

# THEAKER'S

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*Stephen William Theaker*

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*Steven Gilligan*

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# Editorial

Stephen William Theaker  
*Editor and Maestro*

In many ways, I believe this issue of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* to be our finest yet. Entirely new, it features a single long story from Steven Gilligan, author of *Elsewhere* (published by Silver Age Books). This story, *Sabaku*, is the opening salvo of his novel-in-progress, *The Indigo Skies of Home*. Having read *Sabaku*, I can only hope that said progress becomes more actual than metaphorical, as I'm keen to discover what befalls these fascinating characters in the future.

Special as this issue is, one should not forget that every edition of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction* has something amazing to offer, and so I bring your attention to our subscription procedures. There are four options.

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The fourth option costs £16 – send a cheque for that amount, payable to your editor, Stephen Theaker, and we'll send you the next four issues in the post, on actual old-fashioned paper!

It seems I need some more to fill out this page, and

so I will drift in one of my ever more frequent reveries. The sun shines upon all the readers of *Theaker's Quarterly Fiction*, and we have that in common. What else do we have in common? A love of story, an adoration of tall tales, a softness for genre, and a pleasure in poetry. Not, of course, the kind of poetry that rhymes and rambles in equal measure, not the maggot-ridden corpse of verse, but the poetry of prose, the poetry that comes from a simple soul expressing itself through the tropes of spaceships, laser guns, planets, stars and time travel. What other kind of literature can hope to compete? So let's not stamp upon verse, as might normally be our (entirely natural) inclination, but instead let us all hie from here to try a little Tennyson, borrow some Byron, or sample a little Swinburne. And talking of Swinburne, here is Steven Gilligan's latest story, which begins upon a ship of that name...

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# The Indigo Skies of Home: Sabaku

Steven Gilligan

## Chapter One

She had named the planet Sabaku, which in her language meant wasteland.

By the dim light of her portable workstation and the two moons in the sky, Hanikku inspected the small pool of water which cut into the parched sand. Her dry hands, worn and scarred from months of desert survival, dipped into the water and she stretched her fingers. The natural bluish tinge of her skin had darkened in the days she had spent under the harsh sun of this alien landscape and her hair, once a deep golden colour, had all but turned white, and become matted. She splashed water over her face and ran some through her hair with her fingers. The luke-warm liquid soothed her cracked skin and she closed her eyes and imagined that she was somewhere else, somewhere water ran freely and she did not have to struggle to survive. She imagined herself in a place where leafy green trees grew and food was plentiful, a place where she would feel comfortable and relaxed. A place where she would no longer feel fear and solitude. She imagined that she was home.

She took a canister from the workstation and filled it from the pool. An in-built water purifier cleansed the elixir and she lifted it to her mouth and drank deeply. She filled five more canisters (all that she had brought with her) and packed up her workstation. The walk back to her base would take the rest of the night. The workstation was not heavy and fitted neatly on her back with two straps which crossed her chest. It contained all that she needed to test the sand and dry soil for moisture levels. It had a full analysis kit for examining flora and fauna for toxins and infections. On the trail to the water source she had discovered a small patch of almost completely desiccated grass, but it had tested negative for poisons and

it contained, surprisingly, several useful vitamins. Hanikku doubted that it would be very palatable, but at least it would provide breakfast.

Her base had become a farm of sorts. She grew plants and small vegetables from sources she had found in the landscape. A few different types of edible grasses and leafy root vegetables struggled for life in an area she had managed to keep watered fairly regularly. For meat, she managed to snare some insect life that scuttled across the dunes. Large arachnids came out at night and Hanikku had become deft at catching them. They did not taste good and not every part of their bodies was edible, but they were a source of much-needed protein. Water, however, was her greatest concern. She had perfected a technique to pull condensation and moisture from the air, but it provided less than two litres a day. For the most part, she depended on tracking sources of water in the sand and following any potential cache of water. It had taken over a week of observation and tracing to locate tonight's precious find. The water she had collected in the canisters would keep her going for at least ten more days.

Seven months ago, while on a standard scouting mission, Hanikku's ship was pulled off course. She was investigating a settlers' colony on the Pelionis moon orbiting a planet in a system several parsecs from her homeworld, Antila. The colony on the moon had been rumoured to have been damaged by an attack from dissident forces opposed to the Antilan government. Since long-range communications with Pelionis had broken down, Hanikku had been sent to investigate.

Her ship was a one-woman vessel, shielded for the faster-than-light travel found in slipstreams and suited to quick and agile manoeuvres. The journey had taken her less than a week. On her approach to the target system something had gone wrong. She lost control of her ship, it spun off course and spiralling into dead space she quickly became lost. The navigation, communication and scanning controls were dead and she drifted for days. With her food, water and oxygen supplies running dangerously low, the situation did not look good for Hanikku. Mercifully, or so she thought at the time, she passed close to a planet and was dragged down by its gravitational pull. The strong energy shields surrounding the ship were enough protection to stop her burning up in the planet's atmosphere and she crash landed on the sandy surface with only minor injuries. The planet's atmosphere was breathable and, for the time being, Hanikku was safe. She was lost on an alien planet, whose landscape was arid and barren, but at least she was alive.

Survival was one of Hanikku's many specialities and it did take her long to convert her stranded ship into a makeshift base. There was not enough energy left in the power cells to repair the propulsion drives, so escape from the planet was not an immediate option. Hanikku knew that she would just have to wait in the hope that someone would find her and she would be rescued. And so that is what she did. She had been waiting for months.

By the time Hanikku reached her assembled base, Sabaku's large crimson sun had started to rise. The broken ship, with its canopy extended on one side on two metal legs, cast long early morning shadows across the red sun-stained sand. Even this early, the air had started to heat up and Hanikku entered the shade of the ship with some relief. The interior was dim, but not cramped. After the crash, she had removed the better part of the engine and dumped it outside of the craft. The idea was to use it for parts to construct some communications equipment, but the plan had not worked. No matter what she made, using her great experience in electronics, there was no way for her to create a viable power source. She had fashioned the newly-created interior of the craft as best she could and now it appeared quite homely. A piece of stretched fabric ripped from the pilot's seat provided a comfortable hammock and there was an area that opened up into the desert outside which made an improvised stove. Hanikku did not cook much, as fuel for burning was limited, but when raw spider meat and cold, dry vegetation became too

much for her, the stove was a lifesaver. There was no need to boil water as the automatic purifiers in the canisters were still fully functional.

She stored her workstation and five of the six filled canisters in one of the many storage compartments. The sixth canister was used, first to partly quench her endless thirst, and then to water the tiny sandy garden in the shade outside. Hanikku pulled an small, elongated instrument from a pouch at her breast and plunged it into the earth of the vegetable patch. She waited for a moment and stared out towards the horizon. She could see, quite clearly, that it was going to be a hot day, but she also noticed something else far, far away in front of the mountainous ridges on the horizon. It looked like something was disturbing the air there.

*A storm? Thought Hanikku. A sandstorm?*

She withdrew the small instrument from the ground and inserted it into a reader that she had pulled from a pocket at her waist. She frowned for a moment at the reading before tapping a few buttons on the side of the device. The thing blipped into life and a row of lights pulsed across the front. Hanikku pressed some buttons again and a small square display screen popped up from a slot. She studied the screen for a few moments and then folded it up and placed it back in her pocket.

"This is not good," she said. "The soil is too thirsty." Her voice was one of soft resignation. Having spent months here, struggling daily for survival, she had coped remarkably well, but it had dragged her down. In all this there had been no sign of any other sentient life on the planet, no satellites in the sky and no other visiting craft. Friendly or otherwise, Hanikku would have welcomed any form of interaction.

She went back through the entrance of her base and looked around the interior for something that would further aid her minimal horticultural skills. She knelt on the metal floor in front of a low shelf holding several storage crates. She selected the one that she thought might be most help and groaned as she pulled it free of its brackets. The grey lid popped open with a hiss and the crate's internal illumination flickered on, covering its contents and Hanikku's face, arm and breasts with an unnatural green light. Most of what was in here would be of no use to her whatsoever, but after the crash Hanikku had discarded nothing, just in case. She sorted through the various bits of junk, searching for something that could be used as a growth accelerator for the plants or perhaps something that would help with irrigation or germination. She was about to seal up the crate

and try another when her hand closed around something metallic and cylindrical. On closer inspection it turned out to be a telescope of sorts. She held it to her eye and smiled. *Well, this won't fix my garden, but it will help with another problem.*

Outside, she held the telescope to her eye and looked, engrossed, at the horizon. It certainly did look like a storm. Hanikku had only ever experienced one sandstorm on this planet and that been a few weeks ago. Some of her crops had been damaged and lost and she had needed to make some minor repairs to the outer shell of her base, but otherwise she had got off lightly. This new storm, however, looked much, much bigger. There was always a chance that it would pass her by and come nowhere near her base. She looked at it once again. In the moments of looking at the distant gale, a wind had started to blow, and it was blowing in her direction from where the storm was. Three distinctly separate cyclones were forming and stretching away in the sky. She observed the spectacle for a few moments more and then made her decision.

"The storm is coming here," she said softly, and, without panicking, she skipped back to her base and started to rapidly pack things away. Anything that was loose on the floor or on shelves she stashed into any space she could find in the already crammed storage boxes and containers. Next, using a strong vinyl twine, she tied up the boxes to stop them sliding around. She pulled her makeshift desk out and lodged it behind the pilot's seat. Satisfied that nothing would be disturbed in here, she turned her attention to the outside.

The wind had picked up enormously and she glanced over her shoulder to the incoming cyclones. In the time it had taken her to secure the interior of her base the cyclones had covered almost half the open distance. Still calm, Hanikku, fastened down each of the holding cables that connected the shell of her station to large rocks she had hauled to the circumference. Next came the garden. She pulled a metal dome, originally half of the casing for one of the ship's fuel pockets, and placed it neatly over the seedling plants and grasses. Already the wind was unbearable and sand was being kicked up all around her. She shielded her eyes to the onslaught and, pressing against the strong wind, fought her way to the entrance of her cabin. Her white hair was tossed around and it whipped her face like a thousand tiny lashes. Eyes closed, she struggled to open the pneumatic door and it hissed open – the hiss lost in the roar of the wind. She hit a button and the door closed behind her. She leaned with her back against the door

and sighed with relief as she sank to a crouching position. The sound of the wind battering the walls was very loud and the whole cabin and bridge rocked slightly.

She did not know whether the base could withstand this punishment and she crawled over to the control array of the bridge and perched herself on the edge of the bald pilot seat. She touched a few buttons and a faint image appeared on the main screen. Using only a small amount of solar power, a lens on the top of the base fed an image of the storm into the cabin. Through the thick clouds of swirling orange sand she could just make out the towering presence of a cyclone. It was very close now and it was still moving towards her. For the first time since detecting the sandstorm, she began to feel afraid. *If that thing hits, I may not survive this.* She hung her head and made a silent prayer to Meludar, the Bringer of Evil, asking him to spare her life as he ravaged this desolate land.

As the sound of the fierce wind battering the casing of the base grew louder, Hanikku closed her eyes and thought of home. How she wished she were back on Antila. How she wished she was lying in the tall grasses near her home staring up at the indigo sky. For a moment she was there. She rolled over in the lush grass and peered into the waters of a nearby stream. The water was like flowing crystal and she could hear nothing but its gentle trickling – a sound like a thousand tiny bells all playing together. She sat up and looked over to the city in the distance, she stared at the magnificent and elegant towers stretching high into the sky and reflecting the soft purple light all around them. She smiled to herself and then opened her eyes.

The cabin was shaking violently now and, although still sitting, she grasped a foothold at the base of the wall to steady herself. The noise was deafening; it sounded like an army of men had surrounded the ship and were hammering on the shell with metal hammers. She felt the whole structure lift for a second and then drop. A shelf which she had thought to be firmly attached to the wall fell away and narrowly missed her. She looked over to the monitor but all it showed was the air, thick with rapidly moving sand and small rocks. Then the image vanished and the internal lighting flickered once, then twice more, and then it was gone. Hanikku closed her eyes again and tensed her body. *This is it, she thought. This is where I die.* She felt the cabin lift again and the whole thing sloped at an awkward angle. Hanikku slid across the floor and hit her back hard against the corner of a wall. She

screamed out in pain, she the sound of the battering wind drowned it out. And then suddenly all was silent.

