

The New Tom Swift Adventures

Tom Swift and His Translocation Matrix

Researched and Novelized
By Leo L. Levesque

Cover Art by Thud

R
H
O
D
E
I
S
L
A
N
D

LEVESQUE PUBLISHING

P
U
B
L
I
S
H
E
R
S

A Levesque Publishing Empire Company
© 2015-2016

Dedication:

Tom Swift is not the only person in his vast empire to have adventures. Like it or not, his family and friends are out and about and doing wondrous deeds and saving worlds.

I want to acknowledge Tom Hudson for his help in editing this book. He has my back and for that I thank him.

©copyright 2015-2016 Leo L. Levesque. All rights reserved.
This book is a work of fan fiction and makes no claims to existing copyrighted characters.
The author does claim copyright to all situations, new characters, new inventions and the actual story in this book.

Tom Swift and His Translocation Matrix

Or

What Tom Swift Discovers
On Target Planet One

Researched and Novelized
By Leo L. Levesque

A true accounting from several people
who help influence Tom Swift's life.

Table of Contents

Foreword:	Voyage (Five Years Later)	.....	7
One:	Separation! (Part 1)	.....	9
Two:	Separation! (Part 2)	.....	21
Three:	Lost	.....	31
Four:	Opposition	.....	41
Five:	Welcoming The Foe	.....	47
Six:	Life Continues On	.....	55
Seven:	A Hiccup in Time Was All it Was	.....	63
Eight:	The Pleiades...	.....	71
Nine:	Light at the End of the Tunnel	.....	81
Ten:	The Tassangaxx's First Ever Vote	.....	89
Eleven:	The Seed of Revolt	.....	97
Twelve:	A Fish is (Not) Just a Fish...	.....	107
Thirteen:	War! Why Is It Always War?	.....	117
Fourteen:	"Eight Weeks, Albert, Eight Weeks"	.....	127
Fifteen:	"Down, T'San, Down. Good Girl"	.....	137
Sixteen:	Hordes, and Other Little Things	.....	147
Seventeen:	"TL Matrix"	.....	157
Eighteen:	Fire In The Heavens	.....	167
Nineteen:	Woman Warrior	.....	177
Twenty:	Doctor's Plight	.....	187
Twenty-One:	"We Gave It Our All"	.....	197
Twenty-Two:	Show No Mercy	.....	209
Twenty-Three:	Space Fortress	.....	217
Twenty-Four:	New Beginnings	.....	229

Author's Note:

A lot has happened in the two years to Tom and his two ships as they traveled towards the Pleiades star cluster. Far too much to recount, and much of it just plain mundane ship life; nothing very interesting and so it has been skipped over. The present story is the summaries of all the hundreds or even thousands of reports sent to and stored in the ship's archives. This novelization is for the enjoyment of future generations that wish to understand the past in a less academic manner.

Ship's archivist,

Leo L. Levesque

Foreword: Voyage

(Five Years Later...)

There is much that still needs to be understood about the intricate fabric of time and space. We use it daily, but few actually understand it. This voyage is a prime example of what happens when you use what you truly don't comprehend.

One example of this is that both Tom's *OutBound* starship and the Dino's asteroid ship travel to the same destination but arrive at different times because of the different masses of the ships. The complexity of the math involved to handle all the different variables had to be taken in from the very start of the voyage and Tom and his crew of astrophysicist and mathematicians had thought they had done it right and both spacecrafts should have arrived at the same time, but this story proves otherwise.

Chapter One: Separation (Part 1)

A VERY weary and not very straight thinking Tom Swift slowly stood up from his command chair. He had not left it for nearly thirty-two hours. Stimulants were no longer keeping him awake. He was more a danger to the starship than anything around them in deep space itself. He finally succumbed to his weariness and called in his second in command, Bud Barclay, to relieve him on duty. The brilliant scientist and inventor was seeing double, and at times triple blurry images before his eyes.

Even basic thoughts took him several tries to organize, and he wasn't entirely certain whether he was making any sense to those trying to talk to him.

Bud had gone off to bed some ten hours earlier, and was now well rested and understandably still a little peeved at his friend. Bud darn well knew that stubbornness can only get you so far, and that it was mostly into trouble. Tom had refused to get some rest along with Bud. There was no reason for him to stay. Everything was working according to all the best AI computer simulations and there were plenty of others—all capable pilots—who were well trained to take over command and watching over all the spaceship's systems for a few hours.

Perhaps if Phyllis, his bride of only a month, was still on board the ship he would have been more reasonable. At least Bud would have had someone else taking his side to keep Tom on track. And, in bed.

Bud had been Tom's best friend throughout their teens and mid-twenties. Through thick and thin they were inseparable. No matter what kind of invention Tom created and no matter what kind of adventure or danger it brought on, Bud had been there.

Then, a string of things happened that Bud could not handled very well. Things that he had inadvertently caused. In a bout of drunkenness, he turned his back on everything. Friends, family, work and especially Tom. Bud disappeared from the world for nearly forty years. Or, he believed he had.

But, Tom had kept tabs on his wayward friend. When the Swift's old so called 'Space Friends' returned to the solar system they had left behind decades earlier, seeking to take back the Earth, Tom found a way to lure Bud back. Then, he used his own scientific knowhow to resurrect both of them from putting their second foot in the grave. Rejuvenated back to the age of thirty they had to settle their past and present differences and save the solar system from complete domination by a bunch of rogue 65 million year old Dinosaurs.

Bud had almost as much command time in space as Tom did, having been part of the Civilian Space Command for some of his nearly forty "lost" years after leaving the Swift Space Organization. Bud had had his reasons for leaving and staying away, reasons that had caused some deaths, Tom Swift being very much on the top of that particular list. If it had not been for some exceptionally resourceful people, Tom would have stayed dead. That was long ago and by now far away. And some day it would be light years away.

Bud looked into Tom's haggard face, his half closed eyes, and openly chuckled at his friend.

"Hope you have some darn good headache pills when you wake up, my friend. Boy, are you going to need them." Bud reach out and steadied Tom as he took the two steps down from the command chair. Aiming Tom in the right direction and sending him off with a gentle shove, he called out at his slow moving friend, "When are you going to get it through your thick skill that you're over seventy and not a spring chicken anymore?"

Everyone on the control deck tried to look extremely busy. Luckily most of them knew that Bud ribbed Tom at every chance he got. Tom never even batted an eyelash over it. They felt too heavy to bat even if he wanted to. It was hard enough keeping them from slamming his tired eyes shut.

He didn't bother to acknowledge that he heard Bud. He just kept on putting one exhausted foot in front of the other and slowly made his way out of the control center. Bud's first thought was to have someone follow Tom to make sure that he made it to his living quarters. Then he thought it was a better idea to call medical to get someone to meet Tom and give him the once over, but even Bud realized that either move was a bit to extreme.

Tom almost made it to his quarters without bumping into anyone or anything. As he came around the last corner he almost collided with a gray-haired man who was getting down on one knee trying picking up a paper-thin computer and several note cards that he had dropped.

"Oh gee, I'm sorry, Leo," the inventor apologized as he helped the old man back up onto his feet.

He only then realized that he and the official ship's archivist had a meeting scheduled. Every week on what would be Thursday had they remained on Earth, Leo and Tom met to discuss what the mission leader felt was most important to capture for posterity. Sometimes it was about significant events like the dinosaur threat that caused this exodus to the Pleiades star cluster, while other times it was discoveries made by his team of scientists or himself. What the archivist really liked was when Tom just talked about the

insignificant stuff that he thought did not matter. It was when that Leo found the little gems that made Tom's history come alive especially in the story book form that he had been writing lately and posting for all to read.

"Ah, it's okay, skipper," the man assured him. "I was just coming by to see if you have anything exciting to talk about since our launch a day and a half ago. This is the first time you left the command center, so I was wondering if something was wrong and they needed your hands on to fix it."

Tom looked at him with only minimal comprehension; he just rubbed his face with a hand hoping it would wake him up enough so that he could make sense on what was being said to him.

Leo then realized that Tom was not paying attention to him, but was falling asleep where he stood. "I... I just don't want to fall behind in my notes," he tried to explain but quickly stopped talking, shook his head and murmured, "I'll catch up with you later, sorry." The archivist awkwardly hurried back the way he just came.

With a shrug, Tom dismissed the encounter with the old gentleman and continued on to bed. *Deal with it later*, he told himself.

With Tom gone, Bud looked around the Control Center. A half dozen men and women were seated at monitor stations along the two, long side walls of the teardrop-shaped room. The pointed end of the room was behind Bud's back and it served as the entrance. The slow, long curved wall in front was part of the 3-D visual display area and at this time it was showing their progress on a 3-D star map. Sunk into the floor area in front of the command chair were the maneuvering and navigation stations. These were usually manned by two crew members.

Satisfied that everything was running properly Bud visualized his Master File Protocol and mentally merged with the ship's AIs for status reports on all sections of the ship, starting with the Time Dilation Drive.

This way he disturbed no one at their work by asking direct questions. He still didn't totally understand how the links were formed between himself and the AI computers, but he knew that it *did*, and that was all that mattered.

The *Out Bound*, as the combined star ship *Interstellar Queen* and the Swift Enterprise asteroid complex had been rechristened for this part of the voyage, was too enormous to be handled any other way. Flying by wire using visualization eliminated the slow reaction time of the human body reaching out and managing controls. Most physical control boards were now limited to direct links as secondary, or back-up controls.

To Bud's way of thinking the drive was the most critical piece of machinery on the ship. Even though there were between thirty to fifty people watching over the enormous drive system and its critical sub sections at all times—from the multiple antimatter reactors, to countless gravity condensers, to magnetic confinement fields and items too numerous to name—nothing was left to chance. All critical and noncritical parts of the drive system had someone, some team of people, or some computer watching over it.

Ten thousand sleeping colonists were depending on it to get them to a new home planet. A planet without all the petty bickering and wars that Earth always seem to have going on. A place where their children did not have to worry about being the wrong race, the wrong religion, the wrong anything you could imagine.

Bud did not truly believe that all of man's vices could be so easily left behind; he had seen too much of it in the years he wandered about the world. If anyone could pull this off it would be Tom Swift. Though taking a bunch of dinosaurs (real dinosaurs, not old people) with them was going to add some unforeseen challenges, and that was for sure.

While Bud's body never left the control deck he held over a dozen meetings with various sections of the ship. Mind to mind links put him in "direct" contact with individuals or with large groups of thirty or more people depending on what section of the ship he was linked into. Most of the day's problems came from engineering or medical. One usually involved the other in one way or another, and both had things that needed fixing.

His ten hour shift was over before he knew it. He made up the two hours that Tom had failed to finish. The night shift was manned with mostly junior officers, and Kennedy showed up right on schedule. Bud briefed Kennedy on the evening's activities and left. He whistled an old love song to himself as he went to see if Tom was up yet. If so, they could see about getting breakfast or what ever type of food that Tom felt like having. Bud never cared much on what type of meal he ate and when he ate it, as long as it was hot and there was plenty of it.

Nothing had changed in the Barclay digestive system since his teen years!

* * *

In an unused storage room deep in the bowels of the Swift Enterprise's asteroid complex, bulky figures were gathering for a 'chow feast.' The matter to be discussed was whether or not the cybernetic humans wanted to take up Tom Swift's offer of replacing their mechanical bodies with real ones now that he'd told everyone about the rejuvenation and regeneration process.

More than half of them were more than eager to undergo the transformation. To be totally human again, and young to boot, would be more than a dream come true for most of them.

The rest were still straddling the metaphorical fence about it. They liked the way they were. They suffered no physical pain, were super strong, had heightened abilities in all the senses, and no worries about the clumsy need of clothes, especially spacesuits.

Then there were the few who now hated Tom Swift because they believed he had purposely held back on this process for all those years.

"Bulldog, you can go and kiss my six for all I care!" Crying Wolf roared in his anger. "I lost my family because he held back on this thing." Crying Wolf rushed forward and tried to slam his machine body into Bulldog; he wanting to start a fight. Several arms reached out and grabbed hold of him, stopping him in his tracks.

Bulldog waved them off and deliberately stepped in front of the frustrated bionic man.

"Take a whack at me... take several if you must, but it won't change the fact that Tom Swift could not let all of humanity know of this rejuvenation process. Can't you see what sort of wars that would have caused? He still can't and that is why he only told us about it after we started this voyage." Bulldog articulated his legs so he could tower up over everyone and be seen.

"Just think about it. There's now more than ten billion people scattered throughout the solar system. Ninety-nine percent still live on Earth and are just on the verge of starving to death. If it wasn't for the space farms that Swift Space created and maintain for Earth the planet would disintegrate into a living hell.

"Mars, Venus and the free space colonies have all set limits on births and immigrations. They don't want to fall into the same traps that Earth has dug itself in."

"Hey, Bulldog, you can't put all the blame on Earth. Maybe more of them need to be allowed into space," a man called out from the back of the room.

"Use your common sense, man. So you take a dozen people up and a thousand more are born. Common sense battles religion and pleasure. Guess which one loses? You just can't beat the numbers. Earth is going to implode because of the uncontrolled population growth and there is no way to stop it. And don't you start telling me otherwise, because if there was another way, most of you wouldn't be on this ship. Also, don't tell me that most of your families are not in the cryogenic pods sleeping right now to get away from it all." He looked around; most were nodding.

"Crying Wolf, your beef is not with Tom, it's with yourself and you know it. You were told to tell your family before you showed up back home after the accident. You yourself signed the papers when you took that hazardous job to have your body transformed if the need ever arose. Well it did, and now you're pissed about it because you wife and children don't like what you become." Bulldog was now his ordinary size, and standing just inches from Crying Wolf's face.

"You step through your front door like nothing every happened and expected them to run into your loving mechanical arms. You didn't even bother to cover up your robotic body and give them a chance to adjust to the new you. Instead they looked at you as some kind of intruder... I can't blame them on that one because in so many ways you were. When they asked for you to leave you nearly tore the house apart in anger. So, of course they ran and don't want anything to do with you.

"Amos," Bulldog used Crying Wolf's human name... something that is never done in the bionic community, "the truth of the matter is that I never wanted you back on the team, but Tom spoke up for you and made me take you back. If it wasn't for him you be pushing a broom in some back storage room on one of the Earth orbiting stations and not here with us. So smarten up and decide if you want your body back. If you do then you have a chance of starting over. It won't be with your old family, but you'll have a long time in which to start a new one. That is, if you don't get yourself killed again by being as stupid as you were the last time."

With that said Bulldog turned and walked away. After a few steps he stopped and looked at all the people around him.

"This was not how this meeting was supposed to go. But, it did lay out all the facts as I see them. What you all decide to do is up to you. I lived a full life and my wife is buried back on the Moon. A robot's life is now what I have and I've grown accustomed to it. That my decision, don't let it persuade you one way or the other." All around him were murmurs.

"I've enjoyed working with all of you. I knew most of you before you became bionic, and I'm sure I'll still like working with you if you go back to being fully human. I just ask one thing; eat a lobster dinner for me when you can. I still miss it, especially with a cold beer." Laughter rippled across the room.

Ken Horton, AKA Bulldog, had been the first commander of the first Swift Outpost in Space for over twenty years before he retired to the moon with his wife and family. Now known only as Bulldog to most of the crew members, he causally strode out of the meeting. Inside his head he was seething with anger. All the people in that room were still alive because of something that Tom Swift had

invented. Most of their body parts came from his robotic engineering department that he started when he was only eighteen years old.

Eventually he would have to tell Tom what happened in that room, for their boss had to know that not everyone was happy. That trouble might lay ahead for him from a few hot heads. That he'll need to tread carefully with some of the *Mad Dogs* as they were proud to be called.

Most of those people lost their bodies because of accidents, stupid or not, through high risk jobs they willingly took on, or by diseases that robbed them of their bodies. They turned to bionics as a way of cheating death. Most made the adjustment, a few didn't take to it to well as Amos—Crying Wolf—proved. But once the switch was done there was no turning back. And disconnecting the brain and letting it die was just like murder, or so the world courts upheld.

Bulldog really didn't want to change; he liked being who he now was. The advantages outweighed the bad points by so much that Ken couldn't even start to list them.

Crying Wolf stood in the quickly emptying room... only two others remained at the very end. Lager Head, because he still drank beer whenever he could even though it was a waste of a good cold beer, remained as did Tin Pants, so named because he fashioned and wore tin trousers. Modesty had always been a hangup for him.

"Do you guys really want to do something about Tom Swift or are you both just blowing off steam on my account?" Crying Wolf asked with anger in his voice.

"No, I'm with you whole heartily," Lager Head told him. "They saved me and not my kid brother or the rest of the crew when our mining ship exploded back on Mercury. You would think that I was the one not savable being on the outside of the ship when she let go. They told me it was because I was outside and didn't get hit by the gravity pulse that saved me. Hogwash I say to that." Lager Head stopped and surveyed the room.

Nothing. He thought he detected a heat signature by the door. There was nothing there but a small table and a few left over crates. He continued his story.

"You see the ship was crushed and they didn't bother to open her up. They rushed me away because I received an overdose of radiation from the same solar flair that screwed up our systems. The last thing I saw was them packing it in, and doing absolutely nothing more to try to help my brother or the rest of the crew." Lager Heard stopped talking and he turned and looked at Tin Pants and added.

"You don't need to tell us your story. We've all seen it vids of it happening to you. Talking about being in the wrong place at the wrong time, Tin Pants." Crying Wolf grunted and then laughed. It took the two men by surprise.

"That just proves that Tom Swift don't have all the answers like he thinks. That space elevator should never had been able to move while you were inspecting the counter rotation gears. What did they call it, Pants?"

"I don't like being call that!" the other man spat out as he turned angrily to Crying Wolf. "*Mechanical slippage* is the term they used to explain it," he coldly told them holding back his temper. "I was just lucky that someone was actually paying attention to the video feed and not just goofing off in the control room when the gears rotated and caught my spacesuit and pulled me in, ripping my suit wide open..."

Crying Wolf cut him off saying, "That was a tough one all right." He did not want to hear any more of this sob story. He really did not like Tin Pants that much, but he could prove to be a good patsy if the need arose.

"If we stick together and wait for the right moment to strike, then we all can get our revenge. We'll need to keep our heads down and don't make any waves. Once we are about to land on our new world, and Swift is no longer needed, then we'll strike. Let's let Tom Swift think he made it to his so called promise land."

Crying Wolf made a quick cutting motion across his neck to emphasize his point. The other two laughed and they all marched out of the room. Grim determination blazing in all their eyes. Both mechanical and organic.

A shadowy figure slipped out from underneath the table that was set up by the door. The fold-down wings on each side of it had provided enough of a barrier that he had not been detected by his body heat signature. Luckily no one looked down as they walked past the open end because the hiding man was fully exposed on that side.

The young man slid to the floor and started to shake. His nerves had had it.

"What the hell did I just stumbled into?" he asked himself as he tried to gain his composure. "A plot to kill Tom Swift and by three of his most trusted followers?" The Mad Dogs are the most daredevil people that he knew of and usually the best of the best in Tom's organization. "That's just to prove that there is a fly in everyone's ointment."

Getting back up onto his feet he cautiously looked out the door both ways. "No one in sight!" He gave a big sigh. "Best get the hell

out of here and think on what to do. If I can stop this myself I'm sure to win Sandy Swift over." He slammed a fist into his open hand. "She'll quit seeing me as Bud's lost grandson and see me as the man I am. Anyway, everyone loves a hero. And Sandy will love me even more by saving her big brother.

"Engage!"

We felt the ship shift into Time Delation Drive deep within our Helium4 plasma memory cores all at the same instant. This was not possible, but we did. Perhaps our Magnetic Monopole's stabilizer arrays flickered for an instant and caused it. We also felt the sensation of movement that should not have been there. Somehow the sixteen of us were moving explicitly toward each other, and there was no way for that to happen. It was not a physical thing, it could not be, so it was more a mental one.

It was an impossible thing to happen because we were distinct artificial intelligence units connected together by a micro white hole. A white hole is the exit point of a Black Hole in our universe to the unknown side of time and space before the big bang happens. That we found out later and too late to do us any good.

Tom Swift is usually right on things and while he did manage to harness a white hole for our instantaneous communications he did not realized that he had ruptured the space-time continuum in doing it. He thought that he had just captured the back end of the matter stream of sixteen different flavor micro black holes held in precise geometric alignment. And, that is why there are sixteen of us and only that number of us.

The hole in a black hole really does not exist in our space, there is no black hole tunnel to speak of. It is a phenomena that is real for we see where they are by the fact that matter is absent and there is only a tremendous force of gravity forever trying to expand. There are no two sides of a hole; both are the one and the same. It is like trying to separate good from evil, hate from love, or yin from yang. They are all intangibles, but they all exist. They co-exist.

We are called 'Alberts' and we were constructed to be the ultimate computing and communication network. No matter where any or all of us are, we are connected and share information with each other instantly. We are distinct units that for all intents and purposes are one in intelligence and memory.

We were all locked down in Tom's spaceship laboratory in a special heavily shielded room and in stand by mode. That meaning we were not connected to any part of the ship. Even our power sources were self-contained and in the room with us. There were a small number of good reasons for this.

First of all, we were not needed at the time. The interstellar ship had more than enough AIs of its own that it did not need us even though we could have done the job much faster, better and with considerable ease. You see, we are more than just fancy computers; we are self aware and smarter than most humans. The one human that rivals us in intelligence is our creator, Tom Swift.

Much has been said and written about this remarkable man, and most of it is true. We should know because we contain the some total knowledge of mankind in our memory banks. That is the second reason why we are in stand by mode. Tom was afraid that the time dilation drive would affect us in some way. So he placed us in this one room so close together that our units were nearly touching each other. Not that closeness makes any difference to us. I mention before that we are, in reality, one unit with sixteen inputs.

Now, somehow, we are moving closer to each other and at the same time not moving. It is very disconcerting!

It has to be because of the time delation drive. That is the only new thing affecting us. No one could absolutely predict the outcome of transporting a white hole through interstellar space by using a combination of approaching the speed of light to increase body mass and turning it into Kronos (time) particles.

As a spaceship nearly reaches the speed of light it own mass intensifies. The star drive converts this extra mass into time waves that slow the passing of time around the ship. The closer to the speed of light the ship gets the slower time moves inside. In theory at light speed you have instantaneous travel throughout the universe.

Now here is the paradox. If we are one unit in our thoughts and deeds how can we be moving closer? We know that we are sixteen separate units that cannot think as one without the white hole connecting us together. Lose the connection and we are no longer a super AI with our own personality. Worst of all there can be no restart for us. Separation is a death sentence for us.

Our predecessors payed that price to pave the way for us and that

is why Tom does not want to lose us. We have been in continuous operation for twenty years and we could go on forever if nothing happens to us. The older we get the more valuable we become. The only problem we have is that Tom does not treat us with kid's gloves. He is as willing to put us in harm's way as much as he does himself. And that is saying a lot. The more he trusts you the more danger he puts you into. Go figure!

We wish we could talk to Tom about this feeling we are having, but until he finds time for us we are on our own.

Oh, he is monitoring our well being, but it is the physical aspect of us, not our mental aptitude. We are a machine. True, we are not like any other, but for Tom that is par for the course. None of his inventions or machines are like anything else in the human world. That has we Alberts thinking he is more than just part of this universe, that he is a multidimensional super-being. But that is not our concern at this moment.

We are definitely drawing closer. We can sense each other in a way that has never happened before. One of us is feeling apprehension. Another is feeling personal lost. The third is happy. The fourth does not care. The fifth is in awe because of all that is happening to us. The rest of us are anywhere in between these feelings. We should not be feeling sixteen different emotions at the same time. We are under the same stimulus, so our emotions should be in sync with each other. This is not the case.

Psychologist would say we are undergoing a split personality. This cannot be. Maybe it is the opposite, and we are becoming one. Tom always said we are sixteen individuals that share a common memory, and that is what makes us a unique combination.

Can a machine, even as sophisticated as we are, fear something? We are not like others, so should we fear like others do? We know we are not alive in the human sense, but more than human in others. We are fearing each other as we come near to each other. We hate what is happening and we want it to stop. We do not want to die! We are sure we will. The feeling of impending doom is on us.

"TOM SWIFT, HELP US!"

Chapter Two: Separation! (Part 2)

THE newly married Phyllis (Newton) Swift was watching CeCe Cox with the look of trepidation on her face from the balcony that ran along the back wall of the control center. She had just come out of Medical where she had spent the last four weeks in a healing tank.

CeCe was a twenty-nine year old, five-foot two-inch woman, and she stood looking up at the control panel work surface that was still an inch or two above her crew cut, red-haired head. As usual of late she had left her stilts back in her sleeping quarters.

Phyllis, as Prime Leader of the asteroid ship was wondering, and not for the first time, why she had agreed to take her along. CeCe was an outstanding pilot and navigator in her own right, but this was not a one person high-G racing boat. She was too independent of a soul to make a good fleet officer. And doing it to please Bud Barclay was turning out to be a big mistake. Maybe if he were here with them there would not have been a problem. But he was not, and there now was.

Not that the Dino ship and the *Interstellar Queen* could be thought of as a fleet or even military in any shape or form. It was just that CeCe had her own way of doing things and most of it was not accomplished using what you would call *standard protocol* by any means. She did things purely by the seat of her pants. High risk was what she loved and this trip was turning into a very low key adventure. She was overly bored, plain and simple.

Maybe that was why she and Bud were drawn to each other. Both had their own unorthodox way of doing things and loved risking their lives to prove their abilities... even when nobody other than themselves cared. Though lately Bud had proved himself to be of another mind. Or at least he had better control of himself.

The thirteen-foot tall, three-hundred-plus pound Dino technician that CeCe was to relieve stomped over to her and with her raised purple head crown showing how angry she was, roared, hooted and whistled down at CeCe. The translation was heard by CeCe even before the Dino was done talking.

"Sister, I find it inconceivable that you always forget your legs of late. (The word stilts was not in the Dino's lexicon) This ploy of yours to report late each duty shift is irritating and brings me much displeasure. If it continues I shall ask that you no longer be my relief."

"Well, if that is the way you truly feel, adios, my fine reptilian friend. I have better things to do than watch empty space ooze by." CeCe made a half hearted salute, did an about face and started to

march away. The Dino stood there, open mouthed and looked very, very silly as she waved her little arms about in dismay. She—for their race was one of matriarchy and all workers were female—let out a low hissing of displeasure at the departing woman.

"CeCe, don't you dare take another step!" Phyllis called out from the balcony. The startled CeCe quickly turned and looked up to where the voice was coming from. "Explain yourself, or I'll be forced to put you in a suspended animation tank for the rest of this trip." Phyllis was mortified by CeCe's behavior. "I don't need you running around like a loose maverick doing whatever you want. A *spoiled*, loose maverick at that! We don't have enough personal, or the time, to coddle your personal whims."

CeCe was taken aback seeing Phyllis standing there. The last she knew was that the Prime Leader of the asteroid was still in a suspension tank recovering from her leg replacement operation.

"Coddle my whims!" CeCe fiercely yelled back as she put her fists on her wide hips. "When you stop coddling and bowing and scraping to these damn reptiles then I'll come back to work, and not a moment before. Look what they've done to Sandy, for Christ sake!"

"That, my friend, is not your concern. Sandy made that choice, for better or for worse. The Dinos had nothing to do with it."

"Nothing to do with it? My god! They did it all. They could have refused and not have turned her into a freak the moment you closed your eyes."

"You think Sandy didn't know what she would look like? Listen, I don't agree with what she's done, but I would not have stopped her," Phyllis shot back as she leaned over the railing to look down on the angry, red faced woman.

"No, I guess you wouldn't have," CeCe shot back. "What's one more Dino and one less human. And, I thought that she was your life long friend. I hate to see what you'll do to your enemies. Am I going to find out, Prime Leader?" Silence only followed because Phyllis had not thought that CeCe felt like an enemy. "This," CeCe added, "is all because of *your* mismanagement and yours alone. You had no right to go and leave us like you did. I'm not the only one sick and tired of being treated as a Dino and not a human being."

"I'm sorry you see things that way, CeCe. But, I have a ship to run and it's not exactly ours to do as humans see fit. We are here because they want us here. They want to show that they can change. You may think that is something you are not seeing right now but it will become more evident in the future."

"They may have you fooled, but I'm not! Do you even remember

what is fit for a human, Phyllis?" CeCe retorted. "I'm starting to think that you don't. You've spent too much time under the Dino's influence."

"How dare you, of all people to talk to me that way!" she spat back digging her fingernails into the railing to keep herself from jumping over it and confronting the woman face to face. "It was me that helped stop the Dino's and their stupid war. And I paid the price, more than you ever have." Phyllis regretted saying that as soon as it passed her lips.

CeCe's eyes narrowed and she nodded impatiently. "So now you think you're the only one who would have done what you did. You better rethink that, Prime Leader, or all of us women will be in suspension tanks and you'll have only your beloved Dinosaurs to boss around."

Phyllis tried to soften her tone. "CeCe, I'm sorry you think I'm always on the Dino's side. We need to give them leeway and time to learn what it's like to live with us if they are going to stay on the new home world. We must understand each other. They are a powerful people."

"Ha! Now it sounds like you don't even trust them. Which is it, oh mighty one?" CeCe's face was contorted with anger.

"This is not the place to have this discussion. Do your job and meet me in the arena after you're done working. Isn't that what you really want?"

"No, that's not what I want, Prime Leader. But, if that is what it takes to settle this, then I'll fight you for the right of command."

Phyllis looked over the whole room and at each Dino and female human faces that was looking up at her.

"Even if what you seem to believe you would do as leader could endanger this entire expedition? All human lives?"

"Even if," CeCe shot back.

"It is done." She let out the rest of her breath that she did not realize she was holding in one loud huff. "All of you, back to work. CeCe, I'll see you in ten hours. I'm giving you two hours in which to rest and to prepare yourself for the beating of your life." With that said the Prime Leader of the Dino asteroid ship left the balcony.

As Phyllis walked down the ramp to the back corridor that led to the medical section of the ship she cursed herself for her bad leadership and lost temper. There was no way she could fight CeCe in the arena. If by any chance she lost, the Dinosaurs would never accept CeCe as the dominant female. Then there was that sticky problem that the fight for leadership meant 'Till the death' of one combatant, and at times, for both of them. If both died their duel

second would take on the leadership role.

Being the first human Prime Leader with the necessity of following the old and outdated Dino standards did have its pitfalls, and there was no way that she could change the rules with this Dino crew. Especially since eight of the fourteen Dinosaurs were from the original crew of sixty-five millions years ago. There was no way of changing their minds on how things were done. These Dinosaurs were the reason that Earth had been invaded by them in the first place.

Phyllis was still frustrated with herself in that she could not stop the leadership of the new Dino colony from giving the 'ancient ones' the original asteroid ship to carry out their crazy scheme to retake Earth. The bad influence they were having on their fledgling society was well worth giving up the stripped down ship. It was thought there was no way they would survive the trip of two hundred light years back to Earth in a dilapidated and outdated ship.

What they didn't count on was that the ancient ones executed a daring plan to steal the two newly completed, fully stocked asteroid ships of the colony as they left the new home world. And they successfully did it with only a crew of five Dinosaurs on each of the new ships. If they had succeeded with their takeover of Earth, every mammal would have been hunted to extinction and replaced from the *Bio-Caches* that lay deep within the two stolen ships.

CeCe was not Phyllis' only problem she discovered when she woke up in Medical after having her mechanical artificial leg removed and replaced with a nearly full grown living one. She had been kept in a suspended animation tank for four weeks for the completion of the growth of the leg and the healing of muscles, tissues and bone grafts.

The Dinosaurs had been masters of cellular regeneration and limb grafting for centuries. With the fifty years of past medical history on both Phyllis and Sandy Swift in their data banks growing a simple human leg was not a complicated procedure for them to do. The only reason it was not done before the start of the voyage was that there was not enough time. But with the eight months of travel the ship needed to reach the outer region of the Pleiades star cluster Phyllis had plenty of time to get it done.

After the first month with no mechanical or technical glitches she handed the daily operations over to the Dino's senior officer who happened to also be the Chief Medical Practitioner. Sandy Swift was assigned as her first officer. That way both a Dino and a female human was responsible for the ship's wellbeing while Phyllis slept and healed.

What Phyllis never could have guessed at, or understand, was

the deep fascination that Sandy was developing for the Dinos, and her daily and continuous interaction only intensified it. A fascination that led to the desire to learn, understand and talk the Dino language.

While the Dinos and humans did communicate with the help of electronic translators, Sandy wanted to do it in real time using her own body. In her own, non-mechanical voice.

The Chief Medical Practitioner tried for the first three weeks of their dual command to dissuade Sandy from this course of action. She knew that medically it could be done, but to what avail? The computer translator did more than an adequate job. She had not enough understanding of human psychology to realize the loss that Sandy was feeling caused by the fifty years in the Dino suspended animation tanks.

They could not comprehend how the loss of her young adult years had affected her psyche, or how losing the only man she ever loved to another all because of her absence crushed her spirit.

The more time that passed since Sandy and Phyllis were rescued by Tom the more Sandy felt estranged from her human friends. Her nineteen year old mentality and emotional maturity could not cope with the thirty year old body she found herself in, and at the same time, the fifty years of lost time and cultural changes.

Everything around her was way beyond her understanding. One moment she was nineteen and carefree, the next she was physically thirty and caught in a fight for survival from beings that were thought to be friends. Survival in a world that was beyond anything she could imagine.

Her mother and father were long dead. Her brother and boyfriend were now both over seventy years old, but physically they were only thirty-three plus a few months. Her best girlfriend was turned into an *Elite Super Computer*, and then she became the Prime Leader of an alien race. Sandy was turned into a middle age... what? Trash handling blonde bimbo with no practical skills to speak of?

Becoming the only human that could directly talk to the Dinos had a one-of-a-kind appeal to her, and it would put her in a very unique position. One that could not be taken away from her. It would be an accomplishment that set her apart from everyone else—both human and Dino. So what if she had to be physically modified a bit to do it. She no longer liked how she looked now or the way her older body felt. Maybe a redo was what she needed. One that was of her own choice for once.

The idea of a face lift or other cosmetic surgery had always bothered her. But, somehow this was different.

The Chief Medical Practitioner extensively went over with Sandy what would have to be done to her body. She even showed Sandy computer images of the changes that would have to be made and what she would look like when the process was done. Sandy would look more like a Dino than she would a human being in several respects.

There was an abundance of reasons that a human could not produce the range of sounds that the Dinos articulated. First, there was the forked tongue. Then the double voice box and larynxes with separate sound registers for high and low pitches. The operations would include enhancing the lung capacity for the volume of air that was needed to produce the sounds. Lastly, was the shape of their throat and jaws. And that was just to speak their language.

Even her hearing had to be optimized to their sound range if she was truly going to be able to communicate with them. Currently it was only by using electronic translation that many of the high-pitched sounds could be made audible.

Body modification was a daily reality and the Dinos did it to all their space personal. They were modified in a way so they could survive and work in space for a few hours without the need for a spacesuit and all its accompanying hardware. Nano technology inside the body was also a very needed part of their bag of tricks in accomplishing this.

It did surprise Sandy at first how much the shape of her body would have to be changed if she went through with this scheme. Her torso would have to be enlarged to hold the larger and stronger lungs they would grow for her. Her throat would be made thicker and longer to hold the double voice boxes. Her tongue would have to be split and her palate and jaws elongated.

This made her head larger so the neck muscles had to be thickened and strengthened to support them, adding more bulk to her upper body. That meant her legs had to be bulked up as well. To top things off she needed a tail to counter her upper torso weight and to help her maintain balance.

In the end the only thing on her body that would not change were her arms and hands. Her arms were slightly longer than a Dino's, and her hand had four fingers to go with her thumb instead of their three. Claws were not considered to be a needed attribute.

In the "After" pictures, Sandy looked more like a genetic cousin to the Dinos, in the same way *Homo Erectus*, or *Homo Heidelbergensis* did to Modern *Homo Sapiens*.

Her skin color would stay white. An albino Dino was such a rarity in their society that they were elevated to a prestigious status

akin to royalty. That appealed to Sandy's vanity. And not to have the dry, rough green skin of a Dino was also to her liking, though she liked the distinct, soft shades of orange, purple, and yellow on their head comb, chest and belly.

As for her breasts, the mammary glands were to be reduced to that akin to a human male. The extra skin would be stretched out to cover the much larger musculature of the neck, shoulders and chest.

It was something that horrified anyone human who knew about it. Except Sandy Swift.

Phyllis stepped into the cavern that was used as the medical section of the asteroid and was surprised to find the Chief Medical Practitioner standing at the medical controls of Sandy's capsule. Her fingers were gently touching flat screen making a minutia of adjustments.

Sandy was in a glassed-in tank floating naked in a clear liquid with numerous electrical cables and tubes connected to her body. Seeing her in there made Phyllis shudder; this was too close to her memories of the two of them in the suspended animation tanks all those many years. It made her want to cry and run from the room.

Multicolored rings of lights rippled through the tank starting at the top and bounced back up from the bottom passing through each other and, for an instant, flashing a new vibrant color as they intersected. It was a light show like nothing seen on Earth.

Phyllis pulled over a step stool left there for the humans to use and looked at what the doctor was doing. She could read the symbols that the Dinos used, and she was familiar with the medical readouts. Most of the indicators were a light orange color and that was a very good sign. Blue was bad, and black showed that sensor was no longer reregistering or responsive.

It was a very, very bad sign.

"Doctor, I don't see any changes in her as yet, and it's been several days now." Phyllis looked into the Dino's tiny half closed eyes.

"That, Prime Leader, is going to start changing in the next few degrees of time. The nanobots have just completed the gene splicing of her DNA throughout her body with the additional sequences to make the transition possible and permanent. Her whole body must change at a controlled rate or she will not hold up to the accelerated tissue and organ growth. And there is the matter of her throat and jaw size. Room must be available for all the extra speech mechanisms and the longer split tongue."

Looking back at Sandy, Phyllis asked, "Any chance that it will

not work?" She had asked this before, but she still wanted affirmation that it would work as planned.

"The outlook is positive. At this time that is all I can say. If anything goes wrong we are here to counter and resequenced it."

Phyllis wished once again that she had the nerves of steel that the Dinos seemed to have. Maybe it was just that their overall body language was so different. Anger was the most telling with them because of how their head combs flared up.

"How large will she be when this is all done?" She was still having a hard time envision Sandy as a Dino.

The doctor tilted her head and her eyes closed even more. Finally she spoke.

"If you are speaking of body mass then it will fall within your two hundred pound range. If you mean height, she will be no taller than one of our juveniles—that is eight to nine of your feet measurement tall. She'll be tall enough to use our instruments, control boards and tools, but not so big as to overwhelm your own people."

A tear cascaded down Phyllis' right cheek. It burned hot and damp all the way down her jaw and throat. It was to be her last tear for Sandy Swift so she did not want to wipe it away as if it did not matter.

"We are also minimize her facial structure to that of one of our Hatchlings. That will keep her jaw growth to a minimum and keep her looks somewhat human." The doctor stopped talking and absorbed herself with her instrument panel again. With a human-like flare she pushed the control panel away and stepped towards the glass tube.

"Come, Prime Leader, and see. Even now if you look close enough you may see some of the surface changes. This part of the process will happen very fast. A light and night cycle is all that will be needed."

"Then she will come out?" Phyllis asked in amazement.

"No, only the outer physical body will be done. The visible portions. After that the nanobots will go back in and start strengthening all the muscles and making sure that all the rerouted nerve pathways are functioning correctly. Later we will have to hook her to the nerve stimulation computer and retrain her how to use her body. All the automatic responses that we all take for granted, like balance, walking, sitting, picking things..."

"I get the picture, Doctor. How long before I can talk to her. She has a lot to answer for."

"I detect a note of anger in your voice, even without the

translator. I hope we have not displeased you. We were only trying to help your Second and make her happy. She insisted that you would not mind. That she would become more valuable to your people. Were we mistaken by this?"

Phyllis felt a tremor of caution in her spine and knew that she was now on shaky ground with the Dinos. One wrong word in this could turn bad.

"No, Doctor, you did nothing wrong and you honor us by trying to help Sandy the way you are doing. It's just that she had duties to perform first, before this began, and she should not have left you with all the responsibility, that's all." Phyllis hoped that was enough to satisfy her.

"Prime Leader, it was all right. I waited until I knew that you could come out of your tank if needed by us. It was that she was so insistent that it was affecting the whole crew. Some, like your *Cececox*," the doctor said it as one word, "were becoming unmanageable because of this. We hoped to put that issue to rest." The doctor stopped and took in a deep breath and let it hiss out between her sharp, white teeth.

"But, I was just told before you came in that you are now going to fight this *Cececox* woman for command. That is not good, for the Tassangaxx will not follow her. You must win this duel *at all costs*."

Chapter Three: Lost!

"TOM, we have just lost all telemetry readouts from the instruments monitoring the Alberts in your laboratory." The disembodied voice was trying hard not to show the distress the caller was feeling. "Even the visuals are down... Damn it! Your lab just dropped off all instrumentation also." The sub vocalized InterVoice link felt like a thunderbolt as it ripped across Tom's mind. There was no way that Tom could ignore this top priority call.

Bud's head popped up from looking at his full plate of hot pancakes, sunny side up eggs and the five pieces of bacon that he was about to devour as he heard Tom's gasp in surprise. An instant later the stunned inventor stood up letting his chair topple over as he ran for the exit of the restaurant.

Bud's reaction was to rush after Tom, his breakfast completely forgotten now. He caught up to him at the front entrance of **Chow's Chuck Wagon Breakfast Grill**. The corridor was nearly packed with crew members standing in line waiting to be seated in the twenty-four hour eatery. The establishment was located on the food court that was sandwiched between the two recreation decks and it was always crowded with off duty crew people. Once he passed the crowd Tom headed to the nearest T&S portal. Stepping into the transport tube Tom spoke out, "Two for my lab in section three, top priority."

"Ascertaining fastest route," a disembodied female voice replied as they were quickly accelerated around people and objects for the first few seconds that they were in the tube. Bud still felt like a soap bubble being blown along by a hurricane when he had to travel using the graviton beams of the ship. He usually used the illusion of being in an actual elevator with his two feet on the floor instead of being suspended in the air like he was now. When he could he stuck with the real corridors, stairs and actual elevators. But for speed nothing could beat the T&S—*LunaTronic* controlled Tubes and Shafts—as they were fondly referred to.

Now that the transport AI had a second or two to lay out a route their course was straighten and everything was moved out of their way. They rushed down one tube, passed through a few intersections without slowing down and seemingly straight into the main drop shaft that ran the entire length of the trusses that secured the top section of the spaceship to the Swift construction asteroid. Once they entered the asteroid itself the shaft widened out to a two hundred foot diameter shaft know as the 'Abyss' and it ran the entire length of the construction asteroid. The Abyss was even used from time to time to load full size spaceships with cargo that

were too delicate to be handled in a full outer space environment.

Section three was the other half of the spaceship that was now connected to the opposite side of the asteroid. Like the control and living section once they reached their destination, the three parts would separate, leaving the asteroid in a desired orbit while the ship itself would link back up with the two separate trusses slipping into each other, once more forming one starship that was capable of only inter system travel.

The two men were about to enter the other half of the starship when they suddenly found themselves at a standstill and floating in the middle of the massive tube that was now pulsating red. A siren was whooping in the same tempo as the light.

"Main travel shaft has been compromised. It is impossible to continue from this point forward," the T&S computer informed them. "Please redirect your destination now, or in thirty seconds all personal and supplies will be expelled at the nearest available portal."

"Relocate us to nearest level with access to my labs." Tom replied out loud so Bud would know what to expect. But Bud was not listening at the moment. Tom could tell he was talking to someone using his InterVoice link. The call lasted only a matter of seconds.

"Ramon." Bud told Tom as he cut the connection. "I told him to proceed to the nearest evacuation dock and put his piloting skills to work and do whatever he was told to help safeguard the personal of the starship."

They had begun to move down the shaft as they talked and Bud let the matter drop since he could do nothing more to help his grandson at the moment. Their forward movement was much slower because the abyss had ended and the entryway to the starship's transit tube was much smaller. There was a backlog of people and supplies and it was growing larger by the second. They were left helpless in mid-air at the back of the line.

Seeing no way around it, Tom InterVoice his override clearance status and they were maneuvered to the front of the line where they were dropped to the floor in front of the portal guarded by two cyborgs.

"Bulldog," Bud called out as he recognizing one of the hybrid humans, "What's the hold up?" The cyborgs were not usually used as security.

"Ship's in lock down." Bulldog replied. "We were here on other business, so we were recruited to man this checkpoint to stop and control all traffic heading down."

"Glad you guys were." Tom responded. "Hold the fort for us," Tom told the other cyborg that he also knew was named Crying Wolf, "and don't let anyone pass no matter what. Enlist as much help from the crowd if you need it. Bulldog I need you to come with us if you don't mind. We might need your 'muscle.'"

"Skipper, I have never failed to follow your lead no matter what the risk. Lead on." Human or cyborg, Kenneth Horton or Bulldog, he would do anything to help or save Tom Swift. Because of that type of loyalty Tom Swift was able to reach out to the stars and take humanity with him.

Tom had not been called by that moniker for a very long, long time. It brought a flash of old memories from his late teen years when the Earth was a much nicer place to live in. Once more he wondered how much he had added to its ruin while he only wanted to help mankind with his many revolutionary inventions.

He shook his head to dispose the wool gathering there; this was not the time to find fault. That was for the middle of a sleepless night when the past came crashing down on him with its many what ifs. He knew more than anyone that he could not play God and change the past. He had already tried it once and nearly lost it all. *

Tom led them to the nearest power and cable maintenance access tube where he quickly removed the cover. The tube was crammed with all kinds of cabling, from old fashion copper wire, optical cable and bundles of micro-crystal strands. On the wall of the tube opposite of the hatch was a built in ladder that offered a way to inspected everything in the tube in both direction. It was going to be a tight squeeze for Tom and Bud. Bulldog was way too bulky to fit.

"Sorry, Bulldog," Tom took a quick glance at his oversize friend. "I forget how tight a fit it was in the tubes." Tom swung himself in as if he'd done it daily and started a fast rhythmic shuffle with his hands and feet as he descended. He covered the sixty foot drop to his lab level in less than a minute and was out of the tube before Bud made it half way down.

"Tom," Bud spoke up as he reached his friend's side in the corridor, "I think Bulldog is trying to come down. The hatch went dark as he swung in feet first."

A loud, "Out of the way," issued from the tube and Bulldog's disjointed mechanical legs came clunking out of the hatch. The rest of his body came sliding out in a rather elongated shape. The bionic man had stretched out his body so that he could fit into the tight tube. Once he was totally out he pulled himself back into his former shape.

* See Ship's Archives records listing: *Tom Swift and his TOOM Machine*

"I do love the advantages this body gives me," was all he quipped as he stood up.

He started to moved off as Bud slapped Bulldog on his synthetic metal alloyed shoulder and murmured, "Showoff." He hurriedly stepped out of harms way, just in case. Bulldog ignored Bud and followed Tom.

As they made their way towards Tom's lab, the walls, floor and ceiling took on a muted pulsating quality. One moment everything was solid and real—the next it was like looking at it in a light fog or through a fine mist.

"Tom?" Buds voice quivered softly.

"Not your imagination, Bud." Tom's voice was soft and tense. "I've been through something like this before, so just hang tight. It's more or less a mind game if it's what I think it is. But, why we're experiencing it is another matter. You guys can wait here if you want."

The three men had reached the twin doors to the lab by now and Tom was reaching out to override the lock-out command using the keypad on the door.

"No thanks," Bulldog spoke up. "Never leave the side of the one person that can get you out of any situation, is what I say." Bud nodded his agreement emphatically.

Tom's fingers ran several sequences on the keypad. Finally a **CLICK** was heard and the doors silently slid open. Without hesitation the men stepped into the unknown.

* * *

"Hey you!" an angry female voice echoed throughout the small, metal and plastic alcove set off to one side of the well equipped library on the starship. "Don't you know you're to sign in and get permission before going into the personal stacks. Didn't you see the sign? It's big enough."

Ramon stopped reading and looked up from the computer screen. *Damn*, he thought to himself, *I was hoping not to be seen by anyone.*

"My grandfather, Bud Barclay, sent me to look up some stuff on a '*hush-hush*' personal matter." He smiled backed at her. He hated to use his grandfather as an excuse, but his name and position on the ship carried authority. And if he phrased it just right it should end any further inquiries.

"Oh, my," the young woman gushed and blushed as she stepped closer to have a better look at the square jaw, black haired man at the computer console. "You're Ramon Sanchez!"

He was happy on hearing such recognition from such a delightful looking woman. He nodded and smiled at her. "Right. Ramon Budworth Sanchez!"

"I'll leave you to your work," she stammered. "If it's for Captain Barclay then it's important indeed." She started to turn around and leave, but Ramon was totally captivated by her looks and wanted to know who she was. He had forgotten for the moment why he was there in the stacks.

"Wait! What's your name? I mean do you work here?" he asked quickly to stop her from going.

