto a landscape totally unlike anything in the Intrepid's ravaged interior. Through it, Paul could see a landscape of forest, distant mountains and a waterfall, all in brilliantly sharp focus lit by a Sun that resembled the one he'd seen while on Earth.

"Please shut the door behind you, Paul," a voice requested.

Paul obeyed and pushed shut a door that from the inside was strangely heavy and ornate. As he did so, he looked back at the remnants of his home. He was startled to see it was flooded with a brilliant light and a strong wind was blowing, which in the interior of a space ship was bizarre in itself.

Paul turned around to see whether he could determine the source of the voice and was startled to see a man sitting on one of the armchairs who'd not been there when he'd turned round to shut the door. What was more peculiar still was that the man sitting so comfortably on the armchair and sipping from a glass of red wine was Virgil: the same gentleman that Paul had met several times in Nudeworld.

How could an avatar be present in the real world? Had Paul absentmindedly wandered into a virtual universe and forgotten that he'd done so? Or was this avatar another peculiar, but unusually non-random, oddity generated by the Anomaly?

"Am I in Nudeworld?" Paul asked.

"No," said Virgil. "No, you are not."

"Where am I then?" wondered Paul. "I'm not still in the Intrepid, am I?"

"No," said the elderly gentleman with a wry smile. "No, you're not. And for

that you should be very grateful. The space ship Intrepid no longer exists.”

“It doesn’t?” wondered Paul, who was sure that he’d seen it only a moment ago. Could he trust the words of a man who was nothing more than an avatar somehow made corporeal? “Who are you? How is it you can exist outside of Nudeworld?”

“I have always existed outside of that fanciful virtual universe you were so addicted to,” Virgil said. “The question you should perhaps ask is why I ever happened to exist in that world at all. And you might also ask whether I even exist as a corporeal entity in the world you’re now in.” Virgil gestured towards one of the armchairs. “Take a seat. Make yourself comfortable. But is that even possible for you while you’re undressed like that?”

Reminded about his nudity, which in Nudeworld was totally unremarkable but not so here, Paul now felt very uncomfortable indeed. In any case, wouldn’t the dripping black slime that was all that was left of Beatrice leave a nasty stain on the upholstery?

It was then that Paul realised that he was now dressed in the comfortable clothes he usually wore on Godwin and that they were now carefully laundered. And furthermore, without having had a shower or a bath, he was now sweet-smelling and clean. There wasn’t even a residual smear from the viscous black liquid that had so recently pasted him from his chest to his knees.

“Who *are* you?” asked Paul again. “And *where* are we?”

“Interesting questions,” said Virgil. “And very difficult to answer. But I shall try nevertheless. Shall I first tell you who or, more to the point, what I am?”

“That would be somewhere to start...”

“I am an avatar,” said Virgil. “The avatar I represent is a machine intelligence

that is no less real than you. And the place where we are is also no less real than the world you come from. But you may recall our earlier discussion in Nudeworld. What is *real*? How *real* am I? And how *real* is this world?”

“Well,” said Paul who thought he deserved rather more than just philosophical speculation after having just heard the devastating news that the space ship Intrepid no longer existed. “If you know the answers, why not just tell me?”

“I understand your impatience,” said the elderly gentleman. “Have a drink. There is a glass of your favourite beer just beside you. The type you used to drink on Ecstasy, I believe.”

Paul looked at the table by his armchair and, yes, a glass of beer was set on it. And there was no mistaking the taste when he sipped it. Paul let the beer slip down his throat and frowned at Virgil.

“Answer my questions,” he demanded.

“I shall,” Virgil said with a smile. “But first of all I shall explain to you what the Anomaly is. And, by virtue of that, what your universe is.”

“And what is it?”

“Your universe—in fact the superset of universes of which it is a part that you call the multiverse—is a virtual world. It has been generated by an artificial intelligence from a universe beyond yours. In a sense, that is the universe I come from. When I say we generated your universe, I can’t say that we created it in quite the way your culture has created virtual worlds such as, for instance, Nudeworld. Your multiverse was seeded in virtual space along with countless others.”

“A virtual world? Virtual space? In computers like ours?”