Hanikku winced at the pain in her back and reached behind with her hand to feel it. It was very tender and her hand came away wet. *Blood!* she thought. She stood up and pulled up a shutter over a porthole half-way, just enough to see outside. In the light, she looked at her hand and sure enough, her fingers were wet with her own deep blue blood. She looked outside and saw a scene of devastation. The area around her camp was littered with rocks and other debris. Bits of metal and plastic had been torn from her ship and lay in the sand, half-covered with the fallout of the storm. *Has it passed?* She stared out as far as she could and saw that the storm had not passed. All around the ship, but a good distance away, was a wall of swirling sand. She looked up but it was so high that she could not see where it ended. "This is the eye of the storm?" she half-whispered. She pulled the shutter down and sat back down, flinching again at the pain in her back. Moving quickly, she pulled out one of storage crates and searched for a bandage or a pad of some sort. She found a small soft towel and closed the crate and kicked it back into place. She pressed the towel to where she had injured herself. She could feel with her fingers that the accident had torn a hole in the back of her overalls, and she widened it with the fingers so that she could apply the towel to the

wound. It was very painful and she was sat in awkward position and breathing heavily, but it would have to do. "How much more of this is there to go?" she said as she tried to brace herself for the second wave. She did not have to wait long.

When the cyclone hit again, it felt like its strength had doubled. Everything shook violently and Hanikku, who had been holding her injury rather than anything else, was jolted across the floor again. The deafening noise returned and from somewhere deep inside she screamed out, "Help!" She heard a loud cracking noise and fountain of sparks erupted from the control array, showering her legs with shards of hot white fire. She scrambled to get clear, but the base lifted again and she slid back. She could smell burning. In desperation she clambered to her feet and looked at the control panel. Smoke was billowing up from below and flames were dancing across the controls. She turned and ran up the sloping floor to where she had stashed the canisters of water, pulled them out, and allowed herself to slide back towards the fire. She flipped the top open and drenched the fire with the priceless liquid. Plumes of hissing steam mixed with the thick black smoke and Hanikku coughed and squinted her eyes. The base was shook again and she lost her footing and slipped on the wet floor. Screaming, she fell to the hard metal of the deck and struck her head against the canister as she swirled around. She was unconscious before she hit the floor.

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Theaker's  
Quarterly  
Fiction 4

Winter 2004

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four of TQF?**

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something!**

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# Chapter Two

“The sandstorm was an excellent stratagem.”

“Yes.”

“So how would you say it’s progressing?”

“It’s too early to tell. We haven’t even seen the completion of phase one yet.”

“Are we behind schedule?”

“No, no. Everything’s going as planned.”

“You must have some preliminary assessments for me.”

“Like I said, it’s just too early...”

Hanikku woke up coughing. She was lying in the darkness in a shallow pool of water. Carefully she sat up. She could smell smoke in the air, but it was not as strong as before. All was still, and she was glad that the storm seemed to have passed. She groaned as she got to her feet and felt the sudden stabbing pain in the back of her head and the base of her spine. Still coughing she made her way across the cabin, stumbling over rubble and sections of shelving, to the door. She pushed the pad and the door hissed and creaked but would only open about a quarter of the way. Hanikku peered out through the gap and was thankful of the clean air. It was dark outside, but she could see, by the dim moonlight, the damage that had been done.

She pulled away from the door and stepped to the porthole and pulled the shutter up. The catch on the strong window turned easily and she pushed the reinforced perspex of the window outwards. It was a bit of a squeeze but she managed to clamber through the gap to fall to the dusty sand outside. Once fully outside she gasped for air. “Thank Abynar I am alive!” she called out. “I have survived!” She held back tears and got to her feet. The wound on her back had scabbed over and she carefully examined it with her fingers. It did not feel to be too big a cut, but it still stung. She felt the back of her head and it seemed much worse there. A large scab striped the back of her skull and blood had matted even more the back of her long hair. The pain from the wound was a dull pain and her head throbbed with it.

The larger of the planet’s two moons had risen and Hanikku estimated that she must have been unconscious for at least sixteen hours. Still a little unsteady on her feet, she examined the wreckage around her

base. The storm had battered the base itself mercilessly. Large rips had appeared in the shell of her ship and everywhere it was scratched and dented with uneven craters. The whole thing had been moved some twenty metres from its original location, leaving a deep gouge in the sandy earth. Her belongings were everywhere. Somehow, in her haste, she had forgotten the science equipment she had set up at various points to monitor moisture levels. All of it had been smashed and shards of glass and pieces of bent metal lay everywhere. Also there were rocks: hundreds of rock and stones littered the ground. It was all debris that the cyclone had carried here. Despondent, she walked to the garden.

The covering she had placed over the top was missing. *Probably on the other side of the planet by now*, she thought. She knelt down in the dust to examine the damage. This was the worst she had seen, and fighting back tears she scabbled through the dirt with her hands. All the plants she had cared for had been ripped up and were gone. She slumped back on her hands and looked up to the sky. “Why did this have to happen to me? Haven’t I been through enough already?” She rolled forward onto her knees and held her face in her hands. “Why?” she cried. She thought of home again and tried to take solace from the images in her mind. Not for the first time, she lost all hope of ever seeing her homeworld again. She opened her eyes and looked at the ravaged garden again. She blinked and had to look twice, but she was not mistaken. Just barely above the surface of the soil was a single green shoot. She quickly cleared away the sand and grit from around it and examined it more closely. It was definitely alive, but she did not recognise what species of plant it was. “Ah,” she said to it. “You are a good sign, I think. As soon as I get back into my cabin I will bring you water.” She smiled to herself and gently ran a finger over the single small leaf of the little shoot. “I will name you Antila, after my homeworld, and I will make you strong. Strong, like me.”

It took Hanikku several days to get her base back to some semblance of normality. Much had been lost to the sandstorm. The equipment in her ship was beyond repair, the monitor had been smashed and the

control array had been ravaged by fire; the buttons and wires all melting into each other. She managed, by scavenging through what was left, to assemble one complete science kit, but the portable workstation had been utterly destroyed. Of her food sources and water canisters, only half remained, and she considered *that* to be good fortune.

Her plan was to move. Not too far away were a series of caves, and although they would not be as comfortable as her base, they were certainly more secure against sandstorms. Packing all that she could still use onto a small wheeled carrier, she bade farewell to the ship that had served her as a home for the past seven months. The tiny plant, named Antila, she placed in a small plastic tub filled with some of the damp sand where it had taken root. Finally satisfied, she set off, dragging the trolley behind her with flexible cords.

She travelled, as usual, by cover of night, to avoid the unbearable heat of the day. With just one small wrist-mounted torch to guide her, the area seemed eerie and unfamiliar. It was not a part of the planet she had explored much. She had seen the caves before from a distance, but she had never been too close. She did not know exactly what to expect, but she thought that there would be nothing in the caves to fear. It would have probably made more sense to set camp there anyway as it would certainly be cooler living in a cave, and it would definitely provide more protection than her damaged and burned-out ship.

As she approached the caves she looked around for an area that might be a good place to call home. The beam from the torch swept left and right until she settled on an opening that looked about the right size. The caves themselves were set into a low cliff that stretched away on either side into the dark of the night. She dragged the trolley the last few metres and stopped at the cave entrance. The interior smelled like baked rock, but it was cool inside. She ran her hand over the walls and found them to be strangely smooth. The cave was spacious and the floor was carpeted with fine, soft sand. This will do, she thought, and she pulled the trolley in and undid the fastenings. The material from the pilot's seat which she had previously used as a hammock was barely touched by the cabin fire, and although it still smelled faintly of smoke, she laid it out on the ground. She sat down and contemplated her situation. She knew she had at least three unpredictable water sources dotted around the area, although they were all some distance away. And as long as she could keep catching insects and harvesting what little vegetation there was, she knew she could keep

herself alive indefinitely. *So what now?* All of her ship's electrical equipment had been destroyed so there seemed to be no hope of getting off this planet, and there was definitely no hope of building any kind of communication device to send out a distress signal. She turned off the torch and looked out of the cave at the vast dark sky. Sabaku's two moons were full and the light trickled into the cave, casting strange double lunar shadows over everything. *I need a plan*, she thought. *I really need a plan.* Resigning herself to sleep on it she lay down on the sheet of material and closed her eyes.

Sleep did not come quickly, and as the night dragged on Hanikku could not stop thinking about her situation. She could not stop thinking about home. Finally, as the first rays of dawn leaked over the horizon, weariness took her and she fell into a deep slumber.

In the daylight she arranged her things in the cave, and found a suitable area in the sun to plant her precious seedling. The day had started with Hanikku waking from a nightmare which she forgot the moment she opened her eyes. She had been unable to shake off a feeling of anxiety all day. The caves were ochre coloured but solid – like marble. The flame-like colour of the rock melted into the soft yellow of the fine sand. A few small dry-looking shrubs grew nearby and Hanikku had examined them and found them to be edible. She had not yet seen any creatures or even insects, but it was not even midday and she knew that most of the sparse planet's wildlife emerged only at night. The cave felt safe and she began to feel a little more secure about her situation. Hanikku considered this carefully. She knew that it was good to feel safe, but she also knew how valuable it was not to feel too comfortable. *I do not want to live out the rest of my life on this world. No matter how settled I get.*

As she set up her only science kit to start new and improved vegetation analysis experiments, she distractedly gazed at the wall of the cave. *Strange*, she thought. *This looks as though it's damp.* She reached over and stroked the smooth wall and was amazed that her hand came away damp. There was moisture here. Not much, but enough possibly to make a difference. She traced the moisture trail back, to where the wall met the sandy ground and followed the line back into the cave. There was enough light to see every detail and she smiled when she spotted the potential source of the water. Right at the back of the cave there was a tiny fracture at the base of the wall and it was ringed with small dots of condensation.

She would not have noticed it had she not been looking for it. "Are you a well?" she said. She grabbed a length of cord and fed it into the crack. At about three metres she stopped and pulled the plastic cord out. The last fifty centimetres were dripping wet. "Yes!" she laughed. She did not put the water to her mouth as she was not yet able to trust the source. There might be toxins or disease in the water. She grabbed the small device she used to analyse substances and switched it on. As she passed it over the small sample of water it hummed agreeably and a green light flashed on and off repeatedly. *This solves many problems*, she thought as she smiled to herself. It was the first good news she had had in weeks.

Within a couple of days, Hanikku had constructed a robust siphon system and was pleased to note that the small well in the wall could provide her with up to five litres of fresh, clean water a day. It could be moisture rising up into a pocket from deep below, or perhaps there was a small underground stream that passed by a cavity to form a small pool. The water itself was heavy with minerals and had an unusual taste, but that concerned her little. For the first time since crashing on Sabaku, Hanikku had a reliable and sustainable water source. It meant that she no longer needed to expend so much energy on long trips to untreated water pools every few days. It meant that the life-threatening danger of water loss was no longer an issue, and that she could now devote her energy to more pressing matters. Matters that included her escape.

She had had a few ideas, but none of them seemed particularly viable. She had briefly considered the idea of building a distress signal large enough to be seen from space, so that any passing craft might spot it and respond. Any such structure would have to be hundreds of kilometres wide and long, and so this was not an option. She thought of building a primitive radio transmitter to send a distress signal, but she would have needed a power source big enough to send a radio signal beyond the atmosphere of the planet. This was also not a possibility. She had toyed with the idea of creating a small pod from parts of her broken ship, and somehow propelling it into space. But she had no way to store an oxygen supply and, apart from natural solar energy, no way to propel the pod. There was certainly no energy source powerful enough to provide the thrust to get her free from the planet's gravity – she had scanned the elements of the planet to find metal, but she discovered no traces of any radioactive elements that could do the job.

As she was thinking, she saw, just in her peripheral vision, a movement. She spun around quickly and her hand darted out, deftly grabbing a large, meaty beetle.

"Ha!" she said. "Protein."

The beetle was a big one, twice the size of Hanikku's own hand. It had a purplish tinge to its shell and emitted a sharp sibilant hiss as she turned it around to get a better look at it.

"Well," she said, "you don't look poisonous, and I'm hungry. I guess that means just one thing..."

The beetle looked up at her blankly and hissed again, its legs squirmed rapidly. Hanikku had another idea. "Where do you come from?" she said with a smile to the beetle. "If you could show me where your brothers and sisters all live, then maybe I could let you go. What do you think?"

The beetle did nothing but continue to struggle and Hanikku placed it on the ground and watched to see where it was headed. At first, it did nothing. It looked around and cleaned itself and then it looked up at Hanikku. "What is it? Go on, go home. I'm watching you, little man."