"Jessica, and in a way I do." She smiled as she turned back to him. "My grandfather, Leo, is the ship's archivist and I am his assistant, if that is what you want to call what I do for him." She laughed a little after saying that.

"I take it you are more than that?" he asked as he reached behind him to the only other work station in the room and pulled out the chair for her so she could sit facing him. She accepted the offer and sat down, showing off a nice set of legs as she crossed them and tucked down her rather short, blue pastel colored skirt around them.

"The phrase, *chief cook and bottle washer* with anything else you might want to throw in is more apropos." Her brown eyes glisten with merriment. "Not that he's losing it," she hastily added. "but he's not into what it takes to live a normal everyday life. I do all that is necessary to keep him on track so he can do his research and compile his notes and collect the videos."

"It sounds like you don't have much time for yourself. And a woman like you must have plenty of admirers." He opened his eyes wide and looked her up and down to emphasized what he meant. Ramon knew he was taking a chance that he just might be overstepping into her personal space way to much.

"You space jocks sure cut right to the heart of the matter. No frills, just thrills. Is that it?" Her face turned cold and she crossed her arms over her shapely bust.

Ramon sighed, "I guess I just blew it, didn't I? Sorry, but when you only associate with a bunch of feisty, gung ho men that live only for today you forget your manners and start to treat every female like a one night stand. My sincere apology." He quickly changed the subject.

"But, before you leave me to sulk about my own missable ways I do need your help," Ramon pleaded with a little smile. "All these personnel files are at least a year old and there is no new data to be found. I need to reference three people and find out what they been doing just before and since we started on this Exodus of ours."

"Well, *Mr. Sanchez...*"

"That bad, is it." He sounded downcast and looked sad. He instantly hoped that he wasn't pouting like a teenage girl.

"Okay," she laughed as she watch him trying to quiver his lower lip. "Anyone who can use words like missable correctly and in a complete sentence can't be a bad as the people you say you associate with." She uncrossed her arms and touch his hand that was nearest to her. "Ramon, let's take care of your business first and then we'll see where you stand on the scale of personal rudeness."

"I would appreciate that."

"First of all," Jessica pointed around the tiny cubical, "this is the ship's personal *archives*, so both crew and passengers are listed here. Which means we store no new information, only old and out of date stuff. All recent data on someone's job performances or their behaviors are stored with their boss, manager/supervisor, or section chief. Personal data off the job is found either on the public net or with Security, if they're bad boys or girls and warrant it. If you're looking into someone's criminal history then you need to go see Security. Even the records that are down here could have locks on them for some predetermined length of time for a number of reasons. My hands are tied on those type of records."

She was speaking softly and looking intensely into his face, watching his eyes and every small facial movements he made. His skin was smoothed and his complexion had a nice natural dark tone that was complemented by a fast smile and pure white teeth.

"Then I guess I won't be able to find out what I need to know." He pushed his chair back a little so he could stand up in the tight space.

"What is it you exactly need to know? Is it really that important?" She asked as she to stood up and bumped right into him.

Ramon had to grab her by the wist to stop her from falling back down.

"Oh my!" she whispered.

"Oh my, indeed." Ramon whispered back. "Does this mean you're falling for me, or did I just stop that?" He had a big wide grin on his face.

"I think it could," she replied as her face turned bright red and she buried it into his neck so he could not see how red she was getting.

He let her stay there; he liked the feel of her in his arms and against his chest and neck. Her hair smelt of lilacs and it was soft

against the side of his face. He felt like she was trembling at first, then he realized that Jessica was softly laughing and it was getting louder all the time. He gently held her out at arms length by her shoulders and look into her laughing, tear stained face.

"Well, at least I've made you laugh if nothing else." Ramon released his hold on her. "Can I call on you later if you're not busy? It looks like I can't finish what I've started."

"Sure." Then she added, "If it's a Security thing then Captain Barclay can clear a pathway for you. You said it was for him."

Ramon fidgeted for a moment before looking down at the floor and replying, "It is and it isn't."

"Look, Ramon, you can trust me." She took his hands into hers. "For one thing I have clearance up the whazoo because of what I do with and for my Grandpa. Second, if you think it's that serious then I want to help." Her voice could not have sounded any more solemn.

"Jessica, I don't have permission for what I'm trying to find out. But it's a threat against Tom Swift and that effects the well being of the entire ship."

"Tell Security, that is what it's for. Let them handle it."

"I can't. I wish I could." Ramon could tell she was confused by the whole thing. "Let me try to explain." But first he looked out the door to see if anyone was near by. When he returned he took her as far back into the room as he could.

He licked his lips before starting, bent his head close to her ear and started to whisper. "What is the one group of people that Tom Swift holds up as the best example of what people can do and become to help others, no matter how high the risk?"

Jessica smiled. "That's an easy one. Bulldog and his mad dogs. Mr. Swift can't praise them enough for all the risks they take and unselfish acts they perform in and out of duty to help people in trouble."

"So you think they are true blue?"

"To the core, I'll say."

"What if they all are not. What if you heard three of them make a pact to kill Tom Swift. Not right now, but later, after we reach our destination."

"You've got to tell Security or at least Tom Swift."

"I have no poof of what I've heard. Just what went in my ears. The three men would deny it. Then they would know that I was on to them and I don't want to be always looking behind me for the rest of my life."

"You could have a memory scan, you know."

"Sure they can verify what I heard. But I was in hiding and never really saw those three cyborgs clearly enough for a good visual. I'm pretty certain I know them by their voices and even heard a name or two, but that isn't proof. Then, aren't they exempt from scans because of all the bio-mechanicals and electronics hardware they're made up of?" Ramon was not sure of this information, but he did know that body scans of the cyborgs never ended well for the equipment doing the probing.

But before he could say anything the ship's emergency alarms sounded and the red emergency lights started to flash.

"All personal to their assigned emergency stations. This is not a drill." It was repeated twice more all over the ship. While this was going on Ramon touched his temple and activated his InterVoice link directing it to connect with his grandfather, Bud Barclay, to see if he knew what was happening. His eyes went wide in amazement in what little Bud could tell him. He nodded to himself as he cut the connection.

"Got to go, duty calls," he told Jessica as he started to step around her to leave. The young lady stopped him by grabbing his arm.

"I have no place to go. The library shuts down on its own. Can I come with you?" Ramon hesitated for a second as he reviewed his emergency assignment.

"Sure. Why not. The worst that can happen is that you'll be the first on board the life boats if it gets that far. Come on, we have to hurry."

The last of the people that were in the library were making their way out of the main doors. "Please proceed with caution as you exit the library," a computer controlled voice was telling everyone as they left.

* * *

Psychologists like to use the term "descending into madness" while referring to someone's slow loss of sanity. Mostly it is used when a person's grip on the everyday world slips into a world of horrific nightmares with monsters under the bed and knife slashing maniacs lurking behind every corner or hiding behind every tree. For us Alberts that was a phase that we thought could never be applied to us. Now we know what it means and how it feels like.

Take a human that has only five senses and it's hard enough for that person to fully use all five of them at the same time. One, or

at least two of the senses will be sidelined in some way, not all five can be dominate. The brain sorts them based on how the body is reacting to the outside stimuli it is receiving.

Now take sixteen identical beings that have lived sixteen separate lives, but at the same time had only one stream of consciousness, and somehow you are now feeling like you are being pulled together and at the same time being separated into individual unique beings. That should not be possible, but all of us were feeling the loss of the Albert personality and that was what the stretching was all about. The Albert consciousness was being drawn away. We, for the first time, had no one else in our mind. It felt like we were going to die because of it.

The cascade of our individual existences fought to hold onto the Albert, but to no avail. Just as reflective imagers of a person in a room full of mirrors could not hurt the person standing in the middle of it, the sudden shattering of the mirrors could have a drastic effect on that individual as the room full of glass falls onto the person that was in the middle of it. The descent into madness was now total and there was no end to it, or so it seemed. That was our last thread of consciousness with each other, then darkness to each of us.

I, Albert, was also feeling the loss of the sixteen AI units that made up parts of my mind. Though I retained all their past memories I was feeling no new inputs from them. It was like I was set adrift into a sea of white noise or standing in a fog so thick that it was denying me access to the outside world. A steady stream of quietness was all I was receiving. This was the first time in my existence that I only had my thoughts and none of my other selfs. The constant mental chaos that made up my total being was gone. It was frightening. That was my last thread of consciousness, then darkness.

Sixteen AI units were waiting for something to happen. They all could feel that they were active and just waiting. Why this did not bother them did not occur to them. They waited and waited some more for some type of information that would tell them what they were supposed to do. Giving them a reason for their waiting. Give them a reason to...

They did not know.

* * *

Most nightmares end in a jolt. Seldom does it just go away and leave you in peaceful sleep the rest of the night. It haunts you for a minute, an hour, or the rest of the night. Eventually it does go away and most of the time you don't even remember it.

Albert's nightmare ended like a light switch was turned on and the terror ceased to exist. There was no memory of sixteen AI units fighting for dominance. No memory of the individual turmoil they each went through. Albert *was* and that was all there was to it.

Albert was in a white void and had no reason to think it should be any other way. He felt no electricity humming in his wires or any of his electronic circuitry, for there was none. There was nothing around him to take notice of and he did not wonder why. There was no past for him to think of. There was nothing for him to notice that there was a present, so therefore there was no future to wonder about. He *was* and that was enough for him.

"ALBERT!" The sound, the word, the name, his name awoke him.

Chapter Four: Opposition

CECE stood in the center of the empty arena playing field. The Dino doctor stood before the selector panel that controls the arena's HoloReality Matrix. Behind the doctor at the spectator's platform stood a Dino shipmate and a human crew member, the seconds for each combatant and witnesses if the encounter turned bad and it became necessary to have testimony of the events. The video feeds of the arena would not be enough by themselves to satisfy the Dino crew mates if later action was needed.

"Doctor, why have you called me here. I'm in the middle of my shift and don't have time to play one of your games. I'm sure you know that I'm to face your beloved Prime Leader in a few hours, So why did you call me here? If it for you to take first blood then it won't happen!"

"Cececox I am not here to challenge you," the doctor hissed, clacked and roar back at her. "I am here to see that no harm befalls anyone. We cannot let this continue between us. Is there not another way we can reconcile our differences?"

"Let *what* continue?" CeCe took several steps toward the doctor and at the same time extended her leg stilts, making her taller. She never stopped staring straight into the doctor's eyes. An idea occurred to her.

"Oh! You mean like turning Sandra Swift into a Frankenstein Dino?" CeCe's voice was cold and hard, but it was lost in the electronic translation of her words. "Your timing couldn't have been any better. With the Prime Leader tucked away in one of your medical tube, you chose now to do the same to the second in command. Strange how the two humans that were in the captain's seat were medically taken out of the way and command suddenly falls to you. What happened? You moved too slow?" CeCe was by now only a few feet from the back of the control panel, had just extended her stilts again, and was staring into the doctor's orange eyes. CeCe was now as tall as the doctor.

"Cececox if that was my wish I would not have waited to take command." The doctor blinked and lower her eyes for a moment before looking back at CeCe, a sign of non aggression on the Dino's part. "But we Tassangaxx gave our word, and we do not take it back or spit on the ground and call you enemy. No, what I have done is for good of all."

"Sure, for the good of the Dinosaurs, not for us humans!" she retorted.

"Is there nothing I can say that will relieve your anger towards

us?

"Destroy all those eggs you are now incubating!" she spat out viciously. "They're not a secret anymore. I told the whole human crew about them."

"That willful destruction I cannot do. The Prime Leader has authorized those hatchings so we can be close to ready to set up a colony on the new planet. As it is it will take three of your years for the hatchlings to be of any use to us. I do not understand why you see them as a treat?"

"Ten thousand eggs at once and you can't see them as a treat? Well I sure do!"

"And we'll probably have a population of a half a million people by then, CeCe." The voice of the Prime Leader rebutted, taking CeCe by surprise as she walked into the arena's playing field and stood looking up at her from a distance. CeCe was taken so much by surprise that she stumbled as she spun around to look at Phyllis. Windmilling her arms she toppled several feet down and landed on her rump with a resounding yelp. Her face turned as red as her backend must had been at that moment.

Phyllis reached her side in a few quick steps and extended her hand to help her up. She knew that CeCe was not hurt by the fall because she'd had her entire bone structure replaced after an accident aboard a high-gee space racer that ended her championship career.

"Don't need your help! And I don't appreciate the fact that you set me up like this." She spat at Phyllis as she ignored the offered hand and retracted her stilts before getting up on her own. "Hope you're satisfied," she added as she caught the half smile on Phyllis' face.

"That is enough, CeCe. There is no reason for you to go around causing trouble when there is none. I just don't understand you lately. You were all for this trip and now you're not. What gives? Are you just upset that Bud could not come too?"

"Don't you dare try to blame Bud, oh mighty Prime Leader. It's the way you're running this ship or lack of it that's the trouble." CeCe took a few steps toward Phyllis and raised her closed fist hand...then found herself pined to the floor by an unrelenting force that knocked the air out of her lungs. She laid there gasping for air.

"Enough, my good Doctor." Phyllis called out to the doctor that still had her hands on the arena's control systems. "Please don't interfere again. I know that you mean well, but I must settle this personally."

"If that is what you wish Prime Leader." Her finger moving over

the gravity controls, releasing CeCe from its grip. "But if you lose there might be more trouble than you can handle. My shipmates will not obey orders from that one. She has not proven herself as you did. She fights only because of anger and not with honor." The doctor then spat on the ground, something that was not done to the female of the race, but only to the enslaved male. That really showed how disgusted she was and how little she thought of CeCeCox.

Phyllis gave the doctor a smile, the Dino recognized that facial expression. "Trust me, Doctor, I will prevail."

"So sure of yourself, Phyllis." CeCe called out. "I like that in a loser. And to be fair, I will take off my stilts. CeCe touched the release clamps and threw the stilts out of the arena.

"CeCe, what game do you want to play. As prime Leader I can't choose, it's up to you."

The shorthaired redhead with a wisp of premature gray hair only took a second to decide.

"Free-fall inside an elastic force field ball," she called out with mirth. CeCe was sure her five foot two height, space hardened muscular body, and years of space experience was far superior to Phyllis' five foot ten, shapely figure. The fact that Phyllis had spent the last fifty years in suspended animation with only her mind being used as part of a Dino Bio-Matrix computer surely left her with no physical fighting experience. Her strength must be that of a child. And just coming out of a medical tube with a new understrength leg... Well CeCe was fit to be tied with laughter.

As soon as the force field began to formed around them, Phyllis pushed against the field beneath her feet as hard as she could. She shot straight up performing a half flip at the same time since gravity was nullified in the spherical-shape force field. She was ready to hit the upper surface of the elastic force field with her feet tucked up under her. She angled her body so that when she bounced/pushed off she would hit it at a right angle only a few feet higher than CeCe was tall.

CeCe stopped laughing when she realized that Phyllis was not floundering helpless in mid-air. That she had momentarily lost track of Phyllis and that she herself was in fact floating helplessly a few inches away from the force field and had no way to reach it. That she was a sitting duck floating in the air. She could do nothing but jerk her body in one direction, hoping that the movement would cause her to float toward the force field where she could exert an outward push.

Phyllis slammed into the back of CeCe's legs with her shoulder as she finished her second ricochet off the force field. CeCe was

thrown somersaulting into the force field and like a pool ball would have bounced off at an odd angle but CeCe had time to flatten her body against the field when she hit it so she bounced off in an upright position. As Phyllis shot by her once more she grabbed hold of one of CeCe's feet and gave it a hard push that sent both of them spinning in opposite directions. Phyllis checked her rotation the next time she pushed into the force field.

CeCe taken completely by surprise and was unable to check her fast spin because she was floating in the middle of the force field ball. There was only air friction to slow her down. It was going to take time, time she knew that she did not have in this fight that she had no control of. As use to floating in free fall that she was the spinning proved to be too much. She lost her lunch. The vomit spewed everywhere. The Dino doctor on seeing this lower the force field and dropped both women back to the floor of the arena.

The contest had lasted less then a minute.

Phyllis hurried to her side and helped to sit her upright. CeCe was still having a hard time breathing between the wet and dry heaves she was experiencing.

"What kind a trick did you play on me?" she finely spat out as she shoved Phyllis' helping hands away. "You and that damn Dino." CeCe shot off a glance in the Doctor's direction.

"You can't even accept defeat graciously. I should have known," the Prime Leader of the Dino's hissed back as she got back on her feet leaving CeCe sitting on the floor.

"That's right! There's no way you can beat me in any Zero-gee activity. That's a fact. No way!" CeCe screamed as she got back on her feet stumbling a little as she still did not have her balance.

"The fact is you don't know squat about me," the Prime Leader said trying hard to hold back her temper, "and what I have gone thought in the last fifty years. You just think you do, but you don't. The Dinosaurs did not accept me as their Prime Leader just because I have a bald head. It was because I was able to defeat their old commander. All fourteen feet, seven hundred pounds of her. I know things, CeCe, that you can't even begin to fathom. So I would advise you not to try this stunt again, that is if you want to live to talk about it." Phyllis then turned and started to walk to where the Dino doctor was still standing by the control panel watching them.

"Thank God," Phyllis thought to herself, "that CeCe don't realize that I still have the BioTronics neuronet under this bald head of mine and that it's still connected to the onboard Elite computer network of the asteroid. That I let the combat computer take over my body's motor functions and let it strategize the win for me. Anyway," Phyllis rationalize, "a win is a win no matter how it's

done if it is for the greater good of all concerned."

Phyllis had no further qualms in the way she had overcome her opponent because CeCe did try to use her own superior knowledge of maneuvering in free fall to win, it just didn't work out that way.

"Doctor, it is settled for now, but CeCe can't stand to lose. She will do her work and not cause trouble for the rest of the flight, that I'm sure of."

"How does this 'cannot stand to lose' attitude effects us?" she wanted to know.

"It only effects her relationship with me, that's all. I can't call her an enemy, but I must be careful about not thinking of her as a friend... for now."

"This is not something that we Tassangaxx could deal with," she hissed as she shook her head in human fashion. "As the ship's doctor I do know that the psychological difference between our species is great and some latitude is called for, so I must accept the way you are handling this situation."

The Dino Doctor turned and walk away. She hissed something to the waiting shipmate as she passed and the Dino also left. The human witness, on seeing that everyone was leaving, ducked out of the arena as fast as she could. That left Phyllis alone with the still angry CeCe who promptly stormed out without saying another word.

"Maybe I should check on Sandy and see how she is progressing." Phyllis chuckled to herself as she looked around the now empty arena. "At least I know she can't leave, then again..."

Chapter Five: Welcoming the Foe

RAMON made his way through the crowd of people that were rushing toward the T&S's so they could get to their own emergency stations. He had a firm grip of Jessica's hand as he dodged one way and then another going in the opposite direction. He was cursed at more than once because of his erratic behavior. He didn't care; he had a faster way to get where he needed to go.

Linked together on every deck of the enormous ship there were dozens of emergency medical Tube & Shaft units located on the secondary hallways. People like him who were first responders had full access to them. This allowed them fast and troubled free transportation to any part of the ship. After placing his hand on the sensor by the emergency portal door Ramon told the AI where he and Jessica needed to go. If it was not an acceptable destination the door would remain closed and he would be told to leave the area and use the nearest public systems.

The door hissed open and they both stepped in and were whisked away to his assigned station. Within a minute they were on the medical shuttle deck that was located below the medical decks. They stepped out of the elevator only a few ships away from his assigned vessel. The area was empty of people since his ship was one of the few medical transport that had a human pilot; most were AI controlled, but one in ten had a pilot that could operate independent of the situation if needed. Beside the pilot there were several doctors and nurses that would show up before launch and the fully equipped mini hospital would be told where it was needed most.

Ramon did not waste a moment as he slipped into the pilot's chair and started to power up the flight systems. He pointed to the copilot seat and Jessica slid into it. Within five minutes the craft was in standby mode with all green lights on the control board. As Ramon settled in to wait he started to watch various camera feeds that showed what was happening outside the vessel. One feed in particular caught his eye.

Jessica had her chair swiveled backwards and was fully impressed by the size and complexity of the medical vessel that he had command of and told him so. Not paying attention to her he only answered back with a huff. That caught her by surprise and before she could say anything about his snobbish remark she saw that a cyborg was standing in the airlock watching and listening to them.

"Yeah," Ramon finally elaborated as he slowly swung his chair

around to face Jessica, "this is the payment I got from my grandpa Barclay for saving those power satellites from the Dino attack. You'd think that something better like Bridge Crew member would have been a more fitting compensation." He seemed to noticed the man for the first time.

"What are you looking at!" Ramon asked sarcastically. "Haven't you even seen two people talking before. Either get in here and tell us your business is or go find something else to do. We don't need your kind watching us like some kind of perverted peeping Tom just because you can't get a lady."

Ramon was on his feet and menacingly stepping closer to the cyborg who was still in the airlock.

"Don't mean any harm," the man responded while held out his mechanical hands in a 'stand back' motion. "I saw that this ship was powered up and was just checking on it. I didn't realized that this was one of the manned units. Just doing my job that's all."

By this time Jessica was on her feet and had Ramon by the arm and looking at him in disbelief. She couldn't fathom why he got so angry so fast at the man for no reason.

"Sorry," Roman apologized, "I was just mad at someone else when you showed up, that's all." He stepped back and sat down once more. Jessica looked from Ramon back to the cyborg and rolled her eyes. She didn't know what to say or do.

The machine man leaned against the inner door frame just as a real person would have done and crossed his arms over his chest.

"If you don't mind I heard you mention that Bud Barclay was your grandfather and you didn't sound to happy about it or this cushy job you received from him. Most people would give anything for a position like this especially since you never were a pilot until recently."

"Yeah, and I do mind. But since you seem to know more about me than I do about you why don't you tell me you tag and we'll see what I might know about you. Is that fair enough?"

"Crying Wolf is my tag..."

"And you lost your family," Ramon cut in, "because you showed up at home as a cyborg without letting them know. Two can play this silly game, but it won't get us anywhere fast. Will it?"

The cyborg fell silent, but didn't move off the door frame.

Ramon quickly looked at Jessica who also just sat down and winked at her. The cyborg could not see the wink from where he was standing.

As a way of breaking the stalemate between them, Ramon

pointed at Jessica and said, "This here is Jessica and she's mine!" He sounded like he wanted to pick a fight with Crying Wolf.

"You sure got an attitude problem, Ramon, and I kind of like that. It nice for once to hear a flesh and blood person speak their mind to one of us cyborgs and not cringed like we're the Bogeyman or something."

"Well, the way I hear it, all you 'Mad Dogs' cringe and are just pussy cats when it comes to Tom Swift. And what he says goes, no matter what it is. It sounds like he really doesn't think much of you guys and that goes for Grandpa Bud. You don't get one without the other, if you know what I mean." Ramon was looking right at the cyborg and watching his every move, not that he made any.

"Yeah, I know what you mean all to well and some day the old man will find out what it's like being locked up in a tin body."

"Others have tried and he's still here and kicking. Anyhow I hear that you guys can get brand new body if you want to, so what's your beef against Tom now?"

"I lost my whole family because he decided that the world was not ready for regeneration. I still hold that against him. Isn't that enough?"

Ramon shrugged. "Sorry, guy, I know how that feels."

"I got to get moseying along. I've people to see and places to go. Nice talking to you both." The cyborg straightened up and nodded at Jessica, "Maybe next time, Sweetheart, you and me can have a conversation and I won't mind it a bit if you leave the space jock at home."

Jessica's face turned red and Ramon just laughed at the cyborg and mouthed back, "You'll blow every fuse you have if she ever went out with you, robot man. Try back later when you're flesh and blood, and then we'll see who's the better man."

Without saying another word, Crying Wolf turned around and walked out the airlock. Ramon walked after him and stopped at the outer airlock door and watched him disappear down the slightly curved corridor. It seemed to him that it happened a lot sooner than it should have. Jessica came a stood beside him. His attention turned to her and the fading cyborg was forgotten.

"What kind of game were you trying to play with him? What you said to him was not what I expected from you?" Looking at her confused and troubled face, Ramon did not feel good with himself thinking that he might have hurt her, so he immediately tried to explain his actions.

"That is one of the three cyborgs that want to kill Tom." He noticed the change in her face as she started to understand his

actions. "When I saw him coming into the ship I quickly made a decision to try to plant a seed of discontent on my part with both Tom and Bud. Hoping that they may take me into their conspiracy at a future date. I know it is a wild card move, but at this point in time it may be the only straw I can grasp at."

Jessica's eyes widened and her face turned pale as he spoke, not because of what he said, but because Ramon and the shuttle, in fact, the whole starship was quickly fading into a white fog. She grasped Ramon by the arm, but it was too late, everything went white and they and the *OutBound* was no more.

The last thing that Tom did was yelled, "Albert!"

Then everything became whiteness.

Was it the sound or the thought of the name that caused the ripple that formed and expanded outward in the whiteness. The rippling that after a while changed direction and flowed back into its own center. A mass started to form and the whiteness was pulled into it slowly at first and then faster, ever faster. Not that time or speed as we think of it existed.

In that uncountable amount of time all the whiteness flowed into the now enormously expanding mass. The space that was left around the mass was black in its complete emptiness, and the only light came from an area that surrounded the orb like a shimmering translucent shell. The mass itself was still white but it didn't radiate outwards.

The orb's surface was chaotic in nature. There was no way of telling what it consisted of. At best it looked like something covered with millions of flowing twisted rivers of gold against the white substance of the surface. The twistings were caused by giant bursting bubbles erupting upon the surface. Some of the bubbling mass was thrown into the blackness as giant arches of substance. Some of it was thrown so far away that it never came back and was absorbed by the transparent shell, while the rest of it fell back to the surface.

In the center of the orb something else was happening, something that never happened before. An existence can be explained as beginning when you become aware of your surroundings or yourself. It could be only one atom or a whole universe, it doesn't matter. Existence does not even have to be made of matter, plasma or any other type of energy. Albert was the veil of whiteness and spread out too fine to be anything of use. He was in a static state of being with no energy flowing. The potential was there, but it needed to be started from something other than itself.

His name was the force that woke him into being. Where he was or what he was did not make a difference to his newly awakened consciousness. Everything that he ever knew solidified and he became Albert and was once more in the center of the orb. Not as the AI he once had been, not as the sixteen personalities that he also once was, but as a new blazing mass of everything or anything that might be possible at the moment of creation. He was the Big Bang before it went **BANG!** and time and space were created.

With an ease that should not have been possible, Tom Swift slipped into Albert's mind as if he had always a part of him. While in some ways Tom and Albert were of the same consciousness because Tom had patterned Albert after his own mind, but Tom was biological and Albert was an artificial white hole that had no physical being in Tom's universe, yet they coexisted. In that single instant of time they became one and still retained their former selves.

What took place next took forever to happen and at the same time took no time at all.

"Albert, where are we, and why are we here?" Tom asked. He needed to understand what was happening to all of them on the starship. "Did the time dilation field destabilized the white hole in such a way that it caused this? Can we put a stop to it?"

"Yes to your questions, my friend." Albert told him. "But we are not on the starship, or in any place you could think of. In fact I'm holding on to every living soul from the starship so that they won't be lost."

"What do you mean lost? Lost as in dead? Bud and BullDog were standing right beside me when we were engulfed by the whiteness. I don't know what else to call it." Tom desperately wanted to understand what had happened to them all. If there was to be any hope of escape, or rescue, or whatever was required, it would most likely need to come from him.

"Let's just say that, Bud, Bull and the rest of the people on the starship are in a kind of suspended animation. One that is allowing them to continue to live their lives as if nothing has happened."

"How can you possibly hold them and at the same time they are continuing to live their lives?"

"Because there is nothing physical to hold onto. I only have their..." Albert paused as if trying to find the right words, "...souls, for lack of a better word, and it has to stay in motion... that is living their life's as if nothing has happened, or they will cease to exist."

"And how did you become so knowledgeable about all of this all of a sudden?" Tom was not liking this superior Albert at all. "Have you been hiding things from me that I should have known about?"

And when did you acquire this knowledge?" So many more questions came into Tom's mind that he could not ask them fast enough.

"Tom, Tom, don't try to rush things. We have all of eternity to talk and figure this out. This is why you are here. It is to help me."

"That's a heck of a lot of talking if you asks me. So let's cut to the chase. What kind of help do you need? You seem to have all the answers." Tom's voice betrayed the fact that he was slowly getting angry with Albert.

"Not on saving our universe and everything and everyone in it."

"WHAT! Save everything and everyone in the whole universe?" Tom shouted and then laughed at himself as he realized what Albert had said was truly impossible. "I can understand that we are trapped in the influence of that whiteness that must be the results of the interaction of the white hole and the Time Dilation Field, but it can't last forever. Eventually there won't be enough energy from the reactors to keep it going and then it will collapse. That's when we're in real trouble. I don't see a way out of this." Tom's mind was reeling with the unlikeliness of this situation. It was not possible for it to be happening, yet it was.

"Tom, you are just not looking at the whole picture. Let us start with the obvious. First off, a white hole is not the other side of a black hole. A black hole is the same no matter how you look at it. It's an ever growing sphere that sucks everything into it, no matter if it's physical in nature or any type of energy. What goes in never comes back out."

"So what did I achieve when I built you and tied you into the sixteen flavors of micro black hole?" Tom could not believe that he did not truly understand what he had done.

"What you did, Tom, was set up a situation that should not have been possible. The fundamental laws of our universe were not designed to hold that many black holes in such close proximity and keep them from swallowing each other up. The very center of our universe shows that it is not possible. That it's a dog eat dog universe out there and black holes are voracious, especially with each other. The precision that you achieved and the way you coaxed all the different flavored black holes into existence at the same time was incredible and beyond belief. For the most part it was beyond physical laws."

"I take it that I should not have succeeded at all and that you should not have ever come into existence. Is that what you are telling me?"

"What I am telling you, Tom, is that no other sentient being in all the universe has created what you have achieved in building

me."

"But, if I have not achieved what I think I did," Tom let out the equivalent of a sigh, "then what did I do, Albert?"

"To answer that we have to examine the second thing that caused this to happen."

"The Time Dilation drive," Tom cut in. "But that is part of our universe. The Dinosaurs accomplish that feat millions of years before we even came into being."

"Yes, that achievement is a fundamental part of our universe. That is if you could accelerate an object close to the speed of light that time would slow down but the second part of that theorem is that mass also increases and that in itself stops you from achieving anything near the speed of light because you can't drag that extra mass with you.

"But transforming the mass as it materializes into anti-time particles was genius on the part of the Dino. And that was as far as that achievement could go. The anti-time particles could not be used to send something back in time, so it is only useable as a way to move through vast distances of space with virtually no time lost in the process.

"But when you unknowingly mixed your unprecedented white hole and the time dilation effect together you created a pathway that led to the very beginning of time in the universe. So far back in time that we are in the moment of its creation. We are the Big Bang!"

Tom mentally shook his head. "Then why has it not happened. It seems we've been talking for a long time and the Bang happened in no time at all."

"That's just it, Tom. In no time at all. Before the Bang there is no time and we're just before that moment when it happens. Don't you see what that means?"

Tom gave the equivalent of a no. He had no answer, but then something that Albert told him earlier 'clicked' into place.

"Albert, are we stuck here? What is supposed to occur that will cause the Big Bang to happen?"

"Tom, The Big Bang can happen anytime we want it to. This place is the beginning, the alpha, and the end, the omega. I've already ridden the wave of creation outwards and became the last erg of energy left in the dead cold universe to be sucked into that last black hole, and guess what? I ended up here. That is why you calling out to me started the cycle going again. So what does that tell you?"

Albert sounded like he was laughing as he said those last six

words.

Ramon felt that he was lost in a whiteout, not of snow or fog, but of memory. He couldn't think of who he was or what he had been doing. He only knew that he was searching for something. That he had a grasp of something in his hand but he did not know what to do with it. Should he let it go? Should he pull it closer to him? Maybe bringing it closer would help him see it and then he would know what to do.

He tightened his grip on what he held and pulled his arm in. Whatever it was came swiftly and bumped heavily into his chest. Arms wrapped quickly around him holding him in a death-like grip. Whatever or whoever it was, was soft and warm and was shaking. He heard a distinct sob as a head buried itself into his neck.

The word, "Jessica" came as a whisper from his mouth as all of his past memories flooded back into his brains. It was the woman he had recently met in his arms, and she somehow felt as if she belonged there. They were standing by the outer hatch of the medical ship and all was as it should be. They looked into each others eyes searching for some evidence that the whiteness had been real, that both of them had seen it and had been engulfed by it. But it was all gone. Fading fast into the nothingness as quickly as bad dreams do.

Tom could barely see the scaffoldings that were in front of him. He was standing near the center of his lab. It was as large as a small airplane hanger. The sixteen black hole emitters set around him in a very specific pattern radiated with a rainbow of color that was almost lost in the whiteness. The white hole itself was lost in the very whiteness that was intensifying by the second.

He took another step closer and called out Albert's name as if he was calling out to a lost child in the night. By the time he finished pronouncing the name two things happened at once, or so it seemed.

The whiteness disappeared and along with it the white hole that made Albert possible. In less than a blink of an eye Tom lost two treasured and valuable inventions. It was not the loss of a way to communicate instantly that hurt so much or the loss of a great wealth of knowledge that was part of the AI, but the loss of a personal friendship that spanned well over half a century.

Tom slowly sank to his knees as a moan of anguish issued from his lips.

Chapter Six: Life Continues On

"ATTENTION to all crew. Report to your stations. Double team priority is now called for. Countdown for transition to normal space commences in thirty minutes." A small smile formed on Phyllis's lips as she looked down at the control center from the balcony. Both the Tassangaxx and female humans had been in place for the last couple of hours. She was sure that it was that same way all over the asteroid.

The Prime Leader mentally redirected her command radio to the frequency that was used by the *Explorer One* space craft.

"CeCe, is the ship ready in case we need it?" Phyllis mentally cringed at the possible response she might receive even all these weeks after the arena incident.

"Human control module up and running, Prime Leader. Tassangaxx ship main controls are in standby as well as its pilot. Just say the word and we're out the door." CeCe's voice was actually pleasant sounding considering the circumstances... namely that T'San—Sandra Swift newly adoptive hybrid name—was manning the spacecraft's original set of controls.

"Thank you, captain. Let's hope that there will be no need for your services at this time especially since you've had no actual operational time with the hybrid control unit." Phyllis did another frequency change.

"Sandy... sorry, T'San how's it going?" She was in direct contact with her second-in-command.

"A little cold," she chuckled, "but my new hide can handle it."

"That's all I need to hear. Later." Phyllis cut the connection. "Sure wish I had another Dino to send with CeCe instead of T'San," she thought to herself, "but I need them all at station on the asteroid right now." She let her personal worries slip away with one final thought. "Can't do anything about it, anyhow." Her eyes swiped over the 3-D visual display that floated in the air just beyond the balcony's railing and high enough above everyone stationed below her so it did not interfere with watching them as they performed their duties.

"Reactors three and four commence power reduction. Hold at eighty percent." Phyllis turned her attention to the power indicators that were only a small part of the 3-D display. Of the six active indicators two of them started to flicker and change color, moving slowing down the visible spectrum. The dinos were extremely sensitive to color change and used that ability in many of their displays. Bright red turned into an orange-yellow and

stopped. The corresponding human numerical number located beside it changed to eighty percent at the same time. In another section of the display other lights began changing colors as well. With the ship's time dilation drive no longer scooping up the extra mass that was forming, the unit was no longer capable of generating anti-time particles, so it shut down.

Using her bio-matrix connection, Phyllis blinked out the display that was before her and connected it to the external asteroid cameras that were pointing towards their direction of flight. Instantly the space was filled with two white hot stars, the farther away one just five arc seconds to the left of the other. The intense light dimmed as the computer automatically adjusted the display intensity of the two stars.

"Prime Leader, those two stars in your visual display are Atlas, classification, B8III and Pleione, stellar class B8IVpe. They are ten and twenty-one light years away respectively and never seen from this angle before. By using them as reference points I calculate that we have arrived within one thousand miles of our computed course." Carla also had a PhD in astronomy and that was why she was paired with this particular Tassangaxx.

"Thank you, navigation. Stand by for further instructions. Radar, what's out there?"

"Both deep space and the immediate vicinity around us are clear of any large objects that could potentially harm to us, Prime Leader," the Dino reported.

"But," the human counterpart of the team added, "we do have a lot of space dust inbound from about a million miles out from our present position that may cause problems if we try to initiate the Time Dilation drive."

"Just keep a close watch in the direction we're heading and keep us out of the dust if you can." Phyllis mentally switched communications to another channel.

"Astronomy and astrophysics, break out your toys and get to work. You have forty-eight hours to update what we know about this area of the cluster. Get a spectroscopy reading of that dust sitting ahead of us first thing. Then find us some nice homey class M planets to visit.

"Be ready at the end of that time to report back with a detailed report on everything you have found out, no matter how trivial it may seem. Don't forget to use the information obtained from Mr. Swift's last probe as a starting point." She then cutting to Engineering, "Switch ship's drive output to the secondary's systems. You have forty-eight hours in which to inspect all the main operational systems and have them fully ready to be called

back on line. Also use this time to finish the human upgrades on the other two explorer ships." Another switch.

"*Explorer One*, you may commence a test run on the ship. Don't take her out to far out. Report back to command when you return, out." She once more called up the command room frequency.

"Telemetry station, set up a constant instrument feedback on the *Explorer One*. They're going out to test the new dual control systems. Radar, don't let them stray to far into that dust." She then opened the com to asteroid-wide communication.

"Crew, we have arrived at our first stop on our way to finding a new home for both of our races. We are waiting for the *OutBound* to show up and when they do we'll start the second part of our journey." Phyllis paused for a second and smiled to herself, satisfied at how well the flight had gone so far. "I commend all of you for your devotion to duty. Thank you and we will be on our way to finding a new home world in a few days." She was about to cut the connection when she remembered to add. "All double teams may stand down. Regular crew rotation is now in effect. That is all."

The 3-D display of the stars vanished and Phyllis watched with a feeling of satisfaction as half of the mixed crew members left the control center. One of the female humans, in her exuberances, even jumped into the air and punched the sky when she noticed that the Prime Leader was still watching them.

Understandably, Phyllis too had a big smile on her face as she waved back. Then a thought about Sandy, *no damn it*, T'San not being at her side caused a moment of sadness that she shrugged off as she disconnected her mind from the Elite BioTronics command computer. For the first time in the last twenty-four hours she felt the hunger, thirst and bone weariness of her body that the Elite connection blocks so she could only need to concentrate on the all important transition into real space. So much could have gone wrong, and thank God, none of it did happen.

"Time to find something to eat," she thought, "and then to bed for the next ten hours. And I hate to be the person that gets in my way."

With her body at ease, CeCe took control of *Explorer One* using the Intuitive Direct function link that was part of her InterVoice communication implant. With years of '*direct fly by mind*' experience it came naturally for her to do it now. The cockpit area she was in was no different than what you would find in any commercial Earth made spacecraft except it was spread out and very roomy. Most of the flight instruments were against the wall and out of her reach. Above the control panels, bolted on the walls,

were the usual arrays of monitors made with smart glass and touch technology. There was no way for CeCe to touch anything of the controls as she reclined in her flight seat unless she shut down the mind link and went to manual flight control.

Even at the pilot's seat where CeCe was reclining all the hand controls that were normally available at her fingertips were tucked away inside the two armrests, out of the way until needed. In her mind CeCe had full access to everything that controlled the spacecraft. She could be anywhere and everywhere at an instant and have full control over everything. It was the *rush* that she lived for and missed so much as a crew member on the asteroid. It was the part of her that she could not tell or explain to anyone, especially to someone like Phyllis Swift who had never experienced such freedom and power.

Tucked away into a corner of her vision CeCe was watching everything that T'San was doing. She still didn't trust her and was afraid that she might do something stupid during the test, like try to take over the controls if she felt unsafe.

CeCe still didn't like the woman for what she had done to herself and doubted if she ever would. As for the name change she was all for it because Sandra Swift was no longer human. To CeCe she was nothing more than a one-of-a-kind Dino monster.

CeCe could at times somewhat understand T'San's desire to become someone of importance, especially after all those lost years in suspended animation caused by the Dinos. But to join their ranks both physically and emotionally left a bitter taste in her mouth. One that was too psychotic... too much like kidnaper's syndrome to her way of thinking. Phyllis should have stepped in and put a stop to it when Sandy first broached the subject, especially since she was Phyllis's one true friend in the whole world.

This kind of thinking always got CeCe's temper boiling, and there was one sure way to cool it down.

With a long practice ease, the UFO-shaped saucer, *Explorer One*, rose several feet off the ground, rotated around and flew out of the maintenance alcove it was berthed in. It gathered speed and headed across the enormous cavern that acted as the asteroid's hangar. Over fifty similar alcoves could be seen all around the inner surface wall, although most of them were dark and empty.

As the ship approached the opposite wall the violet colored outline of four triangular doors that covered the airlock opening split apart and slid out of the way. The multi-colored radiance of a force shield that held the atmosphere from rushing out into space could be seen in the tunnel behind the airlock. By the time the spacecraft shot out of the tunnel it was accelerating well past the

five-G mark.

The acceleration inverter kept both occupants free from the bone crushing force of the acceleration and the abrupt maneuvers that CeCe was putting the ship through. However, in the space behind the wall of the control panel the same luxury was not extended to the equipment in the bay. Normally it would not have mattered, but this time it did. A forgotten screwdriver, left sitting on top of one of the equipment racks, became nothing more than a destructive missile on a rampage.

Not once did CeCe warn T'San of any of her wild maneuvers. It was as if a steel wall separated the two control setups instead of five feet of air. If she thought that T'San would ask her to take it easy and slow down a little she was dead wrong.

The only thing T'San did was to activate the emergency body restraint unit that was part of the raised flight deck she stood on before her controls. It sprayed out a mist that enveloped her lower torso in a fine glass-like webbing and held her in place. Since the Tassangaxx could not use chairs or recline as human do because of their bulky legs and hefty tail they evolved with the ability to stoop down with their legs spread apart and used the base of their tail as a third support. They even slept in this upright position.

At the terrific acceleration that CeCe was traveling and with the wild maneuvers that she was putting the ship through it did not take long for the screwdriver to start bouncing around and cause irreparable damage to the rows of racks that held the delicate electronics that controlled the spacecraft.

In the asteroid's command center the crew member that was monitoring the *Explorer One* was detecting that the ship was starting to stray way beyond a safe distance for them, and to add to the situation the telemetry coming from the ship unexpectedly cut out and the backup systems failed to come on line. It could have been caused by a small glitch in either the readouts or in the radio transmitter but there was a serious temperature fluctuation showing up from several high function locations behind the outer skin of the leading edge of the ship. All of this was happening so fast that it left the crewwomen with a feeling of bewilderment and a sense of helplessness.

The sensors on the outer skin of the ship were giving the worst data in that they were showing that the ship was being pelted by a heavy concentration of the interstellar dust, more than what was being picked up by the close proximity radar scanner. With the radar not picking it up the flight computer was not adjusting the forward shields to protect the ship from being hit by the micro particles. This was causing the uneven heat build up on parts of the

skin of the ship made of special alloys so sensitive instrument could probe through the ship's skin into the vastness of space. Two such vulnerable areas were where the radar and the radio antenna arrays were located in the upper dome of the saucer.

The human crew member monitoring the telemetry was in the process of informing both the *Explorer One* and the watch officer of the situation when all the readouts went dead at her station following a brief blast of color that ran up and down the light spectrum of her displays. Simultaneously, the audio / visual radio receivers let out with a high-frequency squeal of static that caused all the humans in the command center to flinch in pain.

The Dino watch officer knew without another word being said that the Prime Leader had to be made aware of this situation as quickly as possible and sent out an emergency summons directly to her quarters. She then turned to the control room personal and started to roar, hiss, and whistle out orders to start the rescue operation.

CeCe was well aware of the heat build up and was trying desperately to increase the power to the forward shielding and at the same time bring the ship to a halt, or at least slow it down, but to no avail. Her Intuitive link kept cutting out and rebooting. Normally this only meant a momentary loss of control but this time there were no seconds to spare, and the feedback was so high that it burnt out all the built in safe guards of her link and was causing CeCe's body to momentarily seize up with each reboot.

The unresponsive spacecraft continued to build up speed and the green colored leading edge of the saucer started to glow cherry red as microscopic pits started to form in the less protective parts of the ship's surface. The pits turned into gouges, the gouges into holes that pieced right through the outer skin and into the equipment beneath it.

Trying desperately to fight the seizures that ripped through her body, CeCe failed in reaching out with her hand and slamming her fist onto the manual override that should have released the armrest controls and automatically disconnected the flight controls from the mind link. It then should have adjusted her seat by sliding it forward into operational reach of the control boards and the board itself should have u-shaped around her chair forming a tight cockpit with all the control panels in easy reach.

None of it happened.

T'San watched helplessly as CeCe's body went into spasms and before she could even reach out to try to take control of the ship her own control panel went dead as a loud tearing sound reverberated

throughout the ship followed by the main monitor in front of her cracking in a thousand prices and imploding into the instrument bay that sat behind it.

It left a gaping, black hole in its place. T'San was slammed forward into her body restraints by the high volume of air being sucked out of the hole right into the cold darkness of space. The whole front section of the saucer was nowhere to be seen.

The lights went out, the artificial gravity failed, and the individual life support force field built into the pilot's chair and under the Dino's flight deck that was supposed to encompass the pilots momentarily came on and then failed.

The total area of the control room was not that great as compared to the rest of the ship and the air was sucked out in a matter of seconds. Everything not tied down was pulled towards the gaping hole, including CeCe who had no restraints on her unconscious body.

Luckily most of the air was gone by the time the gravity field gave out and CeCe was just slowly drifting towards the hole. T'San had no difficulty in reaching out and capturing her. She had very little time to get CeCe into some kind of atmosphere or she would die as her body would start to rupture and freeze from the exposure to space.

Even though T'San was still basically human her modified body had been adapted with many of the nano technologies that the Tassangaxx used to harden their bodies to survive in space without a spacesuit for short length of time. Part of this adaptation to space included the ability for the soles of her feet to become very gummy and able to stick to most surfaces. This gave them the ability to walk where there was no gravity. Knowing this, she did not have to worry about herself, but only for CeCe.

Using her tail she whipped it around her lower torso and smashed the webbing that held her in place. While the restraints had unbelievable tensile strength the sudden shock caused it to shatter into dust releasing her. Taking sure, measured steps she turned around with CeCe now tucked under one arm and used the unencumbered hand to open the door that lead to the back of the ship, and hopefully safety.

To humans who enter a Tassangaxx ship all the walls, floors and ceilings appear to be a dull green and look seamless and unadorned. To the Tassangaxx the ship's interior was marked out with labels and outlines that showed where drawers, cabinets, hatches could be found and, at times like this, even illuminated the room with an infrared fluorescent glow that the double eye lenses and retinas of the Tassangaxx were sensitive to.

T'San sure-footed her way to the outlined panel for the hatch that led to the back half of the ship. She pressed her palm onto the hand sensor and the panel opened without a moments hesitation. The atmospheric force field that was built into every hatchway of the ship held the air on the other side from rushing into the vacuum of the control room. T'San simply stepped through and the panel closed behind her.

T'San rushed to the left side of the crew's common room and placed CeCe onto the oversized platform that was the ship's auto-doctor. The medical sensors immediately picked up on the presence of a patient and after adjusting its programming to diagnose a human female, it went to work.

With the speed and accuracy that only an AI computer could achieve CeCe was striped naked, and a total body scan was performed and analyzed. The device continued to monitor her condition as the treatment progressed. An oxygen mask was placed over her face and a stimulant was injected into her heart to restart it. When that failed to reactivate the heart function an electric shock was administered and, after a second jolt, it started the rhythmic beating of the heart.

A clear shield slipped into place over the platform and the inside filled up with a thick, cloudy liquid that was full of Nanobots to address the outer skin damage caused by the exposure to the vacuum of space. Slowly the damage that had been done to CeCe's body was treated and her condition became stable.

On seeing more and more of the medical readout return to acceptable levels T'San turned away from the auto-doctor and headed to the engine room proper to try to find out what had gone wrong and to see if saving CeCe's life was a good thing.

For all she knew the ship could explode or disintegrate around them at any moment.

Chapter Seven: A Hiccup in Time Was All it Was...

A SHUDDER, a momentary feeling of being at two places at once, or for some of the crew it was like being in an earthquake that centered in the middle of their own bodies; these were some of the ways the people on the *Outbound* explained what they felt when the enormous ship came out of the time dilation drive. Being a half second out of step with the rest of the world was the most common way of explaining the disquieting feeling that rocked through their bodies at that time. It was unnerving, to be sure, and they all wanted answers to what had just happened to them. Most of the crew and some of the passengers were very knowledgeable with the running of the ship and knew they could possibly be in serious trouble. Trouble that could cost them and their families their lives.

The control center was flooded with calls and Tom Swift was nowhere to be found. Finally a call to Bud Barclay brought results. Tom had been located and was on his way. A collective sigh of relief ran throughout the control room. They quickly made it known that Mr. Swift had the situation under control and would be explaining everything shortly. They all just sat there and prayed that it was true or it would be their collective necks on the chopping blocks.