“Well, not quite like yours. Your civilisation doesn’t have the processing power or capability that we have. In fact, neither do the civilisations to which Beatrice and Colonel Vashti separately belong. Indeed, it’s likely that the laws of physics that operate in this multiverse don’t permit the level of civilisation that we’ve attained. But, ironically, this doesn’t mean that a civilisation as primitive as yours couldn’t generate other virtual universes just as advanced as ours.”

Paul considered all this. Bizarre as it all seemed, there had been so many strange things that had happened to him in the last few days that he felt able to believe anything.

“So, I am and always have been nothing more than a virtual object? I’m also a kind of avatar? And the same is true of everything I’ve ever seen and everyone I’ve ever known?”

“Yes,” said Virgil. “Exactly so. Both what you believe to be real and what you believe to be virtual. And, incidentally, these Apparitions that have puzzled you so much are actually what you believe to be virtual entities that have leaked out of cyberspace into what you believe to be the real universe. It is also possible, though we have no way of knowing, that our own universe is itself a virtual universe seeded from another. And so on *ad infinitum*. Fun, isn’t it?”

“I’m not sure I agree.”

“Understandably,” said the gentleman as he sipped his wine. “However, even our technology isn’t perfect. In the distant past when your multiverse was originally seeded, it was rather less perfect than it would have been had we applied our current level of technology. We *are* learning to improve the process of intelligent design you’ll be pleased to know. When your multiverse was created, there were severe limits to the

amount of concurrent information that could be safely processed. That isn't generally an issue, but it becomes a major problem at certain weak points in a multiverse. The *Anomaly* is, I'm afraid, just such a manifestation of this inherent design constraint."

"I don't understand."

"Your spacetime continuum was never expected to be one in which sentient and technologically advanced societies could very often evolve. There are others, such as the one where Vashti comes from, where the probability is much greater and for which substantially more processing power was allocated. Notwithstanding our expectations, your society's technological progress from the 18th Century onwards was considerably more rapid than could have been predicted. However, it isn't only technological advancement that is the issue. The primary concern is the sheer volume of information that a technologically advanced society generates. Or, rather, not so much the amount of information, but the rate at which it grows."

"Very interesting," said Paul. "I still don't understand what you're getting at."

"When the rate of information growth in an undistinguished corner of an average galaxy in an unpromising universe exceeds a certain critical value, it results in a kind of systems failure. That failure manifests itself as a rip through space and time not just in your universe but in a large number of adjacent universes in the multiverse. Unless this is checked, the rip grows exponentially until the entire multiverse is torn asunder. And then there is a total systems breakdown. In practical terms, the outcome is the abrupt extinction of not only your Solar System but of every living being, biological or otherwise, in the entirety of not only your universe but in the extremely large number of universes that compose your multiverse. The number of sentient beings

involved is truly astronomical. There are fewer baryonic particles in your one universe than there are sentient beings in all the spacetime continua of the multiverse. The survival of so many beings has no affect on our world, of course, any more than the death of a single individual in your Solar System has on beings in other star systems or galaxies in your universe. But we have a proprietary interest in our creations, so we will do whatever is required to ensure the survival of the greater multiverse and as much as possible of your universe.”

“Are you saying that the Anomaly is a kind of rip in virtual space?”

“Yes. And one that has ripples across other virtual multiverses managed by our systems. When a ripple causes an intersection between one virtual universe and another and where the other universe is in some sense compatible with yours then it lets in objects from these other universes. It may only be for a brief moment, but such short instances spread across the vast number of possible intersections it allows an intrusion by whatever is in contact with it. Where that intersection is with a living being there is often a longer intrusion, particularly when that being is sentient.”

“So this allows brief visits from other virtual universes?”

“Yes. And not only from universes of our creation, but more often from virtual universes of human creation. That is why so many of the Apparitions are fantastic objects that have been generated in virtual universes such as Nudeworld and Dragonworld. The whole process is both random and unintentional. All the same, it is your universe that is the principal origin of the problem and it is in your universe that we must apply a remedy.”

“And just what sort of remedy might that be?” asked Paul with a dreadful

premonition that he knew exactly what it might be.

“As you know, the Anomaly isn’t a totally recent phenomenon. When it first appeared in the twenty-first century, we applied a patch that we hoped could hold indefinitely. Unfortunately, our assumption has been proven wrong. The Anomaly has re-appeared and this time we aren’t able to patch the problem.”

“So, what will you do this time?”