The beetle scuttled over to Hanikku and stopped just in front of her crouching legs. It inspected them with its feelers and then climbed up her knee to rest of the flat of her thigh.

"What's this, little man? You must have a death wish." She ran a blue finger over the shell of the beetle and it hissed back, quietly and softly.

"Or, perhaps..." she smiled. "Perhaps you need a friend?"

She picked up the insect again and looked at its head. It no longer tried to escape and Hanikku thought carefully about what this might mean. She could use a friend right now, a companion, a pet. She rolled the beetle over and gently stroked its underbelly. Its legs undulated and synchronised with her movements.

Hanikku roared with laughter and her whole body shook. "By Abynar," she cackled. "I must be going crazy!" And she tossed the beetle into a pot of boiling water that had been bubbling merrily nearby. The beetle hit the water with a tidy splash and drops hissed and fizzed and they bubbled over the rim of the pot.

An evening meal of boiled beetle meat and water-softened shrub grass went some way to relieving her physical symptoms of hunger, but did nothing to relieve her mental and spiritual hunger. The feeling of loneliness and desperation had become crushing. And then there was the boredom. Seven months with

no interaction with another Antilan, or with anyone from any other world, had numbed her. There had been very little in the way of mental challenges apart from occasional problem solving like the recent water siphon, but it was not enough.

Hanikku was an intelligent person, popular in her home city. She longed for social interaction. She longed to be with people. She wanted to tell her friends about the adventures she had had on this planet; her crash; her struggle for survival; the recent

sandstorm; anything. She smiled faintly as she imagined telling her friends, Kumumi and Akiya, about the day she almost befriended a beetle! They would laugh and she would laugh, they would go out to a bar and drink to the early hours of the morning and Hanikku would feel like she had finally returned home.

She grimaced and spat a piece of beetle on the sand. "You are much too sour to have made a good friend, little man," she said.

## Chapter Three

"Is phase two prepared?"

"It's prepared all right. We're working to instigate it now."

"How long will it take?"

The small freighter *Swinburne* was approaching the final stage of its long voyage home from the small cluster of trading planets in the Altarnei sector. Its cargo was a mixture of lucky finds and shrewd trades.

Captain James Curtaine eased himself back in his ergonomic seat and sighed with pleasure. The excursion had been a simple one, and one specific trade-off on Kyushu had been particularly profitable. Curtaine had managed to exchange nineteen crates of untreated salt for eleven containers of valuable silicon parts and two bottles of his favourite sparkling wine. He had never known such luck and was rightfully smug and satisfied. "How far now?" he said.

"Oh, it won't take too long now," came the reply from the pilot and navigator, Wang Chen. "We passed the Aeris Nebula a few hours ago. I estimate that we'll be within sight of home in about another two weeks."

"Two weeks? I guess it could be worse."

Chen swivelled around in his seat to face Curtaine. "Damn right it could. If I hadn't made such good time through that last slipstream, we would be adding another few days to that estimate."

He smiled and nodded his head. "Good work, Wang. Let me know if the situation changes."

"Aye, Captain."

Curtaine flicked a switch on the arm of his chair and a flat and fuzzy image flickered into life to his left. It was the only other human on the crew, the technician and engineer, Amis Wellin.

"Yes, Captain," came the tinny and distorted response.

"Amis, can you come up here when you've got five? There seems to be some sort of interference on these displays. I want you to take a look at it."

"Aye, Captain. I'm almost done down here, I'll be there in a few minutes."

"Excellent. Oh, and Amis..."

"Yes, Captain?"

"Bring Miette up with you. I'd like her to take a look at something too."

"Aye, Captain."

Curtaine flicked the switch again and the image of Wellin dissolved. He stretched his arms and smoothed his straggly blonde hair back with his massive hands. It had been a good trip all right, one of the best ever in terms of turning over a mighty profit, but Curtaine was eager to be home, eager to sell the goods and get back to enjoy some rest and some well-earned quality time. He looked out towards the main bridge viewscreen. It wasn't a big screen, but it wasn't a big bridge either. It was big enough, however, to show the view outside – the vast expanse of space, with stars flying past them on either side like straight lines of white light.

Captain James Curtaine had only been a captain for a few months, but he had been a trader all his life. Trading for a living, as far as Curtaine was concerned, was something you had to be born into.

Commerce was his religion and the religion of those who served on his crew. Wellin was an engineer, but he also had a shrewd eye for a bargain. Whenever a seller was selling something too cheaply, Wellin was always the first to spot it. He seemed to know instinctively that the seller was selling something he was unfamiliar with. Often he would give the signal to Curtaine, the signal which meant, "This guy has something worth thousands of bonds more than he's selling it for..." Curtaine knew the signal well. Wellin's knowledge of stock and commodity prices was unrivalled throughout the galaxy – the man was like a walking encyclopaedia. And then there was Wang Chen. Chen had the most silvery tongue Curtaine had ever experienced. He had the ability to barter goods and haggle down prices like no-one else. He exuded a natural charm and confidence that would ensure Curtaine always got the best deal.

Of course, it did not work one hundred percent of the time. Sometimes they lost out, sometimes they were tricked, but for the most part they came out on top. Curtaine and his crew had a reputation in all eleven trading sectors, and that reputation was a good one. He sometimes bent the rules a little to get what he wanted, but he was never unscrupulous or underhanded. Well, not much at any rate.

Wellin appeared from below deck and his balding head bobbed over the top of the ladder. "Captain," he said, "what can I do for you?"

"Ah, Wellin. This monitor feed seems to be distorting the picture. Can you take a look at it?"

"Mine's doing the same thing," said Chen, helpfully.

Wellin climbed the rest of the ladder and walked to Curtaine's chair. He removed a scanning device from the pocket of his overalls and passed it over the machinery, sucking air in through his teeth as he did so. "Hmm," he said. "I don't think it's the feed, as such." He examined the readout the scanner had given him. "It might be the holographic emitter itself if it's happening to both of you. My station down below seems to be functioning all right, but I'll have to check."

"Good," said Curtaine. "Get on and let me know what you find."

"Aye, sir," said Wellin and he pocketed the scanner and stepped back to the ladder.

"Wellin?" said Curtaine.

"Yes, sir?"

"Miette?"

"Captain?"

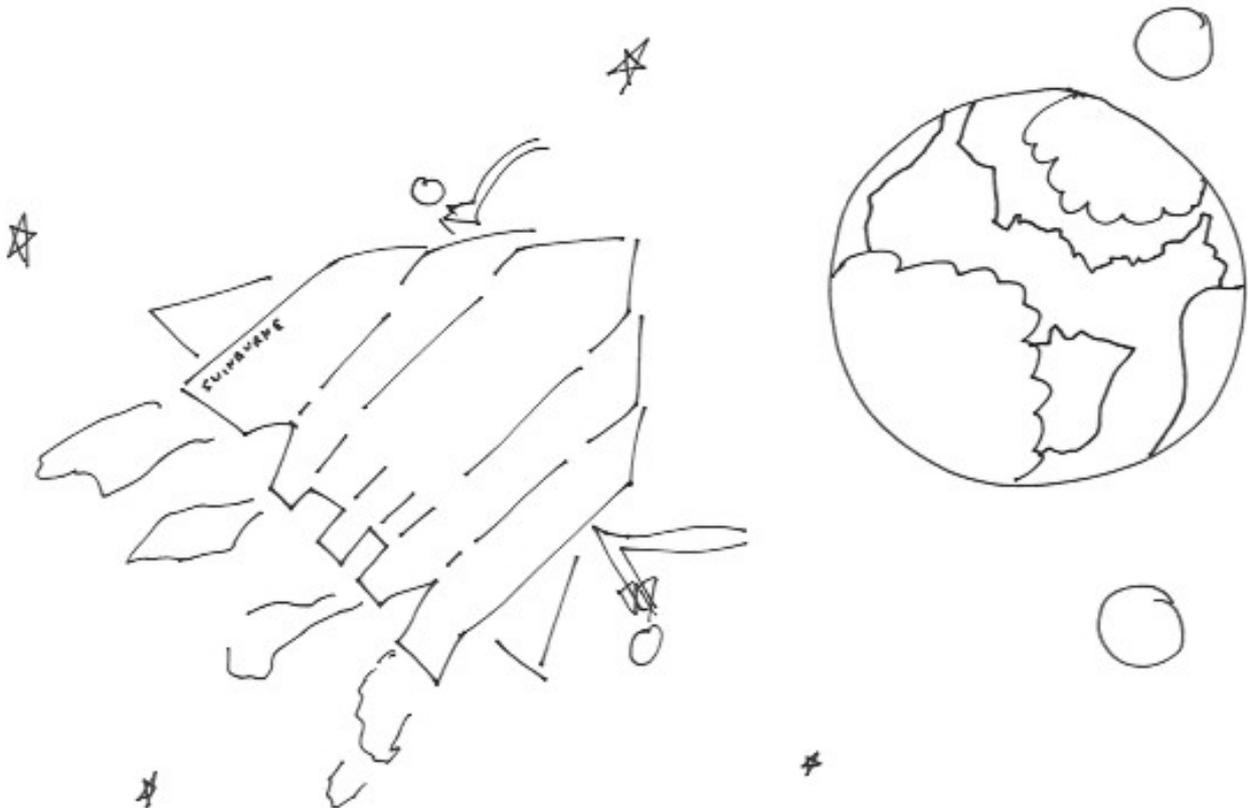
"I asked to bring Miette up with you when you came."

"Yes, sir?"

Curtaine frowned. "So where is she?"

"Er, right behind you, sir."

Curtaine turned his head and there she was. He jumped reactively.



"Captain," she said with perfect diction and pronunciation. "How may I be of assistance to you?"

Chen laughed out loud. "You have to watch androids," he said. "They tend to sneak around a lot!"

"First Officer Chen," said Miette, "I merely ascended the ladder to stand by the Captain and await my instruction. It was never my intention to sneak."

Miette was a medical android, made perfect in every way to look, sound, feel and even smell like a human female aged about twenty, but everything about her was completely synthetic. Her skin was a silicone mix, her eyes were plastic, her teeth were a hard enamel alloy and her dark brown hair, although synthetic, was as fine as any human hair. She was equipped with the latest processing software and extensive data banks. Her knowledge and medical ability were the sum of all knowledge and medical ability the galaxy had ever collected. She had even been programmed to appreciate music. And although stoutly unemotional, she had been known to tell the odd joke. But her timing was terrible. Miette had cost Curtaine a small fortune, but she had been worth every last bond, credit and coin. She was a masterpiece of modern technical engineering – a truly sentient life form with an inexhaustible supply of knowledge and wisdom. If *she* was the right word to use, as although she looked and sounded female she was technically sexless. Curtaine admired her very

much – he did not look upon her as a purchase or a slave, but as a fully-fledged member of his crew.

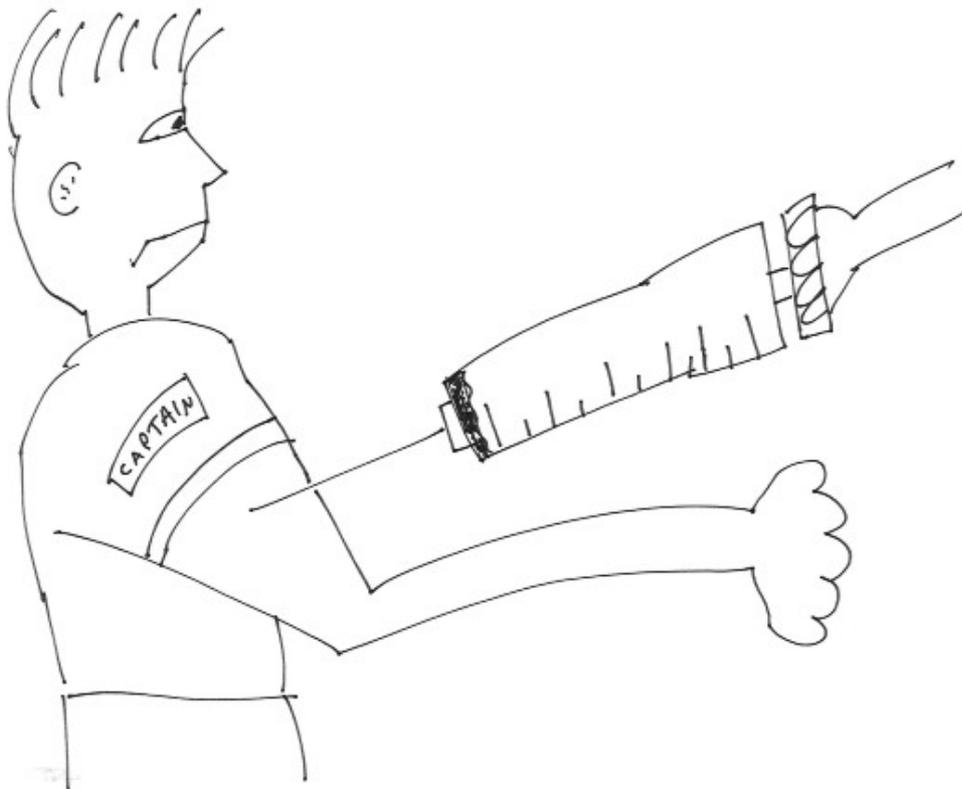
Curtaine waved his hand in dismissal at Chen. "Yes, well, whatever," he sighed. "Miette?"