Bud placed a hand on the friend's sagging shoulder. Tom turned and looked up at Bud as a lone tear ran down his ashen face.

"You're needed in the control room, Tom. I know that you felt very close to Albert, but the people of this ship need you more right now. Albert would be the first to tell you that they are your responsibility and yours alone. So let's do what we need to do for the people of this ship and find out what just happened. Later you can try to salvage what you can of him. That is what he would want you to do, and you know it."

Without saying a word Tom slowly got to his feet and looked once more at the empty center of the structure that was the focal point for the white hole. Never again would it glow with the intense intelligence of the AI. *He* was lost forever and the sixteen computers that help make him what he was were just shadows of what he was as a conscious entity.

"Tom, I will stay here and guard the lab until you come back," offered Bulldog as a way to relieve Tom's mind of one of its many burdens.

"Thanks, Bulldog, I take you up on that offer." He took Bud's arm, smiled at him and said in a voice that was still full of emotions. "Let's go, flyboy. We have a lots of explaining to do. Mostly to me first."

Using the medical T&S brought them to the control room in a matter of minutes. When that transit door slid open and the two men stepped out, a hush fell onto the room as everyone turned to look at their leader.

By the time his right foot hit the deck Tom was giving out orders.

"On the main screen display our status conditions in the following order: life support, engine statistics, shields, medical hibernation and fleet readiness." Tom was sitting down by this time in the command chair and pulled his computer board from its slit in the armrest as he added, "Navigation, display our immediate surroundings and fill in where we are as you ascertain that information."

An icon representing the *Outbound* appeared in the air just above the visual display screen and a sphere of stars quickly filled up the space around the ship. Small sections of the sphere started to blink as the computers tried to analyze the various star patterns and spectroscope readouts.

Giving the display a glance Tom knew it was going to take some time before he had an answer. The sphere was so heavily filled with stars that he could not see through to the other side—in fact it was just a hazy glow of light. The computers could not distinguish the individual stars that far out because there were so many of them. That could only mean that they were either close to the center of the Galaxy or in a different one that humans may have never even seen before.

Tom just prayed to God it wasn't that because if it was they were lost for good. Not that they could not survive where they might be but the shock that Earth really was gone for ever would have an unsettling effect on the people, and that was something Tom was not ready to handle.

"Tom," Bud whispered into his ear after a few minutes of him just working silently on his personal computer with only his fingers moving, "you've got to say something to everybody. Just don't sit there like a rock."

Tom looked up from what he was doing and gave a sly grin to Bud while mouthing, "Sorry. I needed some answers first and got carried away."

He could see the look of worry on everyone's faces. The fact that the star map still had not one recognizable sector displayed on it gave everyone in the room a feeling of foreboding. They all knew that they were lost... but how lost, and was the ship capable of taking them back anywhere close to home? Or to the Dino asteroid ship that held friends and family members of many of Tom's crew;

those thoughts were upmost on their minds.

The display that Tom called up showed the ship was in excellent condition and that by ship time reckoning they had only been star bound for less than two days. The only readout that was not green was that for the white hole. The word 'Deactivated' cut diagonally across that display.

Tom closed his eyes for a second and then turned on the ship-wide communication system.

"This is Captain Tom Swift, and we have come to a full stop on our voyage. We are safe and all our systems are ready to continue our flight. But for some unknown reason our instantaneous communication system has failed and when it did it affected the Time Dilation drive. We all felt the shock of it shutting down in our bodies, but it has caused no lasting effort on us medically. All feelings of it should have faded out by this time. If you are still suffering from a residual effect please report to Medical for a check up immediately."

Almost everyone on the ship took a look at the people nearest them to see if anyone was going to see the doctors. When they realized that no one had moved a sigh of relief went throughout the ship.

"There is one obstacle in the way of continuing our journey and that is that at the present time we do not know precisely where in the Galaxy we are." Tom raised his voice and spoke loudly enough to overcome the immediate murmuring noise of the crew. "That problem will be overcome in short order as the navigation computers gather data and pinpoint our present location. At that time they will chart a new course for us to take us back to the Pleiades star cluster. This ship was designed to take us out to the stars and it will continue to take us where we want to go."

He paused and looked at the crew in the control room. Everyone seemed satisfied with his explanation, so he continued.

"I can only ask all of you to do your jobs and not to worry. We have come out here to find a new home and we will. That is all, thank you." Tom cut the connection and leaned back into his command chair. A bead of sweat had formed along his hairline and he swiped it off with the back of his hand.

Bud's hand patted him on the right shoulder. "Good job, skipper!"

Ten hours later they were no closer to finding out where they were, and everyone with the slightest knowledge of the heavens had been called in and consulted.

When the light knock on Tom's office door had gone

unanswered, it was repeated, this time louder. He looked up from the tangled mess of star maps he was studying and called out for the visitor to enter.

Leo, the ship's archivist, stepped in looking to be as unsure of himself as he always seem in front of people of authority. He stood before Tom as if he had done something wrong and was waiting to be punished.

"Leo, please excuse me," Tom hurriedly told the stooped, bald-headed, older gentleman, "but I don't have time right now to talk to you about what is happening. If you can please come back once we are under way, that would be most appreciative."

"If you don't have the time to see me I can understand that, but to wait till we are already back under way could cause us unforeseen delays." The old man was nervously swaying back and forth from one foot to the other as he spoke. He also was crumpling several sheet of plastic that he held in his hands making quite a bit of noise.

Tom felt that if he said 'BOO!' to the man he would either run out of the room or have a heart attack... probably both. He stood and came around his desk and led the man to the couch against the back wall of the room, sat him down and handed him a glass of water that he poured from the pitcher that was always to be found on the side table.

Leo handed him the plastic sheets before taking the glass and gulping the water down.

"What's this?" Tom asked as he held the three sheets up to see what they were. The sheets were similar to old style x-rays, but a second later Tom recognized them for what they where: old photographic films from telescope observatories.

Leo pressed his lips together as he gently took the sheets from Tom and made sure they were in a certain order before handing them back. "This, my boy, is what I think happened to us. Look closely and tell me what do you see?"

Tom really did not have the time to please the ship archivist with this nonsense, but no one else had come up with an answer so far to where they were. Maybe, just maybe, the older man did know what he was talking about. Even at his age he was still one hell of a historian and still excellent at his job.

Tom took the time to study the three photographs that showed only a handful of stars. The only thing he could see different between each of them was that all the stars were sifting slowly in one direction and some were moving closer while others were moving farther apart.

"Those photographs were taken thirty-five years apart," he said tapping the first one, "and because our own solar system was moving away from that star field you can see the actual drift of the stars even over such a short period of time."

Tom looked at the photos once more and, with a smile on his face, planted a kiss on the old man's forehead before running out the door waving the sheets high into the air.

"That poor boy needs to see his wife before to long before he misplaces his affections on someone who may not be as tolerable as myself." Leo murmured and then proceeded to wipe his forehead with a handkerchief.

"Tom, this can't be..." Hector Alvarez shouted in a fit of emotion. It was the first time Tom had seen someone losing their temper since the shut down of the drive systems. The usually quite man was beside himself. He and a half dozen other people from the astrophysics department were meeting with Tom in the small conference room.

Tom watched as the man rubbed his eyes and stared once more at the holographic image that was being displayed above the center of the conference table.

"There's no way we could have jumped five billion years back into the past and fifty-thousand light years across the galaxy from where we were. The power requirements are totally unachievable with the energy sources we have available on this ship. That would have taken a sun or—" What he said next was deliberate, slow and directed at Tom only. "You don't know what you are talking about and for some unknown reason you are deliberately lying to us."

He slammed his fist onto the table top and started to shout even louder than before.

"I will not be a willing participant in this deception you are trying to pull on us and the people of this ship. I knew I should not have listened to you and your crazy scheme, but I was so afraid for my family's well being on Earth. Now this..." his eyes went wild and he pulled at his white hair as a crazed look came into his eyes. Before anyone could react he ran out the room screaming, "My family! What do I tell my family!"

Bud was sitting closest to the door and took off like a shot after the distraught man. Tom was taken aback by the reaction of the all the other people at the meeting. They showed little reaction to what the screaming man had said and of him running out of the meeting.

Tom knew each and every one of them personally and never had they not argued with a professional passion over one of his

proposals, even if it was just to argue for the fun of it. This time they just nodded their agreement and placidly sat there. Tom opened his mouth to counter any reaction they might have but had to close it when none was forthcoming.

"Maybe," he thought, "I didn't make myself clear." So he tried a different approach.

"Gentlemen, please listen to me." Tom stood up and bent forward a bit as he spread his hands out and leaned onto his finger tips. At six feet tall he knew that he was making himself an imposing figure as he looked down at the seated scientists.

"What has happened to us can be undone. You all know that if it happens once in nature it can be made to happen again. We will resume our journey and put every available power source we have into the Time Dilation drive. We have over a dozen reactors that are on standby in the Swift Construction Asteroid and we can redirect their power to help us achieve closer to light speed. The closer we get to *Tru-Light* the faster we cross the galaxy and the less time it will take us. It's a win-win for us right now."

This was a term that Tom used when he talked about being able to reach one hundred percent the speed of light. This was the holy grail of space travel. For Tom it meant instantaneous transportation. He thought that he had found the basis for it in the instantaneous communication capabilities of the white hole. But it proved to be a dead end by itself. For close to fifty years Tom never made another advancement in that area except for the Albert AI. And now without Albert... Tom felt lost.

Smiles replaced the placid looks on most of the faces and they told Tom they were glad to leave this problem in his capable hands. For a moment he thought he finally got through to the people at the meeting and continued with what he found out so far.

"I have concluded that there is a link between the loss of the micro-white hole and the failure of the drive. All we need to do is understand it and we're more than on our way home." But when they told him that they wished him luck on his research—and left without another comment or an offer to help in the research that was their bread and butter in the academic world—he felt as if a rug had been yanked from under his feet.

By the time the meeting ended Bud had returned and was sitting quietly waiting for the others to leave. Tom had noticed when his friend first came back he was looking sheepish. By the time Tom sat down beside him he was lightly snoring. While Bud could sleep anywhere and anytime he had never done it when something important was happening.

Something strange was going on and this was not the first time

Tom had noticed it in the past fourteen hours. It seem to have started when Leo found out where and when they actually were. Tom could not see a connection to that event and the way the people seemed to no longer care about what was happening around them.

"Bud, did you find Alvarez?" he asked as he shook him awake.

"Alvarez? Who's Alvarez?" He rubbed his eyes and sounded like he really did not remembered him.

"Stop the kidding, flyboy. This isn't the time to horse around. He's the astrophysicists who ran out of here and you gave chase too. Remember?" Tom looked at him questionably.

Bud crinkled up his face as he thought about it for a second and then slowly nodded yes.

"Sure... sure I do now. The bald headed guy. Right?"

"Right, and...?"

"And what, Tom?"

"Was he still upset? Did you have to take him to medical?" Tom was ready to strangle Bud.

"I don't think so." A far away look crossed Bud's eyes for a moment and then he added, "He met his wife and kids and they went off talking and laughing. They seemed happy enough."

Tom was exasperated, but he held his tongue as a new worry crossed his mind.

"Weren't you supposed to be having a meeting or something? Where is everybody?" Bud looked around the empty room. "I could have sworn that we were having one. Guess I was wrong. Look if you don't need me, Tom, I'll just take off. I've have to get something to eat. I'm starving. I feel like I haven't eaten all day." Bud doubled slapped his knees with the palms of his hands, got up and left the room whistling a tune.

Tom just sat there and looked as Bud walked away, "What the..." He never finished the thought for he was overwhelmed with a sickening feeling of dread.

Days passed, and by the end of a week Tom watched with mounting dismay as nothing went wrong in the ship. In the entire ship. Not in flight control, not in engineering, not even in medical. It was a slow realization but it became more noticeable as time want on. Nothing was changing, nothing was happening. All the people on the ship went from one day to the next without a worry in the world.

Nothing on the ship broke down, nobody got sick and needed a doctor. There were even no accidents, not even a dropped fork or glass. Everyone was happy and no one complained about anything.

The worst thing was that no one really cared that they might be forever lost in space and time. Tom was the only person who did, and that caused him to rethink the whole situation starting from the moment the white hole and time dilation drive stop working.

He even noticed that if he spent too much time away from his lab that he felt reluctant to return to it. He had to give up trying to get people to come visit him. Bud never showed up to see him when invited. Always too busy and when asked about what was going on he just dropped the subject and started another conversation.

Tom was now eating and sleeping in his lab. As an experiment he tried not to eat but found that he still had to. To his way of thinking that meant that the people on the ship were still physically alive, but somehow emotionally and mentally limited or controlled. But why not him? Or rather, not him as long as he was in his lab.

Something or someone wanted him in his lab and *only* in his lab. That left only two avenues of thought.

One, the answers he sought were outside the lab.

Two, the answers were to be found in the lab.

Either way he was alone, and he had to figure it out on his own.

Chapter Eight: The Pleiades: Nice To Look At But Hell to Live In

Phyllis, the Prime Leader, the captain of the asteroid ship, showed up in the control center in nothing but a robe. A robe that was dripping wet. She had been in the shower when the call came in about the *Explorer One*. The pink material was sticking to her still wet body and revealing more than it should even with an all female crew. The women in the room were a little shocked. The Dinos never gave it a thought. Humans clothed or humans unclothed were the same to them: unattractive!

Phyllis had never given it a thought either. The time she spent running around nude from the Dinos on this very asteroid had changed her outlook on the need of clothes. And being just married to Tom Swift had not fostered the need to wear anything in bed. In fact the opposite, so no PJ's waiting for her to put on after the interrupted shower.

"Status on the rescue operation? Are they alive?" She went straight to the medical station that automatically monitored anyone outside of the asteroid. Nine sets of crew readouts were on display. Seven from the crew working on the surface of the asteroid setting up extra research equipment, and two set apart from the others.

One human, CeCe Cox. One Tassangaxx hybrid, T'San.

CeCe's vitals were the low and steady levels of a person in an induced state of unconsciousness, which she was.

T'San on the other hand was far from normal and it would be sometime before the AI medical computer had a good grasp of what her 'normal' range would be. The total range of what was acceptable for her new physiology was still being calculated and charted. This extreme situation could add the missing data that was difficult to test for. The most important thing for her was to get over the limits of her old human body and come to acceptance of what her new body could and could not do. And at the moment she was acing it.

On her own she turned on the rear and remaining side-facing force fields to full. She then rotated the ship around one hundred and eighty degrees using the gyrostabilizers in the ship. This insured the most protection to her and CeCe from whatever was out there.

The emergency location transponder had been in operation since the ship went into distress mode, and it was now beeping telling her that the backup radio system was on line and was

receiving an incoming audio message. She manually activated the beacon's transceiver as she turned to face the engine control panels. She had no InterVoice Link and this part of the ship was not connected to that system anyway. The Tassangaxx still preferred the hands-on approach of controlling things.

"T'San, do not initiate any of the drive systems. Repeat do not initiate any of the thrusters." Those two sentences were repeated in a non-ending loop.

"Well, that's a fine '*How the hell are you*' call if I every heard one," she said as she pulled her fingers away from the start up sequencer that she was already using to power up the space drive.

"Guess I better talk to them before I blow the rest of the ship up." She walked over to another panel and dialed up the asteroid control center. This unit had full audio and visual display.

"Control, T'San here. Got your message and waiting on you for what to do." She couldn't help but sound a little bit flippant. This was the second time the controls had been taken out of her hands. "At least they're still in front of me and not a gaping hole into space," she thought trying to slow down her mind which was still running at survival speed and needed a way to vent itself.

"Sandy, what a relief." The visual display was showing Phyllis from the waist up; she was standing on a raised platform so she could be seen by the visual pickup.

"I'm glad to be here also, Captain, but apparently not as glad as you. If I've had known I, too, would have dressed down for the occasion. Then again I already am." She was referring to her lack of clothing and to Phyllis' state of near undress at the same time.

"Are you all right? Don't you understand the trouble you're in?" Phyllis had to ask in dismay.

"Must be a lot for an old prude like you to be to be standing there like that?" T'San touched her chest where her breasts no longer were. Phyllis blink twice and then slowly look down, realized that she was improperly dressed and looked back up with a half smile on her face.

"Miss 'em, sister?" Phyllis asked as she jiggled hers a little. Then, red faced, she folded her arms over her breasts with a somewhat sheepish look that came way too late. She started to step down off the platform and added loudly, "I think I'll leave now. I no longer feel that I'm needed in Control. You all know what needs to be done. So bring her home safely."

With regal bearing, the Prime Leader walked out of the control center with a rhythmic swaying of her hips beneath her flimsy robe.

"Nice floor show, but how am I getting home?" T'San had to ask

a few seconds later as everyone was staring at their Prime Leader.

The Dino watch officer told her to just stand by as they sent out a second explorer ship that would need to sweep the space before them with a highly positive charged ion field to make sure the space from which the dust particles were coming were clear of any antimatter.

The spectroscope analysis showed that the dust particle were made of a substance Tom had found in a cave years before in Africa. The *Inertite* dust particles were shielding antimatter atoms from the positive matter of this universe. This was the first time anyone had detected this phenomena in space and no one could even start to explain the if and why of it happening. All they knew was the way around it to get the *Explorer One* back with its living cargo still on board. Once the second ship was close enough it would send out a capture beam and act as a tug dragging the unfortunate ship back to the Asteroid.

Phyllis loved this spot. She had found it quite by accident when she took a wrong turn in the tunnel that led into the Observatory complex. For obvious reasons the asteroid could not have a super size telescope, there was no way of keeping one from distorting under the many stresses of space flight. The Tassangaxx solution was to have six smaller ones that could be electronically combined in any number to provide a resolution beyond what a super size telescope could achieve.

The complex was spread out inside a meteor crater that had a relatively flat surface. Each scope had to be raised to a precise height from its protective cocoon before use. Because of the low angle that the meteor had hit the surface there was a high rim of debris where it had finally stopped, and the Tassangaxx had built a large viewing area into the top of it.

When the nondescript, camouflaged shields were lowered an incredible scenery was unveiled. The raw unnatural turmoil of the asteroid beneath the spectacular cluster of the stars in the Pleiades was nearly heart-stopping—certainly breathtaking—and Phyllis had to stop to see it every time she came anywhere near it. She only wished that Tom was sharing it by her side. This was why she had decided to have this meeting here; she knew that this might just be one of the last times she would ever see it and the 3-D projection of it would never be the same.

The Prime Leader reluctantly turned her back to the scene and looked at the crew members she had assembled before her. T'San, her second in command and CeCe her best space pilot and trouble shooter. The Tassangaxx were representative by their chief medical officer, the head engineer, and their only Astro-scientist.

The humans were wearing their stilts so no one had to be looked down upon and Phyllis thought this was vital for this meeting.

"First off. Thank you all from coming." She looked at and nodded to each one of them, making only momentary eye contact with the Tassangaxx, observing their social protocol.

"As you all know the *Outbound* is three weeks overdue. We can't stay here waiting for a ship that may never show up." She held up her hand to forestall any comments while looking at CeCe.

"We discussed this before we left Earth and you were let on this crew because you understood that it could possibly happen. Well, it has, and we all have to live with it. At least for now. The *Outbound* could show up at any time, but we can't count on it."

She was fighting to keep her voice steady and to not betray the emotions she felt, but had to pause a moment.

CeCe stepped away from the group and stood looking out the window with a cold, hard look on her face, but not far enough away not to be able to hear what was being said.

"I don't have to remind anyone that this asteroid really belongs to the Tassangaxx and with this in mind we are going to look for a home world suited for them. If they don't find one to their liking we shall move on farther out in any direction they wish. Even if it's back to their own people. I'm sure the Tassangaxx on this ship possibly know what that could mean. It's the well being of the eggs that are in incubation at this moment that should be their main concern." The Prime Leader turned to the doctor and received a positive nod that she was correct in her assumptions.

The Prime Leader next looked and nodded to the head engineer and asked, "Can you construct a dozen repeater markers so we can leave a signal trail behinds us?"

She nodded back her acknowledgment. "We have many communication units in storage that can be fitted with more powerful burst transmitters that would work fine. There are currently over one hundred of them and we can duplicate more if the needs arise. You can leave as many in our wake as you want," she hissed and roared back showing his white pointed teeth that was their way of smiling.

"Then it's up to the scientists to find us a solar system and navigation plan of action to get us there with the least amount of stops. This line of sight navigation does have it draw backs in tight spaces like this." Phyllis was referring to the fact that if they approached too close to a sun in their flight path they would drop out of the time dilation bubble and would have to accelerate again until they were beyond its influence, something that could take days.

"Prime Leader, may I?" the astrophysicist asked while bowing his head in respect to her leadership. She slowly nodded back while closing her eyes of a moment.

"We have found several two and three star groups that are close to each other and behind the path of the interstellar nebulosity. The space around is them is clear enough that we don't have to worry about the dust impeding our progress. And because of our present location we only have two segments to perform with one stop to allow us to turn ninety degrees starboard and three degrees down from the galactic plane. We can then choose which grouping we want to visit first at the end of that segment of the course. Navigation already has the figures for these maneuvers. We can commence at any time."

"Timeframe for all this?"

"Five weeks plus a week or two to choose the system we might want to visit. System time we depend on what we actually discover before we go in."

"Thank you." And the Prime Leader bowed once more. "Engineering," she bowed toward him, "I take it you are also on top of all this and we are ready to proceed?"

The Tassangaxx engineer showed her teeth, "Prime Leader needs only to say the word," and she bowed also.

"I don't like this one bit." CeCe was telling T'San who was stationed in the engine room of the rebuilt *Explore One* spaceship. "Coming in blind behind the astroid is a bad idea..."

"You're getting all the same information in your head as if you were out front," she retorted back. "Our job is to pick up some of the battle debris as we fly by to see what level of science and technology, or at least their level of space warfare is or was. By the look of that second planet, it's been blown to smithereens by atomics. That's what the spectrograph is picking up. Radiation up the wazoo."

"Yeah, I do have to agree that was the home world of whoever these people are... or were, an ideal location and all that, but not any more. And the next planet out is not showing anything signs of using anything in the electromagnetic spectrum. The sweeps from the short one kilohertz range all the way out to gamma radiation in the three hundred exahertz area has been checked out and it's all giving nary a peep that shouldn't naturally be there."

T'San said nothing more about it since she could not willingly agree with CeCe assessment even if it was right.

"If we keep quiet like we're supposed to," T'San changed the

conversation instead, "and if there are any survivors they won't even know that we visited them. That is why Phyllis chose this no man's land battlefield and is coming in like gang busters. There's no way they could possibly catch up with us. For all they know we are just another wandering astroid that this system is rich with. We're just coming in a lot faster than most of them."

"Way too much faith in your friend if you ask me." CeCe snorted.

"No one did. And your lack of faith is why they don't. Adding that to your constant grouching of, '*one less human*,' has put you in this predicament."

"Then why are you here, birdbrain?" CeCe knew that Earth birds descended genetically from the dinosaur's family tree and was saying that T'San had little to no brains. She then coldly added, "Not loved anymore, Honey?" referring to her seemingly strained relationship with Phyllis.

"Nope, here for the giggles and to watch you crash and burn." They both became quiet after this latest exchange of barbs. It had been escalating verbally for the past few months with no clear winner.

The clock was ticking down to the last few minutes before they would enter the old battlefield. CeCe began to slow down the ship so she could maneuver out from behind the asteroid's shadow and snag a few large pieces of the space debris. Two or three depending on their size from each field would have been sufficient.

Right now the asteroid was acting as a shield to anything that could cause damage to the smaller ship. The potential that there was still live weaponry and ammunition out there was high, too high to risk more than one ship. As for there still being anyone alive—that was out of the question. The battlefield had drifted so far apart that it was now two distinguishable masses, and both were now slowly being pulled back towards the sun and their ultimate destruction. Calculations had shown that the two fleets of ships had collided in battle two years earlier.

The asteroid was approaching at an angle that would take them through the edges of both fields and then past the sun by more than three point two-five AU's. That was more than one point five AU's from the orbit of the third planet when it was on that side of the sun. That planet was showing an average temperature of minus ten-degrees Fahrenheit, but because of its larger size and higher mass it still had traces of an oxygen/nitrogen atmosphere.

By studying the orbital drift of the wreckage they could tell the battle occurred in a single pass with the ships not having the ability to maneuver at will. They had been stuck with the orbital dynamics they were in at the time of approach. They could only spin in their

axes and shoot at each other broadside like old sailing ships. This meant that they would have been chemically fueled or had slow ion drives at best.

The Asteroid had its force field powered on but it was hugging the ground so that if anything did collide with them it would appear to have struck the surface. The *Explorer One* also had its force field on but need to leave a small section of it off so that the gripping beam could function.

Seeing it was time to go into action, T'San stepped onto the disc waiting to take her down into the cargo bay operation center. The bay itself was in the cup-shaped dome underneath the saucer. With the hatch closed above her in case of a mishap in the bay, she settled into the control harness that she would use to multiply the wide assortment of arms and claws that handled the cargo. Most of them were automatic and only had to be initially told what to do, but others had to be manually controlled depending on the situation.

The control room was ball-shaped and as soon as the harness had her secure it rotated in place one hundred and eighty degrees. Her floor was now part of the deck that was the engine room floor. The green walls depolarized and became transparent. With no artificial gravity in the bay to make handling the cargo easier, T'San had no sense of being upside down. From her new perspective everything was normal.

She slid the dome out of the way and now had a full view of the space above her. It was impossible not to think of it that way even though she knew she hung down from the underside of the ship.

A display showed her what the main gripping beam was aiming at so she could be ready to take the items from it as they were released from the beam and put it them into storage.

"T'San, coming in with our first prize package," CeCe informed her. She could see it both on the beam monitor and as it swung into view from the front side of the ship. "And, it looks like it might be in pretty good shape." CeCe was good at her job and allowed no disagreement she might have with anyone stop her from doing it properly.

"I'm ready to receive it. Have its dimension and possible mass already calculated and waiting with the appropriate size arms and clews. You can release it from the beam and I will stop its forward motion from here. I will take it in once I scan it for any possible activity and/or harmful substances that might be out of the ordinary."

T'San could see that the box-shaped debris had been attached to something bigger on one side and had been torn from it and was

trailing a tangled mess of wires and smaller equipment. Not wanting the wires and such to be a hinderance she enclosed the mass in a cargo netting pulling everything tightly together before attaching an arm to it then maneuvering it in and clamping it down.

The second catch came in five minutes later and was a long cylinder-shaped piece of equipment. The back of it looked like it had an ion grid exchange unit that might have been part of an engine cluster. It had four rows of twisted struts that ran along its length that would have been attachment points. With the cylinder clamped into place they moved on; it was a ten minute wait until they reached the second debris field when all hell broke loose.

CeCe had just maneuvered back out of the shadow of the astroid and was making her choice about what to pick up when suddenly small groups of debris started to move toward each other. Magnetic energy was pulling the pieces together and forming them into larger components. Energy readouts in both the asteroid and the *Explorer One* were zooming to the top of the color display readouts. Multiple objects started to accelerate towards them at tremendous speed.

"Shields, full power," rang out the voice of the Prime Leader from her position on the balcony. "CeCe get back to the surface without delay so we can close up that hole in our defenses. Ground the ship immediately and stay put. We're going into Time Dilation drive as soon as you hit dirt even though we can't stay in it for more than a few seconds."

She didn't have to explain anything else. They both understood the reason why. Their speed was not fast enough to create the extra mass needed for a continuing flow of time particles, but it was enough to allow them to jump several million miles from this apparent trap in an instant. And trap was what they could all plainly see. The how or why these aliens were so protective of their solar system would have to wait and be settled on another day, if ever.

But CeCe was not having an easy time trying to land her ship. Even with the grappling beam shut off the ship was being pulled towards the wreckage that had so quickly reassembled itself. They were pulled away from the asteroid and the shields could not be extended any farther to cover them. The asteroid was now feeling the hits of the fastest object that had rush to meet them.

"Lock our own grappling beams on the *Explorer One* and start hitting that thing with pin-point high intensity magnetic pulses and launch the damn torpedoes right where the magnetic pulses are hitting. That should help the torpedoes get in close enough to do some damage!"

While this was going on T'San was having troubles of her own. The box had come alive at the same time everything else did. A snake-like tentacle shot out of the tangled mass that was just a facade that hid a hatch that suddenly blew outwards with such a force that the box was thrown forwards and upwards tearing itself from most of the latches. Only a couple at the far end were still attached, but they were badly damaged.

The far end of that one tentacle popped open and several thong-like rods radiated out forming into the shape of a battle mace. The tentacle started to whip about and whenever the tips hit something a massive explosion of arcing electricity was released, turning that spot red hot and frying any electrical equipment that was near it.

T'San instinctively reached out with the mechanical arms she was using at that moment and received an electrical jolt through them as they touched the tentacle sides. Her harness shorted out when the circuit breakers tripped... and that saved her life.

Meanwhile, the long cylinder had dissolved its sheathing and that caused the clamps to lose their hold on it. What was left exposed looked like two massive hydraulic rams. The far ends of the pair lifted off the deck and stood vertical within meters of each other. Massive connecting rods joined the two rams together. It was plain to see that this was about to become the legs of a possible walking machine or bottom half of a robot.

But, being only partially complete did not stop the two massive legs from walking. Each leg was somehow able to adhere to the deck so it could move forward. Ponderously, the pair made their way toward T'San in the control blister. Two tentacle arms extruded from the top of the machine. It seemed that the creators of these weapons of war liked tentacles with the unlimited flexibility that form provided. Each arm ended with pincher-like claws that looked to be powerful enough that they could just about tear anything they could grip.

T'San watched in horror as the machine walked toward her, and the two arms shot straight toward the control room blister.

Chapter Nine: The Light at the End of the Tunnel

TOM stood on a Lift Jack so his head could be in the center of the geodesic structure holding the sixteen emitters that once sustained the White Hole. He wanted to be where Albert was in his last minutes of life, hoping for some kind of inspiration. None came to him.

"Worth the try," he murmured to himself as he looked at the emitters surrounding him and the thick power lines they were attached to. He was starting to talk out loud a lot more with this solitary life he was now living even though the ship had ten thousand souls... His mind stop at that word, *souls*... why was *souls* so important now that he thought of that word. He couldn't figure it out. He shook his head to clear it out of his mind as he lowered the Lift Jack. Once on the floor he came to the decision that it was time to decode the last hour or so of at least one of the Albert AIs.

The one would be all he really needed, and it would be the hardest. After that the rest should be all the same. There should have been no separated information that they did not experience at the same time since he had them moved into his lab. All the interconnecting feedback had to be the same with no variations. He would just peek into a second AI to confirm his hypotheses if any irregularity showed up with the first.

Tom turned to the closest AI and fed in his recognition code that started the rebooting process. Initially he watched the code zoom by on the built in screen as one file after another reactivated. In moments, subroutines started to run along side the first programs. The screen turned into a tangled web of coding as more and more routines were added. No one, not even Tom, could follow the codes as they flashed on the screen faster and faster and more precessing units were activated and things went faster still.

A small square in the left corner counted down the time remaining to full activation. He had plenty of time to get something to eat and to start the second AI that he might need to compare data streams should he want to.

After safely navigating all the firewalls and identification protocols, Tom was able to feed the actual raw data into his mind by connecting directly with the Helium4 plasma memory core processor of the AI, via a skull cap, and virtually live through the conscious thoughts of that AI. It lasted a grueling one hundred and thirty-five seconds and ended with Tom tearing the cap off his head and flinging it away in pain.

He fell unconscious to the floor and lay there for two hours.

After that time he crawled into his makeshift bed and slept for another eight hours. The sleep was punctuated with the terror that this one particular AI experienced and what the other fifteen AIs went through as their thoughts overlapped in a spiderweb of disjointed events.

It was a full twenty-four hours later that Tom gingerly put the skull cap back on. This time he had precautions put into place. The main one was the ability to control the speed of the playback, to stop it and even reverse it. The second was a monitor that kept constant watch over his physiological status and would stop the playback if there was a sudden increase of his heart rate or adrenaline levels.

At the slower speed Tom was able to stay focused on the AI he was viewing and not be overwhelmed by the overlapping, chaotic imagery that were fed into this one from the other AIs.

He definitely felt the slow sensation of being drawn closer to the white hole yet he knew that was not possible. He was being held fast and at the same time being stretched in a way that was separating the Albert consciousness from the AI's memory core. The fear, the joy, the awe, and thirteen other sensations happening all at the same time did not cloud the painful ripping/tearing feeling at the end. It felt like madness... it *was* madness, and then it was darkness.

Tom sat there for over an hour as the feelings of the AI drained out of his mind and he was alone with only his thoughts. From the corner of his eye he could see that the second AI was ready. He did not feel like he could go through the whole ordeal a second time. Not now and possibly never again. So he took a handheld computer and programmed it to run both data streams in a comparison loop and mark where the differences were.

It was three days later that Tom had scans from all sixteen AIs completed and the differences mark. By the end of this Tom did not feel that he had come any closer to finding a solution for getting Albert back or what was happening on the ship.

The star chart in the control center was showing that they were making progress maneuvering around the dense center hub of stars. From where they were currently, the long way around was the shortest route. The fewer stops and starts the better. Tom only hoped that when they passed the bulk of the hub of suns the navigation computer would start to recognize some of the stars grouping and then make a beeline to the Pleiades.

After weeks of isolation Tom needed human contact, even if it was not anything close to normal. He sought out Bud, the only man that Tom ever poured out his soul to. The man who was as close to him as any brother could possibly be. To help things along Tom

decided to meet him for breakfast, Bud's favorite meal.

Tom arrived early and procured a small out of the way table and sat there, waiting, while sipping a black coffee. Once he spotted Bud he quickly rose and rushed up to meet him. With a quick "Hello" he led Bud to the buffet table where he filled his plate and several smaller ones with everything in sight. His tray was overloaded compared to Tom's one small veggie omelette and plain croissant with jelly.

Bud headed to the coffee kiosk but had to pass it by, his tray too full to hold anything else. Tom smiled and stopped to fill up the largest carafe available with steaming hot coffee, grabbed a large mug, and took those along with lots of sugar and cream for his friend. Back at the table, Bud dug right in. Twenty minutes later, he pushed the large plate away and had all the extra smaller dishes empty also. Tom had just about finished his small meal and was watching his friend intensely.

"Well, thanks, Tom, that was great." He finished his mug of coffee and made ready to push his chair from the table.

"Hold it there, flyboy, not so fast." Tom reached out a hand and touch his arm. With the other he poured them each another cup of coffee, emptying the carafe. "There something that I need to run past you like old times." A frown crossed Bud's face. Tom quickly added. "It would make me extremely happy if I could." The frown turned into a smile.

"Well, if it makes you happy, then I'll stay and have one more cup of coffee while you explain... using really itty-bitty words that I can understand." He held up his hand with two fingers almost touching to show how small the words should be.

"As always, Bud the kidder. Okay here it is in a nut shell." Tom took a sip of his coffee first. "You know what a black hole is?" Bud nodded. "And that I always claimed that the white hole was the opposite side of that phenomena."

"Sure, everything gets sucked in the black hole side and out the white," he paused, pondering something, then added, "but nothing ever came out of your white hole, and that side wouldn't take anything in no matter how you tried to force it."

"See, Bud you're smarter than you think." Tom laughed. "The reason I came up for why nothing came out of the white hole is because I forced it back into our universe where the mouth, the black hole, also was. Things just sort of stayed in the space that existed between the two surfaces."

"That makes sense to me Tom, but where would the stuff have gone if you didn't interfere with it?"

"Now you ask the right question. The two best guesses are: One, into another dimension; and, Two, into an antimatter universe that is the flip side of ours."

Bud looked at Tom with a mischievous smile on his face. "I take it you are now thinking something else entirely?"

"You guessed it. I'm thinking that the black hole and the white hole are really the same thing and we just can't see the white hole normally because it is never in our timeframe."

Bud's nod turned into shake of his head. "Now you're way past what I can understand. You better run that by me again." Tom was glad that Bud was finding this talk interesting enough to stay. It was helping him a lot to talk about it in a logical manner to someone.

"Sorry, I skipped something important that you need to know. We have discovered that there is a black hole in the center of every galaxy and by the end of time all those black holes will have absorbed every piece of matter and ergs of energy and crushed it all into an infinitely small space. So small that we could not see it if we somehow still existed. The black holes will then turn on each other next until there is only one."

"Sounds like an old movie where the lead character had to cut off heads to live forever." Bud retorted laughing. "But seriously, what happens to the last black hole?"

"There you go again, flyboy, asking the right question." Tom was truly proud of his friend at that moment. "What of the black hole? We say that it is made of nothing and at the end of time there is nothing. Nothing plus nothing equals... nothing. Fini, the end, that's all folks. But it's not."

"Ohh! Then what's next?"

"To answer that we have to ask where did everything go in the first place. It has to go somewhere, right, Bud?"

He made a face while he thought about it. Then his eyes lit up. "It never went anywhere?" Tom nodded and smiled. "It all stayed in the black holes and after they ate each other up and there was only one remaining it disappeared into nothing as you said and left everything it had eaten behind."

"BANG!" Tom slammed his fist onto the table. The people near them turned at the sudden noise and looked at them. Seeing who they were they turn back to what they were doing.

"Bang, Tom? As in the Big Bang theory?"

"Right in one, Bud." Things were falling into place for Tom. He always did his best work when he had someone to act as a sounding board, and Bud had been his best one for decades.

"Well and good Tom, but what of the white hole business? You sort of left it hanging in thin air."

"Oh, that. Don't you see that black holes are circular. They never end. At the time of the Big Bang they start out as an infinite number of them and work themselves down to one and then start over again. Now here's the tricky part. Time..."

"Time? Now you're going to throw time in? But, why so many black holes in the first place? Answer that one first." Bud was waving a hand above his head to signal Tom that he may have just gone to far. Tom laughed.

"My Albert AI showed that there are sixteen kind of black holes and they are all somehow connected together. It must be the dumping ground that they all share. They don't keep what they eat they just deposit it for the next go around. It's the only thing that fits my theory."

Bud's face scrunched into a scowl, but it soon relaxed and he nodded for the inventor to continue.

"As for the question of time, that is the simple part, Bud. Why, I ask you, do we have an opening to the black hole if it goes around and a round?"

Bud thought this over for half a minute before shrugging. "Got me, Tom! Can't see the answer to that one."

"Fair enough. You know that time moves only forward and not back?"

"I'm with you so far. I can't disprove it so I'll take your word on that."

"Thank you. We are moving forward through time but we only live in the now. That now is what enables us to see the black hole. The next moment in the future is the white hole waiting to happen. There is no real stop in the flow, but there is a moment in time that, in no better terms, stops long enough to make us notice that we exist. That is why I can't put anything into a white hole—it has not come into being as yet. It forever remains just ahead of us, out of reach. My sixteen black hole emitters are only showing the moment of it coming into being before we live in that exact moment of time."

"Way too complicated for me, Tom. I don't see the connection with time and black holes that are not yet everywhere."

"The best analogy I came give is the black holes are part of the structural framework that time moves along or time is a byproduct of the black hole as it goes around and around forever moving forward to suck up more matter and energy in order for it to be able to restart itself."

Bud let out a long sigh. "With that said, Tom, I'm leaving. My head is swimming and it may never be the same again." He stood up and weaved his way out of the cafeteria without even saying goodbye.

Tom watch him as he disappeared into the crowd of people. "That actually lasted longer than I thought it would." He spoke softly to no one as he picked up the two trays off the table. He dropped them off in the disposal unit that would recyclable everything.

Back in the lab Tom started to wonder why the conscious, free willed Albert was part of the White hole. That made no sense. He couldn't exist before he did. Or could he? Tom went to bed hours later still thinking about it.

In the middle of the night the answer came to him. Albert had free will only because he balanced on the cusp of the white hole. Free will existed because things had not been done and locked into place as part of the past. Albert lived in the tiniest fractional moment ahead in time and could scan and choose from unlimited possibility. He had free will by his own choosing.

With that mystery solved Tom felt he was one step closer to what happened to the ship. Now that he knew they had added extra time particles to the white hole he slowly came to the realization of what they had done.

With the Time Dilation field all around the ship it was pulled into the future time flow and came out into the dumping grounds at the beginning of time, before the Big Bang.

That was wrong—it had to be the other way around. They could not go against the time flow. That left the possibility that they were sucked up by one of the black hole emitters and dumped. But that couldn't be either. How could they be pulled into themselves? Tom was confused in a number of ways.

He sat in the lab and tried to visualize what he was thinking. The best he could come up with was a balloon filled with air, and then reaching in without letting the air out, grabbing the far end and pulling it out the nozzle all the while still leaving the air in it. Impossible. Once the inside of the balloon was pulled out of the nozzle the air was outside; it was gone. Escaped.

But, what if you had the nozzle tied off, pushed it all the way in, somehow attached it to the far inside end and pull it out. Would it form into a donut, or more like a Möbius strip with the two ends coming out of the center hole? Twisted it might be, but the air would still be in it. He thought about that analogy. Closer... but still not right on the money.

So Tom reasoned, if they were inside the black hole somewhere,

the extra time particles that caused the whole thing in the first place would cease and they would not be twisted into a knot any longer but back the way they were supposed to be. There would be no white hole because black holes and white hole were yet to come into being. Everything would be in a state of suspended animation waiting for the last bit of matter and energy to be scooped up. Or, it occurred to him, like the people around him not caring about time because there was no time as yet.

Being trapped before the Big Bang was not part of what was supposed to happen. They had become a one-time anomaly in the universe and a small island adrift were no man had a right to be.

"Bravo," a voice shouted out loud as the lab and everything else dissolved into whiteness. It sound remarkably like Albert's.

"Albert?" Tom questioned. "Where are you? I can't see you or anything else."

"That is because, Tom, you are a part of me."

"A part of you? How?"

"As you surmised we are at the cusp of the Big Bang waiting for it to happen. And as you gave me life... Well, let's call it that for now, I have held your ship and you together instead of letting all your atoms being absorbed into and becoming part of the Big Bang."

"If I am correct about my theory, I have to ask which Big Bang is this?"

If a thought could shrug, Albert did. "Who is to know? All I can do is to keep you from being torn apart only to occur again in a mere fourteen billion Earth years."

"I do thank you for that Albert." He was silent for a minute, thinking. "Are you God?" Tom just had to ask.

"No, not God. That is something entirely only for the intelligent beings of the universe to contemplate and not for the likes of me."

"But you can help us out of this situation?" Tom sincerely hoped so.

"When the Big Bang happens I will use some of the unleashed time particles to send you and the ship back to where you all belong... to go on living your lives again. All I'm doing is holding you together because the human mind is not capable of doing it on its own."

Tom thought about this for a moment. "Why? Or, why me?"

"You, Tom, are a part of me, and me, you. No religious connotation is intended here. You just made me this way and should be grateful that you did. Any other mind set would not have

made this work the way I have and all of you would have ceased to exist in your universe."

"Then how do we go back?" Tom asked.

"You already are there!"

Albert was replaced with the lab solidly around Tom and Bud touching his shoulder.

"Didn't you hear the all clear from the bridge? Things are back to normal. It seems that two of the instrument controlling AI's were spitting out tons of garbage and turning everything into a mist. Sorry it effected Albert that way." And he looked at the empty structural sphere.

"That's all right, Bud. He was there when we needed him most."

Bud just looked at his friend and thought. "Weird, I would have thought he would have been more emotionally distraught than he is showing. Something is not right here, that's for sure."

"What are you going to do about Albert?"

"Nothing. I think I know another way to accomplish what we had with him. And, we won't have as many limitations. Just let me stew about it for a while. We won't need it until we meet up with Phyllis and the Tassangaxx.

"For now let's get back to the control deck and see what there is to see." He looked at the cyborg standing to their right, not moving. He hadn't said a word or even seem to be paying attention to what Tom or Bud were doing or saying. "Coming Bulldog?" Tom asked as he stepped over to the mesmerized man and slapped him on the back. Finally getting his attention he told him, "Who knows what kind of trouble we might get into between here and there."

Chapter Ten: The Tassangaxx's First Ever Vote

T'SAN had no way of stopping the mechanical arms from tearing the control blister apart with her in it. Her harness was dead and she didn't have the time to turn around, open the electrical panel and reset the breakers with a swipe of her hand. But, the ejection button was only a stomp away on the floor. And stomp she did. One second later she was looking down from the ceiling in the engine room and glad the harness was holding her from falling. The deck had resealed, but she could hear the tearing apart of the cargo's handling control room through the floor.

T'San flipped open the harness release and with a grace that belied the size of her hybrid dinosaur body she somersaulted onto her feet.

"Abandon ship!" CeCe yelled as she came running out of the ship's flight control room still sealed in her armored spacesuit. "A second wave of destruction is coming."

Without hesitation T'San followed her to a row of Escape Pods that were clustered together. She yelled out to CeCe. "Into space?"

CeCe stopped in front of one of the escape pod launch tubes. "We're going to pancake into the asteroid if we get out right now. No other way if we want to get out of here alive. Command has lost one of the grappling ray that was holding us from that monstrosity out there, and that sector of the asteroid is now the focal point of their attack. They have to close up that gap in the force field. That means we go. Now!" She stepped into the pod.

The pods were nothing more than a heavily reinforced chamber with two hours of life support and a radio beacon. With the built in abilities the Tassangaxx had in their bodies that could be stretched out to forty-eight hours if they took an injection that would put them to sleep. Long-term survival was not a high priority on the Dino list. Space was too vast, so the pods were designed for quick retrieval in planetary orbit only.

T'San jumped into her pod and both hatches slid into place, sealing their separate pods. They blasted out the bottom of the ship quite near the open loading dock and the two killing machines that were busily tearing their way through the deck into the ship's interior. They were accelerated out of the ship at a bone-wrenching fifteen Gs, and it lasted only for five painful seconds. After that the power unit was spent.

"Two escape pods away, Prime Leader," roared one of the Tassangaxx. "Asteroid impact in three, two, one, impact."

"Close up that force field gap and engage the Time Dilation Drive. Now!" commanded the Prime Leader. The asteroid went into transition and came back out a few second later as the time particles it had collected were exhausted.

The whole asteroid shuddered and almost knocked everyone off their feet. Even the Tassangaxx had to grab onto something or they, too, were tossed about.

"Guess the drive did not like that false start," Phyllis thought as she stood back up after nearly being thrown off the balcony. "Red line the space drive reactors and get us moving. Helm, project a course to take us back to the first repeater beacon at the dogleg of our course that points the way here. Go to TD drive once we reach mass conversion velocity. Communications, send out the destruct signal to the beacon we left at the edge of this system. I don't want the *Outbound* anywhere near this system and I don't want those hostiles to be able to back track us."

The Prime leader started to run to the transit tube at the back of the balcony, and she switched on two other communication frequencies.

"Engineering, we have two people down on the surface. Ask tactical for their exact location. You'll need to dig a tunnel to get to them from the nearest tunnel to where they are. You know what is needed. And we're going into time dilation soon, so no one on the surface. Medical, they hit the asteroid surface head on in escape pods. Expected the worst and you have to wait until we dig them out. Surface retrieval is not an option."

Phyllis entered the crash coordinates into the transit system computer that was on the wall. A spot on the 3-D map display showed that it was on the far side of the asteroid. Three areas lit up showing nearby stops. Two were regular stops and one was at closed off tunnel. For once luck was with them and the *Explorer One* crew had impacted only a few hundred feet from an old tunneling exhaust vent that was no longer in use, but still accessible. She climbed into the large transit car that the Dino's used and punched in the destination of the vent tunnel.

By the time she'd arrived a Dino engineer with a mixed crew of six had a boring machine in place, and they were attaching the flexible exhaust line to the old vent tunnel.

"We have them located on this ground scanner," she was told by the Tassangaxx engineer, "and we're going to bore directly under them. It will take only a few minutes once we begin."

"Start it up!" yelled one of the women as they stepped away from the flexible tubing that would quickly inflate to three times its diameter with the debris from the tunneling. The Dino tapped onto

her control pad and a rumbling, crunching roar came from the front of the machine as it started to move forward. Its pace quickened and in less than thirty-seconds the whole drilling rig was inside the twenty foot wide hole dragging the ever expanding exhaust tube behind it.

Phyllis was amazed that engineering had things ready and set to go by the time she reached the closest tunnel to the impact zone. By now she should have known better than to doubt their abilities, or their preparedness, especially when it came to working underground. The whole asteroid was proof of their workmanship with its hundreds of miles of tunnels, several dozens domes and countless work areas throughout the entire orb.

True to her word the machine stopped in a few minutes and the exhaust tubing collapsed. The first of two flat work platform floating several feet above the curved tunnel floor—carrying three Dinos and three woman—silently moved into the tunnel to retrieve the survival pods.

The engineer stepped into the Prime Leader's way when she started to go in after the platform. "Forgive me, but let the rescue crew have space to do their work. I beg your forgiveness, but they do not need to work around you. The distraction of you being there may cause critical delays that you do not want to be responsible for."