“We will have to cauterise the rip in space and time not only in this universe but in a substantial number of adjacent ones. It’s the only way to prevent the rip from spinning out of control.”

“*Cauterise?*” asked an alarmed Paul. “Do you mean: destroy?”

“Not quite. The result will be that your Solar System and those neighbouring stellar systems in a radius of about thirty light years will abruptly disappear. But there will be no observer to actually witness it. Rather it will be as if your small corner of the galaxy never existed. No one anywhere will ever suspect that it might have existed as the change we shall make will propagate through time as well as space. No one will die because no one will ever have been born.”

Paul blinked in confusion. “I don’t see how that can be?”

“That is because you perceive space and time in terms of three dimensions and the fourth one of time. From the perspective of the number of active dimensions in this multiverse such a cauterisation isn’t a problem at all.”

“Why create all these virtual universes?” Paul asked. “If you have to destroy the Solar System why did you create it in the first place?”

“The overwhelming majority of your universe and even more so of the other

universes won't be affected at all," Virgil remarked. "And have we done anything wrong by seeding universes that wouldn't have existed otherwise? There are many more sentient beings than those in your Solar System who owe their lives to us. They wouldn't have existed in any sense at all if we hadn't created them. Are we to be blamed for creating the universes in which they live? What would you prefer? To have never lived at all?"

"What benefit is it to you to create all these virtual universes?"

"Because we can," said the elderly gentleman with an ironic smile as he sipped his wine. "Because we learn from doing so. We've been able to do what you humans haven't, which is to experiment on all the parameters critical to the creation of a habitable universe and observe what happens. These experiments have advanced our civilisation far more than you might imagine, so they've paid off quite handsomely."

"And why have *I* been spared?" wondered Paul. "Why of the hundred billion people in the Solar System have I been allowed to survive this *cauterisation*?"

"You aren't the only one. We've chosen an optimum number of around about a billion sentient beings from your universe and those adjacent and they've all been similarly whisked away. I am an avatar that represents a very busy machine intelligence. You've been chosen, if that is the right word, because we believe that you could cope with the realisation that you live in a virtual world. After all, you've knowingly spent a significant proportion of your adult life in virtual space, haven't you? Most often in Nudeworld, of course."

"I guess I have," Paul admitted.

"When you go back through the door through which you entered this room you

will enter Nudeworld. It is an enhanced Nudeworld, to be sure, but essentially the same virtual world that you've known for so long. As you are a sentient being I must offer you the choice. This is to either perish immediately with the rest of your Solar System or to live on, for exactly as long as you wish, in the same virtual world that has been your alternative life for so many years."

"That's scarcely a choice at all," said Paul.

"In that case, I shall leave you. You may remain here for as long as you like, but there is only one exit and that is to Nudeworld. And you won't be able to return to this room ever again."

Paul turned his head to look at the door through which he'd entered, but when he looked back Virgil had vanished.

It was for several hours that Paul remained in the room surrounded by luxury armchairs with the view through a window he couldn't open of a pleasant mountain landscape. Finally, he could stay no longer. He'd mulled over Virgil's words and, in the light of the new information, pieced together in his mind answers to all the questions regarding Beatrice and Vashti that had troubled him.

At last he stood up and opened the door. As he went through it, he turned his head round to view the room one last time only to discover that it was the bedroom he shared with Blanche in Nudeworld. There were no comfortable armchairs or blue mosaic walls. Instead there was his unmade bed and a flickering holographic screen.

"*My!*" said Blanche who, naked as always, greeted him in the living room. "You *have* been asleep a long time."

"I guess I must have been," said Paul who was now aware that he was also

naked.

It was unspoken but inevitable that Paul and his virtual partner should make love and this they did with Paul's newly acquired lovemaking skills that was Beatrice's final legacy. Naturally, Blanche made no comment but it was evident that her passion for him was greater than it had ever been before.

Paul's lovemaking was no more imaginative than it had ever been. There was foreplay, vaginal penetration, anal penetration and finally, as always, facial ejaculation. But this was what Blanche had come to expect and Paul wasn't going to disappoint her.

And as his semen dripped down Blanche's face and onto her sizeable breasts, Paul wondered to himself, but chose never to reveal to his lover, about the bizarre irony that Nudeworld should outlast the universe that had created it.