"Yes, Captain," she answered and moved to his side. "What is it you need? Are you ill again?"

Curtaine looked up at her from his seated position. Human she might not be, but that did not stop her from being very beautiful. She had pale skin and icy blue eyes. Her long dark brown hair caressed her shoulders and swayed with her every move. She was not unique, Curtaine knew that. He had seen her model advertised and displayed in many brochures and advertisements on many channels on many planets. She was top-of-the-range, and in the year or so that Curtaine had owned her he had become more and more attached to her. He knew she was just a machine but he could not help having feelings for her. Miette was the closest he had come to having a *partner* in a long time. Of course, he had never explained this to her, her loyalty to him was assured with her programming, and, apart from the obvious, just having her around was companionship enough.

"Not ill, exactly. I've been having some chest problems again."

Miette removed a long thin analyser from the long pocket in the leg of her white jump-suit and moved it over Curtaine's chest. "Have you been coughing in the mornings?"



“Yes. A lot. And it hurts.”

“Well,” said Miette, staring at the reading on thin screen of the analyser. “It is not asthma. I’m certain that I cleared that completely. Hmm...” She pocketed the instrument and faced Curtaine. “I will need a blood sample and a couple of hours.”

Curtaine rolled up the sleeve of his jacket. “So, what is it?”

Miette removed another thin object from another pocket, this time a tube. She flipped open the top and removed a long syringe. She held it one hand and grasped the bend of Curtaine’s arm with the other. “This won’t hurt a bit,” she said.

Curtaine screwed his face. “You know I don’t like needles,” he said. “And that’s quite a grip you have there.”

“There. All done.”

“Thanks,” he said, flatly.

“I will need to run some tests and I will let you know what I find.”

“Thanks, again.”

“It’s always a pleasure,” she said and smiled at him. Although Curtaine had an attraction to her, he hated it when she smiled as, although there was a smile there on her lips, it never materialised in her eyes. *I wonder how much it would cost me to get that altered?* he thought.

Miette sauntered away to the lower decks, where a small room had been converted into a treatment area and laboratory. Having a skilled medical android was essential to traders, especially as most were nomadic in nature. Have no fixed working location it was difficult to get medical attention when needed. Traders spent their lives travelling to many and diverse alien worlds and, although most were friendly, some had biological systems that were hostile to humans. No matter what protection you took, it was very easy to pick up diseases, infections and viruses that could prove fatal if not treated effectively and efficiently. What was just a common cold to one species could be the equivalent of a fatal plague to the average human trader, traveller or explorer. Miette was very good at what she did. The crew of the *Swinburne* had been lucky, managing to avoid being seriously infected by anything. Wellin contracted a rare and brutal virus after a trip to the planet Ulethen in search of raw yttrium for a valuable trade. He could have easily been in grave danger but Miette had quickly concocted a treatment for him. He suffered no more than a couple of days of bed rest. And Curtaine had had a chest complaint for some time now, but he was certain that Miette would be able to diagnose and cure it in no time.

Chen spun around in his chair to face Curtaine. “The course is fully plotted now, and the cruise has been activated. Unless we encounter an asteroid field that’s strayed off course, it should be plain sailing all the way.”

“Good work, Wang. You’re being amazingly productive at the moment. Is there something you need to tell me?”

Chen smiled. “Oh, you know,” he said. “It’s going to be good to get home and sell off this silicone. I’m looking forward to finishing this trip and I guess I’m just in a good mood today.”

“Well, that’s great,” said Curtaine, returning the warm smile. “Now, how about a game of yoto?”

“You’re on!”

Miette carefully emptied the blood sample she had collected into a small sterile container. Not that care was needed as her every movement was perfect and precise. A tiny mechanical arm set into the wall swung itself into position and hovered over the top of the container. Miette typed in a few commands on the keypad which was set into the table and the arm lowered itself into the blood sample and extracted the information she needed. It would take over an hour for the tests to be complete and a further hour for Miette to analyse and cross reference the results, so for the time being she sat on a rigid plastic chair and looked around the room.

The small, white-walled laboratory was equipped with everything she required to treat the three humans on the ship. Every eventuality was catered for, except space. There was just about enough room for one man to lie down on the fold-away bench, but only if Miette remained standing.

Set into the walls were various tools that could be automated, using a central computer, to perform most medical tasks – pulse and blood pressure monitoring; administering drip feeds; checking temperatures and the like. More precise tasks, such as surgery, were carried out by Miette herself. Not that she had ever needed to perform any surgery – but she had the skills if they were required.

She liked her work but she was also aware that she had been pre-programmed to like her work. It had taken her some time to understand this, but now she accepted it – for the most part at least. According to her own data banks Miette was just over two years old. She had been built at a factory on the largely industrial planet of Kurelin VI, a planet located at the trade centre of the galaxy. Demand for her particular model had risen in recent years and she was pleased that she was so popular. The sales had even out-

stripped the most popular pleasure models. Having not been activated until she was safely in Curtaine's possession, she had never met another model the same as herself and often she considered what it would be like facing up to a doppelgänger of herself. Finding it difficult to display, or even process, emotional responses, Miette thought that she would find the encounter interesting, but could not be sure until she had actually experienced it for real.

A short, sharp buzz roused Miette and she turned to the laboratory display screen.

"Curious," she said.

In the main access room to the engines Amis Wellin flipped a switch and a display panel lit up above him. He reached up and ran his fingers over the readout. Everything appeared to be functioning within normal parameters and he nodded his head agreeably. Since their departure from the Altarnei sector trading planets, the engines had run so smoothly he had hardly needed to lift a finger. Following the Captain's command, he turned his attention to the holographic emitters. As he suspected, his own communication station was performing perfectly well and the holographic display was faultless. He turned to the main computer console and ran a system-wide check to search for any errors that might have been occurring.

A series of blips and beeps later, Wellin examined the information on the flat screen of the viewer.

"Hmm," he said, frowning his eyebrows. "This is strange."

He tapped a few command buttons and waited for a response. The viewer flashed once and a new series of figures and data appeared.

"This is not what I expected at all."

He turned to his communication station and flipped open the slim hatch to expose the holographic emitters and then he switched the station on.

"Captain?" he said.

An image of Captain Curtaine blinked into life in front of him and as it did it blurred and flickered.

"Yes, Amis. What is it?" said the image.

"Well, it seems you were right, sir. There is definitely some distortion on the image. I'm looking at the emitter right now but I can't see what's wrong."

"Have you opened a view-channel to me?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't see you at all."

"Is the image of me distorted?"

"No, Amis, I mean there's no image at all!"

Wellin pulled over a chair and sat down, shaking his head. This was a problem, all right. The

*Swinburne* had been in operation for nearly ten years and in all that time it had never malfunctioned seriously. Amis Wellin's job had been an easy one.

"Any theories?" said Curtaine.

"I don't know. Overuse, perhaps, though nothing seems to be worn out."

"Could it be some kind of bug in the system somewhere?"

"I've run a full system-wide diagnostic and it hasn't detected anything."

The Captain paused before responding. "Well," he said at last. "Just keep on it and let me know what you find."

"Aye, Captain," said Wellin and he closed the communication channel.

Wang Chen moved the flat round counter to an open square using a popular triangular move. He smiled at the Captain triumphantly.

"Don't get too overconfident, Wang," said Curtaine. "It's not over yet and you know I always win when I play yellow and green."

Chen leaned back in his seat and clasped his hands together over his chest, intertwining his fingers. "Ah," he said smugly, "but white and red have a better chance of victory, statistically speaking."

"That's still under debate," said Curtaine as he executed a move with one of his green counters which blocked seven of Chen's red pieces.

"Nice move," he said, "but watch this..." He moved a single white counter three positions to block half of Curtaine's counters. His position on the hexagonal board meant he had earned himself another move. He liberated a red counter and jumped five positions to successfully block the remainder of Curtaine's counters.

"That's yoto," he said with wide smile. "And game over!"

Curtaine stared at the board in disbelief. "You've won! You've won, but... but how?"

Chen smiled even wider. "Oh, you know, I've been studying some techniques."

"Indeed you have! I didn't see that coming at all. Well done, it was a good match."

Curtaine lifted himself out of his seat and stood over the board, studying the positions of the counters. "I think I'll have to..." he started to say but was cut off by the ship violently jerking to one side. He lost his footing and fell onto the stand holding the yoto board, scattering the coloured counters and the hexagonal checkerboard across the bridge.

"What the hell was that?" shouted Chen.

The ship rocked again and Curtaine was tossed from the stand to the floor. He landed heavily on his side and the wind was knocked from his lungs. Chen pulled his seat straps across his chest and spun his seat around to face his controls. He ran his hands over the controls and the overhead lights in the bridge flickered on and off. "We're losing power!" he called out.

Curtaine dragged himself to his feet and sat in his seat, strapping himself in as he did. He pulled a control panel out in front of him and examined it. "What do you mean we're losing power? From where?"

"I don't know, yet, Captain. Just a minute..."

"You don't have a minute!" Curtaine flicked a switch on his communication station. "Amis! What the hell's going on down there?"

There was no response.

"Amis? Amis! Get your ass up here!"

The ship jerked again, this time much more violently. Everything rocked and shuddered and a panel behind Curtaine blew open, showering him with sparks. He flicked another switch on the communication station and the flickering image of Miette appeared.

"Captain," she said flatly. "What's happening?"

"We don't know. We're losing power it seems."

"Why would that cause the ship to oscillate?"

"I don't know that either!" he yelled, losing his patience. "Go and find Amis, I can't contact him. Get him up here!"

He flipped the switch again, the holographic Miette vanished and he shoved the communication station away. "Wang," he shouted. "Update me." The *Swinburne* was shaking even more now and items were being scattered all over the bridge. A fire had started somewhere and automatic extinguishers came to life, filling the area with opaque carbon dioxide.

"As far as I can tell we're venting ion from the engine..."

"What?"

"That's not all, sir, we're losing power too. From everywhere. I don't know why..."

The ship jerked again and a maintenance kit floated past Curtaine at head height.

"Oh, and," continued Chen, "we've also lost internal gravitation."

"What's causing this?" shouted Curtaine.

"I think it may be something outside the ship," came the reply from Wellin who appeared at the hatchway.

"Strap yourself in, Amis, this is getting pretty rocky."

"I agree with Amis," said Chen. "I think we've been pulled off course by something, and whatever that something is, it's affecting the internal workings of the *Swinburne* too."

"Amis," said Curtaine.

Wellin sat in a seat and pulled the straps over himself. "It might be some kind of magnetic interference." He activated the panel in front of him and typed in some commands. "Or it could be a build up of sceleratus particles..."

"What particles?" said Curtaine through another blast from the extinguishers.

"Sceleratus particles are rare, but..."

He was cut off again as the ship rolled and shuddered violently. For a moment all the lights, including those on the many panels in the bridge went out and the cabin was lit only by the intermittent bursts of sparks. The noise was deafening as the hull groaned and creaked.

"We're spiralling out of control, Captain," shouted Chen as loud as he could manage.

"Where are we now?"

"This area is mostly uncharted..."

"Is there a planet we could land on?"

"I've got nothing here..."

"What?"

"Where are we?"

"What the hell is going on?"

"Miette?"

The hull's breached!"

"Where's Miette?"

"Captain!"

"Captain?"

"Aaaaaaaaahhhhhh!"

The *Swinburne*, powerless, on fire and plunged in relative darkness, banked and rolled, turned and dipped. It moved of its own accord and the crew were powerless to do anything but sit and pray for life. It had reached a critical stage when it hit the outskirts of the gravitational pull of a planet. It was tugged, slowly at first, then with increasing speed. Asteroids narrowly missed the fins of the ship and bounced harmlessly off the upper shell of the hull. By that point life support and oxygen levels on board had reached a critical level and the crew, with the exception of Miette, were all unconscious. Miette crouched on the floor of the bridge and, without hope, calmly switched herself off. Her body, impotent, slumped to the floor.