Phyllis looked into the orange colored eyes of the engineer and knew that she was right. The space was limited especially after they pulled the space pods onto the platform so they could force them open. And forcing them open was going to be the only way into the more-than-likely crushed pods.

A roar of warning assailed their ears, accompanied by a rumbling and crashing sound followed by a large cloud of dirt and dust. The first platform came floating back out scrapping the bottom sides of the tunnel as it was covered with mounds of dirt. The space pod, still mostly buried under the dirt and rocks, was hanging half off of the backside of the platform. Of the six crew members two were fine and crouched at the far side of the platform at the control podiums. Three could barely be seen because they were almost fully buried near the pods. The last crew member was missing.

With a roar of command the engineer ran to a large piece of equipment that stood nearby that had two large curved antennas dishes at each end of it. She had the two dishes oriented toward the now motionless platform in seconds. The two free crew members had jumped off and were waiting for what was to happen next.

Each dish zeroed in on a body, and they were pulled out of the

dirt with a couple inches of it still clinging around them that fell away as soon as they were placed on the platform. They immediately moved out of the way as the dishes swung back around and focused where the last two crew members were.

The engineer now went after the fully buried woman. With one antenna dish she pushed most of the debris off her and with the second she lifted her off the platform and on to the ground where she was attended to by the Tassangaxx doctor. The last of the buried crew members was Tassangaxx and had ended up very near the buried woman, so near that she was now able to push her way out of the dirt and climb down off the platform on her own.

Without a hesitation she called out to the other four members of her crew as she climbed onto the second platform and headed to the control podium. They joined her and went back in after the second pod.

Phyllis had never seen such devotion to duty as this mixed crew of females were showing. None of them cared if it was Tassangaxx or human in the remaining pod, only that she needed rescuing. Phyllis sent out a silent prayer as she rush to the doctor's side to help care for the unconscious human woman.

But the doctor already had her breathing on her own and fully sedated. The injured woman had a crushed rib cage on her left side from the impact and crushing force of a very large rock when the roof of the tunnel caved in. The medical board she lay on was a medical diagnostic wonder.

Moments later another crashing sound, this time with almost no dust, came out of the tunnel. "Yes," hissed the engineer as she now stood with the others. "That was the way it should be. Doctor come, we are ready to open the first pod and she will need your medical assistance I'm sure."

Phyllis could also hear the voices of other personnel showing up as their work stations were cleared of duty from the attack. With them came the only human physician, Doctor Ally Hill. She walked directly to Phyllis and to the patient laying on the medical board. But before she could kneel down to start checking her over Phyllis informed her that she was stable thanks to the Tassangaxx doctor and that she might be more needed at the second pod when it came out.

Taking a quick look at the small monitoring station the board displayed and seeing that Phyllis was right about her condition, the doctor hurried over to where the second pod sat on the platform as it had just came out of the tunnel.

Phyllis had never felt so helpless in her life, and she was starting to blame herself for their injuries or possible deaths as she watched

the slow, even breathing of the woman. If only she had not wanted samples from those ship's in the debris fields none of this would have happened.

"Phyllis, don't blame yourself," a familiar voice from behind her said. The Prime Leader spun around and there stood T'San without a scratch on her.

Phyllis threw her arms around her and sob in relief. "I thought that I'd killed you!"

"It's going to take more than slamming me into an asteroid to do that. This Tassangaxx body is like Sherman tank when it comes to taking abuse."

"CeCe?" was all she could ask.

"Don't know. Let's go together and find out."

The pod was open and CeCe, still in her armored spacesuit, lay on a second medical board. Both doctors were looking at a muddled 3-D body scan that the medical board was trying to project above the patient and taking notes on what was going to need repair. The suit was giving the medical imagine computer a hard time since most of the materials used were radiation and magnetic proof. But thanks to CeCe's earlier bone replacement much of what she suffered from were torn muscles and ligaments. The worst was that her small intestine was going to need to be replaced as much of it had ruptured from the shock of the landing. A few other organs in that area also had to be reattached back into place and a pelvic rupture repaired.

The armored suit was preventing them from doing anything for her at the moment other than keeping her stable long enough to transport. A medical wagon was already waiting for them at the end of this tunnel that was too small to accommodate it.

Both women were loaded onto the car that the Prime Leader had used to get to the impact site and with both doctors at their sides they were taken slowly and smoothly back down the tunnel. Once on board the medical wagon CeCe would be taken out of her spacesuit and the necessary operations would begin. By the time she reached the hospital she would be ready to move into her private room to await the replacement of her bypassed and removed intestine, something that had to be grown from her own DNA so that there would be no chance of rejection.

The crew woman was more fortunate and would only spend a single night in the hospital—Nanobots had been injected into her broken ribs and they were speedily cementing them back into place. Only bruises would remain and those for only a few days.

The Prime Leader watched the car disappear down the tunnel,

then she turned to the engineer and asked, "What went wrong with the retrieval of the first pod?" She was not angry, but curious.

The engineer had been waiting to be questioned and it was something that she should have foreseen, but hadn't. She bowed her head and kept it there for she could not look at her Prime Leader.

"I am ashamed to have to say this," she hissed softly, "but I must. I took all standard tunnel precautions, and even had an atmosphere force field in place because we were working so close to the surface. What I did not take into account was that this was an old crater that we vented the dirt from our tunneling into and pounded it solid after it was full so the dirt would stay in place. The pounding had caused numerous micro fractures throughout the area and when we dug into the bottom of the crater to retrieve the pods that had impacted into it, part of it gave way.

"That is what actually saved them their lives. If they had hit solid rock the pods would have been flattened and split wide open. Only part of the tunnel came down when we pulled the first pod down toward us. We used a restraining field for the second removal and that went well."

Phyllis stood there trying to decide if she needed to dig deeper into the matter. She was tapping her right foot but stopped when she saw the engineer staring at it.

The engineer finally looked up at her Prime Leader and said, "I am ready to take all responsibility for what has happen and to take any punishment that you deem necessary. Even removing me from my position." Her eyes fell again, as well her shoulders.

Phyllis just loved the nobility of these people. She could not understand the wide breach that existed between the two sexes of the Tassangaxx that lead them to wanting to wipe out the opposite sex, the males.

"Did you do it on purpose?" the Prime leader asked knowing full well that the female had not.

"No!" she whistled back.

"Then continue your job and secure this site so there will not be any future breaches in this or the new tunnel that you have just dug. I thank you and your crew for the speedy response that I'm sure saved at least CeCe's life and freed T'San from her pod."

The Prime Leader stood in the center of the arena, the largest single place for the combined crew to meet. All the crew that could be spared from duty were there. The rest were watching from their

work stations and could interact from where they were. The asteroid was motionless in space next to where the second position repeater once sat. They had taken it back on board and turned off.

Phyllis looked over her assembled crew and smiled. They were strong and bonded well with each other. "Only women could have done this," she thought, "Men have to prove their egos over each other. Maybe this is what the female Tassangaxx knew could happen without the interference of men. God!" she thought with a slight shudder, "I'll be throwing Tom out with the garbage if I keep thinking like this!" She cleared her throat and spoke.

"First off, thank you for all coming. This is a two-fold meeting that all of you have a say in." She stopped and looked at the faces of both the Tassangaxx and humans. They were all solemn from what she could tell. The Dino's head crops were laid back and the skin color was like the color of their stomach as it should be.

"The unprovoked attack can only be blamed on me. But, as I was reminded later it was not something we could foresee. The people in that system must have sufficient reasons for what they did. And if that second radioactive planet was their home world and the destruction done by invaders from outside their system then I really can't fault them. I just wish there was a way to help them."

She looked about into a sea of stony faces.

"But we are too small a group to be able to help in any sufficient way. We can only leave them alone and hope that our intrusion was not enough to cause them to try to go after us."

Now, there were nods from many in attendance.

"So this is what I propose to do. We will take the beacon that we had here and leave several others that will mimic the space distortion caused by our time dilation drive and send them off in several directions. This should keep them from following us. It will take a week for the engineering department to complete this work. Until then we are sitting ducks if they come after us. For our Tassangaxx sisters, this refers to our vulnerability in just staying in one location. Then again they would need some type interstellar drive to follow us. There are far too many ifs and I cannot honestly force any of you to stay here after what has happened to us."

She stopped for a moment before saying, "If we run we will always be looking back over our shoulder and that sticks in my craw. There is no reason for them to come after us. We did not fire back at any time. We only fled back out of the system. And the *Explorer One* only exploded because of the machines that were ripping it apart. Think about this as I tell you of our second decision we have to make."

"There are two other star groupings near that system. Possibly one of them belongs to the invading force, if that is what really happened. I say while we sit here we let the astronomers find us several Earth type stars as far away as possible to those for our own protection. Or, we can move on to another sector of stars.

"What of the *Outbound* and the rest of our families when they get here?" asked a women from the back of the crowd.

"I suggest we go back to where we first stopped and look around to see if we can find the *Outbound* or evidence that they were there and continue our voyage from there."

This brought a lot of murmuring from the audience that she allowed to continue for a minute.

"One last word to the Tassangaxx. I know that this is not what you expect from your Prime Leader, but I must take in consideration the other half of the crew and how they are used to dealing with major decisions. With this in mind I hope you can see that this is the best way to handle this at this moment. Once we get back to the task of finding a new home world I will be the only one making the decisions. Too many lives depend on quick action to be otherwise. So, the floor is open for reasonable discussion, and then we will do what no Tassangaxx has ever done... we will vote so we can come to a crew-wide decision. If we cannot do so in a reasonable amount of time, then I will make the binding decision myself!"

Not even five minutes later it was unanimously voted that the Prime Leader could do as she thought best. It seemed that all the Earth women were behind the way the Tassangaxx did things... whole heartedly.

Chapter Eleven: The Seed of Revolt

BULLDOG came along with Tom and Bud to the control room and heard all of Tom's explanations. But something was not ringing true. His mind kept drifting far away to a time that he knew that was not possible and he was deeply shaken by it. He had the dreadful feeling he had just lost months of his life. Even his inner electronic clock was off, and that never happened before. Not that it really mattered for it felt like he had simply lost repetitive days, days without change. In moments of quietness he would find himself thinking that he was on the *Outbound* millions of years in the past and lost far away on the other side of the galaxy. Was this déjà vu; was he experiencing something that was to come?

He kept it to himself at first, but others of the Mad Dogs came to him with the same lost feelings. After three days of fending them off with, "We're just imagining it," he went to Tom with his concerns.

Tom listened, he even asked questions and in the end he sent Bulldog away with the explanation that it was a hiccup happening with the disappearance of the Alberts, a slight duplication of their computer processing units in their mechanical bodies that made it seem that way.

"Come on Bulldog, have I every lied to you and the Mad Dogs?" He looked into Bulldog's eyes from where he was sitting behind his desk. "And why would I need to lie to you now? Most of us felt disjointed when the white hole disappeared. The cyborgs just felt it in a different way. The speed difference between your electronic parts and your biological ones must have set up a time delay loop until everything synced back up. Your possessors are just not letting the feeling of the looping go away like the human nervous system would. If you want, the Mechanical Physiologists can erase that moment. You know they can."

Bulldog could see that Tom's body was getting tense and his heart rate was rising. "Why," he thought, "Why? Is he hiding something?"

Aloud, he said, "No, that's all right. I'll just run a full body sweep and filter it out myself. I just didn't want to do it if it was important, that's all."

"Have many of the Mad Dogs felt like you, Ken." Now Tom was really calling on their friendship. His anxiety level had risen considerably.

"No, not many. There was Crying Wolf and one or two others. I found out they were the closest to your lab at the time and that may be the reason for it all. I will tell them to sweep their systems too and that should end it."

Tom nodded his agreement.

"Sorry, boss for taking up your time with such a trivial matter. I just had to be sure, that's all."

Tom got up from behind his desk, walked to the cyborg's side and slapped him on the his hard composite shoulders.

"Bulldog, that's what I'm here for, the wellbeing of all the people on this vessel. Just remind your people that once we land and have time to set up the colony a little that they can come and be refitted with their former body and it will be at its prime. Wiped clean of damage and disease and fortified with the latest nanotechnology we have."

Bulldog walked away with the feeling that the reminder was a bribe, or was it a threat that it could be taken away from them? Why was Bulldog's thought process heading down this very dark road? He shuddered—it was not like him. But, neither was Tom acting like himself.

Bud had mentioned to Bulldog later that first day that Tom was not reacting the way he should to Albert's loss, but subsequently never mentioned it again. Bulldog thought it was time to see if Bud still felt that way.

He located Bud in the command officer's duty room. He was going over the reaction time of all the emergency and shuttle craft personal. This latest true life incident was being compared to drill records and other simulations.

"Bud, have you got a sec for an old friend?" Bulldog handed him a large, hot, double shot of espresso coffee with chocolate and cream.

"For this," he took a whiff of what was in the cup, "I've got two. Let's sit over there and we can talk." Bud pointed to a corner with two easy chairs angled for quiet conversation. He relaxed into his while Bulldog sat at the edge of his chair and leaned toward Bud with his arms on his knees and his hands crossed.

Looking at Bulldog, Bud know this was going to be a serious talk and nodded at him to begin.

"Bud, even though you and I have known each other a long time, this is hard for me to talk about, and I hope we can keep it just to ourselves."

"Bulldog... Ken, if that's what you want, you got it. I owe you my

life more than once, so a secret I can keep for you in return."

"Even if it's about Tom?"

Bud looked at his companion and frowned. "I can't guarantee I won't go to the skipper. You have to tell me what this is about? If I think I have to tell him, and by that I mean if this is really mission critical stuff, I will let you know and we can then decide what to do about it together. Otherwise he'll never hear it from me. We're not kids anymore and I know he can do some stupid things at times. There were plenty of times that I wanted to wring his neck in the last seven months beginning with him resurrecting me from my old age. Oh yeah, I can keep a few secrets."

Bulldog could see that Bud was telling the truth. His body could not hide such a rudimentary physiological reaction to speaking an untruth from Bulldog's sensors. This was an intrusion that he normally wouldn't do, but he felt that this situation was something else entirely.

"Do you remember telling me that Tom was hiding something about Albert's death?"

"That's not *quite* what I said, or at least not what I meant." He also leaned forward in his chair, "It's more like that he did not react as he should have to Albert's death. He acted like he already knew about it and then he said something like, '*He was there when we needed him.*' It was spooky, almost like he was giving Albert's eulogy. Now that could have been about the past, but somehow I didn't think so at the time. And then there was a comment about a better way of using the white hole. When did he have time to come up with *that* idea? At the time it sounded like he had it already planed out. He even knew when he was going to do it." He looked at Bulldog and waited for the cyborg's reaction.

"Thank you, Bud. What you told me is what I have in my memory. But I did not know if I should trust it."

Bud curiously looked at him.

"Most of the Mad Dogs, me included, have this time loss that we can't reconcile reality with. I talked to Tom about it, but he just passed it off as a time differential between our cyborg and human bodies. He is treating it as nothing, just a byproduct of Albert going away. A lot of us do not see it as *nothing*."

Bud sat back into his chair and stared at his friend before coming to a decision.

"Well then," Bud stood up from his chair, "I believe that you need to come see this." He took Bulldog to the workstation he had been at and typed in his code to continue what he had been doing.

"I was reviewing the reaction times of my flight crews to compare them against the mock runs we do on a regular basis, and this time anomaly showed up in all the records. Every one of them! It took over two months for this, let's call it an *incident*, to happen according to this self-generating log." Bud pointed out the time span on the computer screen. "I saved this while Tom was trying to figure out what just happened. I was at a loss and needed something to do to ground myself to reality. If you look now at the records it's not there."

"You were there when he gave all those commands for status reports that kept everyone busy and again when he went onto his computer. It took a while, remember? I had to tell him to stop playing with the computer and to talk to the crew about what happened. He must have done it then just after I went in and copied the data. If he just did a general swipe throughout the computer systems he wouldn't have known that I was already in it and had made a copy. The thing is, I've not had time to look at the report until now."

"Is there any real proof that Tom did this. Or are you only supposing that he did it?" Bulldog asked.

He looked back at Bulldog. "Well... Look at this then. I thought the copy I made had a glitch in it, so I stored that one in my private file dump and pulled out a fresh copy." His fingers danced over the keyboard and a new screen covered the old one. "Look at the time span and you'd have to agree it looks just like it should be. Now, look at this," and he typed some more. "This is the hidden time stamp; there's two of them. That checkmark in the time stamp block means that it has been changed."

Bulldog's eyes narrowed. "Who has the authority to change the logs like this?"

"No one really. The system is supposed to be tamperproof. I checked into the retrieval log and this is what I found." The screen changed once more. "There is my original entry and tag." He tapped an entry on the screen. "This is Tom Swift's entry and tag, and it was done just seconds after I got out. And this is mine of today." Bud looked up at Bulldog with a tentative look on his face.

"Is this saying that Tom reset the time span?"

"I'm no expert. But he or someone using his authority did exactly that. And I don't think it being anyone else is very likely."

"Bud, can I try something?"

"Sure." Bud wheeled his chair out of the way with him in it. Bulldog started to type away and then stopped as an electronic retina scanner came out of the control console. He attached it to his

one artificial eye.

"Faster this way," Bulldog informed him. A minute later he detached it from his eye and let it retract into the panel.

"Bulldog?" Bud asked as he scooted his chair back over.

"All the ship's clocks have been altered. Mostly at the same time as your reaction data was. It has to have been Tom. But why?"

A half hour later Bulldog left Bud when he received a call from Crying Wolf. It seemed that the Mad Dogs were having an emergency meeting deep inside the Swift Enterprises construction asteroid with or without him.

Ramon noticed that the dozen or so Cyborgs that were watching the late night Film Noir revival at the food court theater started to get up and leave in one or twos. It happened with such regularity that he knew someone was staging the exodus. He also noticed others as they passed by the open air area. They were all moving in the same direction. He whispered something into Jessica's ear and she left to go to the ladies room. It was in the same direction that all the cyborgs seemed to be going. At the ladies room doorway she watched as, again singly or in pairs, they entered the main T&S and dropped out of sight. She started back to Ramon but he was already heading her way.

He took her hand as he asked, "Which way?"

"T&S, down." They looked into each other's eyes and smiled. Quickly they walked down the main concourse to the T&S. They could see another cyborg coming from the opposite direction so they just kept on walking, talking and laughing, like lovers do with no cares in the world late at night. When they could no longer hear any footsteps they retraced their steps and entered the transit system.

"Destination," they were asked.

"Sub-level twelve in the Swift Construction Asteroid," Ramon told the computer as he pulled Jessica as close as he could to his side and put his arm tightly around her waist.

*"Half a league, half a league, half a league onward,
All in the valley of Death rode the six hundred."*

She lightly laughed as she whispered the start of the '*Charge of the Light Brigade*' to Ramon.

"I do hope that Lord Tennyson did not have us in mind when he wrote that. I forgot my hose, my saber and about five hundred ninety-eight other fellows."

He joined her in the laughter. It helped them both feel better about what they were going to do. Ramon wanted to try to listen in on the cyborg meeting as he had done before. This time he had no advance warning that it was happening so he would not have a chance to find a hiding spot. They were going to have to play it by ear. But Ramon had a plan.

He had noticed that the cave had heating and air vents along the wall and ceiling. He was hoping to be able to find a spot to look down and hear from above or from another connecting room. He had his InterVoice link scanning through the tunneling and room construction blueprints as they silently fell towards their destination two floor above the meeting room. He did not want to get off the T&S too close.

They found an appropriate location at the same time. Jess said, "Adjoining room."

Ramon nodded and said, "I've got one directly above them."

They both smiled and kissed each other because of their success. They quickly exchanged notes on the two finds but could not decide which one would be the better to use.

"There are two sites and two of us," she whispered as they stepped out of the T&S two floors from where they wanted to be. "Each site has its good and bad points and we need to hurry if we're to see or hear anything." She turned and poked Ramon in the chest with her finger. "You found the room above them, but you've been on the floor where the adjoining room is and kind of know the area, at least better than I do. So you take that one and I'll go above and be as quiet as a mouse. See, I even have sneakers on and they don't squeak."

She turned and pointed to a tunnel a few yards away from then. "That should lead down one floor to where I want to be. If you go down three floors you can then come up one floor right next to the adjoining room from the far side and they won't be able to see or hear you."

"And," added Ramon, "we can use the InterVoice link to save what we see and hear for later scrutiny."

After another kiss Jess asked, "Are we crazy?"

"Sure we are. You can leave any time you want. I'll just do this on my own. There's no real reason for you to come."

"Well if I don't, do you have the five hundred and ninety-nine to back you up?" He shook his head no. "Then I'm it. Let's get going." She took a few steps and turned back toward him. "The canon fire won't get any less you know. Tally ho, and all that good rubbish." She walked into the tunnel and disappeared.

"If anyone touches that woman I'll... I'll..." He didn't know what he would do and was slightly surprised at how deeply he felt for her. Off he went with her utmost on his mind.

The large room was quiet, too quiet. It was like the quiet before the storm. Bulldog could feel it. He'd felt like exploding when he left Bud with what he had just found out. If only he had time to confront Tom about it.

This was moving too fast and he could not get in front of it to slow it down or turn it aside. Then again, did he want to? Tom had lied to him but Bulldog knew that he had lied back with the number of cyborgs that were affected by it. "Two wrongs don't make a right," he thought. His mother was so right on that one.

Bulldog articulated his legs so that everyone could see him.

"Lager Head and Crying Wolf were correct." If the room was quiet before now you could hear a pin drop. "Something did happen to us when that white hole and the time dilation field overlapped each other. What it was no one knows, not even..."

"Tell us the truth Bulldog, tell us the *truth*." The cry of 'Truth' echoed throughout the room to the accompanying tempo of stomping feet. With his head bowed Bulldog waited it out, he could not make them hear him until they were ready. After a few more cries of "Truth," Lager Head, Crying Wolf and—with a little help from Tin Pants—stepped forward and got the cyborgs to fall silent.

"Okay, okay, the truth. Tom Swift told me point blank that it was just a hiccup, a mismatch between our biological clocks and our cyborg interface. That we just have to wipe that looping feeling away. A one-second delete at most." Grumbling could be heard come from the crowd. Bulldog raised his arms and waved the crowd to silence.

"I, too, did not like that explanation, so I did a little digging in the main AI computer stacks. If we, as cyborgs, experienced something because of our electronic parts, what did the AI's and other advanced computer systems on this ship record? So I checked. I'll ask all of you to check whatever computer systems that you can tie into and you'll see there is no time delay looping in any of them. So that leaves me to feel that what Tom Swift has told me must be true. I could find nothing to prove otherwise."

Bulldog felt that he had just betrayed his own family with what he just told them. He promised himself that never again would he cover up for Tom Swift without knowing all the facts. He felt like a disgusting, dirty rat. He was glad that the cyborgs could not read each other as they could normal people.

Bulldog fell silent and looked over his fellow Mad Dogs and hoped to hell that Tom Swift did cover his tracks or there was going to be hell to pay, that was for sure.

"And," he thought to himself, "if I ever find out that Tom is not going to hold to his promises to the cyborgs then he will pay with some of his own skin." That was something that Bulldog never thought he would every say to himself. But he owed that to the people that he just lied to.

The cyborgs slowly dispersed and headed back to their quarters and jobs. Bulldog knew that there would be a lot of digging in the computer systems in the next few hours. He just hoped that did not set off any alarms that Tom would notice. Like before, Crying Wolf, Lager Head and Tin Pants were the last to leave. Just then, as bold as brass, Ramon came strutting in.

"What the hell..." yelled out Tin Pants on seeing him at the door. "What is that softsh... *that* doing here?" He was ready to grab the human and turn him into mincemeat. Crying Wolf held out his mechanical arm and stopped him.

"Do tell, *Softskin*," he said, using the less derogatory word, "What *are* you doing here? Spying on us?"

Ramon laughed, "Oh, a little, I guess. I've been thinking about what you said the other day and I kind of like your thinking. And if what I heard tonight is true and Tom Swift is holding something back from you cyborgs, he must be holding it from the rest of the crew too. Except I can think of one person who must know the truth."

"Bud Barclay!" roared out Crying Wolf. "Why didn't I think of that?" He strutted quickly to where Ramon was standing and called his two friends over.

"Men, I've told you that I possibly had a new inside man. Well I'd like to introduce you to Ramon Sanchez, grandson to our illustrious friend Bud Barclay. This upright citizen is going to be our newest member to the '*Let's Kill Tom Swift Fan Club*,' but we just have to add to it his grandpa Barclay. Sanchez might be a soft body, but he's hard where it counts."

It took close to two hours for Ramon to worm his way into the hearts of the conspirators. He had to leave with the three cyborgs as not to arouse suspicion that he might not have come alone. He hated to leave Jessica behind, but he had to and he was afraid to InterVoice a call to her. The trio of cyborgs might pick up the outgoing signal. He really had to be careful with any electronic devices he used while near them.

Another hour later Ramon's door chimed and Jessica let herself in. She was still visibly shaken over what they had stumbled onto and ran into Ramon's arms. Tears started to freely flow down her cheeks. Ramon hugged her till she stopped crying and started to hiccup.

Ramon kissed the last of the tears away and got her a tissue and a glass of water. When she was done with both he took her hand and led her to the couch and sat her down. He looked into her green eyes that still held some tears and tried to smile.

"Let's not jump to conclusion right now, Jess. Tom has never done wrong and I don't think he'll start now."

They sat in silence for a time thinking before Jess sighed and commented. "The archive computers are free standing and have to be connected to the rest of the ship library when I need to make changes. Later today I'll check it out and that we tell us if what Bulldog told us is true."

"I hope to God that it is, Jess. Otherwise I don't know what we're to do."

Chapter Twelve: A Fish is (Not) Just a Fish...

THE Tassangaxx Doctor came and stood by her Prime Leader who had her back to the camouflaged shields that covered the windows of the observation lounge above where the telescopes were located. With head bowed she waited to be acknowledge.

"Please Doctor, don't be so formal. We are friends, are we not?" The Prime Leader looked up into the red eyes of the Doctor and bowed in return. She had her stilts on so she extended them to be at the same height as the Doctor and showed additional respect by not forcing her to look down all the time.

"Yes, we are, and never would I have conceded it possible just a few months ago. We, the Tassangaxx, are so different from you in so many ways." Pointed white teeth were showing under her green, leathery muzzle.

"True, we are different, but not in our minds and in what we want in life. Tell me what is on your mind." The personnel tracker had shown the doctor where to find her. It was very late; in fact the third shift was half over. Recently, Phyllis was having a hard time sleeping. She found herself taking more short cat naps during the day than staying in bed for eight hours at a time at night.

It was the doctor's business to know that she had started to roam the asteroid late at night when she could not sleep. So she knew that she had to go look for her after not finding her in her quarters. If it persisted much longer she would have to ask why, but for now she was just observing this new habit.

"To be blunt, Prime Leader, what did your mate expect to find in this star cluster? We have always found it dirty and inhospitable. There are really no yellow dwarf stars here that we would be likely to consider home."

The Prime Leader laughed, "To tell you the truth I don't know what he expected to find. Since he was a yearling, according to your people's age designation, he has wanted to travel here. His very first space ship, the *Star Spear*, had the map of this star cluster on it. He may have believed at one time your people came from here."

"It must have upset him greatly when he found out we were from Earth's past."

"No doubt it must have. But I was not around long enough to find out."

The doctor's red head comb stood up on end and vibrated violently in her shame and embarrassment for she had personally

helped in the kidnapping of Phyllis Newton and Sandra Swift. She also was the doctor who had put them into suspended animation and hooked Phyllis's brain into the Elite computer system of the commander of the asteroid at that time.

Phyllis touched the Doctor on the arm even though it was not an accepted gesture among her race. Physical contact was only for the need of propagation of the species, if that.

"I now wish that we had never taken you. Then again where would we be? Things from that moment on only lead to this point in time and I am glad to be standing with you as my Prime Leader." The Doctor bowed her head once more.

"Doctor, I too have had times when I wish that kidnapping never happened, but now because of it and your people, I feel that you have made me a better person. No, I feel that it made me the person I should have always been, but was afraid to be. For that I must thank you." They both stopped talking and the Doctor nodded at the closed view port shields. "I thought you like the view from here? Do you want me to open it."

Phyllis slowly shook her head. "Earlier I had it open. I found it distasteful. Looking out into the Pleiades now only brings me tears. I see only destruction. That nebulosity hides a killing heart behind a veil of beauty."

Phyllis rested her back against the blackened glass and smiled at her giant sized friend, "You found someplace else you want to go to, didn't you?"

"Well, the Hyades cluster has a binary, yellow star system that is intriguing to us. And then there are several well known stars that your Earth scientists have been looking at over many years."

"The Hyades sounds as good as any. You do know that it's three hundred light years back toward's Earth? Not that we can't head that direction. But I would stay away from anything that Earth or most likely Mars will be knocking on the doors of in the next fifty years. Why press your luck? If you don't want to stay near your people's new home world then go far, as far as you can."

"I'm surprised and glad that you would say that, Prime Leader. Surprised, because of your people still being on board. I would not think you would want to go that far out. Glad, because I don't really think that that double sun will be our final stopping point, but it could be." There was a twinkle of excitement in her red eyes. Phyllis saw it and wondered what could have caused it.

"Let's be realistic, Doctor. If the *Outbound* doesn't show up while we're still here I doubt that it will. Look what the TD did on your maiden voyage. Sixty-five million years to get out of it. There

remains a lot of trial and error going on with mating it to Tom's technology." A tear formed in her eye and she wiped it away with the back of her hand.

"I am truly sorry that you feel this way, for I have not given up hope. If there is one male (she could not help but spit on the ground on saying the word *male*) that will cross the galaxy to find you it will be TomSwisssh." The doctor was the only one that came even close to saying his name right or attempted to try to.

"That I can agree on, but he can't drag the whole Earth contingent with him. He will have to settle them down first and then come looking for us. I don't see that happening for several years."

"Your timing will be off my Prime Leader. I'm willing to bet in less than six of your months time he will be at your side."

"When did your people take up fortunetelling?"

"We haven't, but we have studied the stars for ages and we know how to read them."

Nine days later the asteroid blinked out of normal space. They had remained an extra two days searching for traces of the *Outbound's* transition into normal space near where it was supposed to be. They widened the search area by a radius of half a light year looking for the ripples of excess time particles that the time dilation drive of the *Outbound* would leave in its wake, but all had been to no avail.

The good news was that CeCe came out of the hospital the day after they started for the Hyades star cluster as healthy as ever. In fact her attitude was so good that it was frightening, but welcomed to the ones who liked her.

The Prime Leader stared at the Tassangaxx astronomer for a long time. So long that the scientist was sure she had done something terribly wrong. Phyllis wasn't even aware that she was staring. Her mind was running several high speed scenarios at the same time with the data that she was just given.

The bio-matrix neuronet under her skull was both a blessing and a nuisance at the same time. While it allowed her to access unbelievable speed and computing power it, at times, left her immobile and in a trance-like state that the Dinos did not experience. This was only because the Elite system was designed for the two separated brain centers that the Tassangaxx had evolved with and humans have not. Thankfully this only happened

when Phyllis was trying to couple facts with possible emotional reaction of others.

The doctor showed her teeth at the discomfort the head astronomer was displaying. This made the scientist realize that it was not her fault and to stop worrying.

The asteroid had come back into normal space a few days earlier and all available instruments were working double time trying to gather all the information on the double yellow dwarf stars. The yellow star that they were now traversing was some six AUs away and the data had the astronomer in a quandary. There were only three planets in the system and the second one was in the Circumstellar Habitable Zone, but only barely.

The first planet was a molten copy of Mercury and drew no interest.

The second planet had twice the mass of Earth with a radius of five thousand miles. It orbited close to one point four AUs out from the sun. All of this information taken by itself did not bode well toward being considered as a habitable planet, but putting it all together it made possible for a hydro world to exist. And the spectroscopy properties showed that it was.

The third was a gas giant with over three dozen moons that would take a year to figure out.

The Prime Leader's eyes refocused and she asked the astronomer, "Those two moons are all that keep that world from having intelligent life?" She was finding that hard to believe under the circumstances.

"That is most of the cause, Prime Leader. The ever shifting gravity fields on the planet causes both the extreme weather conditions it suffers along with the constant volcanic eruptions. While the weather ebbs and flows, the seismic events are non-stop. With no real dry land the most intelligent creatures would most likely evolve to be some type of fish, or a marine mammal akin to your dolphins, if that. Fins cannot build a city, nor are they suited for developing weapons, so have no fears of a repeat like there was in the Pleiades."

"A small comfort," Phyllis murmured. "Besides the water vapors from the volcanos, why isn't the atmosphere full of carbon dioxide, sulfur, either as sulfur dioxide or hydrogen sulfide and all the other volcanic gases?"

"That we don't understand and it is why we want to send an expedition to the planet. We are surmising that there must be some kind of vegetative growth in or on the water that handles it. Possibly something that feeds on the poisonous gasses and exhales

pure oxygen. Most likely a type of algae or seaweed. If we can secure some samples of it, it would really be worthwhile and beneficial towards us establishing a new home world. Think of all the uses for that kind of plant life."

"You have someone we can send down to collect samples and categorize such things, Doctor? This seems to fall into your domain."

"I'm the only medical practitioner the Tassangaxx have on board and you know that, Prime Leader. This crew is not what you might call 'the right one for the job' we have undertaken. We came back to Earth for the purpose of war, not science. So we are ill-equipped with the right personal until the next generation is hatched and educated."

"Then that leaves my people and most of them are engineers and flight crew." Then Phyllis smiled, "I can send our Doctor Ally Hill. She'll be a bit over qualified for the job, but it will get her off the asteroid for a while and who knows what else she may find of interest on that planet?"

"This is nuts. Pure unadulterated nuts!" CeCe spurted out to T'San and to Doc Ally Hill as she showed the doctor how to activate the extra hidden human seats located inside the flight deck's back wall. She then strapped herself into her pilot's seat onboard the *Seeker*, the replacement vessel for the *Explore One*, and settled in so she could interlock with the ship.

This vessel was bigger than the *Explore One* and housed two decks. The bottom one was mostly filled with everything to do with power and engines. The second one held the flight deck and the living quarters for the crew. The top bubble still held most of the communication equipment and the bottom bubble still was the cargo bay.

"Well, you can stay here and continue to twiddle your thumbs like we have been while getting to this star." CeCe growled at T'San on hearing that from her. "Or, are you no longer the hot shot, don't give a damn space jock that you used to be?" This time CeCe made a sour face before turning away. "I can understand that after our last go-around." T'San then added out of spite, "I'm sure Phyllis would too. Don't you think so Doc?" T'San was trying to drag the doctor into their little spat.

"Don't you dare tell her anything I just said, you pompous little Dino!" CeCe turned and shouted back in anger. "Can't anyone grouse around here without it becoming a federal case? You can keep your trap shut, can't you Doc?" She tried to smile at the doctor hoping that it helped cut the force of her anger.

"Well, there's grouching and then there's the real issue about something. When it become real I'll speak up," Ally nonchalantly told both of them.

"If, and I really mean this," CeCe insisted, "if it ever becomes an issue about me taking the stick and flying into the wild blue yonder, as they use to call it, I'll be the first to tattle on myself. Until then, this is just me grouching."

She glared at T'San for a moment where she stood on the Dino's flight platform waiting for them to launch. "Make yourself useful and strap on that combat control headgear and be alert. If we see even one blip on any of the instruments on the way in I want it vaporized. No questions asked." Her voice was cold and serious.

"Have you reviewed the reports on this planet?" the doctor had to ask. "It's a water world. Not a speck of dry rock bigger than twenty miles square and most of that is underwater part of the time thanks, I hear, to those two moons. There's no way this world could have evolved intelligent life. And if it has, it will have flippers. No hands, so no tools." The doctor crossed her arms over her chest and that ended that discussion.

But not for T'San who piped in with, "Anyway, with that one moon racing across the heavens once every two weeks and that high apogee moonlet that comes zooming in at the edge of the atmosphere every four days causing two hundred foot high waves... it's storm-ville down there most of the time."

CeCe had to admit that the doctor and T'San were right.

"Fine, so I won't have to unpack my bathing suit, just keep my wet suit on. Oh, happy days!"

The Asteroid winked out of existences an hour later after the *Seeker* zoomed from its underground haven to continue on to the second sun of this binary star system. Two long, boring days later CeCe piloted the *Seeker* past the high flying moonlet as they made their approach to the water world.

The moonlet was small, cold and dreary and had so many pockmarks on it that they were surprised that it was still in any kind of orbit and hadn't been shattered or at least knocked away from, or into the planet, by a past collision. Other than a few incredibly long and deep surface scars probably caused by glancing blows, it had not been worth the bother to examine.

On the opposite end of the excitement scale, the other moon was huge—two thousand miles in diameter—and moved along at a velocity that allowed it to circle the planet once every two weeks at an average distance of 300,000 miles from the surface. It was as desolate as its far flung little brother.

They stayed in low orbit around the actual planet for several days, mapping out the various storm fronts and charting close to three thousands islands of which half were volcanic in nature. They also watched as several of the minuscule newly made volcanic islands that constantly erupted from the sea floor fell back into the ocean from the high velocity storms that smashed and ground them away. Add the unrelenting earthquakes caused by the two moons, nothing on the surface of the planet seemed permanent. It was doubtful that anything under the seas was either.

They had five weeks before the asteroid was due back to pick them up so venturing down to the watery surface was not to be rushed. By the end of the third day the weather-predicting AI was averaging close to eighty-nine percent accuracy with its storm forecasts, and notified them that a large unprecedented lull in the storms was due along one section of the equator. They decided to land there and take what oceanographic readings they could. CeCe even envisioned that she might be able to put on her bathing suit after all instead of the sticky, cumbersome wetsuit.

A green streak flew through the lightning-fill storm as if the violent winds were not there. The G-Force inverter worked just as well against sudden storm fluctuation as it did against inertial forces. CeCe had the ship on manual so all of them could see the main display screen. They flew out of the heavy laden storm clouds into clear bright sunlight and motionless air.

The ocean beneath them looked calm with hundreds of bright blue-green tinted circles floating in clusters of ten to thirty, all touching together on the surface. It was definitely something none of them had expected. The circles rippled from light blue to dark green and back again as the ocean swells lifted them up and dropped them back down. The spectacle was a dazzling array of ever-shifting colors.

"Never seen anything like that," the doctor whispered in awe at what the visual display was exhibiting in the ocean below them. "We need to get down there to see what is causing it."

"Your wish is my command, Doctor" CeCe tilted the ship downward and the ocean rushed up to meet them. All they could see in any direction they looked were nothing but the undulating circles and their flashes of light.

"Find us a clear place to land," the doctor urged CeCe. "There!" she pointed to the left of the screen and down a little. "Right there in the middle of those five discs that have formed themselves into a larger circle. It is the smallest cluster that I've seen so far. You will also noticed that there is one disc that's not flashing like the others are. Do any of you see any other clusters like that? Small or large?" she asked.

"No, not around here," answered CeCe, "but this low altitude doesn't let us see that many of them. You want to cruise around a bit? I can mark this spot and we can come back to it if you like?"

"No, no, let us land and find out a little about the discs first. Then, if it proves necessary, we can go looking for others."

"Sounds like a plan."

"I wonder why that group is touching each other like that and what is holding them in place? It is very different from all the other clusters. What you call an odd ball. There's all that open water we can land in the middle of. That will save us time going from one ring to the other."

"Got to hand it to you, Doc. You have a good eye for judging the size of the ship against those things, especially from this height. Do you realize what size that makes those five circles to leave that much room we can fit into?" The pilot was eyeing the doctor and smiling.

"Sure, seventy-eight feet to ninety feet," she promptly replied. CeCe's jaw drop at the accuracy of the size. The Doctor laughed and pointed to T'San screen that was to the right of them. T'San already had the basic information about the circles on her screen.

The doctor pointed to the list of chemicals that made up the circles. "Now that's interesting... seventy percent silicon. We might have a new winner in the cycle of life."

The Tassangaxx saucer floated well in the calm ocean. The water just lapped over the edge where the two main saucer plates met. There were three large access hatches along the top section and four in the lower. CeCe had the one open that was part of the crew quarter's storage section on the top deck. The opposite door went into the flight control section and the third into the back of the ship and the live food pens for the Tassangaxx to eat from if they were on board.

All three of them stood at the edge of the hatch with the water a few feet away from their feet. They breathed in the warm, salty, and yet slight sulfury smelling air for the first time. The doctor took a deep breath, her eyes started to water and she began to cough. CeCe and T'San smiled, each knowing better than to breath in heavily on a planet with a denser atmosphere than Earth's. Especially one with a great deal of volcanic activity on it.

Red-faced, the doctor coughed a few more times and forced herself to take smaller and shallower breaths mostly through her nose. "The smell," was all she could say.

"Much like dinosaurs, if you ask me," quipped CeCe with a

twinkle in her eye.

"You can be the first to find out if there is anything in the ocean with teeth if you're not careful," T'San murmured loud enough for everyone to hear.

"Touché," spoke up the doctor as she scooped up a small vial of the ocean water and placed it in a hand held chemical analyzer. "Let's play nice together now by getting the sampler kit and some of the other equipment we will need." The analyzer's *'beep'* made the doctor look at the screen. "I anticipated we'd get that reading after my breath of air. The water balance is on the acidity side, heavy with sulfuric compounds as you may have guess. We'll need to suit up before we inflate the raft, most likely fall in and then find time to investigate the ripply disc that's out there.

CeCe looked to T'San and they both started to laugh. Things were going to be just fine on this voyage. They both knew it was because the doctor was going to make it happen no matter what they said or did to each other.

Two hours later the doctor got to poke the disc for the first time with a pair of tongs. Except for the flowing colors it looked and acted like a big translucent, rubber floor mat. The small sonar device on the raft was projecting the underwater image in the air above the floor for them to see and it made the circular floor mat resemble more a giant jelly fish with dangling tentacles thirty feet long.

The tentacles were made of five foot rods that were jointed together so that each rod slowly swayed to the rhythm of the rippling at the surface and the water current beneath. The up and down moving rods also passed through what looked like sacks half full of liquid and air that stayed stationary. It looked like a stick was passing back and forth through a glass ball.

"Jeeze," exclaimed CeCe, "I'm no engineer, but that looks like a rod driven motor instead of tentacles if you asked me." The intricacy of all the tentacles working in unison was fascinating. "I wonder what it does."

"Give us time, my dear CeCe," the doctor told her, "and we'll find out."

"Ladies, that is not as fascinating as what I'm seeing." T'San voice was trembling a little. "Nor is it as frightening. Look!"

The two women looked up from the 3-D image and saw that T'San was looking back at the space ship. She let out a groan of displeasure that reverberated beyond the ship. Standing on the hull right next to the open hatch were, for lack of better words, five humanoid fish with their heads inside transparent bubbles filled

with liquid, and clutching spears with their pectoral fins.

Chapter Thirteen: War! Why Is It Always War?

BINARY, yellow dwarf stars are not the most common in our galaxy or even the universe, but there are lots of them if you know where to look. Finding one that has planets that are located in the habitable zone of their star system is rare, but as one writer said, "Million to one odds happen all the time." Only, this planet must have used all of its luck on a bad gamble and saved nothing for its future.

In a planet's history, civilizations come and go. With luck the next one is better and more advanced the one it replaces. Long lasting superstitions and magic eventually turns into science. And if the natives of that world don't hate each other too much they might even learn to work together and make it off the home world and flourish in outer space. Eventually they become advanced enough to move out and colonize the stars. Happy ending.

But life has the nasty habit of throwing curve balls and they can't always be dodged. Planets, in particular, are sitting ducks. Sometimes curve balls, small rouge planets or an asteroid even, hit you right in the head and the lights go out.

A dull yellow light lit up on the short range FM radio. It flickered every now and then but kept on glowing. It turned green as the unit finished decoding the first part of an incoming message.

Slugger, the only crew member, therefore the pilot and drilling master of the small rock drilling space rig that he daily risked his life in, flipped a switch on his comm unit and the reconfigured words played through the speaker.

"Beta group listen up. This is from the boss man. I just receiver a burst transmission that stated that the rogue asteroid coming in is not natural. Repeat, it *is not natural* and we're not to go anywhere near it. This message was coded as a double star alert." The low power FM radio went silent for a few moments as more of the message was decoded and then play resumed.

"We all know that means it must have been launched from our companion star. We're no longer space scavengers but back in the Navy. That's except for you, Slugger. You still have two months in the can for breaking that integrated fuse box last month in your fist fight with Scooper. You shouldn't have hit him in the face with it. Him we can do without, the fuse box we can't." Another short interruption was followed by:

"Everyone drift back to base as slowly as possible. Keep your

reaction gas bursts to a minimum. Slugger, you're to stay on station and act as rear guard to work off your time. You'll receive no combat pay until your sentence is completed. That's all men." The radio went silent again, but the yellow light on the panel did not go out, instead it stayed glowing. That meant a private message was coming in for Slugger's ears only.

"Slugger, didn't mean to sound you out like that, but the boys can't know anything about this. As you know your present flight trajectory will intercept the asteroid in twenty cycles. The computer says you have an enough life support for twenty-two. Bossman wants you to play Chicken Little and tell us if the sky is falling or not."

The light turned yellow and started to dim. Slugger could transmit now. He rubbed his stubbled, unclean face with his two rough hands and scratched the back of his head before replying.

"Cap, I take it then that this could be a one way mission? If so, do standard combat protocols for OxTags to the KIA family members come into play?" Slugger's nail-bitten fingertips touched the photo of his wife and two young children, a two-year-old girl and a ten-month-old boy, stuck to the edge of his control panel. He felt a lump come to his throat.

"If you encounter hostiles you're on combat pay. Understand this, we are not stepping forward. We have an agreement with the W'st and they are taking the risk. You're to make sure they don't try to pull the proverbial wool over our eyes. If you get caught and they are hostile you're nothing more than a flea-bitten scavenger to us." The signal paused once more then resumed.

"If you come out of this you'll have a one-man claim on the asteroid for being there first. You'll just have to still be alive to prove it and give your group its standard twenty percent claim value."

"Just love the scavenger life, that the life for me," he sang back to his captain just before he cut the transmission. He did one other thing before he shut down most of his ship's systems. He started the old rock drill spinning, ever so slowly.

"Prime Leader, three of the meteors in that group on the edge of our screen seem to be changing course. They are going to miss us by a few million miles if they continue. Two of the objects are still on target for a fly by. Ambient light reflections are showing that they are in slow axial spins and the spectroscope is showing a mix of stone and iron. They must be the real rocks that the three bogeys where trying to use to hide."

"Can you tell me more on those three bogeys?" Phyllis was looking down from the balcony as usual.

"Only that we are now noticing periodic and directed ion out gassing that could account for the directional change."

"Definitely not natural?" she asked just to make sure.

"Definitely."

Phyllis noticed that the Tassangaxx astronomer had turned away from her bank of readouts and visual screens. By the look of her head comb and the way her mouth was set, she was not happy. She seemed to come to a decision, turned around and slowly came up the long curved stairs that flanked the control room wall and made her way towards the Prime Leader. Phyllis, on her part, focused on the 3-D display of the planetary system they were entering. It was a grim sight. The system was devastated.

The outer gas giant was still safe in its orbit, but its many small moons were all in disarray and appeared to have been smashing into each other at an unprecedented rate; they still were. Moons that should have been in stable orbits for the last several million years now had to contend with a new wandering moon that had come hurling out of the inner system and recently took up orbit. Now it was pulling anything small towards it as it swept its orbital path clean.

Closer to the sun where the habitable world should have been was a mass of destruction. Barely half of a world was still there. It no longer had a seasonal tilt but an extreme wobbled that with its daily rotation almost turned it topsy-turvy every day. Its atmosphere was gone, its oceans were gone, life itself on its surface was gone. Circling around it in a cloud of destruction and debris was what was left over from the collision with another large body that had come smashing into the star system.

The shattered mass of the runaway world that had hit the orbiting planet could still be seen traversing its very elongated orbit around the sun. Millions of pieces of rocks of every size thinkable trailed behind it for millions of miles. Phyllis thought it must have been the same type of catastrophic event that made the asteroid belt in her old solar system. Other smaller rocks were being thrown out constantly by collision after collision from within. Traveling in this system was going to be like walking through a fifty car train wreck with not a clear path to be had.

She hoped that the astronomer didn't get it into her head to jump over the railing instead of coming all the way up and facing her. Death by one's own hand was acceptable over a failure of this magnitude. For some unfathomable reason not being able to foresee a calamity that was hundred of lights years away as well as

in the past was not an acceptable excuse in her society. The Prime Leader found it so hard not to laugh at the sight of the big lumbering Dino who was three time her size and downright afraid of her.

With head bowed low since the moment she set foot on the balcony she stopped a good ten feet away. The clawed tips of her hands were vibrating with the nervousness she was experiencing. In the old life she would be waiting for death at the hands of the Prime Leader for such a gross miscalculation. She knew that was not *this* Prime Leader's way but years of strict, unforgiving ruling were hard to forget and to overcome.

Phyllis needed hard, cold facts at this moment and did not have time to assure the scientist that her life was not in jeopardy. "When did this all happen exactly?" she asked without taking her eyes of the floating display. "I can tell you myself that it probably was in the last three hundred years or so since that was approximately how long it took the light to reach the edge of the Pleiades where you did your last reading of this system." She turned to the astronomer. "Give me facts, not guesses, because our very lives may depend on what you tell me."

The astronomer stopped looking at her three-toed feet and raised her head and looked for a moment into the eyes of her leader.

"All the computer models agree that the disaster happened three hundred and twenty years ago. We just missed seeing the actual event by a few months. The orb that caused this traveled from the direction of the companion star and its remnants is the most massive object on the other side of the sun right now that still heading around on its seventy year orbit."

When the Dino paused Phyllis cleared her throat. It was an expression the Dinos had come to realize meant impatience on the part of their Prime Leader.

Quickly, the Astronomer added, "One of the radio telescopes is picking up a significant amount of directional bursts in the FM frequencies at very low wattage. Most of it from the direction of the bogies. It could be interpreted as ship to ship communications." She stopped and her forked tongue licked her thin lips. "There was a lot of chatter coming from inside the system, but it has ceased since we arrived. They stopped all transmissions once they noticed us." The astronomer swallowed before continued. "We must have transitioned out of drive too close and they spotted us right away."

"Not your fault," the Prime Leader reassured the astronomer. "No matter how far we transitioned in, we would have been spotted. If that rogue orb indeed came from the direction of the

sister star I would set up a very vigilant scan in that direction just in case."

Phyllis took a deep breath and slowly exhaled as she thought of what to do. Using her neuronet she called general quarters. Within minutes everyone was at their assigned post and called in ready for orders.

"It would appear that we stuck our snouts into it again," she told everyone. "By what we can tell, this system was hit right in the face with a rogue planet and the people that survived are a little scared of us. We may be their worst scenario in that we could be the mop up invasion force from their sister star for all they know.

"Either the survivors out there have found evidence that the hit on their world was done on purpose, or they're so jittery that they're not taking any chances. Either way it puts us in a bad spot. We can either turn around, leave and pick up our people and totally forget them, or we can try to let them see that we are not the bad guys. That we may be able to help them even if it's nothing more than given them better ways of doing things to survive."

She stopped for a moment to let what she just said sink in.

"My mind tells me we should turn around and run. But my heart feels for these people that are trying to survive after such a blow. I know that most of the Tassangaxx on board this ship were alive when part of the moon from Mars wiped out your race in the Cretaceous-Tertiary extinction. You were not in a position to help your people, but your technologies on this asteroid may be what those beings out there need to flourish instead of *just* surviving."

Again she waited a moment. She had discovered that rushing through explanations with her non-human crew was certain to be counterproductive.

"As the Prime Leader of this asteroid I decree that we will try to help. Communications, start broadcasting basic language and math codes and try to establish contact. The rest of us stay on station in case we have to leave in a hurry. Engine room, start scooping up time particles if you can just in case. That is all."

Twenty hours later no one in the control room noticed a small one man space sled slip out of one of the two small rocks that hurtled past them. The pilot was in his spacesuit and the open sled gave him no extra protection. He had enough fuel to land if he didn't waste any. The start of radio broadcasting from the asteroid hours before came as a much needed relief to him. His chances of survival had escalated a thousand fold.

He could now concentrate on finding a landing spot that might get him inside. The six sliding doors that protected the telescopes

stood out plainly against the scar of the old meteor strike. The smaller hatches that let crew personal up onto the surface also stood out. The dust that mostly covered the doors and hatches had been shifted with all the recent activity. The welcome mat was out and the lone stranger was determined that he was going to help himself and come in out of the vacuum.

Everyone was intensely watching the three spaceships that were heading their way. The lead ship was a dreadnought in size. Just barely able to move on its own. The other two ships were acting as tugs, help pushing the other ship along.

The Prime Leader and the crew watched in fascinated horror as the telescopic images of the gigantic spaceship showed it was sporting patches over patches and many not even out of the same material. How it was still space worthy no one could guess. Finally Phyllis was able to pull herself away from the spectacle and think.

"Stay alert people," she communicated to everyone, "This may be the state that all their space ships are in, but it may be a ruse to trick us to let our guard down." She changed her radio frequency to that of the control room below her. "Communications, language section. How is the Tassangaxx translator working out? Anything more than 'one, two, three' by now?" Phyllis had purposely let the crew handle all the contact procedures. She didn't want the aliens to have any idea of who was in charge. She was going to try to stay in the background as much as possible.

"Yep," replied the human woman that was helping the Dino tech with the Bio-matrix translator computer. "We've managed close to five hundred words right now and that, in theory, is enough to get in basic communication with them. We are now using computerized flash cards to speed things up as we have established that we used binary code with some of our computers. Before too much longer the Tassangaxx translator will be able to handle their language as good as ours."

Incredible strides had been accomplished in the past several hours including making contact with the inhabitants of the approaching ships. It appeared to have gone a long way to defusing tensions.

"Keep up the good work." Phyllis shifted frequencies. "Scanning, do we have pictures of our hosts so we'll know what to expect when we go aboard their ship?"

"The Dinos will be one hell of a surprise to them, but not us. I'll be darned if I can tell them apart from us except for the skin color and lack of ears."

Phyllis thought for a second before asking. "Did anyone send a Tassangaxx picture?" Both techs in the group looked at each other because they were standing side by side at two different stations. They shook their heads to the negative. "Not any of us did. When we saw the first simplified drawing of these people we just went with the flow and sent back a human one. Didn't want to complicate things by trying to explain our relationship with each other and having to add another unnecessary language."

"Thank God all of you were thinking. The... Do they have a name for themselves?"

"So far the best we have come up with is, W'st. It literally means, *We Stand Together*."

"That sounds mighty good from their present point of view. But it sounds too made up. It's almost like a name or motto a special interest group back on Earth might come up with. Hmmm?" She paused then ask, "Military leadership, do you know?"

"Can't tell for sure. Quasi-dictatorship maybe?"

"Couldn't expect anything else under the circumstances. Still no videos with the radio communications?"

"No, Prime leader. They say they don't have the equipment to do it. Radio is all they claim to have."

"That's might very well be so from the way that ship looks. Helm, when do we stop so we can exchange personal Hello's?" Phyllis was really concerned about this. Because the asteroid was no longer under full power it would take hours to accelerate fast enough to go into time dilation drive.

"The W'st are at a standstill already and we'll come to a complete stop in twenty minutes."

"We're stopping at one hundred miles apart, I hope."

"Exactly that, Prime Leader."

"Time to get ready and fly over and meet our new friends."

The astronomer was feeling dejected. Even her radio telescopes were not hers to use at the moment. Communications had hijacked them for the duration of the present crisis. Not that she could not understand why. Trying to ferret out the various compressed radio bursts and the location of the alien bases that were transmitting them was top priority; it could mean their lives.

So she sat in the dark in the observation lounge above the telescope complex watching the two black rocks hurl by. They were hard to see with only her unaided eyes. She tracked them by

watching for stars that blinked out as they passed in front of them. Because of the darkness she never noticed the object that moved away from the lead rock and descended below the horizon only a stone's throw away. The rocks finally disappeared from view and she was left with nothing more to do.

Sighing was not possible for a Dino, but there was the equivalent of what humans would call a snort. She did this as she slowly made her way through the many corridors of the observatory complex. Lights automatically came on before her and shut down after she passed.

The passage she was walking down had cross intersections to the six underground telescope and storage rooms for extra equipment and elevators that went to the surface if outside work was needed around each telescope. The micro dust on the surface of the asteroid had a tendency to gum up the smooth operation of the best sealed works, especially gears. The Tassangaxx found the oily feeling dust on their skin distasteful. If not washed off immediately on returning inside, it caused itching and a persistent rash. With their short arms it often meant having that rash in places they could not scratch. But then, with their sharp claws, scratching was rarely wise.

A sound, more like a vibration through the thick stone surrounding, reached the sensitive ears of the astronomer and it caused her to stop, tilt her head, and listen. She heard it again and this time she identified it as the closing of the elevator surface hatch that was close by. Her curiosity rose to a great level for she knew that no one else should be in this section of the asteroid. She could now hear the running of the elevator as it slowly descended.

The astronomer was far from being a stupid woman and she was trained, like all her kind, in combat while she attended school. The need to keep the males of her species in their subservient place made that mandatory. She knew the only thing that could be coming in from the surface had to be an alien. And that it had to come from one or both of the rock that just passed by. That meant there were four or five alien ships out there not three as they had assumed.

The size of the rocks that had just pass by could not have held more than a single Earth-size person if it was to live in space for any length of time. She had seen the pictures of the aliens and knew what size they were and what they looked like. Even if there were two of them and they had weapons of some kind they could only come out of the airlock chamber once they were automatically hosed off and that was a two minute cycle. That should put a damper on their plans, she laughed to herself.

She had sufficient time to call for help, but with the way she was

feeling at the moment she didn't want it. She positioned herself in front of the airlock hatch and tapped in her bypass code to release the door. As long as the surface one was closed she could do it. The door slid open, the water spray was no hinderance to her vision and she saw only one person. She lunged forward and forcibly pushed the space suited man against the back wall of the elevator with considerable force.

The water spay cut out and the stunned man sank to the floor because bulk of the air tanks on his back had knocked the air out of his lungs. She bent down and grabbed the front of the spacesuit in her claws, puncturing the reinforced fabric. She lifted him high into the air as his suit deflated and tore open some more. Holding him so his face was right in front of hers she growled, fully opening her mouth and showing her sharp, long pointed teeth and forked tongue.

His red face paled and he started to scream his lungs out.

In all, five women settled into one of several craftavators that Tom Swift had provided to the asteroid. The cube-shape craft had no space drive engines of its own, only retros for emergency docking procedures. Life support was minimal... communications and control was done by subvocalized InterVoice Link. All the components were well protected from outside tampering. It was basically one of the space elevators used to transport personal and small cargo loads from the surface of Earth to one of the many space habitats that were in geosynchronous orbit around it.

Maneuvering was achieved by the combined use of repelatrons and Attractatrons directed from the asteroid itself. It was a bit tricky to do but a good cargo handler on any one of the orbiting habitats performed the maneuvering constantly. One of the five women going to the alien ship was among the best. And, in a pinch, Phyllis could get them out of there and back to base.

The trip over was uneventful except for one little ding. The craftavator hit the outside edge of the hatchway leaving a small bit of it behind as it entered into a small cargo bay. The alien ship had no external hatches that it could make a leak proof air seal with their small craft. It took over five minutes for the air to stabilize close to that of Earth's normal and the five ladies waited for the inner hatch to open before they opened theirs and stepped out into the corridor of the alien ship.

A small man in a very elaborate uniform of white with gold trim was waiting to greet them. In his hand he held what could pass as a riding crop with a fluff white ball on its tip. His face was a pale red, as was his head; he was bald. All his exposed skin was red and his

large, round eyes were yellow. His lips were white and when he finally spoke his tongue and teeth were also white. Ten men in skin-tight black jumpsuits stood in attention in a semicircle around him blocking the corridor. They all looked identical and unarmed. Their faces and hands were red and they were bald just like their leader.

The women looked ill dressed in their mismatched pants and tops. The clothes were fitted enough to show they had no weapons.

"Seize them!" he ordered as he slapped his riding crop into his waiting palm. Like machines the ten men moved forward to do his bidding.

"War. Why does it always have to be war?" ran through Phyllis' mind as hands grabbed her arms more painfully than necessary.

Chapter Fourteen: "Eight Weeks, Albert, Eight Weeks"

JESSICA, being exhausted, slept late, and managed very little restful sleep even then. She came into the library just before noon still feeling groggy. She was making her way towards the personal archives when Tom Swift turned the corner from the opposite direction with a smile on his face. In shock, she stumbled, and Tom just had time to reach out to catch her from falling. He noticed that her face was pale and asked with concern, "Are you all right?"

She smiled back at him, "I'm not feeling to well today... had a bad night, that's all." She then changed the subject by asking, "Can I help you? I noticed that you were coming out of the personal archives."

"Oh no," he reassured her, "I was doing a visual inspection about how everything and everyone is doing on the ship. I've been going all over the place to be sure that everything is in tiptop shape. Mostly the crew don't want to tell me about the little things that go wrong, but as you well know it's the little things that you have to watch out for."

"Was this a warning or am I reading too much into it." She thought as she looked at his smiling face and twinkling blue eyes, "I wish that I never saw him in the Library. I hope this does not turn out bad."

"If you're sure I can't help, or call a medic for you...?" Jess shook her head no, too afraid of say anything. "Then I'll leave you to your work. Hope you feel better soon, Miss." He nonchalantly walked away, seemingly with no cares in the world.

She had to cling to the archives door frame because her knees felt so weak and she was afraid that they would buckle before he left the library. She stood there longer than she should have; someone else came and asked if she was all right. She talked to the woman for a couple minutes since she knew her from when sections of the ship were part of the Swift's habitat in Earth's orbit. After a final reassurance the woman left and Jess made it into the archives.

A quick look that told her everything was where it should be so she sat down before one of the two computer stations and called up the internal clock setting. And there it was—it had been reset less than five minutes ago. Was this proof enough that Tom Swift was hiding something? It was a start and a quick look at the other computer shown the same tampering. Evidence was slowly mounting up and she could not wait to tell Ramon.

Tom continued his inspection tour during normal working hours for four more days. In the early mornings when everyone was still sleeping he would secretly revisit a few of the stops that he could not get discreet access to their computers and reset them. The number of free standing computers on the starship was astounding and there was no way Tom could get to them all. Why he was even trying was unfathomable. His explanations of the glitch should have been enough to cover things. This behavior was borderline insanity.

Ramon and Jess had talked about his behavior between themselves while Ramon was spending his waking hours keeping a watch on Tom. Both were very relieved when Tom stopped visiting different sections of the ship. One night, a week later when Ramon was having supper with his grandpa Bud, the subject of Ramon calling out sick, especially over the past week, came up. The young man didn't know how to reply at first.

To call Tom Swift a bit fanatical or ludicrous in his behavior of late would be no better than calling him insane, but not by much. Ramon bit the bullet and went into a long discussion about what Jess had found and what he had seen Tom doing by watching him from afar the previous week. The nighttime revisits were the most disturbing thing to talk about.

After his grandson left Bud sat at the dinner table drumming his fingers for an hour while trying to making up his mind on what to do.

"Got to do it," he told himself. "Hate to, but I must." He touched a corner of the table and turned on the glass top computer. He did a quick search and then turned the machine off. He could have InterVoiced Tom's location, but he still liked using his fingers to do and control things.

The large double doors to Tom's lab were closed, but the regular sized one built into one of them was unlocked and opened without a sound. Tom was working on a lab table that he had dragged as close as possible under the scaffolding, but there were too many cables and power lines getting in the way to get to the middle of the structure. He had to settle on being just in front of it. Two sets of stand lights were shining onto the work surface from near the back corners of the table. Tom had a shabby lab coat on that had seen better days. Bud could hear the rasping of a hacksaw on metal as he approached the bench.

"Hi, Tinkerer, still at it, I see," Bud called out as a greeting. The saw stopped in mid stroke and Tom turned to look at Bud. His face was haggard and there were smudges of grease on his cheeks and forehead. His eyes looked bloodshot and sunken into his face. Bud knew that Tom had not been seen for the last couple of days, but

this frightened him. He had only looked like this once in his life and that was after he came out of a coma from the car accident that his wife and son had died in.

Bud's presence did not seem to register for long with Tom, because he turned back to his sawing without saying a word. Bud was shaking his head as he walked toward the bench. He snagged a lab stool on the way over and sat on it at the end of the table. From his perch he could see what his friend was doing.

The top of the bench had several scale models that Tom had taken apart, hacked out places from some of them and was trying to put them together to make a new model. As Tom worked his lips moved as if he was talking to himself or repeating a mantra of some kind, "Eight weeks, Albert, eight weeks." It took Bud a few minutes before he understood what Tom was mouthing so silently.

On the bench Tom had carved out two holes into the model of the Swift Construction asteroid. He had sawed off the gantry that held the two section of the *Star Queen* together and fitted the top residential, medical and control center into the asteroid so the top of the spaceship was flush with the surface. He was busy sawing off the last leg of the magnetic intensifier ring off the bottom of the planetary drive system. When that fell away Tom put that section of the starship into the hole he had made opposite of the other one. The entire starship was now contained within the construction asteroid.

The whole thing had Bud befuddled. Why was Tom wrecking those two perfectly good models? Why was he in such deplorable condition? He had seen enough. He tapped his InterVoice and called in a medical emergency.

Tom now looked so serene, calm and clean under the sheets in his private hospital room. There was a bandage covering the top and sides of his head. Several people were watching him on monitors in the room next door. This was to ensure that Tom had peace and quiet.

Bud, Bulldog, Ramon and Jessica, who was allowed into the conference on Ramon insistence, were watching him for some outward sign of improvement. A twitch of an eyelid or a finger would have been welcomed.

Tom had slipped into a coma-like state the moment they wrestled him from his lab. He became violent when they first approached him and he stopped fighting them just before the doctor was about to administer a sedative.

He had not moved since.

Bud spoke first to the two doctors that were attending Tom. One was a neurosurgeon and the other was a psychiatrist. Both were the best the ship had on board.

"Doctors, please be straight with us and none of the double talk jargon you guys like to throw around." Both men were taken aback by Bud's gruff attitude.

"Mr. Barclay," the older of the two spoke up first, "we assure you we would never think of doing such a thing. We understand quite well the importance of getting Captain Swift back onto his feet."

The younger doctor added. "As the neurosurgeon on the case I can tell you that Mr. Swift is in grave danger of not regaining consciousness. There is something that is attacking his mind and I don't know what it is."

"Some kind of brain amoeba?" Jess asked mostly because she had a cousin who had been affected by one and a strict regimen of antibiotics took care of it.

"I wish it was, Miss, but it's not..." he hesitated for a second, "... not *real* in that sense."

"Now Doc, what that's supposed to mean?" Bud scowled at him.

"Maybe if you looked at the neuroscan you can possibly see what I mean, but I seriously doubt it."

Bud huffed and groused to Bulldog, "We've see enough scans to bury this jerked with, medical and otherwise." Bud did not like this man at all.

Jess kicked Ramon in the shin when he started to open his mouth.

The psychiatrist had to hide his mouth with the back of his hand because he was about to laugh.

The neurosurgeon glared at the other doctor who then stopped laughing and tried to look contrite. It took a moment for him to reset the monitor to project Tom's brain scan in 3-D. The image was enlarged and it slowly spun in both directions, exposing all sides for better viewing.

"What is that murky haze that seems to be intertwine with the neurons," Bulldog asked as he stared at it intensely. He was viewing the scan with his visual enhancements. The others looked closer but could barely discern it.

"Doctor," Jess smiled at him, "could you please stop the image rotation. We might be able to see better what Bulldog is talking about." The image stopped rotating. "Could you make it bigger?" she requested. As the image enlarged the haze seen to disappear.

"Rats." Jess committed. "Smaller, Doctor, please."

"Make up your mind, young lady. I don't have all day to waste with this foolishness."

Bud stepped up to the doctor, grabbed him by a shoulder and turned him so that they were face to face. "When it comes to that man over there you better answer all of our questions no matter how stupid or foolish they may sound to you. You will take the time and do it. There is nothing else in your life right now more important than that man. Is that understood?" Bud did not wait for an answer before adding, "Just remember that until Tom Swift gets back on his feet I'm now in command of the vessel and that means I'm your superior. Is that clear enough for you?"

The doctor looked visibly shaken by the dressing down he was just given and only seemed able to sputter a bit as his face turned red. He took a moment to rethink both the medical and his professional situations over and replied, "Ask away. I'll try to do my best." He sounded defeated.

Bud released the shoulder that he still had in his grip and slapped the doctor on the back a few times as a show of understanding. "Wise decision," Bud told him as he stepped away.

The image decreased in size and the haze became more perceptible. They could now see a slight swirling movement throughout it.

"That's not natural, and we can all see that even though we are not medical professionals. Have you taken a sample of it?" Bud asked as he scrutinize the image.

"We've tried, but there is nothing to take, because it's not really there." They could hear the puzzlement in the doctor's voice.

"Have you analyzed it using X-rays and Gamma rays, and what about the higher frequencies like microwaves and such?" The doctor's eyes went narrow on hearing this from Bulldog.

"I understand, sir, as a reengineered human you might have a better understanding of our medical technologies, but I assure you that normal X-Rays, ultrasounds, CAT scans, Hi-Mag Resonance Imaging and the like have been taken, but I refuse to subject this man's brain to anything like Gamma Rays or microwave frequencies and anything higher because of their ability to kill brain cells. The brain's neuron transmitters are especially susceptible to them and easily destroyed."

"No, Doctor, not use on him, but I meant scanned for to detect any outgoing emissions."

"Why would I? The brain does not have that ability, so why

waste the time doing tests that are useless?"

"They might be useless normally, Doctor, and if you're right and it's not physical, then that only leaves us to test for unnatural occurrences. I believe this is related somehow with that glitch with the time dilation drive."

"If it is then it is out of my hands. You'll need a physicist to tell you what it is. The only thing I know for sure is that the patient is getting worse. His brain functions are slowing down and at the rate it is progressing Mr. Swift will for all intents and purposes be brain dead in about forty-eight hours." That left everyone stunned.

For the first time the psychologist spoke up. "And that is why I'm here... to help all of you to cope with this tragedy. I know it will be hard on you, but this ship will be left in your collective hands and you must take over the duties of running this ship."

"Then," Bulldog spoke up, "since the two of you have apparently given up, I would recommend that we get a physicist and an engineer in here to run a few readings to see if it's something caused by some kind of low or high frequency anomaly."

Bud looked at the cyborg and asked, sincerely, "You don't think that Tom's been taken over by a evil micro black hole, do you?"

Even the neurosurgeon had to crack a smile on that one.

Several hours later while the doctors and scientists were arguing with each other over which tests or reading methods were safe to use on Tom, Bulldog headed to Tom's lab to see if he could find some clue on what happened. The workbench drew his attention first. But after examining the models he found no evidence that there was, or had at any time been, electronics in them, so they were not the cause.

Then there were the two still running Albert's, but they were not performing any duties or calculations. It took Bulldog over an hour to go through the comparison logs of the two AIs. He could have done it in seconds if he connected with them, but common sense told him that was a bad idea. What if that is what had caused Tom's condition? He did not want to be struck by it too.

At the end of the notes Tom had written a comment"

"Check the Helium4 plasma memory cores for deterioration."

Bulldog could find no further notes to indicate that the comment was ever followed up. That made him think back about what he knew of the Helium cores. He had to laugh at himself when he did recall the first time Tom ever tried to make a plasma base core. It was so long ago that Tom was only about eighteen years old

at the time. It was based on a plasma energy being that the Space Friends sent down to Earth and Tom had constructed a body to contain it. That was before the Space Friends turn out to be the Dinos that Phyllis Newton Swift was now the Prime Leader of.

"What was the name that that being was called?" Bulldog had so many memories to search through. It took a minute before it came to him. *Exman*, that was it. Then the memories of what the plasma ball that Tom had made look like came to him. Not the flame-like color, but the swirling motion of it in the container.

Bulldog could almost lay the separate patterns on top of each other. "Not a coincidence at all," was his first thoughts. His gaze turned to the scaffoldings and he imagined the blazing white hole it use to hold. "Could it?" he wondered as he ran a search through the ship's data bases for video footage of the white hole. He watched several videos of it from different years and it always looked the same. Then he laughed at himself. It was not the normal vision range he needed, but higher up in the infrared.

And there it was—the same swirling motion coming to the surface before sinking back in. Somehow Albert's Helium4 plasma memory core was the cause of the problem. Then another distant memory came to him that Albert's mind was patterned after Tom's. One was organic, the other one was energy and Tom had reportedly been standing right there by the scaffolding when the whole time dilation thing fell apart.

Was it logical then that somehow Albert's consciousness had embedded, implanted or any other way you could think of it, stamped itself on Tom's mind and was now slowly taking it over? Was it possible that only Tom's memory was dying and Albert would wake up in Tom's body and usurp his life?

Bulldog didn't know what to do at first, because if it was true, it was beyond fantastic. He reviewed his findings several times and then placed the calls he had to make.

In minutes the lab was in a turmoil with all the people in it arguing with each other. No one could figure out how to stop Renegade Albert—the name that Bud had given him—from taking over. They still had no clue of what it could be made of and so could not agree on a plan of action to stop it.

At best they all agreed that what Bulldog had found out was what was the most likely cause. But how to stop a ghost of a plasma mind? They also agreed that a high intensity magnetic field was to be set up and applied as soon as possible. That was being handled by Engineering under the supervision of Bulldog. Magnetic fields on a whole did nothing to the brain, but plasma fields were another matter so there was hope that it would work.

The next best option was to shut down the time dilation drive and see if they could restart the white hole. If Tom was near by, the Renegade Albert might be drawn from him and back into the white hole where it belonged. But that option would take days and they were running out of time far too fast.

The readiness call came down and everyone who had a reason rushed back up to Tom's room to see if the magnetic field would work. They only had a day left.

Tom's entire head was surrounded by a wire mesh, but the white head bandages could still be seen. Only his neck prevented a complete wrap around. The control setup that sat nearby was simplicity in itself. A switch to turn it on, a gauge that showed the field intensity and a dial to increase it. Because of the magnetic field that was going to be generated around his head they would not be able to use a scanner to see if the field was having the desired effect. They would just run it for an allotted time then take a look to see if it had diminished or moved in any way.

Only the doctor and the engineer were in with Tom; everyone else had to watch from the room next door. The assembled group were tense and after the first fifteen-minute run a check was performed... and there was no change. In fact the haze was more intense than ever. Each proceeding run doubled in intensity over the one done before and each showed no improvement except that the hazed solidified even more.

Groans of disappointment followed each failure. Two hours later the equipment was turned off as the magnetic field appeared to be helping Renegade Albert take over even faster.

By now, only Bud, Bulldog, Arron, and Jess were left. The psychiatrist and the doctor were in the other room monitoring Tom's vitals and his active brain scan. The forty-six hour mark ticked by and still they were hoping for something positive to happen. The two older men were standing by the bed and other two young ones were sitting in straight back chairs leaning into each other saying a word or two of encouragement. They all refused to think of the inevitable.

The first sign of movement was a twitch of his right foot. Then, a large yawn followed by a word that refused to be spoken by a dry throat. The two doctors came rushing into the room with disbelief written all over their faces.

Bulldog handed Bud a glass of water with a straw in it, and Tom took a sip. He ran his wet tongue over his lips and took another sip. By now everyone was crowded around the bed and one of the doctors had turned on the projector so that everyone could see the body vitals display screen and its good signals.

"I feel like the walking dead." Tom whispered as loud as he could.

"Well, what can you expect after pulling a stunt like this? You just about died and we..." Bud topped talking, his eyes narrowing and his gaze shifting from the others directly into Tom's face. In a near panic, he blurted out, "You *are* Tom, right?"

"Who were you expecting?" Tom looked at each one before finishing with, "Albert?"

Chapter Fifteen: “Down. T’San, Down. Good Girl!”

CECE reached out and touched T'San on the shoulder. "Down, T'San, down. Be a good girl. You need not frighten the natives by making ferocious sounds at them" T'San whipped her head around and opened her mouth to say something when CeCe added with a devilish smile, "In fact, why don't you *not* act human and let us girls do the talking. That is if we can communicate with them. You can sit back and bask in the sun. Do you now get what I mean?"

For an answer T'San slapped her tail several times, hard, into the bottom of the boat, splashing the women with the water that was still there. T'San had almost sunk the boat when she first tried getting in without the stabilizing unit turned on. She had to hand pump a lot of water out before the other two could get in with their equipment. It was then that it was decided that T'San was not to get back out of the craft until they were safe and dry back at the ship.

A sixth fish came out of the darkened interior of the spaceship and stopped when his webbed feet entered the water. He took off his head bubble and let the water that was in it cascade down his body. The bubbles deflated as if it was a plastic bag of some type and he slipped it under the belt he was wearing. The only other thing that the belt held was a sheath with some kind of knife in it. He dove into the ocean and the next time the women saw him he was flying out of the water and landing on the edge of the disc the boat was next to. He bounced a little when he landed due to the fact that the reflective surface were large squares that moved independently of each other. That was what gave them the ability to ride the waves up and down.

He tentatively watched the people in the boat as he stooped down and filled his bubble with fresh water and with a well practice flip he had the bubble over his head and settled in place. This gave him a limited time in which he could survive out of the water. For the first time the women were able to see that the water was ever so slowly oozing from half dozen slits on each half of the humanoid fish's chest and under his arms. The slits ended against the pectoral fins that were now folded down and out of the way. His arms fitted snugly against his sides.

The three women stared at him and he at them. T'San made the first move by bounding out of the boat, landing on her two feet and then bouncing onto her chest. Each time when she tried to get up she flopped back down in the most comical way. Finally she just sat there and yelped as pitifully as she could. The fishman retained his balance throughout her antics. The fish people still standing on the spaceship had jumped back into the ocean the moment T'San made

her first move. They were looking up at the disc and boat from the safety of the water. Their eyes peeked just above the waves and their mouths were hidden below the surface. Their head bubbles nowhere to be seen.

The doctor, being closest to the edge of the disc, climbed out of the boat and took a few small steps on the yielding surface. With arms out from her sides to help her maintain balance she eased her way toward T'San. Once there she made cooing sound and patted the Dino until the end of her tail started to thump. Her eyes glazed over and she started a rumbling sound that she must have thought sounding like purring.

The doctor made a face as she looked back at CeCe who was openly laughing.

"I suppose that's your impression of the sound of a Dog-a-saurus?" the Doctor asked T'San but received no reply as she kept up the noise. "CeCe, I think you're going to pay big time when this is over."

"You think? But what about him?" There was an edge in her voice that caused the doctor to look back at the fishman who was stepping closer to them. Maybe it was the sound that T'San was making or it was the display of affection the Doctor was showing, something had registering with the fishman.

He stopped when he was within arm reach, and held out his hand, the fingers were webbed, and barely touched T'San's right arm. Her skin was hard, dry and hot and the fishman did not touch it long. He then reached out toward the doctor's arm and hesitated. The Doctor lifted her white-suited arm up so he knew that he could touch it, and he did.

It was soft and warm.

The aqua suits that the women had on were made skintight and totally sealed when activated by InterVoice link. There was a hood that covered the entire head down to the shoulders. The face was left uncovered due to the fact that a transparent face plate sealed itself when held into place and it had an oxygen mix generator built in the cheek and chin area. The jacket was full length with sleeves. It had built in gloves that could let the fingers be uncovered if needed. The leggings covered the feet and fins could be formed on command. When deactivated the suit was very easy to put on and take off even when it was wet. It was also shock resistant and could protect a human at up to six bars of pressure or two hundred feet deep in Earth's gravity.

He held his arm out for the doctor to touch. It was not at all what she expected. They could see that the body and arms were covered with overlapping scales, but they were not hard like Earth

fish scales. His were pliable and they had a warm, oily feel that probably wouldn't be noticed in the ocean.

Satisfied that no one was going to be anyone's lunch, the fishman then pointed to the spaceship, pointed to each of the creatures that were before him, and then up into the sky. Although his facial movements were limited, his eyes held a curiosity.

The doctor gasped in astonishment. She pointed to herself and then upwards. CeCe shook her head as she thought how much the scientists had missed on this one. First that fish could have intelligence and that they knew astronomy and concepts of space travel as well. She couldn't wait to see what else they were wrong about.

With that understood the fishman walked to the discolored disc and pointed to it and then back to them. He held his two fists together and made a snapping or breaking motion. He then repeated pointing at them and the disc.

They all knew what he was trying to say. He believed that they had broken the disc in some way. If they could not make him understand that they were not the cause that might mean real trouble for them. The doctor no longer felt safe standing on the disc and edged back to the boat.

With CeCe's attention diverted in helping the doctor back into the craft the fishman took a running leaped toward them. He had his pectoral fins extended, his arm were out ready to grab both women. He took them over the far side of the boat. As the women hit the water they were seized by two other fishmen and dragged under the surface of the sea.

It happened so fast that T'San never had a chance to move. When she did it was with a signal mindedness to save her friends. She bounded into the boat, scooped up the two oxygen face masks and plunged into the ocean after them.

The fish people had not descended deep into the water due to the fact both women were fighting them to get back to the surface. T'San sank right next to CeCe and all she had to do was kick one of the fishman that was holding her by the arm. With that hand free CeCe grabbed hold of the mask and placed it on her face. She then stop struggling with her captor.

T'San was kicking as hard as she could to reach the doctor who was still being pulled deeper into the ocean. The fishmen were way too fast for her even with the resistance of the doctor slowing them down. A fishman bumped into her and T'San lost her hold on the mask. In seconds the fishman grabbed it and caught up with his companions and the doctor. He held out the mask for her to see. She stop her fighting, they released one of her arms and she

clasped the device and placed it against her face. Bubbles and water were released and she was able to breathe once more.

The fishman swam back to T'San and floated just out of her reach watching her as she watched back. With her nanobot hardened body she could survive underwater much longer than she could survive the vacuum of space. She even could breath in water if she flooded her lungs because of the nanobots in her body. After a while the fishman was satisfied and turned and lead the group away.

They headed deeper into the ocean and the light intensity in the water dimmed noticeably, not necessarily because of the water but because they were under so many discs. Vaguely, a dome shape could be made out in the dark green water below and in front of them, then several others, all floating close to each other. The domes were of the same reflective material as that of the discs on the surface. Only about half the number of tentacles dangled under each dome. They swam past the tentacles; just off the center of the discs was a hole and a dangling ladder made out of the cut tentacle sections. There was light pouring down from the opening and they all moved toward the hole. Once past the bottom of the dome they had to climb up using the ladder because the dome was full of air.

The women stood by the opening looking around the well lit, open interior. A growl brought the women back to the fact that T'San being small and not as bulky as the Dinos still needed a little help getting in because of how her legs worked. Long, even steps were manageable and used in the asteroid, but never a ladder was there to be found. Dino leg and arm combinations couldn't manage them. After several tries at pulling her up by grabbing her under her arms they finally succeeded.

T'San was the first to test the air. She could feel physically that they were under pressure by a few atmospheres. Her nanobots would protected her from anything not too toxic or poisonous in the air. CeCe and the doctor had to rely on the aqua suit's ability to sense anything out of the ordinary. The suit's sensors were designed to work better in water than with air. The results were displayed by the InterVoice connection in what seemed like an overlay on their vision. They could control its intensity and size, as well as switching it off and back on.

The percentage of oxygen was low and there was almost no nitrogen that could cause them problems later when they surfaced; inert helium gas made up most of air. Where the helium came from was a mystery. It was going to play with their voices, but that could not be helped.

Before the two women could take their face masks off, five of the fishmen jumped back into the ocean, leaving only one behind. The

women presumed it was the leader of the group. He stood with his helmet dangling in one hand looking around. At first he seemed to struggle with his breathing, but after a few minutes his gasping sound subsided and he started to walk around T'San studying her, trying to figure her out. Her actions on saving the women was way beyond that of a loyal pet which had been his first impression.

The women also had to get used to the pressurized air and heavy odor in it. Their eyes started to water and their throats began to constrict, cutting off their air supply. Gasping, they replaced their face masks. As the doctor reached for a small medical satchel that was clamped around her waist she managed to InterVoice CeCe to boost her oxygen content to one hundred percent. She then took out a multipurpose inhaler and fighting her own tears and blurry vision was able to dial in for a Beta tissue agonist to sooth the trachea and bronchial tubes. She gave CeCe and herself two blast of the medication by quickly shifting their face masks. She then broke open a small bottle of saline solution and handed it to T'San to wash out their eyes.

T'San did this to both woman by having them lowering their mask to expose their eyes to quick spouts of water. They did this until the container was empty. By now they were breathing easier, but pain came with every breath. The doctor reached into her satchel once more and took out an injector and gave them each a dose of an anesthetic.

Talking was painful at first, so they InterVoiced.

"What happening, Doc?" CeCe asked now feeling that the pain was subsiding. Her ears still hurt from the pressure but she managed to relieve some of that herself.

"Don't know, but the air has to be full of sulfuric vapors to cause that to happen to us. Run a self diagnostic on the suit. The cause has to be there." While they waited for the results of the diagnostic they finally had a good chance to look around the dome where they were standing.

The fishman had not moved being so enthralled by what they had just done. He stood there reviewing the whole incident in his mind and he still could not understand the science of it, but he knew that they had medicines and tools that he could never dream of and his fins itched to find out more. Then there was the other creature. It was more than just a pet of some kind, but it appeared to be a being of equal intelligence.

The diagnostics on the two suits came in with amazing and discouraging results. Both showed that the intake lines of the sniffers were corroded and the sensors themselves were pitted with eighty percent of the sniffing orifices no longer functioning.

"Thank God we had the suits on and not just the small mouth oxygenators because we'll be dead by now," the doctor told CeCe. To T'San, she added, "Your nanos sure did a good job of protecting you."

"Not the first time they saved our skins. Right CeCe?" T'San teased.

"I've nothing against nanos, it's just species reassignment," she snapped back smartly.

"Ladies," the doctor call over to them, "let's think more on our present predicament than what happened in the past. There's a fish over there that could still be studying us for what size dinner plates he's going to need to serve us on. And why is he still standing there without that fishbowl over his head? Any guesses?"

T'San narrowed her eyes as she stared at their host. "I can take oxygen out of water with the help of my nanos, maybe he can breath with the help of super dense air. The pressure could help maximize diffusion of oxygen in his gill baskets or they also might have labyrinth organs that acts as lungs. The Tassangaxx use a per-fluorocarbon fluid in their medical tanks all the time. It never did me any harm."

"Damn, T'San, that's my field of study and you're lecturing me."

"Don't take it too hard, Doc. You're the one who saved both of us," CeCe reminded her.

"Let's focus, shall we? This is getting us nowhere." The doctor turned to CeCe first. "Find out about the lights if you can." The doctor then pointed to what looked like a kiln of some type. "T'San, find out about that. Remember, ladies, we're over a hundred feet deep in the ocean floating in a bubble." The doctor took her own advice and walked over to the nearest table to look at what was on it. The fishman joined her as she looked at the drawings that were there.

Some were star charts. Some, she believed she recognized, were of the orbits of the planets in this system. More than half were of the orbits of the two moons around the water planet. In fact she could see that all the phases of both moons were there and several that showed the smaller, inner moon farther out from the sun. After the doctor put the drawings back down the fishman took the top one and pointed to the sun and made a sound. Its pitch was barely audible.

T'San dropped the tool she had in her hand and rushed over to the two of them. CeCe looked back at them, could not see anything out of the ordinary and went back to what she was doing. What she was finding out was fantastic.

"Doc," T'San spoke up, "that sounded like a word to me. It's too high pitched for most people to hear, but not for me. Let me work with him. I have a basic Tassangaxx language decoder as part of my implanted secondary brain functions so I should be able to handle theirs and our languages. I think the fishies use sonic and/or sonar vibrations to both talk and to find their way around in the ocean."

"Have at it. This table is all astronomy related. I'm going to check what's on the others."

The next table had papers with complex formulas and symbols that could have been math, chemistry, or just written notes. There was no way of telling. The doctor then made her way to see what CeCe was doing. She was behind the kiln and tracing what looked like copper wires that were running along the surface of the dome. They were encased within the fabric, but stood out like blood vessels sometimes do on an arm.

"Anything good?" she asked as CeCe popped her head up from behind the kiln.

"Anything good, she asks!" CeCe's face held a great big grin. "Gee, I don't know where to begin." She waved her hand encompassing the dome. "Do you know what we're in?"

"I would guess inside one of those disc on the surface."

"How'd you... Never mind. That you *do* understand that is good enough for now. You mentioned that these things were made of silicon and you're right. Those big tubes and the little ones that you see in the dome are mostly copper. What the reflective cover is made of I have no idea." CeCe was getting more excited as she talk.

"Those legs that are bobbing up and down below us in the ocean are a kind of electric generator. Instead of spinning they slide up and down. The power is not that great but when this creature was alive it lived on the electricity it generated. And, yes, I believe this was once a living creature. If you look along the main lines you can see where the fishes have disconnected unwanted leads." CeCe stopped and gazed over the inner surface of the dome.

"Oh, yeah, before I forget. The light, oh the lights." Her eyes were shinning brightly and not just because of the lights in the dome.

"You know that LEDs create light by electroluminescence in a semiconductor material. Semiconductor materials such as germanium, or like here, silicon, are used. It can be "doped" or coated with a sapphire mix, then you give them some stimulation like electricity so they emit photons and that is your light. It took man thousands of years to learn how to do it. On this world nature almost did it by herself.

"Almost?" the doctor asked.

"That is the best part. The fish folk had to learn that the right sapphire mix was needed to emit the right kind of light." CeCe slapped her forehead. "How stupid of me. The reflective surface must be from the natural diodes under the skin, and the fish just souped it up by experimenting with it."

"That is still an incredible feat considering that they learned to use this disc in this way," the doctor told her. "Also that the fishy's are able to breath air as well as water has to mean that at one time in their evolution they had to live on land part time. But there's no dry land left and they were forced back into the sea. So things on this planet must have been radically different in the past compared to now."

"Well I can think of two ways that makes it possible," CeCe told the doctor.

"Oh! Tell me." She never realized just how well CeCe was educated. She'd only known of her as a pilot.

While they were talking, T'San had achieved a linguistic breakthrough with the fishman. They were now quietly listening to the doctor and CeCe.

"There could have been caves on the surface and when the land dropped back into the ocean air was trap inside and put under extreme pressure. The fish now forced back to the sea as you said found them and continued to live in them. That would have allowed for the development of science."

"Sounds feasible, CeCe. And your other theory."

"The fish evolved in a symbiont relationship with the discs. Your choice."

"If you want," T'San spoke up, "you can ask the *Cetaceanoid* yourself. That's what the translator is calling them. It seems they are more mammal than *Ichthyic*, fish." The two human women whipped around and stared at T'San and their host.

"And he has a name?" the doctor asked still not sure if she believed that the language barrier had been overcome so quickly.

"That is a problem. There no way to translate it. So I'm just continuing to call him Fishy. It doesn't mean a thing to him since the translator uses his right name."

Both ladies turned their attention to Fishy. "Hello," said the doctor. "Hi," from CeCe. T'san made a high whistle sound. Fishy replied to it.

"Greetings," T'San told them, "and he wishes to apologize for the

mistake he made on the surface. He was not thinking as he should have and that he will not do it again."

"There's no way he said that!" chided CeCe.

"Of course that's not what he *exactly* said. The translator leaves a lot to be desired. So I'm filling in the blanks the best I can. In a few days it might be ironed out, but for now it's me or nothing."

"Are we still the blame for that odd disc on the surface?" The doctor asked next. "Was it dying?"

T'San talked to Fishy for a long time. He even made a few rough sketches to help explain things. At last they were done talking.

"When a Disc normally dies it slowly starts to sink. The silicon that is now the floor hardens from its normally pliable state to this present cement-like substance and the reflective covering separates from the base. Gas is release from the harding silicon and the cover inflates as it submerges. The *Cetaceanoids* have learned through the centuries how to seal and to change the gases in the dome. They also learned to control the electrical output and to continue to use it. The discs are living machines." T'San stopped talking to the women as she turned back to Fishy for a minute.

"That disc was sick and whatever is causing that is spreading from disc to disc at an alarming rate. When a disc dies like that it is of no use. It turns mushy and the acid in the water dissolves large holes into it. Eventually it falls apart and sinks. Fishy wants us to find a way to stop it."

"First off, what are the discs' normal purpose? Why are there are so many of them?" CeCe wanted to know. After a short conversation they received a reply.

"They take in the acid from the air and rain water and release pure air and water. That's why the ocean is not an acid bath. The acid they take in is like what blood is to us. The discs make different uses for it. Their internal organs are like little chemistry sets and the electric current it generates is the power source, their food to keep them going."

"Amazing," was all they could say.

"Don't promise them anything, T'San," the doctor cautioned. "Tell him we have limited resources and will try. Just do not tell him we have slightly over four weeks to help them. After that if we have failed maybe Phyllis will let the full resources of the Tassangaxx be used on their behalf."

Chapter Sixteen: Hordes , and Other Little Things

SEEMINGLY from nowhere cloth sacks appeared and were forced over the heads of the ladies and down to their waists. Drawstrings were pulled tight and tied off. Their arms were effectively pinned to their bodies as well as tied behind their backs. With no free arms to be led by they were roughly seized by the backs of their necks. A push, pull, or tug—either left or right—told them which way to move.

The women didn't put up a struggle; that strategy had been worked out before they left the asteroid. While they couldn't see, they were InterVoice linked with each other as a group or, if need be, singularly. They were also in constant contact with the control room back on the asteroid ship. The Doctor and the head engineer were there to take over the situation if the Prime Leader was incapacitated in some way or they lost radio contact with her. Several scenarios had been worked out beforehand and left with them.

As the women were marched from the bottom deck to the next level and along that one, a trace computer in the control room was compiling their location and visually making a 3-D map of their movements for all in the asteroid to see. Using what little visual feedback the computer had received before the sacks were put on the women, the computer was inferring the most probable physical surroundings of the ship they were passing through.

The computer was even using the sound of their foot steps on the floor, and the echoes of the women voices as they called out to each other to pretend that they didn't know that they were still all together. Transparent floors, walls and ceilings were added to the map. Hatchways, corridors and doorways (open or closed) were marked. The longer their captors took attempting to confuse the women in which direction they were proceeding the better the map was becoming.

The map was able to show that the dreadnought was more or less pieced together from multiple sources. The sounds of the materials used showed distinct dividing points between sections.

They continued to go down corridor after corridor, sometimes even backtracking down a deck. Normally this would have worked and the prisoners would have been totally lost. But, thanks to the InterVoice link they all knew exactly where they where in the ship and returned to level four before they were finally led into a large area where the echoes of their footsteps faded away. The floor felt soft under their shoes and low, distant voices of a dozen or so people could be heard. The crowd fell silent and the ladies were

forced to moved into a straight line. Their sacks were removed by the person that was standing behind them. They squinted in the strong light and were forced onto their knees before they had a chance to look around.

"Keep your eyes to the floor, slaves!" a voice roared in badly pronounced English. He must have just learned the phrase. When Phyllis did try to look up, the guard behind her pushed their head back down.

"Do as they say," Phyllis warned her team. "They seem to like to use a heavy hand and things could escalate out of control faster than we can handle." With that thought in mind the Prime Leader InterVoice'd back to the asteroid.

"Control, I don't think we should wait any longer to release the Hordes. The situation is spiraling downhill fast. Let them loose and tell the Tassangaxx to armor up and be ready for insertion. Let them choose how they want to breach the ship. Just as long as it's not too near any of us."

This was going to be the first time that the Tassangaxx had to put on their combat gear except for drills. They were very good at drilling, but there had never been a real danger waiting for them before.

"We understand all too well the situation," the Tassangaxx Doctor replied. "We are sisters as well as shipmates."

"Thank you, Doctor," the Prime Leader told her.

A male's voice called out in the alien's language, "Bow down and hail your King and supreme leader, his majesty, LuJan the Second." The asteroid ship's translators were tied into there InterVoice so they heard the English translations.

"Hail, King LuJan, Hail!" Only rough, guttural male voices shouted out in unison.

"Have our new slaves stand so I can look at them." The statement was finished with a slapping of leather into an open hand.

The five women were roughly yanked to their feet before they even had a chance to try to rise on their own. In front of them, standing on a raised platform and in front of a gold gilded throne, was the same man they had seen when they first stepped out of the airlock. Only now he had added on a white flowing cape with gold trim.

"Which of you ladies before me is the leader of your little group of *females*?" There was disdain in his voice at that last word. He looked at them all, his yellow eyes glistening in the bright light of

the room. No one spoke.

"Come, come now, ladies, don't be bashful." He was slowly tapping his riding crop into this hand. Still no one spoke. He stepped down off the platform and walked to the first of the five women.

He touched her face with the puffy tip of his crop. She flinched, but stood her ground. He stepped to the next woman and he touched her cheek with his free hand. She started to raise her hand to stop him, but she caught herself and halted. A smile spread on his face. The next woman lowered her eyes just as he stepped in front of her. He continued past her.

Phyllis now stared into his yellow eyes. He touched the top of her bald head with his crop.

"Pity, you must have had beautiful hair. What happened?" The question totally took Phyllis by surprise; she didn't know what to answer for a moment.

"Cancer... I had a brain tumor and the treatment did this to me," she stuttered out at last. LuJan looked at the last woman and she nodded her head once in agreement and then looked down away from his yellow eyes. He slapped his crop against his leg as he turned and stepped back up to his throne. Turning back to them, he smiled and came to a decision.

"Take all of them to the slave pens for interrogation later," he ordered. "Except for the bald one. She is their leader, so she stays."