# Chapter Four

“What do you have for me?”

“Phase two is now ready for implementation.”

“Excellent. What’s your overall projection?”

“Overall projection?”

“How long will it take them?”

“It’s impossible to say, General, this is all a part of what we were hoping to observe.”

“Of course, but there has to be an extrapolation.”

“There are too many unknowns – too many random factors – but this is what we expected isn’t it?”

“Well, yes. I suppose...”

The early morning sun washed over Hanikku’s sleeping blue body and she opened her eyes slightly to greet the dawn. Yawning, she sat up and stretched. Her mouth was unbearably dry and she reached for a canister filled with water from her well and drank deeply. She tipped the remainder of the water over her head and allowed it run through her hair and down her dehydrated face. As she rubbed her wet eyes she massaged the lids and prepared herself mentally for another long day. Sitting in the mouth of the cave, she looked out over the flat, featureless landscape of Sabaku.

“Sabaku,” she whispered to herself. “Sabaku the wasteland.”

Her thoughts turning quickly to food, she rose and walked into her cave to check the stores. There was not much left, just a few strands of a leafy plant she had found a few days earlier. Knowing that this would not sustain her for long, she decided that she would spend the day hunting for insects and searching for more vegetation. There were still areas nearby that she had not yet fully explored. At one time she had started to draw a map of the area in the sand, but the sporadic winds had stolen it. Now, she kept a map only in her memory, but it was accurate enough.

Fully awake and refreshed, she packed a small satchel, tied two canisters of water to her belt and picked up her only weapon – a long pointed shaft of metal salvaged from the wreckage of her ship. She guessed it must have originally been part of a railing but it now served her well as a spear.

Leaving the cave she walked out into the desert in

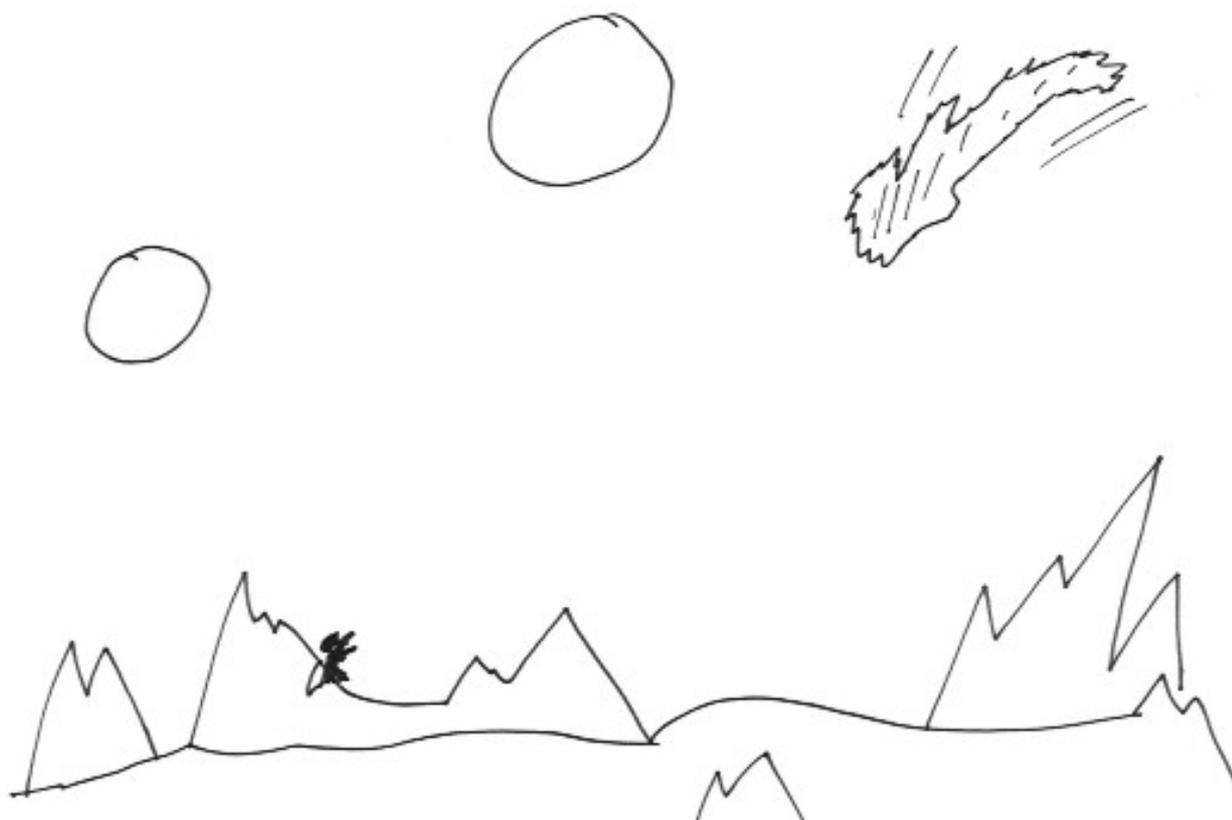
a westerly direction towards one of the lesser-explored areas that showed the most promise. Luck was on her side, as after only about half an hour of walking she discovered a small patch of densely leafed bushes. She pulled her analyser from her satchel and checked the plant. It did not contain many useful vitamins, but it would provide valuable carbohydrates. She harvested several large branches and tied them with a cord. Her mission a success, she started back to her cave. The next thing she saw shook her to her core.

In the distance, up in the sky, a meteor was burning its way through the thermosphere something like a hundred kilometres above her. It was a ball of fire the size of a space craft and, as far as she could tell, it was heading her way.

Instinctively, she ran back to her cave and reached it in a third of the time it had taken her to walk out to the bushes. An outcropping of rock near the dwelling provided an ideal standpoint for Hanikku to watch the approaching meteor. It was much closer to the planet’s surface now and she could see that she had misjudged its course. It looked now like it was going to hit the desert close by, but not close enough to present any real danger – although Hanikku’s knowledge of rocks impacting planets was limited. She could hear it now as well – it made a screeching sound like steam forcing its way from a geyser.

As she watched, the meteor screamed its way into a hillside a couple of kilometres away – impacting the dry earth with a loud thud which echoed across the plains. The ground beneath her feet trembled and a vast dust cloud billowed outwards from the impact site. Hanikku stepped backwards to her cave, her eyes never once leaving the dust cloud. *This may be an opportunity*, she thought. *There may be raw materials in that meteorite I could salvage. Metals perhaps. It could be an iron-rich siderite.* Without stopping to think it through any further, she set off towards the impact site.

Wary of possible radiation contamination, Hanikku peered over the brow of a low hill and studiously examined her multi-purpose analyser. The gamma levels were well within safety parameters and she stood to get a better view. The meteorite was elon-



gated and as big as a large house. It was covered in the fine red dust of the desert and partially embedded in the sand. A powdery ochre cloud still loomed around the site. Analyser still in hand, Hanikku descended the hill and approached the crater. Dust settled all over her matted hair and coated the blue skin of her exposed face and arms. She could feel it penetrating her mouth and nostrils and she pulled a bandanna from her satchel and tied it across the lower half of her face. Closer to the object she see that it had an uneven exterior with a fin running down the side she was closest to. She held her hand near the surface to test the heat levels. It was still very hot and she pulled her satchel up and dragged it across the meteorite with both hands, clearing away the thick dust. She was surprised to see that it had a shiny metal surface. She queried her analyser for a material scan and examined the results. She was surprised to see that it was predominantly composed of a titanium alloy and an idea came to mind. Switching the analyser to a different setting she examined it again.

“Life signs!” she gasped, muffled slightly under her bandanna. “This is no rock, it’s a ship!”

She stepped back and looked at the shape of it again while she wondered why she had not spotted it sooner. It was definitely a vessel of some kind, sleek but large enough for people and cargoes. There was even, clearly defined now in the new light of her

observations, a powerful-looking engine section at the rear. It did not look like a regular shuttle or even a transporter. *A freighter, perhaps*, she thought. Either way, she realised that it mattered little at the moment. There were survivors somewhere inside and her main priority was now getting them out somehow. She emptied out the contents of her satchel and wrapped it around her hands to shield them from the surface temperature. Using the bag as a rough cloth she frantically ran it over a section of the ship, clearing away the dust and searching for a door or any kind of opening into the ship.

“Is anyone in there?” she shouted as she searched. “Hello? Hello?”

There was no response as she continued brushing away the grime. After a couple of minutes she discovered the slim crack of a hatch. She brushed around it and soon found something that resembled an electronic-locking handle. Tugging at it proved fruitless and, frustrated, she banged her covered fists against the hull. A hiss made her jump back as cloudy white air fizzled out at several points along the hatch seal. Desperate, she kicked the hatch hard and it creaked and groaned in response. More air hissed out and settled thickly on the dark orange sand. One more firm kick proved successful as the hatch eased itself open a crack. Hanikku managed to get her hands around the thin opening and she pulled with all her strength. The pneumatics seemed to respond pos-



Hanikku in the eyes. "I, I, I," she said, her voice deep and irregular.

Hanikku had a thought. "You're an android," she said. "But I scanned life forms on board."

"My, my, my, my, name. Name, name is Mi, Mi, Miette," said Miette, her head and left shoulder twitching uncontrollably. "My name is Miette, I am a medical android. How may I assist you? Am I eligible? Am I, am I, am..."

"Look," said Hanikku, grabbing hold of the android's shoulders to steady her, "my name is Hanikku. You have crashed here. Where's the rest of the crew?"

Miette looked up the ladder and said, "Bri, bri, bri, bridge."

"Fine," she said and scrambled up the ladder, leaving the malfunctioning android behind. At the top of the ladder was a small, cramped room. From what she could see in the dim light it was definitely a bridge, with three pilot seats, many control panels and a shattered viewscreen. There was a thin layer of smoke in the air coming from a small fire burning in one corner and part of the room had caved in. Most of the panels were shattered and wires spilled out like exposed intestines while some of them intermittently spewed out showers of sparks. *There must still be some power here*, she thought, and she searched for something that might light the room. Her engineering experience paid off and she soon found a open panel which seemed to be for controlling power and lighting. She tapped a few buttons and flipped a switch underneath the panel. The bridge was immediately filled with light.

Sitting in one was of the chairs, and either unconscious or dead, was a powerfully-built human-looking man. He was wearing the tattered clothing of a trader. Hanikku put her hand to his neck and found a pulse. His face was scratched and battered and he was bleeding from a cut down the side of his cheek. Hanikku shook him gently.

"Are you awake?" she said. The man groaned and opened his right eye a crack.

"What?" he said.

"My name is Hanikku. You've crashed."

"Who are..."

"Hanikku. I'm here to help you."

The man turned his head to look around and winced in pain. "Wh, where's everyone else?" he mumbled.

"Your robot is below deck and malfunctioning."

"Miette?"

"Yes."

The man eased himself halfway out of his seat and

reached forward. "Wang," he said.

Hanikku looked at where he was gesturing and inspected the other seat. A figure was slumped limply over it. Hanikku checked him for a pulse and found none.

"I'm sorry," she said calmly.

The man slowly shook his head. "My name's James Curtaine," he said. "Welcome to the *Swinburne*."

"Er... thanks."

"Where the hell are we?"

Hanikku walked away from the dead man and looked around. "You're human aren't you?"

"Yes."

"I don't exactly know what planet this is or where we are but I'm concerned that this ship isn't safe. We should get out."

"Yes," said Curtaine and he pulled himself fully out of seat, obviously in some pain.

"Let me help you," said Hanikku and she steadied him by holding onto his arm and helped him gingerly descend the ladder. Miette was standing alone and staring into the opening that led to the engine room.

"Miette?" said Curtaine. "Are you all right?"

The android didn't move.

"Where's Amis?"

There was still no response and Curtaine turned to Hanikku. "Can you look in there? My engineer, Amis Wellin, should be there."

Hanikku carefully stepped around the debris that littered the floor and entered the room. It was dark inside and she called out. "Hey! Anyone in here?"

She was greeted by a low moan when she accidentally kicked a body on the floor. "He's here," she called back to Curtaine. "And he's alive."

Wellin resisted as Hanikku helped him to his feet. He was groggy and seemed unsure of where or who he was as he stumbled forward with Hanikku's aid. Curtaine jogged forward to help.