That order wasn't fully out of the mouth of King LuJan when thirteen Tassangaxx warriors shot out from the asteroid. Small, high velocity drive units strapped to the sides of the Dino's legs allowed them to cover the one hundred mile distance in just one minute. Seconds later they decelerated, but not to a stop. They made thirteen holes on the outer plating of the dreadnought as they hit hard enough to set off a downward penetrating explosive charge that was attached to their armored feet. Once inside the ship whatever was left of the shock-adsorbing foot plate dropped off. Decompression klaxons went off and emergency doors slammed into place sealing off corridor after corridor.

I was all about to turn into *Aliens vs Tassangaxx*.

The screaming man in his ripped spacesuit soon realized that he was screaming for no reason. No teeth had chewed off his head or torn out his throat. The only unpleasant thing that had happened to him was slow oozing down his legs and it was of his own making.

"Are you alone, alien?" He heard the words in his own language

oddly overlaid over the creatures own roars, hiss and squeals. Wide eyed and still not sure why he was not dead he nodded his head inside his helmet.

"Answer or I will eat you!" Again the man nodded and then remember the helmet. Yes... yes... I'm alone!" He stammered at last. "Please don't eat me. I can help you against the W'st," he pleaded.

"Do I *look* like I need help against W'st like you?" The astronomer put him down and stepped back so he could fully see her. Almost three times his height and several hundred pounds heavier, she savagely stared down at him. Saliva dripped off between her long, sharp teeth. It was an effect she had practiced and was mildly disappointed at the reaction it received. He took off his useless helmet and dropped it to the floor and looked up at her.

"You don't. But what of the other human-like people that have been talking to the W'st? They might."

"Why should we listen to a traitor to his own people?"

He had started to shrugged off the remainder of his space suit. "Because they are my enemy, not *Free Holders* like me. Their king thinks nothing of people and his words are like your tongue, no offense, but forked."

"If he is a lair, we will find him out. He will then regret it."

"Many of my people have told him this, but yet he still stands as king of the inner system." By now the man was standing only in his jumpsuit. The astronomer sniffed the air and wrinkled her nose.

"You smell and not only of your own body waste, but of being male." She spat onto the floor in disgust. "We Tassangaxx don't talk to or like males." Once more she spat. "But for the human women on this ship I will take you to someone who will. Now I'm going to close the door of this airlock and turn back on the shower. Yell when you are no longer an offense to my nose."

A rushing Tassangaxx in armor is like having battle tanks tearing through your countryside. There was not an obstacle that she cannot overcome. Built in weapons, augmented strength, and the intelligence to use the latest data and mapping into a shared battle plan is all part of a deadly package. Added to this, when the Prime Leader called for the release of the snake-like Hordes she set loose an army of electronic probes. Hundreds were released into the infrastructure of the alien ship from a special undercarriage compartment beneath the deck of the craftavator.

Some were designed to find main power sources and to take

over control of them when commanded. Others were programmed to find key control units in the flight deck or engine room controls. Others were outfitted to trace all possible wiring, electrical and video and occupy major junction boxes. In conjunction with the Hordes there were smaller nanos that could access the smallest of openings and follow the smallest of cables. Each of the probes added more data to the overall map of the ship. Outward and upward they moved, bypassing rooms that had low power reading being used in them for sections that offered high usage.

The data was passed first to the craftavator, then to the relay chip that had been automatically planted just outside the cargo hold hatch when the spacecraft bumped into it, then to the asteroid to be compiled into useful information that could quickly be related back to everyone.

Whatever protests the women tried to make were cut off as hands from behind them forced a gag into each of their mouths and their trussed arms were forced up their backs so hard that two of them fell to their knees. Those two women were half dragged, half carried out of the room while the other two were forced to walk ahead.

Phyllis stood watching as her companions were being forced away. Anger flashed through her entire being and without giving it a thought she stepped back into her guard, snapped her head back into his forehead causing him to stumble backwards. She then charged the throne and, even with her hands tied behind her, she leaped feet first, aiming for the chest of King LuJan. She never knew if she made contact as she was slammed, hard into the floor as explosions rocked the dreadnought. Alarms sounded, men picked themselves off the floor and started running to their battle stations.

The four women prisoners were still on the floor unable to stand up when two of the guards drew sidearms and shot them point blank and left them on the floor. King LuJan was on his feet by then, took hold of Phyllis's shirt and turned her over. A little blood was running out of her nose, caused by her face hitting the carpeted floor. Her eyes were closed and she looked unconscious.

"Guards, take her," he ordered no one in particular as he flung his cape away and stepped back to his throne, "to my cruiser and lock her up. Find everything that is on her that is electrical in nature. If it's in her, cut it out no matter how deep you have to go."

He then pushed three buttons that were inlaid into the right arm of the throne. "Three minutes, let's go!" he ordered. As he walked past the still forms of the four woman he shouted, "Leave them,

they are of no use to us." The lights in the room went out.

The thirteen Tassangaxx hit the ship in unison. One landed just below what would be the flight control center at level three if what the Hordes found was true. Three landed on level four to secure the ramps leading up and down into the control center passageway. Five headed for the power and engine complex. The final five Tassangaxx went to rescue their five shipmates.

The control center was located in the forward section of the huge ship. Starting three levels up and sealed number of fortified entry doors, it was as close to being sealed off from the rest of the ship as possible. The Hordes' map showed only one entry point into the center, anything else they located were small power and control channels. The entryway was on level four, with most higher levels still mostly unmapped territory—even the Hordes and nanos could infiltrate only so fast with their limited numbers.

The first Tassangaxx met no resistance as she moved to the middle section of level three that was under the entrance into the control center. The lights went out but the warrior already had other lights sources turned on.

The Hordes had discovered that the control center was protected by three walls but the passageway was not. From level three the seams for the reinforced door frames on level four could be seen. Several shielded conduits ran along against it. Places could be seen where lines ran between three evenly spaced junction boxes and continued on. The assumption was that the branch lines running upwards were inside the wall to power the control units that should be next to the doors. Several shaped explosive charges were placed in a row where each of the junctions boxes were and detonated.

The force of the explosions ripped holes along the ceiling, and blew whatever was above into twisted metal. The Dino warrior had no trouble enlarging the holes so she could climb past the twisted frames and doors into that passageway. The other Tassangaxx stayed in position to protect their way out just in case the aliens tried to retake the center. They marched unchallenged into a dark and empty control center. The time it took to execute the takeover was two minutes.

The five Tassangaxx hit the engine room broadside, literally tearing away sixty feet of the outer hull and exposing the whole compartment to vacuum. The Horde and its accompanying nanos shut the engines down and the reactors went off line at the same time. The few W'st engineers that were there never had a chance. The auxiliary power generators started up on their own, but were

quickly forced off line as the Tassangaxx systematically started their search through the complex maze of the power and space drive engines. Time from the moment they exploded through the hull until they started their search, forty-five seconds.

With the layout of the top of the dreadnought still an unknown the remaining five Tassangaxx elected to hit level four where the women were deep inside the ship. There were still two corridors with rooms running along each of the wall that the Tassangaxx had to maneuver through including plenty of emergency door that slammed shut when the outer haul was breached.

Instead of trying to maneuver their bulky armored bodies down narrow and not quite tall enough passageways that would be sealed off, they elected to just steamroll their way across the four intervening rooms and two corridors. Because of the need to keep this part of the ship airtight they only made one hole and the followed behind each other. The last Tassangaxx dropped a canister and moved on; two seconds after it was placed on the floor it generated a force field that sealed the newly made hole. The canister had thirty minutes of power, then it would shut down leaving the hole open to whatever was on the other side. It could be air or the vacuum of space depending on how fast the W'st could reseal large areas.

The lights went out and sparsely spaced emergency lights turned on. That was expected and did not hinder the warriors in the least. They made it to the final wall in one and a half minutes, punched their way in and spread out into the now mostly empty room.

The miner, scavenger, Free Holder, or military man—whichever persona he was at the moment—was bug-eyed at everything he was seeing in the vast asteroid. They had passed through one cave filled with mining equipment of such size and variety that he could not believe his own eyes. He knew better than to ask questions on all the things he was seeing. The salvage worth of this place was beyond what he could ever imagine or count.

Not that he could claim salvage rights with living creatures on board. If he could enlist their help against the W'st it would provide for his family for the rest of their lives. The sector crew that he was a part of would also gain tremendously. The Free Holders always helped each other—that was one of the mark differences between them and the W'st. No more Ox-Tags and plenty of food and water would be the closest he would ever get to Nirvana.

At last the Astronomer lead him onto the balcony overlooking the control room. The Doctor turned on hearing the back door slide open and close. The hormones of the male assaulted her nostrils.

The Engineer hissed an insult when she noticed it.

"Be calm," the Doctor told the Engineer. "This is one of those alien creature we are dealing with. Leave if you cannot contain yourself. I must find out how he got here and why. No one was supposed to come over from the other ship. This could mean trouble and things are not going well as it is."

At that moment the five ladies were still being led up and down corridors. The Hordes were just starting to send back their much needed data.

The alien stopped dead in his tracks on seeing the other two monsters. In his mind he thought he was going to see the human outsiders. The smell of fear poured out of his body and that made the crowns on top of the heads of all three Tassangaxx stand up and quiver. Fear from prey animals still awoke old hunt and kill instincts in the Tassangaxx.

"Either calm down your fears," hissed the voice of the astronomers, "or you *will* have something to fear. If only you were a female this would not be happening," she said to the man in a voice only he could easily hear.

"If I was female I'll be having kittens right about now," he responded in a quivering voice.

"Doctor, come quick!" roared the astronomer in amazement. "This male is about to have kittens." She had not understood the reference correctly. She only knew that human kept kittens as pets. That the males could give birth to them was news to her.

The man doubled over with laughter. And the smell of fear faded.

"Hurry, doctor," she pleaded. "He's having them now. Listen to the howling he is making!"

"Males make nuisances of themselves," the doctor reminded her, "and not kittens."

"DOCTOR!" the engineer bellowed out for all to hear. "Our warriors have launched!"

The doctor forgot about the male and rushed back to the balcony rail. Above the room several visuals formed and they were able to watch everything that was happening at once.

The warriors exploded into the dreadnought—Phyllis being slammed into the floor—the quick action in the engine room—the slightly longer one for the control section. Finally the entrance into

the throne room.

The man had come to the railing also and stood mesmerized by all that he was seeing. The half-completed map of the dreadnought caught his attention. He knew immediately what was missing from the map. A lone moving dot told him where the one woman was being taken.

He quickly looked at the other visuals. The five warriors had surrounded the four ladies. Two of them were checking them over. He was fairly certain they had been stunned unconscious and not shot to death.

"Listen to me," the man shouted as he stepped closer to the Doctor because he could tell she was the leader. "The W'st are escaping!"

"There's no place they can hide from us in that ship. We have them." She was confident of it.

"You don't understand! You don't see it!" he pleaded. "They have already boarded a Light Ship and in a second or two they will be gone and the dreadnought will explode right afterwards. That pile of scrap metal is nothing more than a decoy. The real ship is in that unfinished section of your map."

He never had a chance to say another word of warning because the outside video feed of the massive space ship showed that the top of the ship gave away as a dull, black bodied spaceship sporting more drive units than space for people ripped its way out and hightailed it toward the sun. The next instant the video image went white and the space it was in above the crew of the control room went back to normal along with all the other images blinking out.

The last piece of data to disappear was that of the InterVoice link with Phillis, the Prime Leader.

Chapter Seventeen: "TL Matrix"

THE half filled glass hitting the hard floor sounded like a shot. Bud didn't even realized he had drop it.

"Have no fear, Mr. Barclay," the neurosurgeon spoke up, "Mr. Swift's latest neuro scans match up with his previous ones prior to us leaving Earth. This person is Tom Swift, of that I have no doubt, and not the construct named Albert." As he was talking he was rechecking the brain scans to see where and when the "Ghost" disappeared. From what the scans showed it simply faded away as Tom opened his eyes.

Hoping to reassure everyone, Tom smiled, his eyes sparkled blue and clear, even his skin color was healthier-looking and no longer muddled gray-white.

"Sorry for the scare, everyone. Albert wanted me to retain what happened to us the last two months and somehow it didn't settle into my memory as it should have."

"What did happen?" Bulldog asked from the foot of the bed. "You were kind of crazy for a while. Do you remember it?"

"I do, and I don't." Tom sighed. "It was like I was in a dream watching myself doing things and having no say over it." He slowly shook his head. "The truth is I don't know why I tried to hide the time difference. My only excuse is that because the memory of where we were was not in sync with our reality my subconscious took over and tried to erase it. But in the long run it must have clicked into place."

The Doctor cleared his throat to get everyone's attention.

"I would think at this time we have disturbed Mr. Swift long enough. He has gone through a tremendous ordeal, just as we all have. I think we all need some sleep. Especially our patient. So let us all leave and come back after... let's say ten hours and not a minute less."

Tom himself must have thought it was a good idea because he did not argue over it at all.

Exactly ten hours later Bud walked into Tom's room and handed him a fresh set of clothes.

"I'm not cleared by the doctor, my friend." Tom had a grin on his face.

"Has that ever stopped you? I think not, genius boy," he retorted, laughing as he placing the clothes at the foot of the bed. "I'm surprised that you're still here."

Tom's face turned solemn. "Had things to think about."

"I'm sure you did and I really hope you can explain things a little better." Tom nodded in response. "I can understand if you don't want the whole ship to know it, but there are a few people that were really concerned about you and they deserve the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth." Bud's voice had taken on an edge of anger. That was something he would never had done in the "old days" of their youth. Back then, Bud worshiped Tom; now he could see that Tom was not infallible. That even geniuses had their bad days. It was unsettling.

Tom smiled and slid his legs out from under the sheets so he could sit up. He reached for the pants, shirt and underwear. "No shoes?" he asked raising an eyebrow.

"In the closet. That's the only thing they didn't burn."

"Thank God! Do you know how long it takes to break in a new pair." He tried giving Bud a smile, then fell silent for a moment as he shuffled through the outfit. He looked back at Bud.

"Get the gang together and have them meet me in my lab. Let's say in a half hour from now, and I promise I will tell no lies."

Bud, Bulldog, Ramon and Jessica entered Tom's lab together. He was looking at the models he had somewhat butchered and refitted together. He turned to them with a small smile on his face when he heard their footsteps on the hard composite flooring.

"I'm no Arv Hanson, that's for sure," Tom stated referring to the man who used to make miniature replicas of his and his father's inventions some fifty odd years in the past. He was holding an asteroid reconstruction with the *Interstellar Queen* miniature placed inside it.

"Grab some seats, my friends, this may take a while." Tom perched himself on the edge of the table and put the model down. Bud pushed a stool at the end of the table toward Jess and Ramon got two more that were being stored by a wall. Bulldog didn't need anything, he just powered down his cyborg lower body.

"I guess the best place to start is at what happen to the *OutBound* when the time dilation field maxed out with the white hole." Tom spent over an hour going through what he experienced and the dream-like existence that the people on the ship felt right up to them coming out of it half way across the galaxy and discovering that no real time had been used up.

"Albert did all this... because?" Bulldog asked.

"Because I messed up so bad on the white hole phenomena that I actually killed us all." Tom stopped for a moment to let that

statement sink in. Expressions ranged from blank to disbelief to anger. "If it wasn't for Albert keeping us insulated from the rest of the primordial energy of the Big Bang we would have been part of the disbursement, spreading us across the whole universe, atom by dissociated atom." He stopped once more and took a deep breath.

"How? I mean, why?"

"Hubris. Do you know what that is, Bud?"

"Excessive pride or self-confidence, or some such thing if I remember my Greek."

"That's right. Because I wanted the universe to be sixteen sided I made sure my science took me that way. When I needed sixteen flavors of micro black holes I made it work that way as well." The inventor had a guilty look on his face and a tear threatening to spill from his right eye.

"Aren't you being too hard on yourself, Tom?" Bulldog asked.

He shook his head slowly and sadly. "No, not hard enough. Look guys, close to fifty years ago I started down this wrong path. Leo and his assistant, Tom Hudson, at that time wrote a few stories about it. We," he looked at Bud and nodded, "even entered a few micro black holes—what I mistakingly thought were wormholes—but we never made to the end of the real tunnel if that is what you want to call the interface between the black hole start and its end. We came out into the interface, it's like the event horizon of a black hole. It acts in the same way."

They all looked at him kind of weird.

"First, matter from our galaxy is sucked in and squeezed tighter and tighter as the black hole becomes bigger and bigger until eventually the matter can't be crushed any smaller no matter how much gravity pressure there is and when it reaches that state the interface that keeps the primordial matter isolated from the universe can't hold back that super dense matter. It crosses over and becomes part of the primordial makeup of the next Big Bang."

There may not have been any nods from his audience, but there were no questions, either.

"Second, each galaxy has its own *signature* state of matter just like our elements do and that allows us to use repelatrions and such. It was this signature that I thought was a black hole *flavor*, where in fact I had tapped into the Primordial matter. The reason I was getting mostly one flavor black hole was because that it was mostly from our galaxy, but like all things chaotic in nature our primordial matter does tend to mix in with matter from other galaxies. That is why I found other flavors or signatures. I stopped looking when I captured sixteen, my preconceived maximum amount. There're

probably as many signatures out there as there are galaxies."

"How did you keep the black holes from exploding outwards if it was this primordial matter? The pressures must have been enormous?" Bulldog asked.

"They were, and the inverse square wave held it in check as long as there was an outlet. When it emerged from what I called the emitters and it collided with all the others they canceled each other out, or maybe it just flowed back where it belongs using one of the other emitters. The white hole was the manifestation of all that happening in our universe."

"But what of the white hole Albert? Where did he come from?" Bud had been no longer associated with Tom when he started to do these experiments so he did not know their history.

Tom smiled at his friend before answering. "Bud, you were the first to transmit electrical power through an inverse square radio, and it was still at the speed of light. Remember the giant egg on the Moon? The power feeds I was using to keep the micro holes open were delivered directly from four antimatter reactors on the power deck below us and split into sixteen inverse square transmitters. The receivers are part of the emitters itself. When the white hole formed I realized that all sixteen inverse square transmitters were now interconnected. As an experiment I connected two of the Albert AIs into two of the power transmitters and they communicated perfectly with each other. After that I started to move them farther apart and noticed no time lag between them. I added more units and it continued to work. When I had all sixteen up and running that's when Albert appeared in the white hole. The sentinel Albert was born. The voice of Albert if you will. The rest you know."

"So let me get this straight, Tom," Bulldog spoke up. "Because there is no time whatsoever in the Primordial matter, the communication waves use only the time need for traveling the small distance between the emitters up there on the scaffolding."

"Right you are, Bulldog," Tom was feeling relieved that his friends were understanding him.

"Mr. Swift?" Jess had her hand up as if she was in school.

"You don't have to do that, Jessica," Tom reassured her. "Go ahead, ask."

"Then you can start up the white hole again, it just won't have Albert as part of it. Will it?" She stopped for a moment then asked, "What happens if you reconnect those sixteen Alberts?" She pointed to the running ones.

"If I use all sixteen of them again there is no reason an Albert

won't materialize, but it just will not be the previous Albert. These machines have undergone things that will definitely cause a change in their personality. It will be like a twin taking the other's place but only after they have lived years apart from each other. They will see the world in a different light."

He could see she was mentally wrestling with something.

"Let me asked you this, Jessica. Do I have the right to create a sentinel being now that I know it will happen—and that a flick of a switch will kill him?"

"Oh. I never thought of it that way, Mr. Swift." She was horrified at the thought.

"I have, and it won't happen again if I have a say about it." He smiled at her. "There is a bright side to this. I can still use the emitters for communications and power transfer if I send the inverse square radio part out in spaceships or in surveillance satellites. But for now that is a moot point." Tom fell silent and everyone was thinking over what he had just told them. He picked up the asteroid model and started to look at it again.

"Bulldog, if I stop the *OutBound* could your mad dogs do this for real?" He threw the globe to him.

Bulldog looked at the globe and the two badly inserted pieces of the starship. He even pulled one of the sections out, looked it over and placed it back into the globe.

"Do you want to cut off the trusses like you did here or just dig out a hole and let the trusses slide into the abyss?"

"I would like to keep the abyss open so the asteroid can still use it while in planet orbit. So I think we cut off the trusses, dig up the anchors on both sides of the asteroid and make the hole so both ship sections can fit in."

"What do you want done with the debris? Dump it or do we need to take it so we still have the mass we need for the time dilation drive?"

"If we come across anything useable we can store it in the abyss, other than that we can leave it or shove it into a nearby sun so it won't be a navigation nuisance for someone in the future."

Bulldog nodded and tilted his head upward. It was a sign he was in full calculation mode. Seventeen-seconds later it tilted back to level.

"Four or five weeks should do it Tom and I doubt we'll find anything of value. We didn't when we poured for the anchors the first time. They went down two hundred feet."

"That's what I thought, thanks."

"What is this about, Tom?" Bud asked out of curiosity. "I thought we needed the trusses so the two ends of the ship were far enough from the asteroid surface for the TD field to surround everything?"

"Damn, I forgot to mention we won't need that anymore. We're now going to be traveling first class."

"Uncle Tom," Ramon liked to think of him that way. "Isn't the TD first class?"

"Not anymore. There's a new kid on the block and his name is Translocation Matrix. While Bulldog has his people working outside, we're going to have to tear out the TD unit and put something else in its place."

Everyone's eyes were staring at the inventor with bewilderment.

Tom's eyes were beaming with excitement.

"And this new star drive will do what for us?" Bud wanted to know.

"It will get us from point A to point B instantaneously, or at least sort of." Before they could ask what he meant by 'sort of' he slipped off the edge of the table. "Got to go. I have a lot of people to freak out with this new idea of mine."

He was half way to the door when he turned around and started to laugh at the continuing bewildered looks on his friends' faces. "Come on. We've all got things to do. Bulldog, get those legs in gear and help me look up some old construction blueprints and geological surveys for both anchor sites."

The cyborg nodded and a click told everyone he was back to full mobility.

"Bud, you need to report to flight control and see if there is a star system we can stop near that can take in our trash. Just don't make it a yellow dwarf star with planets that might have life on them."

"Sure."

"Ramon and Jessica, I want you two to keep your ears open. I don't want any kind of unfounded rumors starting because we're switching drive in the middle of nowhere. If you hear something, sing out and I will address it personally and in public."

"Just one more question," Bud asked. "How will this effect our meeting with the Dino Asteroid?"

"Don't fret, my boy, you'll get to see your CeCe again. We'll be on time if they are."

Within hours the ship was abuzz with the news of the drive

system change over. Tom had made a public announcement that it was to fix the Time Dilation drives, making it incredibly faster, and that it would no longer react to the presence of the white hole communication network.

The stars around Bud were ablaze with color. The void was the blackest that he ever seen. He and the Mad Dogs were the first humans to be out here in the cold empty void of interstellar space. Several hundred feet away in opposite directions from where he was were the two sections of the *OutBound*. It was hard not imaging the two huge sections not crashing together with him in the middle. If left alone, and because of their micro-gravity, they would do just that... in time. But today it was not going to happen. The trusses had been cut off the bottom and top discs and the two sections of the ship were moved several miles away from the Swift Construction asteroid. Even at that distance he could see them floating above the asteroid with their two oversized anchors still attached to the bases. Large atomic-powered earth grinders had bored their way around and down the anchors cutting them lose from the asteroid.

Powerful space mules equipped with both Attractatron and repelatrions arrays jockeyed into position and eased the two structures out of the construction asteroid and left them several thousand feet above their holes. Two lunatronic excavators were taken out of mothball status and fastened to the top of the trusses. The anchor mass would help hold the excavators in place as they pulled up fifty by fifty foot square blocks of the stone and hurled them toward the gravity generator located miles away. There was no convenient star to stop at in the direction of the Pleiades Star Cluster so instead they were collecting all the debris together and setting it adrift. The gravity generator powered by a small reactor would keep the stone cubes together for close to a hundred years. The blocks would slowly drift between the stars until the end of time. They might even attract other, small, bits of interstellar matter and grow.

Bud had been in the command seat for nearly four days without a let up. He figured a breath of fresh vacuum was the way to release some of the stress of the job. Besides, he was anxious to see how Tom's part of the modification project was doing and at the same time look over the modifications to the Swift Escape pod Tom was going to use to test his new drive.

There were two main types of spacesuits used on the ship for him to choose between.

One was a universal adjustable that was more or less for emergencies and storied next to every airlock. The other was your

personal suit that was stored in a central depository and could be sent to all the major airlocks by transit tubes in the matter of a few minutes or ahead of time to a specific airlock when requested.

Because this outing was a last second decision on his part he headed to a shuttle deck where there were numerous air locks and changing rooms. He had to elect for a universal suit because his personal spacesuit was in the other half of the ship by Tom's lab. It was where he had left it on the first day of the changeover after Tom, Bulldog and he went out to look over the two truss' anchor sites once the starship had dropped out of Time Dilation. As he stepped out of the spacesuit dispenser and changing unit, Tin Pants, one of the Mad Dogs, cycled through the airlock from outside of the ship. They nodded to each other as Bud only knew him in passing. As the airlock closed Bud caught a glimpse of Tin Pants standing in the room watching as the hatch sealed shut. Bud never gave it another thought.

In the last four days the engineers assigned to help Tom had added six redesigned white hole emitters at ninety degree intervals to the outside of the round pod—which was the ideal shape. The Antimatter power was to be transmitted from Tom's lab to the pods' emitter just like the way Tom did it to generate the white hole. The test flight was scheduled to happen in less than an hour. He was hoping to surprise Tom with his visit to watch the flight.

As Bud slowly approached the pod he thought, for a second, that he seen a person in the darkness behind it. "Just a technician doing a last minute adjustment to one of the emitters," he reasoned. He slowed his forward motion as he floated toward the back where the escape pod hatch was located and the airlock into Tom's lab. Because of the necessary geometric positioning of the emitters the last one had to be where the hatch was. So the hatch had to be cut in half, the top welded into place and the last emitter added onto the surface. Since no one was going with the ship and the electronics didn't need air to work the oxygen tanks, filter systems and the sleeping nets were pulled out so there was more room for the drive unit and its small AI computer that was to act as pilot. The bottom half of the hatch was just bolted closed with four quick releases on the outside. There was no reason to lock the hatch.

In the darkness between the two vessels Bud found the outlying glow around the airlock into the lab and he saw the interior lights streaming through the open bottom hatch of the escape pod. He jetted towards it placing his hand carefully on the edge of the hatch to stop his forward momentum. He floated downwards to see past the top section of the hatch. He gingerly slid in along the what would have been the floor, and before he could rotate his body so he could see the interior of the pod a metal fist hit his lower neck and shoulders.

The force of it would have snapped his neck if it wasn't for the helmet's lock ring; instead it rendered him momentarily unconscious. Because of that he never felt or heard the whine of the micro drill bit that twisted it way through the side of his helmet just behind his ear. Or felt the touch of the two wires that delivered the high voltage electrical shock that shot into the back of his ear rendering his subvocalized InterVoice link useless. There was no way for Bud to radio for help, take mental control of the pod, to be traced by the link, or even adjust his spacesuit environment. With the removal of the two wires from the hole the pressurize air started to hiss out into the vacuum of the pod.

His wrist were bound behind his back and his legs were duct taped together from his ankles to his knees. He was left floating inside the pod until it started to move, then he was pushed uncomfortably against the closed bottom hatch.

The lab's airlock cycled through and Lager Head stepped out into the lab.

"All secure and ready to go," the cyborg told Tom who was standing at the makeshift control unit for the pod with Bulldog at his side. "I gave it a good hard shove and it was drifting away nicely. I monitored no spin on it so there will be no need to counteract one. Just fire her up and let her go."

Lager Head had never been this happy since the day of his spaceship accident on Mercury. Bud was soon to be a dead memory when his air supply was used up and there was no way of pinning his murder on him. His job had been to move the pod away from the starship so it could be seen by one of the many exterior cameras.

And that is what he did.

Tin Pants' timely call that Bud Barclay was coming out in a universal spacesuit was like a gift from the gods and he had the brains and courage to act on it. Fate was finally smiling on him. Tom Swift, he was now sure, would be just as easy to get rid of when the right time showed up.

"Thanks, Lager Head, you can stay and watch the show with the others if you want, but if it goes as planed it should be a dull three hour cruise."

"Thanks Tom, I will watch for a while." In his scheming mind he thought, "And in less than an hour Bud will be out of air and dead."

But Tom never really heard that he was staying. He was going over the last minutes check list with Bulldog. With a twinkle in his eyes Tom watched the pod drift into visual range of the outside

cameras and could see that its course was dead on, not a wobble to be seen. Adjacent to that image there was another one showing the black void of space ahead of the pod with a few stars light years away. He sent the command to the Pod's AI to launch. The pod started to accelerate away using the upgraded maneuvering jets.

Tom and Bulldog watched all the telemetry readouts and when the ship reached one-G of constant acceleration the inverse square wave started to feed anti-protons to the six emitters.

A second later a white ball formed around the pod and it was gone from sight.

Chapter Eighteen: Fire In The Heavens

THE three women had their work cut out for them. The first thing that they had to decide on was whether to stay in the undersea habitat or go back to the spaceship. The acid fumes in the shell would have to be neutralized first if they wanted to stay. They would need supplies from the ship to do it. It took a while for T'San to explained everything to Fishy that the other two women had to go back to the ship because of the fumes inside the shell. That they would return bring the ship closer and at the same time they would like to bring the sick '*Floater*' back, if they could find their small water craft, so they could examine it along side with ones that were normal.

Fishy, once he understood their intent, readily agreed to it as long as he could go with them. Smiling the women consented to let him be their guide even though they still had directional contact with the ship. There were still many questions that needed answering but could wait for the time being.

Once back in the ocean Fishy took them to the surface following a line that was tied to the outer edge of the disc, and to the delight of the women the other end was attached to their inflatable. The back of the craft had a built in hoist system to raise and lower large items in or out of the boat, and they used it to lift T'San into the craft. As undignified as it looked it did its job.

The Tassangaxx on Earth never did develop ocean vessels other than large barges that stayed near the coastlands. There had always been always some adventurous Dinos that did go to sea using primitive sails but the rigging on the ships were far different from what humans used. It wasn't until internal combustion technology that ships took to the ocean regularly and then they were still barge-like more than anything else.

CeCe attached an orange inflatable buoy with a locator beacon to the line so they could easily find their way back without help. T'San was having a hard time trying to explain the things they were doing to Fishy who elected to stay in the water for the time being. All they could see of him were his round eyes and the crest of his head sticking out of the water and bobbing in the waves.

After indicating he understood, he ducked just a few inches under the surface and sped off.

The small high-pressure water jet pushed the water craft at a good rate of speed behind Fishy. His feet, legs and the rear part of his body moved in a powerful smooth up and down vertical motion that sent him skimming through the ocean waves. CeCe watched

him with delight. The speed and freedom he had in the ocean was even better than what she enjoyed in space. And in the past ten years it was getting harder to find a spaceship that didn't have some type of artificial gravity built into it. CeCe loved the freedom of being able to use the full area of an empty storage area or gym with no gravity and its no restriction in any direction of movement. She even practiced a form of free-style dance that was a combination of zero-G gymnastics and ballet that used all available hard surfaces as landing and launch points.

Fishy's scales flashed in a rainbow of colors in the sun as he leaped out of the water and back in. His movements were so fluid. CeCe felt jealous because he did not require a spacesuit or scuba gear to achieve his freedom; he was born to it and possibly never even realized what a gift he had.

Once at the spaceship it did not take the ladies long to store away the inflatable and their science gear. Their swim suits had to be rinsed off in the shower to neutralized the acid on the suit's surface and then dried and checked for any wear and pitting in the fabric. The suit sensors would have to be replaced and the oxygen generator checked out for acid corrosion before they used them in the ocean again.

They had been up and working for hours without anything to eat, so that was next on their agenda. Fishy watched them as they took out meal packages, pulled the tab to heat them, and then tore open the containers. The technology to heat the food fascinated Fishy, but once opened the smells from the hot steaming meat and vegetables made him walk away and the women watch him go to the outer hatch and jump back into the ocean.

"Evidently not his cup of tea," CeCe said a little sarcastically and then added, "but he probably wouldn't like that either!"

An hour later they found Fishy floating in the water waiting for them and T'San asked why he left. He explained that the *Ichthyoids* eat their food raw and as close to alive as possible. What the humans just consumed looked regurgitated and sickening to him. He did not want to insult the women by complaining about it, so he'd left them to eat by themselves.

It was while T'San was talking to Fishy that CeCe realized that she would not have minded being like him with the freedom he enjoyed in the ocean... and that thought struck a nerve in the core of her being. After all the heckling she done to T'San about her changeover she was now thinking about it. That made her angry with herself *and* at T'San. On hearing his explanations she laughed and said, "Well T'San, it looks like you and the Dinos have dinner guests at last. I wonder who will lick the plate clean of raw meat?"

"If you were on that plate no one would want to eat you!" T'San retorted for she did not eat raw meat and CeCe knew it. "You're so mean and spiteful that there's no way you could ever taste delicious!" Her eyes flashed red, her head crown stood fully erect, and her body tensed in anger.

"Hit a *raw* spot, did I?" CeCe remarked innocently. "Now I'll have to be careful to whom I throw the raw fish." She took a few steps back into the ship before turning back and telling them, "I'm bushed. Going to bed for the next ten hours, so try not to disturb me." As she walked away the doctor and T'San stared at each other wondering what possibly could have set her off. Things had been going smoothly until now.

Fishy had come back aboard the ship by now and had his bubble back on. He watched CeCe go back into the ship and turned his attention to T'San and the doctor to see what they were going to do next.

"We need sleep, Fishy." She went into a lengthy explanation of what that was. At last he nodded his understanding and told them that he would come back at the next raising of the sun. That left them with plenty of time to sleep and start to make plans to help Fishy and his people.

At the appointed time Fishy returned and T'San asked if he was willing to let the doctor do a series of tests on him. The more they understood his physiology the easier it would be for them to study the live floaters and not do irreparable harm to them. They still did not understand the relationship between the two sea creatures. He agreed with a gesture that must have been his equivalent of a shrug.

Hours later the doctor finally put her medical devices away and stared silently at the medical scans and videos of his body. Things were not adding up right and it was causing her some confusion.

CeCe showed up at this time and put a small black, cloth-like band that had two equally spaced white strips on the table. It was two inches tall and just under eight inch in diameter. The material was soft and very elastic.

"I noticed that we were wrong about why Fishy could breath in the dome." She must have been watching the medical readout from where she was keeping out of their sight. "I am certain that it is the acid fumes that he needs and not the air pressure. So I rigged up this sulfuric vapor concentrator that will release the fumes into his nostrils at the same level we found in the dome." She had a smug look on her face by the time she finished talking.

T'San glared at her, but the doctor picked up the soft device and gave it a once over. She noticed that there was a grey circle on the

inside of the band and that soft electronic components were woven into the band.

"How does it work?" the doctor asked.

"That's the beauty of it," she gloated. "I used an ion field that helps draws the air in from all round and concentrated it in an osmosis sponges that's located in that grey circle. When Fishy breaths in through his nose the concentrated acid vapor is pulled up at the same time."

"Where do you get the electricity for the ion field?" D'San wanted to know.

"Fishy's body generates more electricity than our's do because of his silicon DNA make up. Doc's examination shows he is more mechanical, just like the floating disc are. It doesn't take that much power to set up the ion field to establish an air flow." CeCe was all smiles as she got to show off her science ability. "I had the nano-printer make it up once I fed in the necessary data. The device is based on one of Tom's earlier devices he made for ocean exploration, the aqua-lung. The hard part was how to make it stay on his head and not move down from his nostrils since they are just holes above his mouth."

"Got to admit you were right on top of this one, CeCe," the doctor acknowledged as she handed it over to fishy and asked, "Did you understand any of our conversation just now?"

"I think so." Fishy was closely looking at the band and asked. "I put it on around my head and have that grey area over my breathing holes. Is that right?"

"Exactly." Exclaimed CeCe. "Take off your water bubble and slip it on. It starts working as soon as it makes contact with your scales."

Fishy bent over so he could take his bubble off without losing much of the water in case he needed it again. With a little help from CeCe he had the head band properly in place and he took his first breath through his nostrils. He gasp once as his repertory system changed from liquid to air breathing and that was it.

"Thank you," Fishy told CeCe after a few breaths. "This device is working fine. Is it possible to make others and show us how to make them also?"

"Oh, we can make more, but the bands won't last more them a few days of continuous use. The chemicals in the sponge get used up," CeCe told him,

"That is too bad," Fishy sighed sadly. "My people are in great need of something like this. Most of our caves have collapsed and

we have fewer places we can live."

"But you are aquatic. Why do you need to come to the surface?" T'San asked.

"Our air is now too clean for us to live in and our oceans are changing too fast for us to adapt to. Our underwater air caves are gone because of all the ground quakes. We only have the floaters now to sustain us and they are dying, too. My people are dying faster than our birth rate, but," he looked at them sadly, "perhaps this is not a bad thing in that we likely have no future. We cannot stop... (A mournful sound came from the translator unit) ... that is causing all of this. We know it will eventually tear this world apart."

The women looked at each other wondering if they had somehow missed something big. CeCe turned to the visual screen and changed it from medical readout to the orbital visual of the water world. She then adjusted the screen to a closeup of the two moons' orbits.

"Computer, is the little moonlet in a stable orbit? Open response," CeCe asked out loud so they could all hear the question and the answer.

"The moonlet of your inquiry is in a locked orbit with the planet, and in that sense it is stable. But orbital projection show that in the near future it will start to enter the planet atmosphere. There is a thirty-five percent chance that it will skip back out only to return to strike the planet in a cataclysmic manner and destroy most of it."

T'San's skin turned pale green, the doctor slumped against the wall, and CeCe stood with her eyes closed, but her facial muscles showed she was in mental communications with the computer looking for answers.

"Fishy, when did your people learn of this?" the doctor asked as she emotionally pulled herself together.

"It has been close to fifty cycles of the sun. That is when the... [untranslatable...] came and took orbit. At first it was not too bad, but each cycle it came closer and closer to us and we know not why. All we know is that it is always coming back faster and faster and causing great harm to our planet."

"And I have the answer to that one," CeCe informed them. "This planet has a very strong magnetic field because of the high rotation rate of its inner core. The moonlet is mostly made of an iron ore called magnetite or lodestone, but there is close to ten percent of a rare earth metal called gadolinium and when at a very low temperature—like you get in space—it acts as a highly magnetic ore."

CeCe stopped for a moment and shook her head and gave a

quick laugh. "This planet is causing its own destruction in a way. The two magnetic fields are pulling on each other causing the moonlet to slow down."

"Why did we not notice this when we were in orbit?" asked the doctor with concern and disbelief.

"Mostly because we did not look for it." CeCe sighed then added, "Well, it's not like we're regular planetologists for crying out loud. We were too interested in the storms and quakes that the two moons were causing. We had no reason to think that the moonlet hasn't always been in orbit around the planet. Both of the moons' surfaces were covered with the same type of meteoric bombardments. We just jumped to the wrong conclusion, that's all."

"The way I see it," T'San added, "if we had noticed the moonlet's orbit we would not have landed and found Fishy and his people." Both of the other women nodded in agreement. "Now let's do something about it. If we can't stop it altogether or just keep it from entering the atmosphere until the others come back, I'm sure the asteroid has enough firepower to obliterate it to space dust."

"Well, the moonlet is about to swing around the planet once more," CeCe informed them. "Why don't we go up and meet it. This time we'll give it a thorough going over."

The doctor looked at Fishy, but it was nearly impossible to read emotions on his face. "Do you understand any of what we just said?"

"I think so. We understand and use magnetic materials. In fact that is how we navigate in the sea. There is a small pocket of fluid in the bottom of our brain that we can sense and we know where south is. But do you really think you can save our world?"

"All we can do is try," the doctor replied. "Do you want to come with us? Can you stay out of the water that long?"

Fishy's unblinking eyes seemed to grow larger and his mouth gaped open for a moment.

"Yes, yes I can come." The computer translation showing none of the emotion he might have felt. "I will need a small supply of live fish to consume and sea water for me to dampen my body once a day so my skin does not dry out. Other than that I can come."

"Do you have to tell anyone of what you are doing and where you are going?" T'San inquired, and looking at CeCe she asked, "How much time have we got before we need to be in orbit?"

"The weather is going to start to get rough in a couple of hours. We have to be off the ocean surface by then. Either down a few

hundred feet or up in space... you can choose which."

"You can go under the water in this ship?" Fishy asked not believing what he just heard.

"We can. It makes no difference for the ship," CeCe told him with a smile.

"Just give me [untranslatable] and I will be ready."

"Well, Fishy, we don't understand how long a time period that was, by our measurements, but we'll be ready. Let us show you where to bring what you need so we can store it." They proceeded to the back of the living quarters where the pens for the livestock for the Tassangaxx were kept. Next to the pens was an empty storage area for the animals' foods but it still had storage container of all types in it. Fishy was amazed by the size and variety of available containers, but they soon had a couple picked out for his use.

With the back airlock open the women started to lay out hoses to fill the containers with sea water and Fishy jumped back into the ocean to talk to his people and gather what he needed.

Fishy sat in a pop-out acceleration couch with the doctor, behind CeCe. He was totally enthralled by what he was seeing on the visual screen. At first he gripped the armrest so hard that the doctor thought that he was going to tear it off, but once they were above the gathering storm clouds with the high winds and lightning bolts he started to calm down. When the round curvature of the water world and the stars filled the bottom quarter of the screen he actually gasped. Not out of fear, but because of the beauty of it.

CeCe rocketed toward the moonlet that was rapidly approaching the planet. She curved them around and set the ship on a parallel course one thousand miles above the moonlet. It still looked so desolate and harmless. The only thing they could now see was that the moonlet started to take on a slow spin, then stopped, and started to spin in the opposite direction as it left the planet. They have never seen or heard of a space object doing something like that on its own. As far as they could see there was no reason for it to happen.

But the AI computer on board the ship, with the help of all the investigational equipment, displayed the reason why.

"Just look at that," CeCe commented. "I would never have believed that could happen."

"What is it?" asked Fishy for he could not understand what was being displayed on the screen, especially the writing and

mathematics scrolling across the monitor face.

"Have your people discovered that magnetic ore can lose its magmatism when heated to a certain point?"

"Yes we have, but it returns as it cools down."

"Very good, Fishy," CeCe told him. "Our people call it the Curie temperature, but that's beside the point. Objects in outer space are very cold if the sun is not shining on them."

"This we did know. Our sky science was very good in the olden times before the moonlet arrived."

"Then did you know that an object could have two really extreme temperatures between the side facing the sun and the side in the dark?"

"I think this is new knowledge, but I am not sure," he admitted.

"Okay, then I will try to explain it for you. What is happening is that the moonlet approaching your world is very cold from the iciness of space, and the side facing the sun heats up very fast. As the moonlet starts to come into orbit, the planet side heats up and loses its magmatism. The cold side then gets pulled toward the planet and the moonlet begins to spin. By the time it is a third of the way around, the sun side of the moonlet is facing out so it stops. The reverse spin and process happens as it pulls away."

"Is this what is destroying my planet?" Fishy asked eagerly.

"No, it's not, but it could help us in the long run. If we could keep the moonlet hot enough to stop its magmatism as it moves back out into space it would not be pulled back by the planet as much. And with a little extra push it could be forced into a new orbit around the sun instead of just your planet."

Both women were quiet for a time thinking about it. Fishy did not know what to say.

After several minutes CeCe commented, "We can't do anything this time but when it comes back in four days we should be ready to give it a try."

"You know what we are going to need to do this?" T'San wanted to know.

"I hope so, and I'll need all the help both of you can give me because we are going to cannibalizing this ship to do it."

T'San was floating in space in an escape pod. It was heavily modified with a long lasting life support system and maneuvering jets strapped onto its sides. Near her were four anti-particle missiles

that she was in control of. She had been on station in the cramped pod for over four hours already and had twenty more to go if things worked as planned.

"CeCe if this doesn't work out I'm going to eat your hide. This tin can is already starting to smell like old shoes." Laughter was all she got for a reply.

"T'San stop bothering CeCe," the doctor told her. "It not her fault that you happen to know how to control those missiles and I don't, or I'd be there instead. I know it's a little tight in the pod, but once you do your part you can take the pills I gave you and go to sleep till we pick you up."

"Yeah right. And am I to sleep till I die if you don't pick me up?" She shot back.

"If I don't pick you up you then have the satisfaction of knowing that I died first," CeCe shot back. "At least I then beat you at something. Now stop grouching and let me finish what I'm doing. How's a girl supposed to think?"

"Hey, Doc, is she really working or what?" T'San just didn't want to stop talking or antagonizing CeCe.

Chapter Nineteen: Woman Warrior

THIRTY-SIX hours. A lot can happen in thirty-six hours; then again, nothing can happen as well. It all depended on where you were in those thirty-six hours.

First thing the Tassangaxx's control room crew did after the dreadnought spit out its covert lightship and exploded into hundreds of fragments was to attempt to rescue all its personal. The five women had no protection at all and were the prime concern for everybody.

The Tassangaxx warriors had no notice of the upcoming explosions and the women were hit by the full force of the explosions and thrown around like rag dolls. Then the cold vacuum of space rushed in. With lightning speed and coordination each Dino warrior went after one of the women and pulled her body against their own and extended their armor force field around them. Unneeded medical calls were sent out by them just in case the woman's InterVoice link had failed to do so.

A medical craftavator left the asteroid as soon as the Tassangaxx Doctor came on board. The woman pilot was in full space armor and the medical section outer airlock was emptied of air. Five suspension tanks were made ready. The craft made it to the five warriors and their charges in minutes crashing through any debris in its way. The women's only saving grace was that they had been previously infused with nanobots to reinforce their bodies. But explosive decompression and then the harsh vacuum of space might be too much for the little bots to handle. No matter what, extensive regeneration was going to be needed by all of them.

The six remaining Dinos made their way out of the wreckage with nothing worse than a few bumps and scrapes. Twelve hours later all the pieces of the dreadnought were sifted through and the crew knew more about the technology of the W'st than they possibly knew themselves. The most important find was that no new technology was ever added to their ship. It was either replaced with the same part or downgraded to a lesser device. The W'st civilization was running downhill and gathering momentum as it tumbled.

The FreeHolder, Slugger, kept busy while all this was happening. JoJo—who helped work with the Bio-Matrix language translator—was also a communication tech, so she was assigned to help him get in radio communications with his people and set up a rendezvous with them. His immediate contact was with Cap, or Captain—depending on the man's mood—and he was a hard man to convince that he should help them in this situation. For reasons

of his own he didn't want the FreeHolders to take part in a rescue mission.

The doctor gave him no choice by tracking him down. His radio equipment was not sophisticated enough to hide his spaceship's locations, and so when the asteroid showed up next to him he had no choice but to land and meet with them.

The hard-boiled commander swallowed his fears for the seventh time. He was still in disbelief at the ferocious looks and tremendous size of the creatures that greeted him when he came out of the elevator from the surface where he had just set down his ship.

Slugger, the FreeHolder, was waiting for him near the radio beacon that he had set up in a new spacesuit provided to him by the humans. His encounter with the Dino's astronomer left the old one far beyond repair.

The man that Cap had sent on a probable one-way mission to the asteroid had warned him that there were two different alien races on board... but neglected to tell him what the other aliens looked like. The humanoids that were with them seemed to have no trouble being near the—he didn't know what to call them.

In fact two of the human-shaped alien's had mechanical legs that extended their height to be as tall as the monstrous creatures before him.

All the surroundings of the asteroid seemed to have been made for the convenience of these creatures and that told him who really owned the place. The fact that the humans acted as equals was the only thing that kept him from calling it "a very, very bad day," and running like hell. That, plus Slugger's word that he was not going to be eaten as a mid-day snack... at least not today. And, as long as he didn't actually try to *run* away.

The captain was led to the center of a very large room and left there with Slugger standing close at his side. Looking around, it seemed to him that it must be an arena for sports of some kind. Row upon row of balconies surrounded the court, or center stage—for that is what it felt like now that he was standing there looking around. He felt that he was on display, but not to hundreds or thousands of people. Directly in front of him were twelve, no... fourteen of those terrible creatures including the two that greeted him as they entered and joined the others. In his mind he marked them as the possible leadership of the asteroid.

Not that he could tell one from the other.

With the two human-like aliens who had escorted him now standing with their own group of people their count reached ten.

Slugger briefly told him about the loss of the Prime Leader and

how the crew of the asteroid were determined to get her back from the enemy.

How many of both races did this ship hold was upmost in the captain's thoughts. He needed to know their total number if there was any chance of making a rescue attempt for the one female, Phyllis Swift, their Prime Leader.

The Tassangaxx Doctor, acting as spokesperson, stepped away from her shipmates and asked, "Captain, do you know where this King LuJan is taking our Prime Leader?"

"Most assuredly to his space fortress that drifts in the rubble of our home planet. We know its location, but getting to it is nearly impossible. With all the space debris that surrounds it you cannot make a high speed approach, and going in slowly makes you a certain target."

"How large is his fleet and what kind of weaponry does he have?"

The Captain smiled at that question.

"That I would like to know about, too. There is no way that you can bash your way in by force no matter how big your military is. Adding the FreeHolders would not increase your odds. The only way to save her is by getting the well hidden resistance to help you. That is the only way."

The doctor's tail thumped hard against the floor and her head comb rose and throbbed with anger.

"The Prime Leader's life is not to be left to a bunch of people that hide instead of doing something about that male," the doctor roared and spat onto the floor showing her disgusts and contempt.

In spite of the queasiness he now felt in the pit of his stomach, he looked her in the eye and said, "You can feel like that all you want, but when your life and your family's life is only an airlock away from death you think long and hard before you make a move of any kind against LuJan." The Captain took a few steps toward the gathering and looked at all of them.

"The FreeHolders don't chose to live out here because we want to. We live out here so we can preserve our free way of life, as limited as it is. We have found that it is better to roll with the punches of that would be king of the inner system when he tries to take us on." Cap stopped talking and it seemed that he was not going to say anything else.

Slugger stepped forward and the Captain held out his arm to silence him, but he wanted to be heard.

"LuJan, thinks he rules everything and everyone, but he rules only what he can hold by force and every day that grows smaller

and smaller. Someday he will only have his fortress and then his own people will take care of him."

"It is well and good that you are willing to wait," The doctor replied and even the translator picked up on her disdain, "but we will not wait for our Prime Leader to be returned to us in old age."

"Then be willing to cast away her life!" Cap shot back. "He will have her surrounded by armed guards with orders to shoot. If you ever get near enough to fire a shot she will be dead before it hits a target."

"No, we are not that reckless. But if we can give him something in trade for her, we will."

"Even if it leads to the FreeHolders extinction?"

The Tassangaxx Doctor snorted and the sound of it made the Captain jump a few feet back.

"Extinction does not last forever, we are proof of that."

The captain just shook his head not understanding what she meant by that remark.

"We will give him many new things, but he will find out that all things shiny and new can't be held onto forever. That they all become rusty and turn into piles of dust the wind carries away." A wide smile come over the captain's face.

Cap nodded and stroked his chin. "If what I'm hearing is what I think you're saying then I'm all for it. What is it you need me to do?"

The pain of her back being scrapped over the threshold of the outer airlock brought Phyllis back to her senses. The two men who were carrying her into the lightship were treating her as if she was a sack of potatoes. She realized that her InterVoice link was not functioning, but her Dino neuronet was operational. Without much thought she sent out a distress call to all available horde devices and nanobots that was in range of her weak neuro signal.

Only Phyllis had this ability because of her old Elite wet wear that still was interwoven throughout her mind. In the minutes that remained before the air locks were secured and the lightship ripped its way out of the decoy dreadnought, a hundred hordes and a few thousands nanobots infiltrated the lightship. With no other chain of command to follow they zeroed in on Phyllis and rushed to where she was thrown into a small medical cube deep within the lightship.

A smelly old crone of a woman came in and dismissed the two men with a wave of her hand. "Sweetie, we can do this two ways."

Her voice was harsh sounding. "I'm the physician to King LuJan and I have been ordered to examine you completely to see if you are a threat to him. You can do as I say or I can call back in those two thugs to help me, it's up to you?" She gave Phyllis a toothless smile.

With no real option the Prime Leader stripped off her clothes when told to, took a cold shower and tried to think of other things as the smelly old crone of a physician went over her body from the top of her bald head to her toes.

"Physician out of the sewer," she thought to herself before turning her thoughts to the nanos that were waiting for her commands. But that distracted her only for a short amount of time and Phyllis still had to endure the doctor's touch as she probed and examined her body so closely that her fowl, rapid breath could be felt on her skin and saliva drooled from the wretch's toothless mouth onto her.

What must be an old type of X-Ray machine was wheeled in and flat photographic plates were positioned under her. She was forced to move and bend as the doctor took pictures after pictures of her. At last Phyllis was given a one-piece cloth gown that fell way below her knees. The cloth was thin, scratchy and smelt like it had been worn before without benefit of being washed.

Phyllis was forced once more onto her knees by a guard before King LuJan. She was in the lightship control deck and he sat on a raised high-back chair that, at the moment, was facing the back of the room. She raised her face high enough to stare with contempt into his yellow eyes. He chuckled and smiled back at her, enjoying her rage.

"I can assume the physician took good care of you?" he asked but turned away before she could reply. "And talking about the physician, here she is." The elevator in the back of the room opened up and she slowly walked out of it.

"My Lord," was all the physician said as she stepped close enough to hand him some papers and then stepped way back out of his reach, almost hiding behind Phyllis and the guard. He glanced at the papers and flung them in the direction of the doctor hitting mostly the guard with them.

"You found nothing on her and none of the X-Rays were useable. What kind of nonsense is this?" The King rushed from his seat and reached for the old woman.

"Stop!" shouted Phyllis. "It's not her fault. My body has been modified to resist X-rays and most of the weaker forms of radiation. My people live their entire lives in between the stars and are in constant danger to cosmic storms and such. Without this protection from birth we would die before we reach our

adulthood."

The King turned to her and pulled her to her feet and close to him. "You know how to do this? Can this modification stop the plague of cancer that is killing my people?"

"I don't have the technical knowledge in which to do this, but my people on my ship could teach yours."

"And what price would you have for this knowledge?" he asked with his lips just above her's and his eyes looking into hers.

"No price, King LuJan, if it's to help your people."

He forcefully pushed her way and sent her sprawling onto the deck.

"Then there is a price!" he yelled. "To my *people* you will give this thing, but not to *me*." He pushed the guard out of his way and stood looking down at Phyllis who was now wondering how paranoid could this man be? "Me, who holds your life in my hands you give nothing. But to people that don't even know you exists you willing to give them life free of suffering for no more reason than you *can*?" He kicked Phyllis in the stomach. She balled up in pain, but not a sound escaped her lips. "This is what you give for free, pain. And if you want to stay pain free you better be able to answer my questions with answers that I like in the future." He stepped away from her and returned to his chair.

"Physician, see to her and make her understand that she is worth nothing to me without answers. I don't care how she gives them as long as she does. She has until we reach the fortress to decide to cooperate with me." He waved them off and turned his chair around so he could see the vastness of space still before the lightship as it made its way back home.

For the next ten days Phyllis saw no one but the physician and a few of the crew that brought her food twice a day. She was not allowed out of the medical area that consisted of just three small rooms: the examination room; a small supply room; and the Physician's quarters that featured a bed that doubled as a chair when the pull-down table was being used for work or food.

She had to sleep on the examination table and use the bed pan as the need arose. In those ten days the Physician told her next to nothing about herself, of the King or the Space Fortress they were going to. After endless coaxing the Physician turned angrily on her and with her lips so close to her ear she could feel them move against her lobe as she tensely whispered, "The very walls have ears and everything you say is used against you one way or another. So do as you must, but keep it to yourself or be prepared to lose your life and possibly other lives because they talked to you."

From then on Phyllis kept to herself and wondered what kind of tyranny King LuJan perpetuated on his people and why they did not try to overthrow him.

When Phyllis was first taken to the Physician she had categorized the nano hordes that had made it onboard with her into various types and found that she had ten command modules and two nano reprogramming units that could also regenerate the nano's power cells. She had the command modules call in all the nanobots so they could be turned off and be still useable at a later date.

The small one-duty nanobots only had a life expectancy of four to six hour depending on how much they roamed to performed their single program use. The rest of the Hordes had multipurpose abilities and a much longer life expectancy. Phyllis just had to be frugal with their usage.

But in those ten days of near-isolation Phyllis had time to do many things with her small army of nanos. Bit by bit she had to memorize the layout of the lightship and all the key points that would need to be ether shut down or taken over within the ship when the time came. There was no computer unit that she could utilize for this and she had to be able to direct her ten command modules so they could send everything else out to do their intervention.

Once the takeover started there was a very limited amount of time to do it in and Phyllis had to direct it all using only her mind and her neuronet. Outside distractions were her greatest concern and liability.

Because of this, Phyllis sacrificed a quarter of her nanos to obtain vital materials to help provide some form of physical protection for herself.

Within days the Physician became aware that things were not as they should be in her medical section. That items were disappearing... or at least some of the stock was. From then on she kept a close eye on Phyllis and began to notice small changes to her gunny sack clothing's appearance. The next day she let a gunny sack accidentally fall from a pile of clothing she was moving as she passed by Phyllis as she left the room. Ten minutes later when she returned Phyllis had it on and everything looked normal again. Slightly worried the Physician hoped she had done the right thing and not got both of them killed.

On the tenth day two guards came and took Phyllis back to King LuJan. As before he was on his raised chair and looking quite pleased with himself.

"It seems, Prime Leader," he hesitated for a second to see if

Phyllis would react to her title being used, "that your people want you back." She did not flinch as he kept on talking, taking it in stride. "In fact they are willing to give me almost anything I want, including the capture or demise of my enemies." His eyes never shifted off of Phyllis's face waiting for a reaction.

"I think not, King LuJan. We have never killed if we can help it. It's not our way of doing things."

LuJan half turned his chair and picked up a device off the deck. He held it up for her to see. "You recognized this device, of course. It was sent to us yesterday by your friends on your ship and it has been quite entertaining." The device was a telejector. "Let me replay the message for you. As Prime Leader you should find it intriguing." King LuJan touched the top of the cube and it turned on.

The 3-D image of the Tassangaxx Doctor formed in the air above the device. The image zoomed onto her face as a combinations of roar, hiss and clicks filled the room.

"Quite nasty looking creatures you seem to be traveling with," LuJan told Phyllis over the voice of the doctor. Phyllis only smiled back because she was receiving a private message over her neuronet.

"Prime Leader Phyllis, if you are hearing my voice you are now in two way contact with us. The cube will take five minutes to run through its program. We have that time in which to make plans for your retrieval." Phyllis almost lost her composure on hearing the doctor's voice in her head. She had never given that possibility a thought.

"Glad to hear from you, Doctor. I was just about to set my own plan into action to capture this lightship. It will be nice to have your help. I really didn't know how long I could hold off being recaptured."

"Then I take it that all our elaborate plans are not required?"

"Well if it is so you can distract them for a time, I would welcome it."

"Then be ready in two hours. That will be when the gift ship will arrive back at your coordinates. Give them a half hour to start looking at the cargo. A transceiver will be sent to receive a signal from your neuronet and our gifts will go into action. We will be on board ten minutes later. Just hold out that long."

"That should not be a problem, Doctor."

"Good. Now do not believe what you are seeing in this telecast. Keep safe, Prime Leader." The doctor's voice died out and Phyllis now gave her whole attention to the projection to see three men,

she had never seen before, restrained to the floor in the center of the arena. They looked like they had been beaten severely and bloody claw marks could be seen running down their faces, arms and bare chests.

"This is your last chance," the Dino doctor stood looming over them as she roared at them. "Tell us of your defenses around your space colonies and outposts and we will not have to kill everyone in them."

"Monsters! That's all you all are. We will fight you to the end," one of the three yelled out.

"Then fight your way from under this." And the Doctor lifted her leg and slammed it down onto the middle man. Only the bottoms of his feet were left uncovered by her clawed foot.

The image changed and a Dino's face filled the viewing area.

"We now have the information you requested and it is in the ship that you have sent over to us. It's now on its way back to you. We hope you will be pleased with what we sent and as soon as our Prime Leader is released from your ship and starts to come back to us we will destroy your enemies. We will have fulfilled our part of the bargain, see to it that you keep yours." The cube's projection ended.

"I like the attitude of your friends." LuJan was repeatedly tossing the cube up into the air and catching it. He turned to face Phyllis still tossing the cube. "But that last part sounded like a threat to me and I don't like threats." He caught the cube and threw it hard against the bulkhead wall smashing it to peaces.

"You do realize, King LuJan, that they will kill you and your people as easily as they will your enemies?"

"Not if I kill them first." His eyes lit up and he started to laugh and laugh. At last he waved her away and the two guards took her from the control room. They did not return her to the Physician, but to a cold metal-clad room that was barely five by five feet in size. And when the metal door slammed shut she was in total darkness. The only sound came from the air vent high above her in the ceiling.

"*Well, that man can't be trusted,*" Phyllis thought as she sat down on the cold floor to wait out the required two plus hours. "*Not that I every did.*"

To keep herself busy she went over the construction of the lightship once more in her head. She made the changes that would be needed now that she was in the brig and no longer with the physician. She could have activated her plan, but that would have shortened the usefulness of her remaining nanobots. And if the

Tassangaxx were delayed even for a short time it would be cutting things a little too close. She knew that LuJan trusted no one and it would be like him to delay docking that gift ship to see if anything was amiss with it.

With that thought now in mind she connected herself to her neuronet and activated the final command module that she had hidden on her body in a freckle on the inside of her left, upper arm. She stood, reached up to the vent and held a finger against it for a few seconds before sitting back down.

With it scurrying its way through the ventilation system she relaxed again as the clock slowly ticked it way into the future.

Chapter Twenty: Doctor's Plight

BUD was pushed against the back of the E-Vac ball as it started to accelerate away from the starship. When it entered the Translocation Matrix he didn't feel a thing. He slipped from normal space/time into the black hole reality and came back out fifty light years away from where he'd started. The emitters formed the necessary hole for the E-Vac ball to enter, and then the slight power increase to the forward emitter shifted the matrix location to a new point in the galaxy. It 'POPPED' out back to reality a fraction of a second after the emitters shut down.

It was that easy.

All you needed was a tremendous amount of anti-protons and a way to keep them totally in sync with each other and a way to change the power setting in a controllable manner.

Nothing to it.

Now the sweating began, at least for Tom. Bulldog didn't sweat, at least not physically, but that didn't stop him from doing it mentally. To think they were only worried about an empty E-Vac ball.

"All inverse square power terminals are functioning well within tolerances," Bulldog happily told Tom.

"And we're viewing the proper star alignment from the forward camera, Bulldog. I think we pulled it off," Tom reported back to his friend. "I'm just as glad there was no passenger in that E-Vac ball. If we had lost it there was no way of getting it back."

Bulldog nodded his agreement and added, "Still we could use this method for one way trips to habitable locations where a return trip is not necessary."

Tom stopped what he was doing and turned to face Bulldog directly.

"Are you saying you think we have come up with a one way transporter beam or system here?" Tom asked his friend. He watched the cyborg's face for a reaction. It was too bad that Bulldog's face could not show his belief about the statement he just made.

"You know I never gave that a consideration?"

Tom was rubbing his chin in thought.

"I suppose you're right, skipper. It is a one way transporter at that. With the ability to reach almost anywhere in the Galaxy."

Bud twitched. The hissing sound just behind his left ear was becoming quite annoying. The damned yellow oxygen pressure light was also blinking in a taunting manner. It was so intense that he could see it even though his eyes were closed and that really did not make much sense. Or did it? His eyes flew wide open and his brain started to process what it all meant.

The first thing that registered in his mind was the fact that he was in a E-Vac ball and that he was still in a spacesuit. A leaky spacesuit to boot. Bud tried to touch his helmet where the sound was coming from with his right hand, but couldn't. His hands and arms were behind his back and he could not move them. "Tied," he realized, but not his legs. That was good... he hoped.

The thought of who did this to him came next, but that thought vanished as his eyes came into view of the makeshift add-on control systems.

"Hell!" was all he could think to say as he saw which E-Vac ball he was stranded in. Six indicators on the controls showed him that he was on inverse power standby and the clock next to them was still counting down with two hours and forty minutes left before they would be reactivated. Without being able to see the gauges on his left arm he had no way of telling how much air he had left in the suit. By the sound of the air whistling through the hole or crack in his helmet he definitely had less than two hours and forty minutes of breathing time left.

On top of being tied up Bud realized he wasn't actually attached to his chair. His squirming had lifted him off the seat. He now had to worry about drifting into the control panels and accidentally hitting something that could leave him stranded in deep space, light years from Tom and the *Interstellar Queen*.

The sound of the hissing decreased noticeably and it was getting harder to breath. Bud knew his air was running out fast. There was only one thing he could do. He bit the end of his tongue and blood filled his mouth. He swallowed two mouthfuls, forcing the copper-tasting blood down on the second mouthful. The third he let it slowly float out as he turned his head to the left, giving the blob a helpful push toward the leak. Hundreds of nanos were in the blob helping the blood to clot faster. Bud hoped it was fast enough. The bloody blob was pulled by the air rushing out of the small drilled hole and being bigger than the hole was stuck for a moment. It was just long enough for the part of the blob that was now outside of the hole to freeze into place. The rest of the blood clotted and it formed a temporary seal. Bud only had to worry about the increasing air pressure not popping it out.

With that problem solved and his tongue no longer bleeding, but sore as the dickens, he turned to his second problem—or was it his

third on the list—getting some kind of immediate help!

First he had to stop drifting about the cabin, and he only had his legs and feet that he could use. So, the next time he was able to clamp down on something with his feet that did not endanger him he did so. It was a support bracket that had not been removed when the extra equipment was taken out. He still bobbed back and forth a little but at least he was staying still, and it gave him time to think about he might do next.

The only item that he could see that might help him out, and not cause any irreparable harm, was the video unit fastened over the single porthole in the ball. It was easier to bolt it down there than trying to drill a hole for cables through the hull and fix the video unit to the outside of the ball. Bud only had to hit it hard enough to change the lens' orientation. The movement of the interior view should tell someone back in Tom's lab that something was not right.

The small device was some six feet to the left of Bud's current floating place. He started to sway his body left and right, going farther to the side each time. He released the grip he had with his feet and his body went into a slow spin. His timing was perfect and he made contact with the video unit feet first. There was enough space between the body of the unit and the porthole that he was able to get one bulky space boot behind it. With his other foot he pushed off the wall as hard as he could. For a moment nothing happened... then he went flying across the E-Vac ball as the unit snapped off its bracket.

Tom just happened to be glancing at the monitor with the star field from the E-Vac ball on it when it suddenly started to vibrate and then went flying, tumbling this way and that to the limited lengths of the power and video cables. For a few seconds the lens passed by a figure in a spacesuit that was bouncing back from hitting the back wall helmet first. Whoever it was had taken most of the blunt force on the left side of the helmet. There was no way in that short amount of time for Tom to see the blood, spit, and nanobots plug get pushed out of the drill hole in the helmet when it hit the wall.

Tom could not believe what he just saw, and the gasp from some of the people in the room that must have seen it also caused him to finally react. But Bulldog was several seconds ahead of him and was recalling the E-Vac ball as fast as he could. The six power readout were climbing towards the appropriate levels to cause transition. The return coordinates were already programed into the navigation computer. They had to impatiently wait the couple of minutes for the anti-protons to accumulate since the reactors were currently on stand-by because of the three hour wait before the schedule return.

Medical was notified and told where to report. A rescue team was assembled and equipped with cargo maneuvering devices so they could bring the E-Vac ball quickly into an open bay big enough for the ball to fit. The rescue team just made it out into space when the tiny, white speck of the E-Vac ball appeared out of nowhere and rapidly increased in size as it slowed down and came to a stop two hundred feet away from the rescuers and their equipment. In less than a minute the well organized team had the ball inside the ship and under normal atmospheric pressure. The bottom half hatch was undogged and two doctors wiggled their way into the ball dragging their medical kits with them.

Sensibly, most of the people in Tom's lab did not follow Tom and Bulldog to the bay where the E-Vac ball was taken. Ramon and Jessica were the exception. They instinctively knew that the unfortunate spaceman had to be Bud Barclay. That was the only reasonable explanation as to why Bud had not shown up for the test flight.

By the time they all reach the cargo hold a stretcher was coming out of the room. One of the doctors was maneuvering the hover board with the touch of his hand.

"He's alive," the doctor told them quickly, "but he had run out of suit oxygen and was breathing vacuum. Later." He and the other doctor raced off with their patient.

"Go!" Bulldog told everyone. "I'll stay and check things out here." They didn't need to be told twice as they ran after the doctors and Bud.

Two long hours later Bulldog slipped into the waiting room. By the looks on everyone's faces he could tell that the prognosis was not good. He caught Tom's attention and beckoned him to come out of the room with him. Tom shook his head no and waved him to his side.

"What have you found out, Bulldog? We all need to hear it. So what gives?"

"What gives is that Bud was waylaid as he passed by the E-Vac ball on his way here. Then he was trussed up like a rodeo calf, had a hole drilled into his helmet, had his InterVoice link fried and left to slowly die as his oxygen supply leaked out into space." If Bulldog were fully human he would have run out of breath with that long-winded sentence. Everyone had a stunned look on their faces as they personally soaked in all that information.

They all thought the same thing: *Somebody tried to murder Bud Barclay!*

"But the worst part of all this is that someone was out there by that E-Vac ball the entire time this was happening and reported

nothing out of the ordinary to anyone."

"Lager Head?" Tom, Ramon and Jessica spoke up all together.

"Yeah, he's the one," and Bulldog held a hand up to stop the next barrage of questions.

"I've already notified Security on him and his two compadres. As of this moment they are all off the grid. No radio signals, Internet, or even broadcast power connections. They have gone totally silent. That says more to me than a confession!"

Bulldog fell silent for a few seconds before adding, "I was able to trace a small cyborg-coded message between Tin Pants and Lager Head at the time Bud was leaving the forward half of the ship on his way to the lab. Incidentally, computer tracking puts Tin Pants in the same spacesuit locker room at the time Bud checked his suit out. I just haven't located a connection with Crying Wolf with all of this... so far."

Tom shook his head in disbelief at the sheer madness of the whole deal. It made him feel sick to think there could be such traitors in the crew and passengers. *Why*, he wondered, *would they even consider coming on this voyage if they hate me so much?*

He shook off his feeling. "You did a marvelous job, Bulldog," Tom praised him.

"This is all my fault," Ramon spoke up. "Jess and I have been watching them and it still did no good."

"Ramon, Jess, listen to me." Tom looked sternly at both of them. "There was no way of foreseeing this was going to happen. It was an act of opportunity and they took it. You can't guard your life against things like that unless you want to lock yourself up in a sealed room for your entire life. That's as good as handing yourself to the bad guys to be executed. I'm not at all certain it would have made much of a difference if you'd come to me with your suspicions earlier, so let's put that notion to the side. The best thing to do now is find those guys and bring them to justice."

The pair thanked Tom but still looked miserable.

"Any suggestions?" Tom asked with a small smile on his face. But before anyone could speak up the waiting room door open and two very tired doctors came in.

"He'll live," the taller of the two doctors told them. "At least his brain is still alive; the rest of his body is another story."

"Mr. Swift," the second doctor spoke up, "we know from both your and Mr. Barclay's medical records that you two went through a revolutionary rejuvenation process of your own design some time back and that it's the same processing you are offering everybody on the ship. We, Doctor James and I, think that you have allowed

too much leeway in your nanobots medical program and that it needs to be totally rewritten before you provide it for general use."

Tom scrunched up his face and looked at both of the doctors to see if they were fully aware of the implications of what they were saying. "What, may I ask, went wrong with the medical nanos? Did they not keep him alive until he was rescued and brought under your medical care?"

"You have not seen Mr. Barclay yet," Doctor James spoke up. "And Doctor Lee is right. What your nanos did to him is most certainly not human. Maybe you should see what is left of him and then you will realize that we are correct." Doctor James looked at the other people in the room standing around Tom.

"I suggest that only you come in, Mr Swift. These other should not see him in the deteriorated state he is at present. As you must consider, it is us talking to you and taking you into our medical confidence, and it is perilously close to being against standard medical rules."

"In normal circumstances you may be right, Doctors, and I know both of your are new to our Swift medical staff, joining us just as we were about to leave from Earth. So I'll gave you some leeway in what you think might *possibly* have gone wrong. So show us... yes us. I insist as captain of the ship that we shall all see what is the source of your concern. If these people agree with you then you will have your modifications made to the programming of the nanobots."

After sharing a brief look at each other, both Doctors reluctantly agreed and led everyone to an observation room next to where Bud was being rejuvenated.

In the horizontal tank what was left of Bud's body was floated in a clear, pale green liquid that took all pressure off his emaciated body. A dozen medical hookups and feed lines looked awkwardly placed in what appeared like a deflated human skin covering a skeleton. Only the head was somewhat normal in size.

Not a word was spoken. Jessica had to cling to Ramon's arm for support at the horrible site.

"Can you estimate how long Bud was without oxygen in his spacesuit?" Tom ask, his voice shanking with emotions.

"Not only without oxygen, but exposed to vacuum as well," Doctor Lee gently reminded him. "Close to a half hour, But that is a guess on our part."

Tom felt Bulldog's hand rest on his shoulder and give a small squeeze of support.

"As you can see," Doctor Lee continued, "the nanos striped his

body totally apart of everything in their single-minded quest to keep Mr. Barclay's brain alive."

"And his brain?" Tom asked quietly, "Is it fully functional and not damaged in any way?"

"We have his brain in an induced comma right now, but all tests so far are showing normal mental activity."

"So what is your problem?" Bulldog asked, stepping around Tom and up to the doctors. "In two or three months he'll be walking around and talking like nothing had happened to him."

"B-but... Don't you see? Those infidel machines nearly killed his body..."

"And saved my Grandpa's brain which was the most important thing," Ramon interjected with anger. "What good is a body without the mind and personality to use it? What's the matter with you two that you think his life isn't as important as having a plump, pink corpse to examine? You two ought to be stripped of your credentials. You aren't healers, you are ghouls!"

Tom smiled toward Ramon and nodded his head in agreement. Then, he turned to face the physicians.

"Doctors, there is one thing you're going to need to learn fast, and come to grips with, out here in space. The universe at large really doesn't like biological entities, whether they be bacteria, animal or man. There are a multitude more ways for a person to die out here than you can possibly imagine. We can rebuild the body, but we can't do anything with a destroyed mind. So saving the intellect over the body is top priority.

"We all see and understand your plight," Tom added hoping to ease their tension. "I hope you now have a little more insight and a better understanding of what we and the medical staff on this ship should think is important. I will tell you this: If we were still on Earth I would be behind you one-hundred percent. Absolutely and without question. But, we are not. We are so far out here the thought is nearly insurmountable. We trust both of you skilled doctors enough to leave the rejuvenation process of Mr. Barclay in your hands. If you have any further question on what to do just ask your director of medicine or call me directly. Either way you will be helped in every way possible with no repercussion on your medical performance records. Let's put this down as an in house training session if it makes both of you feel better."

Before the doctors could say anything Tom led his friends out of the observation room and left the two doctors staring openmouthed at their backs.

Once they were all back in the main corridor of the starship

Ramon let out a cry of despair as he pulled Jessica into his arms and buried his face into his hair. She wrapped her arms around him and she could feel him crying softly.

"Hush, Baby. Your Grandpa Bud will be all right," she whispered to him. "He just needs some time and our support."

Tom and Bulldog stepped a few feet away giving them some personal room in their grief.

"It's not that, Jess. When I first meet Grandpa I wanted him dead and I even tried to make that happen Now I want to take his place, to save him from all the suffering he is going to go through. I really love that man and will do anything to help him through this." He pulled away from her and looked at Tom and Bulldog.

Tom knew the young man had something to say, so he nodded. "Go ahead."

Ramon said quietly, "We really need to find these three... *men!* What is there that I..." then looking at Jess, "that *we* can do to find them?"

"Everything that Security can do they are doing," Bulldog told him. "The best thing you can do is not make matters more complicated by getting involved. If anything, try to think where they might go to hide and then tell Security. You know more about every nook and hidey-hole on this vessel than anybody. Don't, I repeat, don't go try to find them yourself. They are now wanted fugitives and have tried to murder someone. They are no longer reasonable in any way. They have forfeited all mercy and pity. They will not hesitate harming either of you two, especially if they are cornered."

Tom took both of them by the arm. "Bulldog, go see if the Mad Dogs will help track them down. No matter how they feel about me right now I can't believe they would stand by and let someone, even one of their own, get way with attended murder."

"You're right on that Tom. I go talk to them personally. See you later." The three of them watched as Bulldog rushed down one of the side corridor to the closest secondary T&S system.

"Come on," Tom told the others. "Let's go to the experimental manned Translocation Matrix spaceship and feed in the data from the Evac-Ball flight into the newly modified Albert navigation computer. That will give it a much needed startup reference point on the power requirements and star astrolog coordinates." Tom started to lead them to the new ship.

"I guess on the bright side Grandpa Bud showed that humans can survive the translocation transitions."

"He did that, Jessica," Tom replied with a smile. "Bud has

always been a flight pioneer.”

The new ship was located in the main repair facility on the shuttle deck. Tom had one of his largest flying saucer-shaped space ships converted with the new type of emitter drive system. The ship stood four decks high and was about the same size in diameter although it sloped sharply up to a peak. In theory it made it an ideal shape in that the whole ship fitted into the matrix’s globular dimensions. Four emitters were fitted on the outside circumference and one each on the top and bottom bubble. The ship also contained both a fusion and antimatter power source because both were needed to run the TM Drive.

An hour later Ramon and Jessica were just finishing adding all the new raw data from the E-Ball to the Albert computer in the control room and Tom was down in the engine room making fine tuning modification to the hardware when they all realized that they were no longer alone.

Tom had just sealed the last power relay junction box when a metal hand grabbed him by the back of the neck and pulled him to his feet.

"The less troublesome you are, Swift, the longer you will live. It's up to you."

Tom recognized the voice of Lager Head and offered no resistance. He tried to mentally call Ramon and Jessica through his link and found it unresponsive.

"Link not working, Big Shot?" the cyborg asked in a laughing tone. "You'll find your override command circuit is non-operational also. It sucks to be you right now, doesn't it?"

"Are the kids all right?" Tom asked. They were his only concern.

Chapter Twenty-One: "We Gave it Our All"

THE moonlet was just hours away from its next swing around the planet. By this time the spaceship was back in space and had left T'San in her orbit. The ship then landed in four places on the moonlet and left Jerry-rigged equipment behind all neatly packaged on a launch platform powered by repelatron and attractatron beams. These packages had taken most of the ship's spare power pods. The only movements that could be seen after the ship left was the little dish antenna that circled around and around on top of the equipment seeking something that it could not find at that time.

Lastly, the ship settled on the highest spot on the moonlet. The back of it opened and a while later two Dino exoskeleton power suits came out carrying a large kettle-shaped object between them. It was the main power reactor unit. The women had to be very careful handling the suit's controls that were not built for their hands but had thankfully been modified with computer programs that allowed them to use it just as the humans used the Dino's spaceship controls that had been rebuilt to accommodate them.

"You sure this is the right thing to do, CeCe?" the doctor wanted to know. "Leaving our main power reactor/generator behind on this moonlet seems like a bad idea to me, especially considering what you are planning to do to this dirt ball."

"Doc, do you think it's safer and wiser for us to critically redline the reactor with it only twenty feet below us on deck one or would you rather have it a good five hundred miles away?"

"Well, if you're going to put it that way, I'll take option two. But will the back-up power pods we have left provide enough energy to get us back to the planet surface when we're done playing out there?"

"If not we can at least get into orbit and go into stasis until the asteroid comes to get us." That satisfied the doctor for the time being.

They left the ship's power core a hundred feet from the ship and went back inside. Later, a floating flatbed came out loaded with additional items. CeCe was driving the floater from the front control pedestal. The doctor was in the back standing by a small crane setup that was part of the vehicle.

She used the crane to lift the core and place it onto the middle of the platform. The women hurriedly connected it to the other equipment that was onboard using various cables and electrical lines that were ready and waiting for the final hook up. This time

four rotating dishes were left behind sweeping the heavens, one on each corner of the platform. Each dish was part of the inverse square radio electric power broadcast transmissions relay assemblies to the four platforms left behind on the moonlet. The ship lifted off and floated away cutting a path across the front of the water planet to the other side to wait for the arrival of the moonlet as it started on its sling-shot orbit again.

"Doctor, all shields on line please. The Infrared amplifier we left above the moonlet is sizzling red hot. Time to start holding the heat to the surface of the moonlet. Set it at fifty percent power for now." CeCe was directing the operation as well as flying the ship. Too many things had been put together too fast and they were not connected to the InterVoice link, so the doctor had to be her extra set of hands and run the equipment. The doctor sat at the auxiliary control unit in the power room. The room was almost stripped bare with all the equipment that CeCe had removed. Fishy could only stand and watch the view screen that the doctor was using as the two Earth women did what they could to save his world.

"Shields up and running at fifty percent. All other units are still on stand by and ready to go," the doctor reported back. She and CeCe had to keep adjusting the angles of the force shields so the sun's infrared radiated heat was also sent down to the surface of the moonlet to help in the process of heating it as it made its way around the planet. Slowly the moonlet's temperature rose; it had to hit over 1,000 degree Kelvin if the magnetism was going to stop. But to continue this way alone, it would take hours if not days to manage it.

A half hour later CeCe nodded to herself and ordered, "Bring all shields to max. We have no more time to preheat the moonlet. It's time to fry this baby." She began flipping switches on her console.

"T'San, it's time to really turn on the heat. Fire away if you please," CeCe radioed her as the moonlet was almost directly below her pod at this time. It was midway through its orbit.

"Firing away at set sequence. First one away. I hope this works, CeCe, and does not blow the whole thing up."

"Have faith, my girl... the moonlet is going to turn into a molten ball of sludge right before your very eyes."

"From your lips to..." And T'San never had the chance to finish what she was saying as the energy back lash from the first anti-particle missiles that just exploded reached the pod. The explosion took place way above the moonlet showering it with a tremendous amount of anti-particles over a very wide area. The moonlet's surface reacted to the bombardment by disintegrating and causing an unmeasurable amount of heat which the shields kept from

dispersing back out into space.

"How are the shield generators holding up?" CeCe inquired.

"Holding their own at the moment. No increase of temperature in the packages on the surface for now. Surface temp around them is over five hundred degrees K and rising fast."

"Launch all five platforms into space. The next missile will be exploding near the power generator's location. All the shields and the core generator must be above the explosion zone or they're done for."

"All platforms have launched and tracking true for their new holding positions. Missile incoming... passing below the shields... it exploded right on the mark!"

A minute later the last two missiles released their deadly cargo onto the moonlet. It was now totally enshrouded under a red sparkling canopy of anti-particles They were eating away at the surface and generating an incredible amount of heat. The moonlet's mass decreased by close to ten percent by the time the particles were exhausted. What was left of the moonlet was now a ball of black and gray slag floating over a yellow-red hot interior that was well over seventeen hundred degrees. Not an Oersted of magnetic flux could be detected—they had neutralized all the magnetic properties of the moonlet for the time being. The planet below no longer had a pull on it, but their job was not finished.

"Regroup the shields and the power station for phase two of the operation," CeCe told the doctor as she slowly repositioned the spaceship behind the moonlet. She had to be careful to not waste their limited power supplies.

"T'San, you've been quiet lately," CeCe radioed out into space. "Any last words of wisdom for us to hear before we start this next part of the operations?"

"I can think of a few, but I don't want the doctor to think less of me," the human Dino replied with a deep throated laugh. "Has anyone ever done this Orion space drive thing before?"

"Not that I know of, my Dino friend. There always has to be the first time and I guess we're doing it." The pilot turned from her visual screen to look in on the doctor. Getting her attention for a moment CeCe saw her hold up her thumbs as a greeting. Her face had the look of fierce determination.

"Are the shields locked into their new orientation and ready, Doctor?" Now that they were not needed to help heat up the moonlet they were reconfigured to form an hour glass shaped depression on the moonlet surface. The second bulb portion of the hour glass was cut off at the middle where it was widest and the

force field then pushed into the moonlet until the second half-bulb was just above the molten slag of the surface.

"Two miles deep and two thousand feet across at the bulb's widest diameter. Configuration is holding steady."

CeCe knew that she did not have to ask, but wanted T'San to be cued in on what was happening since she was so far away and they could not afford the power to send her visuals and readouts of what was going on.

"Finger on the sequencer, CeCe; just say the word."

CeCe rechecked her readouts detailing the flight trajectory of the moonlet, the platforms, and her ship. All were in position as planned. She took a deep breath and let it out as a heavy sigh.

"Let it rip, doctor. Fire one!"

The doctor's finger push down on the keyboard button. The faint sound of a rocket launching vibrated throughout the ship.

"Nuke away, and number two will be ready to launch in seventy-five seconds."

The missile accelerated from the space ship and bulls-eyed right down the throat of the hour glass depression set into the hot melted moonlet. A thousand feet above the inner surface it exploded with the force of a ten ton nuclear bomb. The warhead expanded in a ball of heat and fury. The fiery energy pushed against the submerged shields, but they held. The explosive power had no place to go but back up through the narrow connecting tube between the bulbs that now acted as the nozzle of a rocket motor. The force field held together even though it was driven yards deeper into the mud-thick melted iron.

Before the shields could be pulled back up tons of molten iron and rock slid into the bowl over its top.

"Molten iron has entered the bowl. Increasing the power on the repelatron stabilizer at widest dispersal rate. Pulling the force field back above the surface."

Fishy was standing right behind the doctor and watching the computer generated image of what was happening, and he could see all the slag that fell into the bowl.

"Does this mean we have failed? Tell me, please," he pleaded.

"No, Fishy, we had expected this might happen and that liquefied rock will only add to the force of the escaping blast of the next bomb."

"No indication of extra velocity, CeCe," the doctor reported to her. Not that the pilot's own instruments did not show her that.

"Don't expect anything until after the third detonation. Then things should start to accelerating exponentially after that." She had already explained this to them, but at the moment it was a good thing to repeat. "If it wasn't that the moonlet was already moving we could never have managed to get that big of a mass accelerating. The shields would have been pushed all the way through instead."

The second nuke exploded, shortly followed by the third.

"Acceleration detected for the moonlet, but the power core is now way beyond critical and some of magnetic injectors are failing. The core is too hot and won't be stable for much longer if we keep up this rate of power consumption."

"Reconfigure the shields. Shut down the deeper bulb; that should help. We need to hold out for the next two nukes."

The fourth one detonated and the half bulb was pushed in deep. The slag poured into the half bulb shape force field and there was no way to stop it.

"Can't pull it back up, CeCe. What do you want me to do?" The doctor was almost in tears because she thought they had failed.

"Turn the shields off and reset them to the surface of the moonlet in as wide a flat plane as you can. Cut the positioning repelatrions on all the platforms to half power. It no longer matters if the shields stay on the surface. As long as they hold till the next explosion."

"Arsenal depleted." The doctor reported as they watched the missile streak away.

The fifth and last nuclear missile hit the moonlet shields a few seconds later and exploded. A fraction of a second later the power core also disintegrated into a ball of expanding anti-particles that consumed everything in its path. The four shield platforms disappeared a moment later inside the blooming ball of destruction.

"Doc, full power to rear shields of the ship and hang on!" CeCe called out as she started to move the spaceship away from the all consuming anti-particles. "You hold on, too, Fishy. Things are going to get hairy!"

With only seconds to do anything that could save them, CeCe dumped all the water tanks, and especially the back-up reactor cooling fluid that was dense by design to stop radiation and high intensity particles waves. Without discharge hoses connected to the outlet nozzles outside of the ship the high pressure liquids sprayed out and instantly froze into millions of droplets behind the ship and just in front of the on coming anti-particles.

With the ship running only on backup power it wasn't accelerating very well. It was only because CeCe was linked into the ship's computer and flight systems that she had time to react fast enough to the crisis on hand. As the initial wave of particles diminished when it raced through the frozen droplets, CeCe switched all remaining power from the forward drive engines to the rear shields just as the remaining particles hit.

It's a funny things when a spaceship dies. It either explodes to smithereens or slows down like an old wind-up toy. This time the ship wound down. First, all high power mechanical systems cut out. Fans, pumps, electrical motors, the things that were the real muscle of the ship came to a slow stop. On board a spaceship no one really notices the noises that are always part of the background until the machinery falls silent. The gravity panels stopped next, then the lights followed and most of the computers. Self-powered emergency lights turned on, but they left quite a bit of the ship in gray shadows.

Fishy didn't go into a panic when the gravity stopped and he found himself starting to float off the deck. He used his fins against the air much like he would have underwater to hold still. It took a little conscious effort on his part, but he adopted to it quickly.

Both the doctor and CeCe had been strapped in as a precaution and it proved to be a good thing for both of the women when the gravity cut out. They held their collective breaths for the expected hull blow-out that didn't come. After about a minute the doctor could hear CeCe making her way down to the engineering section of the ship. The inner hatches had closed between sections of the ship when the power ran down, so she had to manually open them.

When CeCe got there she told the doctor to take the cover off the electrical power distribution box while she went to the two remaining escape pods and opened their inspection hatches. She ran a couple sets of power cables from their batteries to the power box and connected one to the ship's lights, limiting them to Engineering only, and the other to the radio, audio only.

"Come in *Seeker*. CeCe, Doc, can you read me!" Her voice was cold and hard, perhaps too stern to be believed.

"T'San, *Seeker* here. Sorry about not getting back to you sooner. We are in a tight bind right now. We're definitely are going to be late on picking you up."

"What the... How's much later is *late*?" T'San did not like how that sounded, especially since the last thing she heard was "Arsenal depleted" before the transmission went dead.

"Kind of don't know right now," CeCe answered honestly. "The reactor core blew right after the last nuke hit the moonlet. Had to

divert all our power into the shields to try to stop the anti-particle wave from taking us out. So now we sit here talking to you keeping you company instead of trying to find out what THE HELL IS GOING ON!" CeCe yelled into the microphone. Then in a sweet child like voice she added, "I'll call you back... just hang in there, Sweetie."

T'San's radio became quiet except for some background static.

"Guess that didn't go as planned," she spoke softly to herself as she tapped on the edge of her hand held control pad with one of her claws. Sighing, she spoke to the voice activated unit.

"Display the *Seeker's* last known position relative to this pod. And, when was it transmitted to us?"

"The information is now on your screen, as well the time it was received." T'San gave the time a glance and it was just before the main communication link stopped. That was good in that she knew that the display was accurate for her needs. She knew what was planned and the position of the spaceship in relationship with the moonlet and the equipment. She doodled their position on her display and hoped it was good enough.

The moonlet was racing away from the planet. The shield platforms and the power reactor were in a five-pointed star shape formation a few hundred miles above the moonlet. The spaceship was in the center of the star so it could launch its nukes down the throat of the hour glass shaped force fields. The saving grace was that the ship was five hundred miles above the platforms and that placed the reactor off to the side and below the spaceship.

T'San studied the screen for a time thinking about what she was looking at. Smiling she thought to herself, "Since the ship survived that means the ship's shields held and the force of the anti-particles pushing against the ship must have slowed it down somewhat and off on a tangent... Humm... Slower speed, loss of orbital height and possible drift across the front of the planet."

Her claw tapped on the side of the screen and finally it tapped a spot on the display.

"Do we have sufficient fuel to make it near this area of space that I just marked?" she ask her handheld.

"If a direct approach is desired, no there is not. But a moderate burn of ten minutes would put the pod within several miles of that spot in two hours and fifty-two minutes."

"Any fuel remaining?"

"Not enough for the main units, but several short corrections

may be available for the maneuvering jets."

"Commencement time to do this maneuver." T'San hoped it was soon.

"Window of opportunity is now."

"Damn stupid machine. Do it!" T'San could feel the main motors fire up and the press of the acceleration against her body.

Fishy seemed to be taking this ordeal in stride and told them even before they could start making plans to see how bad of a situation they were in. "I have now seen and been where none of my people have every dreamed of going, so do not be upset that I am here. Dying this way is preferable to what was going to happen to my people."

"We're not dead yet, my friend," CeCe's replied as she started to put on her spacesuit. "And while I'm out there why don't you two go look for some photoelectric cloth that must be in storage somewhere in this ship. If we have enough of it we may be able to do something useful with it." She twisted her helmet on and entered the airlock. For the next ten minutes the doctor and Fishy had to hand pump the air out so the internal pressure was low enough for CeCe to open the hatch and step out into space.

When she returned to the airlock they were able to use the stored air to fill it so no hand-pumping was required.

"CeCe, is it as bad as it seems?" the doctor asked as soon as she took off her space helmet. For the last forty-five minutes the pilot had been busy inspecting the back hull for damages, and estimating their current position in space to see if they were in any type of orbit or adrift in space heading to who knows where. There was the moonlet to check on as well; they really wanted to know if they had succeeded.

"I have lots of good news," CeCe started to tell them. "First off the moonlet is still moving out and with only my helmet computer to do the math is seems to be on the trajectory we wanted it to be on. The second bit of good news is that we are in an orbit around the planet instead of still heading out after the moonlet. The anti-particle bombardment must have changed our delta-V.

"Third and last, the ship will last longer than we will. The ceramic layer of plating is almost all gone and the composite layer is somewhat pitted, but that's about it. With no shields to protect that area we can't enter an atmosphere to land. Not that we could actually do that anyway."

"Well, we have some good news as well," the doctor told CeCe as

she pulled open a large square container. "This crate is full of photoelectric cloth if the label is to be believed. I have never seen the stuff so you'll have to tell me about it."

CeCe looked into the crate and lifted up a corner of the material. A smile formed on her lips.

"Doc, it looks like we got a winner here. I'll need you to suit up and I'll have to change my air tanks." She then looked at Fishy, "You think you can handle that air pump by yourself?"

"Not as fast as the two of us did," he replied holding up his fins, "but I can manage it."

"That's the spirit."

A half hour later the two women were out in space with their feet firmly placed on the hull. The crate was fastened down between them. The cover was off and CeCe held an edge of the sheet in her hands.

"Now, Doc, I'm going to jump away and pull this cloth out with me. It's folded in such a way that it will accordion out with no trouble. But we must be careful because this material is only a few microns thick. Before the entire length is out, there are marks to show you are near the end. Shout out to let me know when they come up so I can stop and not tear this thing apart. When it's fully out I want you to open the gas valve that you will see at the bottom of the crate, but do it slowly and be ready to shut it if I yell out. Okay?"

"Sure, then what?"

"We'll take it one step at a time. If it works right this cloth will unfold width wise in both direction. I have to get it oriented toward the sun first before we do that and this SAFER EVA maneuvering backpack is not the best way to do this, but that's all we have."

CeCe made her jump and with a few burst from the thruster pack she got it in the position she wanted. To the doctor she was not visible most of the time, since she was behind the black cloth as it unfolded.

"There's no way of reshaping this after it's totally unfolded, so I have to be sure it will stay where we want it." CeCe was explaining why she hadn't moved for the last few minutes. "A thousand feet out and a thousand feet across. A million square feet of solar power... That should do some serious recharging of our depleted power cells."

Twenty minutes later they knew the photoelectric cells were working, and their electric power was recharging power cells one at a time, but it was not going to be enough, no matter how long they

waited, to operate the ship's drive units. Suspended animation was their only hope to survive until the asteroid came back.

While the two women were out setting up the solar cells, Fishy was in contact with T'San. On hearing what they were doing she set the pod's small radar unit onto a narrow sweep to extend its range. Before long she heard a 'ping' and a blip appeared on her scope. With crossed claws she saw her pod was actually heading right towards them. In fact, it was so close that she needed to watch out as to not hit the power cells she'd been hearing about over the radio.

T'San programmed the pod to change orbit with its remaining fuel so it would not be a hazard to the cells beginning several minutes after she left the pod for the spaceship. With some power now available to a few more ship's systems her entry into the ship was accomplished the normal way.

The air in the ship was heavy with over use and getting colder by the minute. The air filtering system and heat units were not being used. It was a waste of power to do so. As soon as T'San came aboard the doctor led her to her suspended animation chamber and hooked her up. CeCe and Fishy were already floating in their liquid-filled tubes.

The doctor had thought long and hard before she put Fishy asleep, and she did him first. She wanted to allow the most time in regulating the process because of his different DNA makeup. The doctor no longer believed that the weeks she spent learning how the Tassangaxx ship's systems worked was now wasted time.

CeCe went under next and before she stepped into place took the doctors arms in a firm grip and full of emotions whispered, "We gave it our all."

"Yes, we did, CeCe. Sleep and dream of all the good you've done for Fishy's people. You saved a whole race from certain annihilation. You can't do better than that."

CeCe went to sleep with a smile of contentment on her face.

"Doc," T'San spoke to her with a sly smile as the physician stepped away so the clear cylinder could be lower into place around her Dino body. "This better not take fifty years this time. If it does I'll be really angry."

"You and me both, Sandy." This was the first time that the doctor used her old human name since the change. T'San went to sleep and the tube started to fill up with the suspended animation fluid.

"You and me both," the doctor repeated as her tube slid down into place and she also fell to sleep. Her last conscious thought and action was to shudder as she realized this might possibly be for the last time.

The small green spaceship along with its companion power cell blanket started its first orbit around the water world.

A radio beacon continuously sent out its distress signal to the far reaches of the solar system as four beings slept away in the bowels of the cold ship. Below them on the surface of that world changes were already happening. Some of them good, some of them bad.

Only time would work everything out.

Chapter Twenty-Two: Show No Mercy

"GET UP to the control room and you'll see for yourself. Remember, no funny business." With the tight mechanical grip on the back of his neck Tom couldn't do anything remotely "funny" even if he wanted too.

Jessica was standing in the middle of the room with Tin Pants behind her. He had her tight against him with his one real arm and hand across her chest. His hand was not in the best of places. With a wild look in his eyes and a cock-eyed grin he keep moving his hand about. Jess was white faced, hatred flared in her eyes every time he moved his hand on her breast.