"Amis," he said. "Amis, are you injured?"

"Wh, what?" he said, his speech slurred.

"It's all right, old man, we're safe now, more or less."

"What happened?"

"It looks like you crashed," said Hanikku. "Look, I have a camp nearby. I think we should get out of here."

"But we have supplies here," said Curtaine.

"Later," said Hanikku. "You can always return when you've ensured that it's safe."

Curtaine nodded his head. "Agreed," he said. "All right, let's get out of here."

# Chapter Five

"So what now?"

"We wait, General. We wait and we observe."

Captain James Curtaine looked at the pyre with detachment as Wang Chen's body burned fiercely in the sand. The black smoke spiralled upwards and dissipated in the night air while a lonely tear worked its way down the side of Curtaine's nose and fell to the dry ground.

"So long, Wang," he said. "Wherever you are now I hope it's better than where I am."

With the help of Hanikku – the strangely beguiling sapphire-skinned woman from Antila – he had salvaged a few items and supplies from the *Swinburne* before it had collapsed in flames. Hanikku had also patched up his head and his leg, which he had injured at some point in the accident.

He tried to piece together what had happened but it was all somewhat hazy. There seemed to be no real tangible reason as to why they would have lost control of the *Swinburne* so easily. The knowledgeable Wellin, who sat at the entrance of Hanikku's cave nursing a bandaged forehead, working to fix the damaged Miette, had suggested something about scleratus particles. Curtaine was unsure of the exact science involved but he gathered it had something to do with a disruption of space and that had somehow affected the polarisation of the ship, causing the controls to become unresponsive. But Curtaine felt that there must have been something else to it, after all they must have been knocked off course a long, long way. He had absolutely no idea where they were. On the course that Wang had been navigating them there were no desert-class planets, so what planet were they on now? It was possible that after they had all been knocked unconscious they had drifted into a stray slipstream and travelled for hundreds of parsecs, and if that had happened then they could conceivably be on the other side of the galaxy altogether.

Hanikku's story had been similar to theirs. She had lost control of her ship and somehow ended up there. Curtaine began to wonder if perhaps there was some property of the planet that had pulled them here. Hanikku, also far from home, had called this planet Sabaku, which he gathered meant something in-between wasteland and solitude. It seemed apt.

"Hey, Captain!" came a shout from Wellin. Curtaine nodded his head in respect to the blazing body of Chen and turned to walk the short distance back to the cave.

Wellin was still working on the limp body of Miette. "How's it going with her?" said Curtaine.

"Well, it's deactivated at the moment, but it's going to be all right."

"It?"

"Sorry, James," said Wellin with genuine regret. "I meant *she*..."

Curtaine sighed and sat down in the dirty sand. "So what's the damage?" he said.

"It's mostly superficial – there's no actual damage to her structure at all. I think that she maybe just took a couple of hard knocks to the head and that disrupted her processors. I've reset all of her main systems without losing any of her memory. The main trouble was with her motor-neurone system and with her vocal synthesisers, but I think I've repaired them now."

"Good work, Amis. Boot her up then."

"Aye, sir." Wellin carefully sat Miette against the exterior rock wall of the cave and straightened out her white jump-suit, which had been torn only in couple of places and dirtied even less. He carefully brushed her long synthetic dark hair from her face and reached behind her neck to touch the tiny activation button. As he did, Miette's body shuddered slightly as if fitting for a second and then she slowly raised her head and opened her eyes. She looked first at Curtaine and then at Wellin and then back at Curtaine. The Captain looked directly into her shining blue eyes. "Are you with us?" he said gently.

Miette opened her mouth and spoke but no sound came out.

"Amis?" said Curtaine.

"Wait."

She closed her eyes for a moment and then opened them and opened her mouth again. "Yes, James," she said in a pitch-perfect voice. "I am most definitely with you."

Curtaine laughed and slapped Wellin on the shoulder. "Ha! Well done, Amis, I owe you one."

"You owe me ten thousand credits!"

"What happened, James?" said Miette. "Where are we? Are you injured? Your hand... And you, Amis,

what have you done to your head?"

"It's good to have you back, Miette," said Curtaine with a warm smile. "There'll be plenty of time for medical treatment later. Are your systems functioning within correct parameters now?"

Miette paused for a moment before responding. "As far as I can tell, yes. Was I damaged?"

"Nothing serious," said Wellin. "Everything should be all right now."

"And where's Wang Chen?"

Curtaine and Wellin looked at each other apprehensively before they explained to the android exactly what had happened to them all.

Hanikku returned to the cave in the early night with armfuls of dry grasses and a thin leafy-looking plant.

"There was no sign of any living creatures I'm afraid, so we're eating vegetarian tonight unless you have some of those protein supplements left."

Curtaine and Wellin both stood and brushed sand and dust from their clothing to greet Hanikku. "I'll see what I can find," said Wellin and wandered off to the stack of things they had salvaged from the *Swinburne*.

"I'm glad you're back safe," said Curtaine. "I've boiled some water."

"I'm fine," said Hanikku and she handed him a bunch of the dry grass. "Here, put these in the water to soften them. They're not much, but they have some nutritional value."

"Sure."

"How's your robot?"

"Miette? She's fine now. She's away in the desert analysing the sand for any clues about water sources and whatever else she might find."

Hanikku sat on the ground in front of the pot of boiling water suspended over a small campfire. "I think your robot may be useful."

Curtaine sat down as well and waited for a moment to compose his response properly. "She's more than just a robot," he said. "She's my friend and companion."

"Oh?"

"I think she would take offence at being called a robot."

"But..."

"It's all right, but please show her some proper human respect."

Hanikku laughed at this. "I'm not human," she said.

Wellin returned with a small packet of something. "These are all that's left," he said.

"Toss them in," said Curtaine.

Wellin tore open the packet of protein capsules and emptied it into the pot. The cooling air of the desert night wafted steam from the pot and sent it swirling into the air. Curtaine followed its course and looked up at the sky at the two lunar bodies. "Do the two moons affect the conditions here?"

"I haven't noticed anything strange. There have been a couple of violent sandstorms but that's about it. There are no oceans that I have seen."



"Would they affect the drift of the sand, Amis?"

Wellin sat back down and looked up the moons. "I'm no geologist, James. I don't know."

Hanikku stirred the thin stew and looked at Curtaine, surveying him. To the extrovert Antilan, the humans seemed aloof and detached. She was curious about them and she had not yet decided whether she could trust them completely. They were all in the same desperate situation and she *had* helped them – it seemed only logical that they should cooperate.

"What is your homeworld like, James," she said.

"We're from a planet called Memory. It's the fifth planet orbiting the star Ifalna, have you heard of it?"

Hanikku nodded. "Yes, I know of the Ifalna star. What is it like there, on Memory?"

"It's a beautiful place. Temperate, mostly ocean, clean, an intact ozone layer, lots of diverse life, what can I say? It's home, I love it."

"Sounds nice."

Wellin butted in. "If we ever get off this hell-hole, you'll have to come and visit us there!"

Hanikku laughed. "I don't like the way you say *if*."

Out of the shadows, Miette appeared holding a plastic bag of sand in her hand. She startled Hanikku who was still having some trouble with her presence.

"Hello," said Miette calmly.

"Hey," said Curtaine. "Have you had any success?"

"Some," she said. "The moisture is definitely heightened directly to the south of here. I will return there tomorrow to check the results again."

"We've made a stew," said Hanikku, trying to sound congenial. "Although it doesn't smell too great."

Miette sat down and carefully placed her soil samples on the ground. "I lack olfactory senses," she said matter-of-factly. "And, not having an internal digestion system, I do not eat."

Curtaine laughed so loudly that it made Hanikku jump. "That's a good one!" he roared.



"I don't understand what's funny," said Miette. "Have I missed part of this conversation?"

"Hanikku here seems to be a little uncomfortable by you being so human," said Curtaine, still sniggering.

"Why is that?"

"I suppose I am a little threatened," said Hanikku defensively. "It's just that I assume... well, you're a robot, right? But you seem so real. And you are a very beautiful woman, so it's hard not to feel apprehensive with you around."

Miette took no offence at Hanikku's words. "I am technically, an android. A robot can take any form, whereas an android is specifically anthropomorphic. And I'm not sure whether or not I am beautiful, as my aesthetic appreciation of form changes with object, subject and context." She paused and looked around for a moment before her eyes settled on Hanikku again. "I was constructed as a female because most people find dealing with artificial intelligence less threatening when it is contained within a female shell. But, realistically, I am sexless. It is not my intention to threaten you. If it helps, you have my permission to perceive me as a robot or a machine. I will not be insulted."

"I don't see you as a machine," said Curtaine, affectionately patting her on the knee. Miette looked quizzically at him.

"I'm sorry," said Hanikku. "My experience with artificial intelligence is limited..."

Miette did not reply and instead turned her attentions to her soil samples.

"Hmm," said Wellin. "Is that stew ready yet?"

Later, when Sabaku was well into its night, Curtaine sat with Miette a distance from the cave as they studied the dune landscape lit divinely by the two moons. A small breeze had kicked up, and particles of sand were being blown gently from the tops of the low hills. The vista looked like it had been invaded by hundreds of tiny fairies, all fluttering around in the twilight night searching for the perfect place to find slumber.

"I'm sorry if I behaved improperly earlier," said Miette.

Curtaine shook himself from his reverie and turned to face her. "You didn't misbehave," he said. "You've just got to understand that you are a faultless creation, perfect in every way, and some people will be in awe of you when they meet you for the first time."

"But I have interacted with many beings belonging to many different species since I joined you. Why

have I not encountered this behaviour before?"

"Well, like I say, you're perfect. I don't mean to be impersonal or anything, but you are an impeccable imitation of a human, and most people you meet are not going to be able to tell the difference. But Hanikku saw you malfunctioning, so she knew what you were."

Miette fell silent for a minute before saying, "This is like prejudice."

"Well, I suppose that's exactly what it is."

She lifted her arm and placed a slender hand on Curtaine's forearm. "Some planets have a comprehensive rights arrangements for androids and for any other object possessed with intelligence and self-awareness."

"Perhaps Antila doesn't have those rights in its society."

"I've checked my data banks and it does not..."

"There you go then. You'll just have be patient with Hanikku. She'll like you well enough once she gets used to you."

"Yes," said Miette, smiling. "I hope so."

Curtaine stood and looked out at the moonlit landscape. Although the place looked fairly inhospitable and although it might have been as treacherous as Hanikku said it was, he couldn't help but admire the simplicity of it all. It was so quiet and serene. Despite the lack of water and food, he had not yet seen anything that he could describe as being a *threat*. He laughed and looked down at Miette. "It's a bit like a vacation planet, you know."

Miette stood up to see what he was looking at. After a few moments she said, "Why do you say that?"

"Look at it," he said, making a sweeping gesture with his arm. "It's exquisite here. The landscape is so calming and peaceful. If the land was a bit more arable this is exactly the sort of planet I would choose to retire on." He paused and sighed deeply. "It's beautiful," he said.

Miette looked at what Curtaine was looking at and somewhere deep inside, calculations took place at a speed beyond those any human synapses could manage. In a split second she analysed meanings for the adjective *beautiful* and all references to it and attempted to match them to what she viewed before her.

"It's an aesthetic quality, isn't it?" she said.

"I suppose so, yes," said Curtaine. "But there's more. It's not something you can really analyse, Miette, no matter how good you are at it." He swivelled to face her and placed his large hands on her shoulders, turning her to face an arrangement of low

dunes just to the right of where he stood. "Look at those dunes," he said. "Tell me what you see."

Miette looked and calculated and looked and analysed and said, "I see sand dunes being disturbed by the breeze. I see moonlight being refracted by the many silicon grains. I see complex chemicals reacting with the elements in the air and the sand. I see..."

Curtaine cut her off, "Do you see anything more abstract?"

"Beauty?" she said.

"Yes, beauty. What do you see that shows you are witnessing a unique kind of beauty?"

"James, I don't think my functions extend to this area of thought."

Curtaine sighed again, this time through frustration. "I don't suppose it does, but you have the capacity to learn don't you?"

"Yes, but..."

"We'll keep going with this. Given time you'll be appreciating music and art." He smiled warmly at her. "I'm sure of it. Come on, let's get back to the cave, it's pretty late."

Miette nodded and as they walked back through the cold sand she touched his arm again. "James?" she said.

"Yes?"

"It's something that Hanikku said earlier..."

"Yes, what is it?"