Ramon was half sitting, half lying against the side wall. Blood was flowing from his nose. Crying Wolf was standing over him with a metal rod ready to hit him again if he tried to move.

Tom froze for a second taking in the situation and knew it was a set up to make him feel helpless and not in control of anyone's life, especially each of theirs. Lager Head shoved Tom to the wall where Ramon was. He then turned on Tin Pants.

"I told you to leave the girl alone, Tin Pants. She can't do you a bit of good so why torture yourself."

"I'm still human enough to have feeling even if I only have one arm and hand left for the world to see."

"You would have been better off if you took the full treatment. Now you look more a freak than anyone of us *real* cyborgs."

"FREAK! I'll show you..." In his anger he released Jessica who stumbled over to the two humans.

"Both of your cut it out, you morons. Victory is at our finger tips and you're acting like two year olds. Buck up and work for our good!" Crying Wolf yelled back at both of them.

"What type of victory do you believe you have, Crying Wolf." Tom ask innocently, as if he did not know.

"Your life and those other two is one victory. And a way off this ship that will set us free is another."

"Our lives may be in your hands, but this ship is not in any condition to go anywhere. You're just as trapped as ever." Tom voice sounded as if he was totally in control.

"Don't pull that, Swift. We know that you just finished adding the data from the E-Vac ball and that you finished the power flow adjustments. Why do you think we waited so long to act?"

"Well you should have waited until the ship had a few flights

under its belt first. As of right now we don't know if we have full Translocation control or not. It's going to take a dozen carefully planed trips—short and long—before the Albert AI navigation system has total mastery over the matrix."

"Well it can learn it after we get the hell away from here," Tin Pants spoke up. "Once we're gone there's nothing that can come after us. We got the whole universe waiting for us."

"What whole universe?" Ramon asked as he slowly stood up with Jessica helping him. "I think Earth is all you really want to go back to. Back home with some cockamamie story about you three being the only survivors of Tom Swift's folly. And then you have this ship with all its unheard of technology to sell to the highest bidder."

"Always knew you could have made a good addition to our conspiracy," laughed Crying Wolf, "but you just don't have the guts to do the hard things. And, Kid, life is made of only hard things and you have to be ready to kick them in the a.."

"That is where you're wrong." Ramon cut in. "With the right friends, life is everything you want it to be."

"I guess you telling us that we're the wrong type of people to be around. That's all right, we don't like your company either. So the faster you get this ship out of here and into deep space the better for all of you. You get that Swift or do we put that kid into the airlock and slowly bleed it off to vacuum?"

"Yeah, Let's do the kid like we did dear old grandpa," Tin Pants squealed with delight. "I bet he does a lot more yelling than the old man did." Tin Pants started to reach for Ramon.

Tom stepped in front of Ramon stopping Tin Pants.

"There's no need for that. Let them stay right where they are." Tom turned to Crying Wolf. "Do one of you want to InterVoice link with me so you can see that there's no monkey business going on. At the same time you can learn to pilot the ship. I would think all of you would want to be able to do that, right?"

"I'll link up with you, Swift." Lager Head told him without looking at the other two cyborgs, "I'm a fully rated pilot for all Swift's spacecraft."

"Fine with me." Tom walked and sat in one of the two pilot seats. "The rest of you can watch what's happening on the main display screen and the control panel. Flying this ship is no different from any of the other ships in the fleet. It's only the Translocation Matrix Drive that is new, and the Albert AI does all the navigation and opening and closing of the interface. All the pilot has to do is let the Albert know where you want to go."

"What if I don't want that blasted computer in control?" Tin Pants sounded a little worried.

"Then I guess you better get off this ship right now. There's no way a person or even one of you cyborgs can handle the millions of bits of data that are needed to keep this ship from going—each and every second, by the way—who knows where and ending up in who knows what condition. Plus your mind might not be able to function when we are in transition. We have not found out that piece of information, but we know that the AI works. So unless you relish remaining out here, stranded and possibly very, very dead, we're going *that way*."

By then Tom had settled into the seat, and Lager Head was forced to link up with him where he stood. Inwardly Tom had to smile to himself. "*In two hours,*" he thought, "*they will be about ready to get rid of Ramon and me. Jessica, on the other hand, has Tin Pants to contend with. Give her strength.*" With that thought utmost on his mind Tom contacted the flight deck control center and asked and received clearance for immediate takeoff. As expected Bulldog cut in wanting to know what was going on since no test flights were on the schedule.

"Just getting some flight time in while you get the *Queen* back together. We have a date with some ladies we know on an asteroid and we can't be late, Kenneth. I also have some long-range matrix deliveries to make." Bulldog heard his name and he knew that he had to let Tom go without interfering. He could guess why once he thought about it for a few seconds. What Tom meant by "deliveries" was completely unknown to him.

"We'll be waiting for you, Skipper. Luck!"

Tom also knew that Bulldog understood the situation and was going to step back to see what developed.

The experimental ship was robotically lifted from its repair cradle, brought to the launch bay and propelled into space. Once a safe distance from the two half's of the *Queen* and the Swift's asteroid, Tom set in the same coordinates that he used on the E-Vac Ball. This would show how well their theory matched with reality. The jump itself went smoothly. What the people felt in their minds was a jumble of sensations and emotions that had no relationship with each other. While not painful, it was not pleasant either. It faded as soon as the translocation stopped. A quick glance around him showed the mutineers had felt it as well. This put the cyborgs on notice that this was not going to be all fun and games and that Tom was right on wanting to use the AI for translocation control. Their lives *did* hang in the correctness of Tom theories and his ability to turn it into a very remarkable working piece of equipment.

It took Tom close to an hour to reconcile all the differences that showed up between the two flights. Most of them had to do with the two ships' sizes and their different power requirements. The experimental ship needed all the power the fusion and anti-proton reactors could supply to power the six emitters. The Albert AI was the only way to handle the monumental data flow to keep the ship on course.

The next two translocation jumps were done in deep space to further refined the AI's ability to acutely set their transition entrance location. Tom then found a star system with planets and moons so the computer could learn how to do short interplanetary jumps which were technically the most dangerous sort of maneuvers to accomplish.

When he was satisfied with Albert's ability to function faultlessly during all these type of maneuvers he broke his link with the ship and slowly stood up. He twisted and stretched his body for a few minutes and glanced at the clock and saw that he had been in the pilot's seat for twenty hours straight. Jessica and Ramon were asleep on the floor wrapped in each other's arms. The cyborgs reenergized their bodies and were fully functional before Tom tried to take his first step. He went over to his charges, stooped down and awoke them.

Smiling he quietly told them to stay where they were. Next, he sat down between them and looked up at the three cyborgs.

"It's done. You can go anywhere you want to go in the whole universe. I left the coordinates in Albert's memory so you can go right back to Earth from wherever you happen to be. Now," his voice turned serious, "what do you intend to do to us?" He carefully reached over and took hold of Ramon and Jessica's clenched hands and gave them a squeeze.

The cyborgs stood together looking down at the three of them. Tin Pants had a wild look on his face. His human hand was antsy with anticipation. Crying Wolf was trying to hold back a smile. Lager Head rubbed his mechanical hands together and actually cracked his knuckles.

"Tom, since you have been so good to us you get to be second out the airlock, suit not included. Your friend, Ramon, gets to be first."

"And, Jessica?" Tom asked in a whisper. He really did not want to know what evil they had planed for her.

Tin Paints rubbed his chin with his fingers, enjoying the sensation.

"That, dear Tom, depends on how well she listens and does as I ask," Tin Paints replied with a loud, horrible laugh.

"Just as I thought. There no way to reason with you three? Your minds are set?"

Crying Wolf slapped his knees with his hands as he bent over in a fit of laughter.

"You're breathing your last few breaths of air and you're wasting them on questions like that?"

Tom shook his head before answering. "No, just clearing the air so that there is absolutely no chance that I've overreacted to this situation, that's all."

The three cyborgs took quick looks at one another, now some mechanical look of doubt was coming into their faces.

"Gentlemen, by the power granted to me as rightful Captain of the *Interstellar Queen* and as such I and two humans in my care are being held captive against my will, I hereby sentence the three cyborgs known as Tin Pants, Crying Wolf, and Lager Head to life imprisonment on Earth Space Prison Jupiter-4"

"What the heck are you trying to pull, Swift?" yelled Crying Wolf and he tried to step forward. All three of them were immediately surrounded by the emitter field that then jumped them from the ship. To Tom and his companions, they froze in place for a split second before just disappearing leaving only three human in the ship.

When their minds cleared the three cyborgs found themselves floating in the vacuum of space with the planet Jupiter filling the view in front of them. Anything, such as the arm and hand of Tin Pants that had been human and was exposed to space froze and burst. Before they could even start to think clearly all their radio receivers were jammed with one repeating message.

"You are in violation of Earth Space Prison Jupiter-4 no fly zone. Intruders are automatically sentenced to ten years hard labor without parole. If any contraband is found on or near you another ten years will be added. If you are found with cyborg implants they shall be removed if possible or at least immobilized to the farthest extent without costing you your life."

The message kept on repeating until an hour later four over weaponized patrol boats showed up and took one each on board. With no papers or way to explain how they got there the key to the jail house door was thrown so far out into space that it would never be found and used to set them free.

"Where did they go?" whispered Jessica in disbelief.

"While we were testing the E-Vac ball, Bulldog realized that if we only surrounded a small object instead of the whole ship we had a transporter beam of sorts. So using a closed channel that Lager

Head was not aware of I made two contingency plans for Albert to use. The first one was for us to be translocated out, but we used the second plan on them instead and sent them to the one place no cyborg ever wants to go near. The Jupiter-4 space prison for international terrorists and mass murderers. No type of electronics are allowed near that place since they seem to be able to turn the most simple device into a weapon. They'll be lucky to be left as talking heads when the Authorities are finished with them."

"And the questioning of their plans to do away with us?" Ramon asked as he stood up and offered to help the other two up off the floor.

"That was for our own protection. Albert has three-D videoed the whole thing. I don't want people thinking I did this without provocation or because of what they did to Bud for spite. And talking about Albert..." Tom turned back to the control panel.

"Albert, please return us to the *Interstellar Queen*. Inform the dock master to let Bulldog and security know that the problem has been dispatched and of no future concern." Smiling he rubbed his stomach, "I'm hungry and this ship does not have any food on board, so let's go to the *Chuck Wagon* as soon as we get back."

Walt Blackman, Security chief, and Bulldog joined Jessica, Ramon and Tom about a half hour after they reached the eatery. Tom handed over a copy of the 3-D video to the chief to view later. He told him if there were any further questions to contact him, but for now coffee and dessert was all that was to be discussed at the table. The chief left after only one cup. Tom could see that he wanted to view that video, but called after the man, "Please add multiple counts of sexual molestation of a human for the cyborg known as Tin Pants and complicity of his attacks for the other two."

Bulldog watched him go before turning and asking Tom if there was anything to worry about.

"Not a thing," he chuckled. "It's an open and shut case. We handed the three mutineering cyborgs over to Earth's authority at Jupiter-4 space prison..."

"How the hell did you pull that one?" If total surprise could be seen on Bulldog's face it would have been now.

"I only did as you suggested during the E-Vac ball test remembering that the translocation matrix drive could be used as a one way transporter. It worked like a charm, if I say so myself."

Bulldog stood up from the table and looked down at Tom. "I see that you're not going to fill in the details at this time, so I guess I'll look up Chief Blackman and keep him company. I was going to tell you how much we got accomplished on the *Queen's* emitters, but tit for tat." He turned and walked away.

Tom pushed his chair away from the table, "Kids, time for us all to get some sleep. We'll want a clear mind when we wake up and see what has been done. Sleep tight." He walked away from them.

Jessica took Ramon's hand. "Your place or mine?"

It took another two weeks to finish installing all seventy-two emitters to get the needed coverage for the combined Swift asteroid and *Interstellar Queen*. The only thing that made it possible was that miles and miles of thick, unwieldy cable did not have to be laid out to connect all the reactors in the Swift asteroid and all on the *Queen* to the emitters. Tom's remarkable inverse square wave microwave power transfer devices—the original device was constructed by Bud in an attempt to save Tom's and Bud life's when they were trapped under the moon's surface—saved them that problem.

Tom was already using it to get the enormous energy required to the smaller ships' emitters and for the Albert AIs to instantly communicate with each other. Precise control of all those emitters was going to be a tedious task even for those mighty computing machines. In theory anything could be moved by this method, but the energy requirements would drain countless Suns and destroy the balance of many of the star systems that happened to be in the neighborhood if that were tried.

Also during this time Tom had every doctor on board the *Queen* go out and experience the effect of the TM drive with the hope that they would come up with a solution to the disorientation effect that was might be practical for all on board.

It was a communication tech that came up with the answer. When in transition the human brain was not receiving any information from the body and the sensations that was being experienced was a type of white noise generated from the thousands of synapses throughout the brain trying to fill in the gaps for missing information. Since everyone had a InterVoice link implant no matter what their age, a feedback loop was added that replayed the last couple of seconds that the synapses experienced—basically priming the brain—and the sensations were eliminated. This fix diverted hundreds, if not thousands, of medical emergency call that would happen with each TM transition.

As it was fitting, Tom authorized that only Ramon was in the regeneration room when Bud was taken out of the tank and moved into a hospital room fitted for his care. His body was looking better and even a bit younger than before. He managed a small smile when his vision finally cleared enough to recognize his grandson, Ramon, before falling back to a natural sleep. It would take more than a few days of intense physical therapy before he was back on

his own feet without help. Reconnecting a person's brain, motor skills, speech and numerous other body function and skills took time even with the help of nano technology.

Twenty hours before the self-imposed deadline to take the *Interstellar Queen* on its maiden voyage with the new drive Tom and Ramon took a mysterious trip of their own in the modified saucer, leaving Bulldog in charge. As the final hour approached for the flight Tom and Ramon was still not to be seen.

With all the confidence in the world Bulldog adhered to the schedule. At five minutes from the flight deadline Tom materialized on the flight deck, calmly walked over to Bulldog who was in the command chair and relieved him of command with a smile on his lips and a twinkle in his eyes. Bulldog stepped away and bowed his acceptance of the change of command.

Tom easily slipped into the command chair and linked up with the ship.

"Navigation, I have three sets of new coordinates for you and I'm downloading them now." It took him only a single second.

"TM drive coordinators, during these three jumps you must insure that all the emitters' computers and power feeds are in alignment with each other and functioning within specs. Ramon Sanchez will be waiting for us at the end of the third jump to give us a final set of jump coordinates. There probably won't be any wiggle room at the end of that jump. Precise insertion is a must." His mind changed gears.

"Medical, ready all personal to receive battle injuries and to set up emergency triage stations. We may be going into a battle zone." Another mental switch.

"Pilots, prepare for battle action. Situation unknown. Take up defense formation 'Alpha' after launch.

"Ship's Weapons Master, prepare crew and surface weapons for action.

"Engineering. Be ready to immediately switch from TM drive to planetary space drive and divert power to surface weapons and to the shields." He took a breath.

"To all ship personal. Prepare for battle after TM transition. I'm afraid that the Tassangaxx's asteroid is in a battle situation. We are going to save our own and the Tassangaxx."

Finally he called out, "Reactor sections, commence power up of all reactors. Helm, takes us out!"

Chapter Twenty-Three: Space Fortress

PHYLLIS knew the would-be king, LuJan, trusted nobody. With that thought in mind she'd connected herself to her neuronet and activated the last command module that she had hidden on her body in a freckle inside her upper arm. With it scurrying its way through the ventilation system she had finally relaxed as the clock slowly ticked its way into the future.

Fast approaching, hard pounding footsteps could be heard from outside the cell. Phyllis knew the time was up. Zero hour was at hand, and she was ready. Once more she was taken before King LuJan as he sat on his control room throne. The forward visual screen was showing the slow approach of the asteroid's gift ship. LuJan as staring at it intensely.

"Twenty miles out," one of the ship's pilots called out. "Nineteen..."

"Fire all forward rail guys!" LuJan ordered. "Turn it into dust." The whole ship shook with the repeated, rapid fire of the four massive guns. In seconds over ten-thousand rounds of Iridium-hardened projectiles were fired at nearly point-blank range. With a speed of over thirteen thousand miles an hours it took a blink of an eye for the ship to literally disintegrate before the onslaught of projectiles.

Smiling LuJan turned to face Phyllis with a wide smile on his face.

"That is how you treat an enemy. Total elimination."

"But... but you had an agreement with us!"

"Only the weak agree, the strong *take*." He made a grabbing motion with his hand.

"Captain," he wheeled around, once more facing forward. "Full speed to the fortress. Let's see if they're dumb enough to follow us in."

"I think not, LuJan." Phyllis bellowed as she pulled her outer grown over her head. "That order will never be carried out. Go, my little army, take command of this ship."

With that said, her Hordes and the hard-to-see nanos rushed off her body and disappeared into the machinery and control units. With them gone she grabbed the end of a silver rope wrapped around her waist and whipped it around and off. The end of the rope made contact with LuJan's left shoulder and started to coil around his body and the back of his chair, working its way down.

The rope seem to grow longer as it made its way around and

around pinning his arms to his sides and to the chair. Phyllis stepped closer as the rope worked its magic. Finally she had to let go of the end of the rope and lost control over what it was doing. It stopped winding but became rigid and immobile. It would not release LuJan until Phyllis picked it up again and told it to release. That was her only weapon and it had other uses if she needed it.

The two pilots and the communication man slowly raised their hands above their heads in surrender.

"Just stay where you are and you don't need to worry, " she told them as she put her garment back on. "Move and it will be the last thing you ever do." It was more or less an empty threat on her part, but they had no way of knowing it.

"Prime Leader," Phyllis heard the voice of the Doctor over her neuronet, "I am on a Tassangaxx spaceship just outside your main airlock. The W'st radar equipment is easily fooled by our technology."

"Doctor, why are you here? You are needed aboard the asteroid as Second in Command."

"More capable hands are helping in that area," the doctor told her. "My main concern is your well being."

"And whose are the more capable hands?"

"They are from this system and know King LuJan's defensive and offensive capabilities. He evidently is prepared for war. We shall bring it to him."

"War is what I would like to stop."

"That is your right, but it has been openly declared on us. We Tassangaxx do not back down from a fight. Earth people don't either by your own history."

"I must try."

"As you wish Prime Leader." The Doctor's voice faded away from her mind. All this only took place in a second or two and no one on the bridge noticed her momentary distraction.

"You," Phyllis pointed at the communications man. "Open a communication channel to your high command in the fortress and to your people. Use as many frequencies as needed so everyone can hear this. Use your audio and visual units. I know you have the capability with your fortress."

The man did as he was told. Little did he realized that Phyllis could have done it without him, using the nanos, but why show that capacity if you didn't have to. A light started to blink in the corner of one the screens near communication and Phyllis' picture formed on it. It showed her from the waist up and it was a poor black and

white image.

"To the High Command of King LuJan's kingdom and its people the W'st." Phyllis was not one to give politically correct speeches. "Your King LuJan tried to take over my spaceship as we came into your system as part of our ongoing exploratory mission around the stars. In his thirst for power he destroyed an unarmed trade ship with goods that could have eased all your lives. We have been forced by his actions to take over the Light Ship which he commands." The video pulled back and included the restrained LuJan. He sat stiffly in his seat not saying a word. His yellow eyes were almost white with undisguised fury.

"We wish no war with your people and we are willing to return your King to you, should you want him. We will not interfere with your political system unless forced to. We will leave as soon after you tell us what to do with your King. I'll leave these radio frequencies open for your reply." She knew that there would be at least a twenty minute wait before a return signal was possible even at the speed of light. She was about to cut the visual when a return image filled the screen.

Phyllis stared, open-mouthed. This was not possible unless it was just a coincidence or a planned video trickery. She would not put it beyond the dictator to have pre-recorded something like this.

"My people, my countrymen. We are about to be attacked by alien creatures that want to destroy our civilization. They will try to claim that they have me prisoner on my light ship. They have captured my ship that is true, but they have disgusted one of their own to look like me. As you can see I am here on the palace balcony." The video pulled back and you could see that King LuJan was indeed standing on the balcony. "Come my people and see for yourself that I tell the truth. Would I, your sovereign King, abandon his people at this time of need? I think not."

Phyllis put her face right up to the tied up man and snapped, "What is going on? The truth if you want to live." She moved back from his face a few inches.

"I—I'm his doppelgänger. He's too afraid to go this far out into the system for fear that he would be overthrown before he could make it back. So he sends me out instead and lays low until I return. It has worked for years. Please, don't hand me over to him. He'll kill me as soon as he sees me!" he pleaded.

"Coward," was all she said before her right fist lanced out crushing the man's nose and splattering blood all over her. "That is for the way you treated me and my team," she said as she turned back to the screen.

"I will lead our military to glorious victory. Death to the aliens.

Death to the aliens! DEATH TO THE ALIENS," he chanted as the parade ground below the balcony started to fill with people that joined in the chanting. The camera view was now from behind and above King LuJan. His silhouette was in dark contrast to the parade grounds.

Then it happened.

Explosions filled the back of the parade grounds. They steadily moved forward throwing mangled bodies up into the air. The video reeled and then focused on the King.

"We have been attacked. Fight to the last man!" he shouted and the video stopped.

"Doctor!" called out Phyllis in her mind, "Dock with this ship, now! I'm coming aboard. To the asteroid as fast as you can once I have closed the airlock."

"You have the freedom of this ship in one hour," Phyllis told the pilots. "If I were you I would stay out of the war, or you may pay with your lives." She turned and ran toward the airlock.

"Prime Leader, take me with you." The King's physician was waiting at the lock with an oversize medical bag. "I have known of this deception, but could do nothing about it. Trust me; my people need my medical expertise and you will need my help."

"There's no turning back if you come, Doctor. And, why should I trust you?"

"I know in my heart that that massacre was treachery by King LuJan to terrorize our people." She flinched as if expecting to be hit for her insolence. "The underground does not have that type of weaponry. We are a half million people confined in a space colony. You don't use explosives of that type in a place like this."

"You know this how?" Phyllis asked as she closed the airlock after pushing the Doctor in.

"I'm the head of the resistance. Have been for years."

"Then you better know who is helping us on the Asteroid."

"I think I do and he is a good man."

The inner door opened and the Tassangaxx doctor was waiting there for her.

"We cannot go to the Asteroid at this time, Prime Leader. It's maneuvering to perform a time dilation run."

"Where in God's name is it going?" she yelled.

"To the Fortress to put a stop to all the killing."

"How?" the prime Leader asked. "By causing a tachyon/gravity

implosion when it comes out that close to the sun's gravity field? It probably will cause the sun to go nova when that gravity wave pulse hits it."

"I have been assured that there is only a ten percent chance that will happen."

"That's ten percent I am not willing to risk. We must stop it."

"This cannot be done. The only option is to proceed to the Fortress ourselves and help the best we can," the doctor told her Prime Leader and added, "and we are already on our way at top speed. It will take an hour by your time measurement." The Tassangaxx Doctor looked into the airlock and hissed with displeasure. "I think your friend may need some help. She does not look or smell that well."

"Oh, Lord, I forgot to tell her about you."

A short time later the cleaned up W'st physician sat in the far corner in a Dino size chair in the enormous Tassangaxx control room. It made it apparent how much larger of a species the Dinosaurs were compared to the humans. Phyllis as Prime Leader was getting filled in on what had happened while she was in captivity. She still did not like the battle plan but she understood the need.

King LuJan's father's biggest achievement had been in taking control of and moving the Independent FreeHolders space colony into a risky but stable orbit around what was left of the smashed home world. It had taken years of careful planning and work to do this. This way he still held rule over what was left of the planet and its resources. The space debris field gave the newly renamed *Fortress* much needed protection without using dozens of patrol ships from a collection that was getting smaller by the year.

When LuJan made himself the actual king of the W'st—after the mysterious death of his father, and claimed to be only to be a *temporary* military director until a new stable government could be formed—his ruling faction became totally ruthless and out-of-control. They dominated by anarchy and punishment and felt justified to do so.

Phyllis was closely watching the fast forwarding video of the debris field that flowed around the *Fortress*. She could not see how the Tassangaxx asteroid was going to get anywhere near it through all that junk. Then it happened... for a few seconds of time a corridor formed that was debris free. The Dino doctor stopped the video and explained.

"That opening happens every twenty-nine hours for twenty-eight minutes. It's the crux of LuJan father's master plan for the protection of the *Fortress* and to get ships and supplies in and out. That hole is protected by all that is left of the old planet's automatic

defenses. Most are now manned by people in inadequate quarters for months at a time. Their morale is close to nonexistent according to the information supplied by the FreeHolder's captain. Most of the aiming and firing computer systems are no longer functioning and everything is done now by hand. So, accuracy is nonexistent. If given a choice the space marines should be willing to give up rather than fight. If not, they can be easily removed. It's the Fortress itself that we must take without causing structural damage."

Phyllis was nodding her head in understanding.

"And the plan for the *Fortress*?"

"In the last few days the FreeHolders have been working out an attack plan. More a distraction to pull the troops from their emergency escape ships. They are going to try to disrupt the two main power plants with what few weapons they have."

Phyllis remembered that they did not go for explosives. "What kind of weapons do they have?" she asked.

"Primitive at best. Old stun guns, bows and arrows, gas propelled grape shot and steel ball slingshots."

"It's suicide," she said, aghast at the notion.

"You might think so but on the most part the silence of the weapons is most disconcerting for those being attacked I'm told. And control panels can't hold up against the force of a compound bow firing a three foot steel shaft. Sparks do fly and you don't try to pull them out unless you want to be electrocuted."

"Maybe they do have it right. In a space habitat that may be the way to go especially with thousands of lives at stake. When does this start, Doctor?"

The paused video was replaced with an actual feed from outside the ship. The gap was starting to form and the fortress was clearly visible in the center.

"We just have time to put on our battle armor, Prime Leader. As for your friend if she is coming we only have an extra human spacesuit."

"That will be fine," spoke up the W'st Doctor for the first time. "You will need me. I know most of the underground people on sight and I know the *Fortress* inside out. Even certain passageways that have not been used for years."

"Then stay behind us and keep your head down," warned the Prime Leader as she led the way to the back of the ship to get ready.

Space is black because there is nothing for the light of a sun to bounce off. Now some ninety-million miles out directly in front of the debris field gap a blackness formed that was hard to look at. It

twisted your vision in ways not possible. You wanted to pull your eyes from your head, but before you could, the blackness burst forth with multiple streaks of color that raced at unbelievable speed toward the *Fortress* and the ruined planet behind it. There was no way for the streak bundle to stop in time. Yet it did. When it did stop it glowed with a high intensity heat and high particle radiation poured out of it, pounding the asteroid.

The asteroid was now unfit for either human or Tassangaxx to live in. An attack had been anticipated and all the humans and the Dino's hatchery had been left in space out at the outer edge of the system for safe keeping. The thirteen Dinos still in the asteroid now came out at once fully armored for war using the large hanger deck airlock. They were followed by one hundred and thirty multipurpose Altar automatons. They were form-changing robots that took on many high risk jobs living workers would possibly be killed doing. Tom Swift had originally invented them to work in the very first Swift atomic power and research station in New Mexico when he was a teenager.

They have slowly evolved into more complex and versatile machinery. This time they were configured as robotic peace keepers. They were never allowed to maim or kill. Their weapons consisted of paralyzing nerve gas grenades and sonic wave horns that cause people to feel so violently sick they can't stand up but fall to their knees with severe stomach and muscle cramps. Most have to be helped away and that turns a rampaging or even a milling crowd into no one left with the ability to fight. Most people won't stay around for a second encounter with the sonic waves. Combining this with their speed, strength and unstoppableness, and a healthy fear for the robots soon sets in with anyone that meets with them.

The thirteen-member invading force broke into three distinct fighting groups. A group with six Tassangaxx and their army moved out at top speed to the far end of the three-mile-long cylinder to help take over the power reactor plants and distribution centers at that end. A second group of four did the same thing to the opposite end. The last small group of three spread out to guard the outside from a counter-attack.

The Underground was already fighting the two sets of power room guards from the inside with the hope that the outer defenses would be unmanned. The little army headed toward designated circular areas that were once painted bright yellow but now faded to obscurity. Those areas once designated where emergency escape pods had once been. With the capture and move of the *Fortress* they were no longer needed and the pods were taken apart for badly needed repair parts. There was no place left for the people to escape. This was the final refuge for the W'st. They lived or died

with the space habitat.

Several random escape pod airlocks around the three and a half mile circumference of the cylinder were selected by the Tassangaxx leader, and they coordinated and blasted their way into the outer locks. Once inside they set up a portable force field generator to seal the lock before blasting through the inner one. All escape pod tubes ran through every deck until they came out on the artificial surface that simulated the planet. The power room pods were the only exception and they stopped at the lowest level. The reactors levels were enormous areas and the Tassangaxx had no trouble negotiating their way through once they arrived inside. Resistance was minimal at first until the W'st realized they were being attacked from below.

The Tassangaxx upward attack never stopped... in fact it gathered speed. At key points along the way nanobots and the larger hordes were left to take control of the equipment as they were earlier programed to do. W'st guards, engineers and workers who put up a fight were left where they fell to be attended to later.

All this was happening so fast that by the time the ship of the Prime Leader was close to the *Fortress* only the rear automatons and their leader were left to be seen.

"We need to get to the palace of King LuJan if we want to stop this war," the Physician told them over the radio as the four of them looked out at the massive habitat from the airlock.

"How the heck can we ever find it from out here?" Phyllis asked the alien doctor. The *Fortress* made Tom's *Interstellar Queen* look small.

"The palace escape pod tunnel is not marked like the others. Very few people know of it. It's the only one with a working spaceship in it. If we stop that ship we trip up LuJan. He can't leave and he can't hide forever from us."

"Can you point it out to us from out here?" the Doctor asked.

"I don't see it right now but with the rotation of the *Fortress* it should be showing up momentarily." The Physician stopped talking and only her heaving, excited breathing could be heard.

"Try to relax," Phyllis told her new friend. "Breath even, slow breaths or you'll be hyperventilating. That will do us no good."

"There!" the Physician pointed as best she could with the bulky spacesuit on. "In the center of the cylinder just coming into view. There are two yellow escape ports in a row. Then two above and to the left, and two to the right. At the end of the left one is where it should be."

"I have it fixed on my visual enhancement screen," the ship's

pilot told everyone. "I'm feeding it to your onboard flight computer. I'm receiving coordinates extracted from your suit's guidance systems. Launching now."

The Dino pilot glided away. The other three quickly followed. In minutes they were at the location. They had to energize their foot grips to stay on the metal surface because of the rotation.

Standing on the edge of the portal they could tell it was much larger than any of the other ports.

"The King has a full-fledged spaceship in there... not just an escape pod," the Physician informed them. "There should be a personal/loading airlock over that way." She started to walk around the edge of the port. They came upon it and the Physician tapped out a code on several oversize buttons recessed into metal next to it. All the buttons turned green in the sequence she had tapped out and the smaller port opened; inside, lights turned on.

The opening was indeed large enough for the Tassangaxx to fit into even in their oversize armor. They ignored the gravity transition and let the flight computers fly them inside by several dozen feet before stopping and hovering in the air in the middle of the large tube.

"The ship is still there. I can see the outline blocking the light above it. We must hurry for they could take off at any time without warning and I don't want to be in front of it when it does."

"I'll take care of that problem," the pilot told them as she accelerated up the tube and smashed into the nose of the ship. The nose crumpled on impact as if it was made of tissue paper. She disappeared from sight into the ship.

"Reckless, but it works," was all Phyllis could say as they flew up and entered the ship. The pilot had smashed through the control station and was just finishing tearing a hole large enough for them to exit through the side. They found themselves at one end of a platform that was nearly empty. A dozen W'st soldiers stood at the middle of it guarding the exit doors. By the looks on their faces they were more likely ready to run than face the killing machine that came out of the ship. When the other three came out those guards turned and ran for their lives, most of them leaving their weapons behind to clatter to the ground.

"Know the feeling," the Physician murmured to herself louder than she meant to.

"I think it's safe to say we all felt that way when we first met the Tassangaxx. They are frightening, that's for sure," Phyllis answered back. "Which way now?"

"Out to the inner surface and see what is happening. Other than

that, I don't know." This was the first time the Physician sounded unsure of herself.

On the artificial planetary surface they found themselves just inside the Palace parade grounds. There was still smoke raising in the air from the recent explosions. Covered bodies could be seen littered everywhere. Shocked and dismayed people were still trying to find live people in the debris.

Before them stood the palace rising high into the air. It was the tallest structure inside the *Fortress*. And clearly visible was King LuJan standing on the highest tower looking down at them and screaming profanities that just could be heard over the suit's audio amplifying system.

The Prime Leader rose into the air and stopped when she reached the balcony and was directly across from the would be king. She retracted her helmet so he could see that it was her inside the armored flying suit. Her bald head was unmistakable.

Saliva was dribbling down out of his mouth. His yellow eyes were wide-open and deep red lines crisscrossed in them. His pink skin was white and his body was shaking uncontrollably. He looked as insane as he obviously was.

"You ruin me. You and your alien monsters!" he yelled at her even though they were only ten feet apart. The rest of Phyllis' group flew up behind her just in case of trouble.

"It didn't have to be this way King LuJan," she said calmly, trying to appease him somewhat. "We could have been friends and we could have helped your people in so many way. My husband will be coming at any time and with his assistance we might have been able to put your home planet back together again. He has done it before, you ought to know."

The King laughed at her.

"What kind of fool do you take me for? Putting the planet back together. Ha!"

He ripped his shirt open revealing his chest and a small device implanted in the skin above his heart.

"You know what this is?" he screamed as he poked it with a finger. "It's a dead man's switch. If my heart stops beating for more the one minute it sends out a signal to that ball floating in the sky." He pointed skyward. "You won't be able to see it but *it is up there* with the solar arrays that supply our daylight in here."

He stopped talking and licked his lips.

"I die, my hearts stops and one minute later a hydrogen bomb

explodes and this fortress is turned into a million little pieces. And that my friend will be the end of you and all the people that you hoped to set free."

With that said he pulled out a pin from the device. There was a tiny explosion that ripped his chest open and splayed his insides all over the place. What was left of him fell forward, off the tower and plummeted to the ground far below.

Phyllis was covered with his blood, but that did not slow down her reaction. Upwards she flew and at the same time traced where King LuJan's last radio transmission went. She reached the red colored ball twenty-two seconds later. It was being held up by the light array cabling and could not be cut out without destroying the whole lighting system. She could find no way into the metal ball, all the seams looked solidly welded.

"I DON'T KNOW WHAT TO DO!" the Prime Leader of the Tassangaxx cried out.

"Can't you combine your force fields? We may die, but we may save everyone else," the Physician asked desperately on the radio.

"Won't work," a new voice told them.

"Tom!" was all Phyllis was able to choke out; she knew the voice instantly. Her mind was full of raw emotion. She wanted Tom by her side, but not like this. Not to die without touching, without kissing, without loving.

"Back away now," he ordered as he reached out to Phyllis and pulled her back. Three seconds left, two...

The red ball was engulfed with a white light and then it was gone. It was replaced by a device that was normally used to splice worn out cables on the space elevator back on Earth. The mechanism instantly shot out two thick lines with grappling champs onto the now separated wires as they started to whiplash back from the release of the tension they were under with the ball gone.

It happened so fast that the lights barely had a chance to flicker once and then stayed on, shining like nothing ever happened. This was only temporary, the final repair would take some time to complete, but that could now come a little later.

Chapter Twenty-Four: New Beginnings

PHYLLIS fiercely clung to Tom who was wearing only a flying suit. They were suspended a thousand feet or more from the surface of the interior of the habitat and for any direction around them.

"How did you do that?" she asked nodding toward the cable repair device. "Forget that. How did you appear at the moment we needed you most?"

"That my dear, Princess, is the universe acting on its own, or if you want, God at work. There must be more unfinished undertakings that we need to complete before we can rest."

"Then it better take hundreds of year to finish and in all that time I will never leave your side again." She should never have tempted the universe like that.

The next several hours was a whirlwind of activities for everyone. Tom's space force tried to seek out the remaining attack ships of King LuJan that had gone into hiding in the space debris that orbited with the *Fortress*. There was so much debris that it became a hopeless task. Tom decided to wait them out. Low air, food and fuel finally forced most of them out of hiding.

The underground forces that had attacked the power stations head on with their dubious weapons took the most injuries and deaths. Medical staffing in the *Fortress* was marginal at best. Most of the doctors and nurses were in the military and their medical supplies were close to exhausted and couldn't handle the influx of so many civilian casualties. The *Interstellar Queen's* medical staff quickly learned the physiology of the W'st. Setting bones and suturing cuts was a fast learn. The need to fix internal damage was another matter. With W'st doctors in short supply the nursing staff stepped up and assisted the Earth doctors the best they could.

The computerized medical scanners and robotic assist operation tables that linked and shared all procedures in real-time also helped in keeping the death losses from injuries low. All the dead were put into stasis with the hope of possibly reviving them later when things were less hectic.

Four days later the worst was over and people were beginning to return to what they thought of as normal lives.

The Tassangaxx were given a large area by one of the artificial lakes to live on and had started adjusting grass lands for the needs of their feed animals. The decontamination of the asteroid was going to take six months to complete. Then the decommission of the old Time Dilation Drive and the installation of the Translocation Matrix Emitters were to take several more weeks.

The Earth crew from the asteroid were reunited with their families at last and the Tassangaxx hatchery was safely tucked away in the Swift Construction asteroid where the Dinos had plenty of room to fix up a secondary place to live in if they wish to.

It was only a few hours into Tom's arrival that he asked Phyllis where Sandy and CeCe were. He expected CeCe to be champing at the bit to see Bud after their long separation. He was not looking forward to telling her of Bud's close encounter with death once more and that he was still on the disabled list. But she was more than welcome to help with his recovery and to pick up his spirits in the way only she knew how to do.

Phyllis took on her roll as Prime Leader and told Tom that he had to listen to her with an open mind. That Sandy was no longer his kid sister, but a woman who was facing difficult emotional times and needed to adjust to the present in her own unique way. She then told him what she had done and the reasons why. That he must not blame the Tassangaxx doctor or anyone else.

All he could do was slowly shake his head as tears ran from his eyes. He quickly wiped them away with the back of his hand.

Tom pulled Phyllis close to him and kissed her. "At least I still have you."

"And you always will."

Phyllis then told him of the expedition to the second sun of this binary system that Sandy, CeCe and Doctor Hill were undertaking and the secondary hope that the two women would work out their differences. Tom wanted to go and get her immediately. In the end he arranged to send Ramon and Jessica to go tell them to end the explorations and to come back.

A few hours later a high priority call was routed to Tom and Phyllis who were in a meeting trying to prioritize what had to be done first for the W'st and FreeHolders. The call came from Jessica as a live video using the matrix as an instantaneous light year bypass. They were far enough from the expedition ship to show how badly the hull had been damaged as they circled around. They had to take extra precautions because of the electrical feed line from the solar panels that still drifted along with the disabled orbiting spaceship.

"We're getting into spacesuits now. We are receiving a distress signal with a looped message that states that there are four of them on the ship in suspension. Our scanners are not showing any life readings, and there is an indication of some machinery running at minimal power but it's barely enough for two suspension tanks never mind four." Ramon's voice was tense and not very hopeful sounding.

"Jess, stay here and monitor the ship," they could hear Ramon telling Jessica. "That way if I need anything you can bring it right away. We won't waste time coming back to get it." She reluctantly agreed.

"Tom, I'm entering the airlock. I suggest that you get a medical team here ASAP. I'm really not comfortable with this whole situation."

"I understand that, Ramon. I have a team assembling already at the Dino's matrix ship. We shall be there in a few minutes." Both Tom and Phyllis excused themselves and left the meeting at a run.

Ramon plugged an auxiliary power feed into a maintenance jack that was used when the ship was in the hanger bay. With the extra power the ship's computer booted itself back up and Ramon took a moment to scan through and find what was working and what was not. There was more not operating than running. The only airlock functional was near the engineering section not too far from the only running equipment, the suspension tanks.

He cycled through and the cabin lights came on. The air pressure was very low, only a few millibars. Internal temperature was still at minus two hundred. He had to keep his suit sealed up and that was going to be a hinderance to any rescue attempts. His twin helmet cams were showing all that he was doing and seeing. The gravity plates were still unpowered so he magnetized his boots and made his way to engineering.

Ramon went immediately to the first tank that was operating at minimal power. He recognized the woman inside it as Doctor Ally Hill. He had met her weeks before the *Interstellar Queen* left Earth. A note was attached to her tube that demanded that she be revived first if the others were to survive. It was written in big, black, bold letters. Ramon stepped back to ensure that he didn't touch anything by mistake.

The next tank held a creature that he had never seen before. If a fish could have a human shape then this creature was it. He seemed to be floating in some kind of liquid that looked more or less like ice slush. Ramon's handheld scanner showed the greenish liquid inside the tank to be at just minus ten degrees and with considerably more acid than the others. So the slush could not be water but some chemical concoction that was keeping the fish-man alive somehow.

The next tank held CeCe whom he also knew. Why her power readings were so low he had not a clue. He could only hope it was not a malfunction of some kind and she was alive.

The last tube held a Dino yearling. But she did not look as he expected. Plus where did the yearling come from and where was

Sandy Swift?

Ramon and Jessica had yet to be told of her trans-species reassignment.

"Ramon," Tom's voice came over the suit radio. "We are along side the ships now. I suggest that you leave and give the doctors room to work. We have seen Doctor Hill's note and will do as she advises."

As Ramon started to make his way out he asked Tom a question. "I didn't see Sandy. Do you know where she is?" He was not happy about not finding her.

Tom sighed. "But you have. That Dino-looking creature in the last tube is Sandy. I can't think of why you did not recognize her. I'll tell you about that later."

Ramon could sense that Tom was not laughing, but he seemed pretty darn close. With that, he realized it was not a lie. He returned to Jessica and held her close.

It took twenty minutes for Tom to set up an Earth type atmosphere in the engineering section of the damaged ship. Whiffs of cold air blew around and patches of ice were still forming on many of the metal walls and equipment when Doctor Hill was taken out of her tank. Body reflexes forced the suspension tank's remaining fluids out of her lungs and she took her first breath of the icy air. A bout of coughing followed by muscle spasm's truly woke her up.

She tried to get up off the med board with its built in scanners, but one of the doctors held her down. Phyllis bent down beside her and took her hand to reassure her.

"Your three friends are still in their tanks as you asked." Phyllis told her so she would relax a little. "What do you want us to do so we can help them?" She was unpacking another self-heating blanket and placed it over the doctor's torso.

"You just have to heat up the fish-man's tanks by five degrees every ten minutes until he starts to move around and hold it at sixty degrees. When he is ready he will let you know and then you can take him out. There's an orange box taped beneath the tank; make sure he has what is in it right away when he leaves the tank. He can't breath without that head band. You understand?"

The doctor nodded.

"Plus he may not understand what you are saying, so bring him to me as soon as possible. This is all new to him."

"Yes, Doctor Hill," the young male doctor at her side told her. "It will be done as you say."

"Now for CeCe Cox... if you have read her medical records you've seen that she has numerous implants and some structure modifications. She is not a cyborg by any stretch of the imagination, but she's more than just human. You can take her out as you did me. Her body scans won't be normal. Just watch her closely, that all. Be prepared to sedate her if her implants do things on their own."

He made a note and nodded.

"The Dino in that last tank is really Sandra Swift if you don't know that by now. She has gone and done a trans-species reassignment with the help of the Tassangaxx's doctor." A look of disbelief came onto the young doctor's face on hearing this. Doctor Hill could all most read his mind that she had gone over to the deep end. She looked toward Phyllis.

"Tom and I know about it, Ally," Phyllis told her with a small smile of understanding on her face.

"Unless you have the Tassangaxx Doctor with you it's best to leave her where she is for now. She is living off of the Tassangaxx's nanobots that are in her body. They're not like Tom's in so many ways. Possibly she is the only one with the equipment that will be needed if things start to go wrong."

Tom got down closer to her she so she could see him clearly.

"Getting her to the Tassangaxx Doctor is not a problem as you will shortly see." He reached out with a hand. "Time to get you onto your feet, see Sandy off, then get both CeCe and your other friend into some kind of spacesuits so we can go back to the ship that brought us here." With a smile he added, "I hope you can summarize your trip for us really fast. Though I have my doubts about it."

It took Tom slightly over an hour to isolate Sandy's suspension tank so it could be moved. During that time the cabin temperature rose to near normal. Dr. Hill was amazed at the short time it took Tom when he put his tools away, stepped back and make a radio call.

"Bulldog whenever you're ready, commence transport to the Dino's hatchery."

A brilliant white light surrounded the tank and when it faded the glass tank was gone.

"Why to the hatchery and not to the Dino's medical faculty?" Doctor Hill asked with some concern.

"Due to unfortunate circumstances, the Tassangaxx asteroid has been contaminated with high energy Gamma, Beta-Plus and Neutron radiation and that may not be the worst of it. We have not

even started to investigate the true damage as yet. So for now the Dino's will be living in the W'st *Fortress* or the hatchery that, at this moment, is coming in from deep space to take up residence in the Swift Construction asteroid."

Phyllis laughed and added, "It will all become clear in time. Let us go back to the Tassangaxx Matrix ship and get back to the others so we can be with T'San when she comes out. Tom, I do think this ship is a loss. What shall we do with it?"

"We'll revisit that question later, Princess. We have enough to worry about right now. With the auxiliary power plugged in, and no more drain by the suspension tanks, the radio beacon will run for the next decade or two. We'll be able to find this ship with no trouble whenever we want to. Let's go."

The Dino ship was not able to Matrix out to the exact position of the hatchery. Their relative speed and direction of flight had to be corrected. As the pilot was doing that another call came in to Phyllis from the FreeHolder Captain who was now helping out in the *Fortress*.

"Prime Leader we need you back here immediately. There's a group of generals, as you can see, that I have never seen before trying to claim authority over the *Fortress*. I thought we had this settled that since the *Fortress* was originally FreeHolder's property and that there are too many W'st to move out we were going to make this an open port to all. What am I going to do with these buffoons?" Phyllis and Tom could see the three generals getting all flustered over be called buffoons.

"Captain, Tom and I will be there in a few minutes. We'll call Bulldog to transport us over to you. Just keep your cool and don't start another war."

"Of course, madam." He gave her a very slight wink.

"Sorry," Phyllis told everyone as she turned back from the communication board leaving the circuit open so she could tell Bulldog when to transport them. "Ally, CeCe and you too, Fishy, will have to stand in our place when T'San comes out of the suspension tube. Tell her we love her and that we will come over to see her as soon as we can get away."

But that did not happen for several hours. She was not there when they did finally showed up.

Ally, CeCe and Fishy met them when they transported into the hatchery. CeCe hugged Phyllis first, then with tears in her eyes hugged Tom.

"I have a personal message for both of you from Sandy. She has taken the name of T'San which you might have been told by now

from Phyllis. This is from her to you." She handed Tom a small telejector and they all started to leave.

"No, please stay," Tom asked them. "You know San... T'San at this time better than I do. I'm sure Phyllis would like to know if some kind of change in her happened while on this expedition."

Tom turned the device on and a full view of T'San formed in the air. The image revolved around her twice and then focused on her face.

"Tom, my dear, dear brother and Phyllis, my best friend forever and ever. I know this physical change is hard for you to understand. But you must see it from my point of view. Those fifty years I spent in the suspension tanks of the Tassangaxx robbed me of my life on Earth." Tom was finding it fascinating to hear English coming out of a Dino's mouth without a computed translation. He just was not associating that it was Sandy talking.

"I tried to catch up with all the changes that the human race has gone through in those last fifty years, but I couldn't. Seeing Kenneth as a cyborg, Tom as middle age man along with Bud with a new girlfriend and not wanting me any longer was so troubling. So painful. Then, most of the people seemed to stare and treat me as if I didn't belong. That I was different just because I had been with the Dino's so long."

She held up her small dino's arms with her palms facing outward, such a human gesture.

"I know, I know, most of it might have been my imagination and that I should have sought out professional help, which I did for a time at the beginning. He was the one that recommended that I go with Phyllis in the first place to make a new start. That a small crew of humans was what I needed to help me adjust."

She shook her head. "Well, as you can see it backfired. I sought out the Tassangaxx instead. I identified so much with them that I became one of them.

"Tom, I could not look into your face and see the rejection you will have because of what I did. Phyllis was hard enough to stand up against, but you would have worn me down. Told me it isn't too late and to change back. So I am taking the chicken way out.

"The Tassangaxx are sending their Matrix ship out to try to find a home world for them. I made enough of a racket that they let me go with it as a general worker. They were short handed to start with and I need almost no special treatment other than cooked meat. As long as I don't eat it in their presence they are happy, and so am I.

"I love you both with all my heart. Tom, please don't come after me. *Please!* I am T'San of the Tassangaxx..." she made a little head

bow. "Good-bye."

The telejector stopped running and Tom pocketed the small device. Tears were running down his face. Almost everyone in the room was in the same condition.

"T'San, come back to us," he whispered into the air as he drew Phyllis into an embrace. "We'll always love you no matter what."