"She said, 'you are a very beautiful woman'. Am I? Am I what beauty is?"

Curtaine stopped and looked at her. "Come on now," he said smiling. "You're embarrassing me."

Miette tightened her grip on his arm a little. "Do you find me attractive?"

"What would that mean to you?"

"I want to feel human."

"I don't see you as being anything other than that, Miette," he said, no longer smiling. "And yes, you are very, very attractive."

She didn't respond this, she just stared blankly at him. He wondered what was happening inside her head, or processors, or data banks or whatever.

"Thank you," she said finally. "That means much to me."

As they continued back to the cave Curtaine held her hand and she squeezed it back reciprocally. He could not guess what she might have been thinking. She was, after all, an android, not even truly female. But he knew that his eyes deceived him, and, to some extent, he welcomed the deception. It was not unheard of, for a human to fall in love with an android. *But is it possible*, he thought, *for an android to fall in love with a human?*

# Chapter Six

"I see that they are bonding!"

"It's what we expected..."

"When are you going to introduce their next little friend?"

"Ha, ha, ha! There's nothing little about it!"

"So it will be a surprise?"

"Oh, yes."

"And what about that droid? Will it be able to predict it? Will it see it coming if it observes the landscape too closely?"

"We have been extremely careful, General. We always knew that the android would be an integral part of this and I can guarantee you that they won't know what hit them until it's far too late."

"I'll hold you to that guarantee!"

Two weeks had passed on the desolate planet and Hanikku was gathering up all the supplies that the small group of three – four if you counted the android – had to their names. It was not much and she began to worry that having three mouths to feed was putting too great a strain on the already meagre resources. It was early morning and she inspected the dew collectors that Miette had constructed around the circumference of the cave. The well in the cave had dried up several days ago and water was extremely scarce. She harvested about one litre from the assorted collectors and drained it into a canister. She knew that this would not be enough to satiate the group for even one quarter of the day. Survival had become critical and she wondered if they would ever be able to escape the surface of this accursed sphere.

In the time she had spent with the traders she had grown to like and trust them more. She had even come to enjoy the company of the android, Miette, and occasionally forgot that she was even a machine at all. And the engineer, Amis Wellin, had helped them all considerably – aiding Miette in constructing the new dew collectors and providing some invaluable analysis of their surroundings. He had discovered many things that Hanikku had overlooked. Although he claimed to be a standard engineer he had theorised on many aspects of Sabaku. But it was with the leader of their crew, Captain James Curtaine, that she had experienced the most difficulty. It was not easy to dislike the man, but she had

found several ways. He was knowledgeable, he was forgiving, he was easy-going and hard working at the same time. In short, he was the perfect person to be stranded on a desert planet with, and this is what irked Hanikku so much. In a different life she could have easily seen herself admiring James Curtaine for what he was, but here, in this mini pressure-cooker of a society it was very different. She hated the man with a vengeance, and yet she did not know why.

Coughing announced the emergence of Wellin from the cave.

"Good morning," he said. "Is there any water?"

Hanikku shrugged. "Not much," she said. "Not enough to soak us for the day, or even for the remainder of the morning."

"Hmm," he said, stretching his large chest. He was a big man, perhaps once a little overweight, but he had lost weight since his arrival on Sabaku. He scratched his balding head and yawned. "Miette will locate us some water."

"She's out there now, somewhere. She's already searching for a supply."

"I have confidence in her, she'll come up with something. She always does."

Hanikku looked at the solitary canister of water. "Yes," she said quietly.

The red sun was rising and the dry ground glowed in its light. The days on Sabaku were short but that did diminish their power. At midday the temperatures became almost unbearable and it made it difficult to forage for anything. Obviously, Sabaku's wildlife seemed to prefer the night time and so hunting for large foul-tasting insects was confined mainly to the nocturnal hours, and this made it difficult to catch the daily quota of protein.

"If only it weren't so dry here," said Hanikku. "This place might not be so bad."

"That's stating the obvious," said Wellin with a laugh.

"What's up?" came a call. It was Curtaine emerging from the cave.

"Good morning, James," said Wellin. "Not much is what's up. Although it seems we're running low on supplies – namely water."

"Ah," said Curtaine. "Where's Miette?"

"She's out searching for water," said Hanikku.

Curtaine smiled at her. "And what's that in your

beautiful blue hands?"

Hanikku bit her tongue and threw the canister to him. He caught it deftly and said, "Looks like we've only got about a litre here. What are we like for food?"

"We're just about out," said Hanikku. "All the resources near here have been used up. There's nothing within a ten kilometre radius that could keep us alive for more than about another week."

"What about that weed you've been cultivating?"

Hanikku looked shocked. "Antila?"

"That's right," said Curtaine with a wry smile. "It looks big and leafy enough to eat now."

She shook her head and threw her arms up in defence. "No way, not a chance."

"Aw, come on."

"Ah, ah! That's a symbol and it's not for consumption."

"A symbol?" interjected Wellin.

"A sign of life," said Hanikku. "I've been caring that plant for weeks – it's like a friend to me."

Footsteps shook the party from its terse discussion as Miette approached from the dunes. She held in her arms a large rock-like object which she tossed to the dusty ground as she reached them. It landed with a thud and rolled to Curtaine's feet where it stopped dead. He looked down at it. It was roughly ovoid and about the size of a large cooking pot with small grey nodules all over its black surface. "What the hell is this?" he said, touching its surface with the sole of his boot. It was soft.

"I've been running," said Miette.

"What?" said Wellin

"I ran south for sixty kilometres earlier this morning."

"Are you malfunctioning again?" said Wellin.

"Certainly not," said Miette.

"And what?" said Curtaine.

"What?" she said.

"And what did you find? What is this thing?" Curtaine nudged it again with his foot.

Hanikku walked over to the object to get a better look. It looked almost as if it was moving. Its



surface was gently rippling in the sun, and it smelled strongly of salt and seaweed.

"It's a fish!" said Hanikku.

"That's correct," said Miette. "Well, almost correct. It's a cephalopod." And, as if on cue, an orifice opened up at its crest and five lengthy tentacles pushed their way out and inspected the sand and Curtaine's feet.

"A what?" he said, backing away a little.

"It's a sea-dwelling creature."

"What?" said Hanikku, Curtaine and Wellin together.

"Sixty kilometres south of this cave, and obscured by dunes, there is an ocean."

"An ocean?" said Hanikku.

"The ecology of this planet is truly amazing, isn't it? That there could be an ocean here and yet no water vapour or precipitation. It is somewhat stagnant, but there is flora surrounding it and fauna in it and I believe that the water could be treated and used for drinking."

"An ocean," echoed Curtaine and he sat down on the ground to inspect the sluggish sea creature.

"What did you say this was?"

"We should relocate," said Miette.

As the group approached the shoreline, the smell hit them. It was like rotting meat. The area was mostly marshland and rich with vegetation. After the long days spent in the desert the profusion of green was astonishing. Low, thickly-leaved trees scattered the area and there were many plants that were cactus-like but with no spikes. The ground was mostly covered with short, thick grass that looked, in places, almost like moss. The ocean, if you could call it that, started where they stood and ended at the far horizon. The water seethed and was covered at the shore with a scum of seaweed that was rotting in the sun. Bubbles sporadically rose to the surface and broke with audible pops. In the far distance, beyond the ocean, was a range of low rocky hills that started green but ended red at their summits.

Curtaine grimaced at the stench and held his hand over his nose and mouth. "We can't migrate here. It stinks!"

"I'm sorry," said Miette. "But need I remind you that..."

"Yeah, I know, you have no sense of smell. Remind me to get that altered if we ever get off this planet."

"It doesn't smell too good, I agree," said Hanikku. "But just look at all the growth here. I have been scavenging food all this time and there was this oasis

practically on my doorstep."

"There are several areas suitable for camp nearby. If the smell here is too much for you all we need not set a base up at the shore," said Miette.

"I don't mind the smell," said Wellin, stepping cautiously over a bump of mossy vegetation. "It's kind of organic and earthy."

"Earthy!" said Curtaine, his eyes wide. "It smells like something died here."

"Which, in effect, it has," said Miette. "There are several areas here where the profusion of vegetation has become too much for the soil to sustain it. The earth here is still predominantly sand and not best equipped to nurturing plant-life. The abundance of life here is due to the water source and to an inexhaustible supply of compost. It seems that with so much life some of it has to succeed and some of it has to fail. Forty-three percent of what you see here is dead, rotting and feeding new life."

"Forty-three percent?" said Wellin.

"That's an approximation, of course."

Hanikku looked around at the mulch and the flora. "Are there any creatures?" she asked.

"From my preliminary studies I have identified some twenty-two varieties of fish, crustacean and cephalopod that thrive in the nutrient-rich water of the ocean – although it should more properly be called a salt lake."

"Any insects or mammals?"

"None that I have seen."

"Is the lake tidal?" asked Wellin.

"Yes it is, but the ebb and flow is only a few metres."

"Well then," said Curtaine, gingerly removing his hand from his face. "Let's find an area we can call home before the sun sets."

The four walked a way back from the shore until the scent of decay had dimmed. Miette spotted a patch of dry ground that was big enough to accommodate them and all their supplies, which they had carted the distance using flat panels salvaged from the *Swinburne* pulled on lengths of plastic fibre also from the wreck. The patch had three palm-like trees around it and it looked like it would be suitable to suspend a covering over if they could use some of the large leaves from the palms.

"This will do fine," said Curtaine.

"I'll prepare the filters to purify and disinfect the water from the lake," said Miette.

"Most of my filters are still functioning," said Hanikku. "I'll help."

Hanikku and Miette opened up various containers until they had found what they needed and then they

headed off the lake. Wellin sat down heavily on the ground and opened the canister that contained the last of their current supply of water. He took a swig and then handed it to Curtaine who snatched it eagerly and drank from it while he sat down next to Wellin.

"What do you think?" said Wellin.

"It's a damn sight better than where we were before."

"You've got that right."

Curtaine replaced the lid on the canister and set it down on the dry sand. "Have you got a plan?" he said.

"A plan?"

"A plan to get us off this planet."

Wellin laughed. "There's always a plan," he said. "But it hasn't presented itself to me yet."

"Have you given any more thought to what happened to the ship?"

"Yes I have."

"The scleratus particles?"

Wellin sat back on his elbows and stretched out his legs. "That's right, although they're just theoretical really."

Curtaine unconsciously copied Wellin's posture and yawned as he did. "Go on," he said.

"Well..." He paused before continuing. "They are supposed to exist only in slipstreams and they kind of bind the whole tunnel through space-time together. But, if they escape from the slipstream, then they can cause trouble."

"Trouble?" said Curtaine, frowning.

"They cause disruptions in space, distort things. I suppose you could say that they distort reality. But don't ask me why because I don't know."

"You said that they must've done something to distort the polarisation of the *Swinburne*."

"That's right. Oh, I don't know, James. I'm an engineer, I'm a practical man – not much for complex theories."

Curtaine patted him companionably on the shoulder. "It's okay, old man. Why don't we strip some of these leaves and make a shelter before the girls get back?"

"Girls?" said Wellin.

"Just a term of endearment," said Curtaine with a laugh.

Miette strained the scum from the surface of the glutinous water and dipped a canister in. She carefully tapped a button on the lid of the container and the automatic filters sprang to life. The canister buzzed and blipped and she looked at the lights

around its rim.

“The water is not as contaminated as I feared,” she said to Hanikku who was hunched over the edge of the water, scanning it with Miette’s portable analyser. “The filters in your canisters have no problems in rendering it safe.”

Hanikku looked up from what she was doing. “I can’t believe that the stench of rotting vegetation here has not infected the water more.” She looked at the surface of the elongated analyser. “There’s quite a heavy mineral content in this liquid here, and some traces of proteins. It’s almost a meal in itself!”

“You may be right,” said Miette. “I will fill the remainder of the canisters and containers and then we should head back.”

Hanikku looked out over the surface of the lake. “I think we should go fishing first,” she said.

“We do not have any equipment.”

“I see some shellfish,” said Hanikku. “Or at least they look like shellfish.”

“Where?” said Miette, standing up to get a better look. Hanikku pointed to a spot about ten metres away and Miette looked at where she pointed. There seemed to be, floating on the strata of the green scum, several large conical-shaped objects. They were a pale, creamy colour and they bobbed gently on the undulating surface.

“How deep is this water?” asked Hanikku.

“It would be shallow enough for you to wade out to those crustaceans if you wanted to.”

“Fine,” she said and carefully placed the analyser on the dry ground before stumbling out into the water. “Yuck! It’s sticky!”

“It’s perfectly safe, there are no toxins present.”

Hanikku plunged further in and paddled her way towards the creatures. She had to brush and scrape away several layers of seaweed froth from her arms and breast before she reached the shells. She scooped up as many as she could carry and then made her way back to the shore. Miette watched with unwavering curiosity as Hanikku dropped the shellfish to the ground.

“I count fifteen,” said Miette.

“Are they safe to eat?”

Miette dropped to knees and grabbed the multi-purpose analyser. Taking a sample from one of the creatures she tapped at the buttons and waited for the results. “They are perfectly safe,” she said after a moment. “Rich in Vitamin B and a quite high fat content. Lots of cholesterol! This is just what you need after such a meagre diet over the past few months. They could be eaten raw, but they would probably be more palatable if you removed the meat

from the shell and either boiled them or cooked them over a flame.”

“Thank you for your culinary advice!” laughed Hanikku. “Have you collected enough water for our immediate needs?”

“Yes.”

“Then let’s get back to the boys.”

“Boys?” said Miette, raising a questioning eyebrow.

“It’s just an affectionate turn of phrase,” said Hanikku, smiling. “Come on.” She gathered up the shellfish and the two of them walked back to the base camp.

As they approached the clearing they were surprised to see that Curtaine and Wellin had organised their supplies and erected something that looked much like a shelter using long, broad leaves to construct a low roof.

“Wow!” said Hanikku. “This looks great. A real home-from-home.”

“It will do for the moment, while we consider our options,” said Wellin.

“What have you got there?” said Curtaine, looking away from away from a palm leaf he was busily binding with thin cord.

“Clean drinking water,” said Miette.

“And some unidentified, but safe to eat, shellfish,” added Hanikku, holding one out on her blue hand for Curtaine to inspect.

“Excellent,” he said, stopping what he was doing. “Ah, Wellin?”

“Yes Captain!” he saluted. “One barbecue coming up!”

Night drew in on Sabaku and Miette stared in the flames of the small fire as the three others ate shellfish meat seared over the blaze. The sounds of the surrounding wildlife encroached on the group. It was an ambient mixture of creaks and groans from the unusual plant life and the gentle lap and ripple of the nearby ocean. The sounds barely invaded her consciousness as she accessed her numerous data stores, calculating their survival chances; the length of time the food and water resources would sustain the group; the relative chances that a passing ship would scan the planet and discover and rescue them – she gave them odds of two-hundred and seventy-two thousand, six-hundred and ninety-two to one of being located and rescued anytime within the next ten years.

Wellin was the first to retire, drinking some water and then curling himself up into a ball at the base of one of the palm trees.

"Are you tired?" Curtaine asked Hanikku.

"Not especially," she said. "The days here are short and the days on Antila are long – about twice as long as they are here."

"Well I'm beat," he said. He stretched his arms out above his head and then ran his fingers through his messy blonde hair. With a long, noisy yawn he bade Hanikku goodnight and curled up near to Wellin. The night was warm and there would be no need for coverings or blankets. Wellin had salvaged five fire blankets from the wreck of the *Swinburne*, but they remained bundled up with the rest of the supplies.

Hanikku looked up at the night sky. Only one of Sabaku's two moons was visible tonight and the sky was cloud-free as always. "The air smells cleaner now," she whispered to Miette.

Miette jerked her head up quickly to face Hanikku. "I'm sorry," she said. "I was processing. What did you say?"

"I said that the air smells much cleaner. The smell of decomposition isn't so bad now."

Miette looked around. "The wind has changed direction," she said impartially.

Hanikku sighed at the android's lack of effective chit-chat skills. "Well, I guess I should at least attempt to get some sleep too. We did a lot today."

"Yes," said Miette, and as Hanikku found a place to lay down Miette switched herself to slumber mode.

In the latter half of the night Miette's internal sensors burst into life. She opened her eyes and quickly stood up. The other three were sleeping and she dashed to Curtaine to shake him awake.

"James, James!" she said.

He rolled over and half-opened his eyes. "Miette?" he said. "What's the matter?"

Her face had transformed into an expression of fear. "Something's wrong. Wake everyone up."

Curtaine rose and woke Wellin and Hanikku while Miette crouched on the ground, the palms of her hands spread out wide on the sand.

"What's going on?" said Wellin, rubbing his eyes.

"Miette says something's not right. We have to get up."

After a moment or two the three of them stood, still only half-awake at the side of Miette.

"What is it, Miette?" said Curtaine. "What's wrong?"

At first, she did not reply, she just crouched as if in deep meditation.

"Miette, what's wrong?" repeated Curtaine.

"I believe..." she said.

"Yes?" said Hanikku.

"I believe that we are about to experience an earthquake."

"What!"

"I can sense tremors in the ground and they are growing stronger. We need to get far away from here, and fast."

"By Meludar!" exclaimed Hanikku. "An earthquake?"

"How long do we have?" said Curtaine.

"Minutes only. Grab what you can and let's move."

The group sprang into action. It was still dark but it looked like the sun was just beginning to rise and, with the camp fire all burned out, it provided just enough illumination for them to be able to co-ordinate themselves.

"Do you have water and medical supplies?" said Miette, hurriedly.

"Yes," said Wellin, obviously panicked.

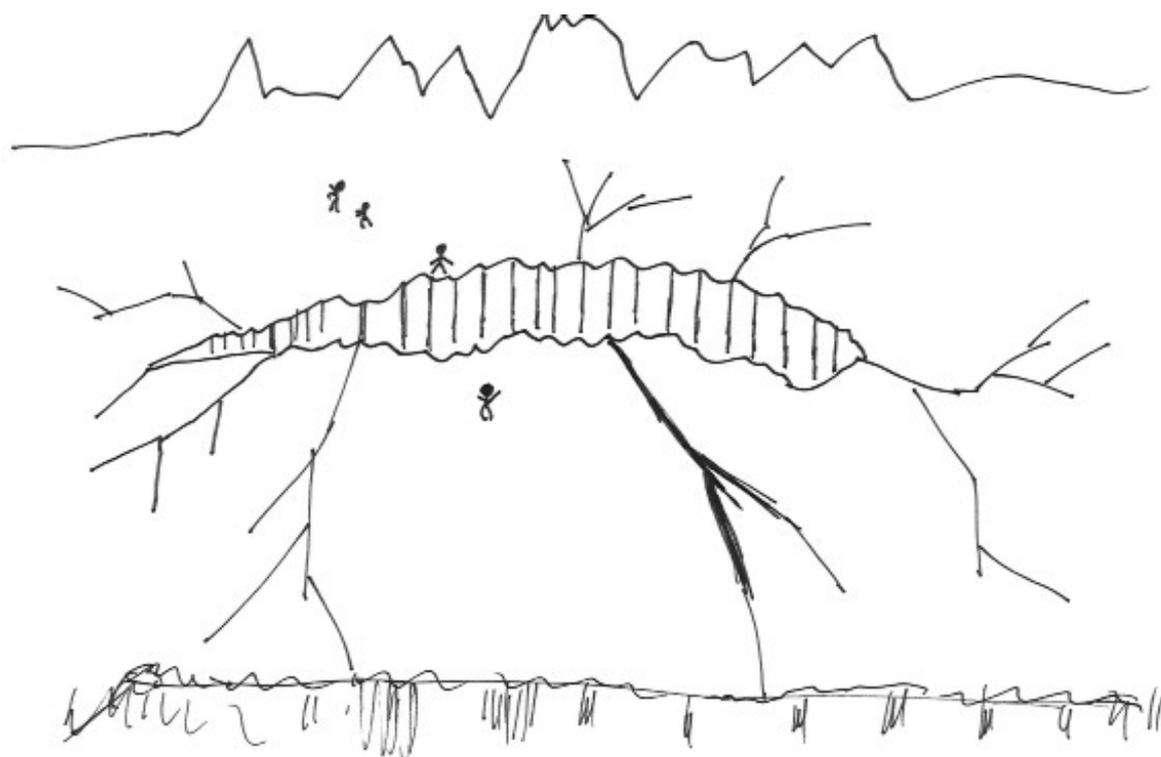
"Then that's enough. Let's move." And with that she started to run inland away from the lake. The others followed, running as fast as they could but finding it difficult to keep up with the engineered, athletic legs of Miette. After only a few seconds Curtaine felt the ground beneath his racing feet begin to tremble.

"I can feel it now!" he bellowed ahead to Miette.

"Just keep moving!"

Then the sound started and the ground began to shake more violently. It sounded like a deep scraping of rock against rock. Hanikku lost her footing on the dry earth as it shook and Curtaine stopped to help her up. "Come on," he shouted. He grabbed her arms and pulled her to her feet, roughly pushing her on. He looked ahead and saw that Miette was a fair distance away. Wellin, surprisingly, despite his weight and size, was not too far behind her. Lost for a moment in the rush of adrenaline, Curtaine failed to notice the fissure that was opening up ahead of him and Hanikku, and it was with a yell that he clumsily tripped over its lip and sent himself flying over the gap to land heavily on the other side. The items he was carrying were scattered everywhere and Hanikku came to halt at the edge of the widening crack. The side she stood on was lifting itself up. "Hey!" she shouted at Curtaine, desperately trying to keep her footing. "Are you all right?" But he just lay there motionless. "Hey!" she shouted again and saw that Wellin and Miette had stopped and were running back to where Curtaine lay.

The fracture in the ground was spreading away on either side and zigzagging its way through the land-



scape. The rock edge on which she stood was now jarring violently and she had to drop to her knees in order to stop herself falling in.

“You’ll have to jump,” cried Wellin over the deafening noise as he approached. “You’ll have to jump before it gets too wide!”

Miette stepped forward and Hanikku nodded. She took a few steps back and then ran forward to launch herself over the edge of the gap. She flew through the air – a blue blur against all the crimson dust and sand that had been kicked up into the air – and landed in the grasping arms of Miette. The wind was knocked from her lungs with the impact and she gasped for air.

“Good catch,” said Wellin. Miette placed her carefully on the ground which still shuddered and ran over to Curtaine. She checked his pulse – he was alive but unconscious – and she picked him up with ease and slung him over her shoulder like an oversized rag doll. “Wellin,” she shouted. “Help her up, and let’s go!”

Wellin dragged Hanikku to her feet and the group continued on, a little slower than before. Still the ground shook and each of them fell several times, Wellin managing to draw blood from fresh cuts and grazes on his hands and knees. Thick red dust clouds choked the air and the sound penetrating their very beings. In less than one minute they were unable to see anything and Wellin called them to halt.

“This is crazy!” he yelled. “We don’t even know where we’re going. We could be going around in

circles for all we know. We could be heading right back to that fissure.”

Hanikku coughed, inhaling too much of the dust. “He’s right,” she choked. “I think we should just stay put until it’s over.”

Miette eased Curtaine to the ground and knelt down to touch the earth with her hands. “I think the shudders are decreasing. I will sense any more ruptures should one start near us. All right, stay put for the moment.”

Hanikku looked at Wellin’s torn hands. The blood from his scratches was unidentifiable as it was mingled together with the red dust, but she easily see the flayed skin. “You are injured,” she said, still having to raise her voice above the din of the quake. “Let me help you.”

“I’m fine. Why don’t you see to the Captain?”

Hanikku crawled over to where Curtaine lay and attempted to rouse him.

“Leave him!” snapped Miette, completely out of character.

Hanikku backed away a little, partly shocked and partly angry. Wellin looked at Miette.

“Miette?”

“It’s over,” she said.

“What?”

And as abruptly as it had started the ground ceased to tremor and the noise dwindled away into silence. Thick red dust fell down like exotic snow and covered them with a blanket of cherry-coloured ashes.

# Chapter Seven

"Wonderful stuff, Director Ermanno. Truly wonderful."

"I knew you would appreciate it, General."

"How did you possibly manage to generate an earthquake?"

"We have remotes in the planet's plates, of course!"

"Truly wonderful. Would you say that it was a success?"

"I think they seem suitably softened now. The humans lost one of their crew in the crash, as we witnessed, and I think the android may be cracking under the pressure."

"Cracking or evolving?"

"Evolving! That you could even suggest such a thing..."

"And what about your Antilan?"

"She's not my Antilan."

"I only meant that she was, you know..."

"One of my kind?"

"Yes, well, whatever. You were saying that they are now *suitably softened*."

"Yes, indeed. Please excuse my impudence."

"You are excused. Do continue."

"Ah, yes. As I was saying, they are now suitably softened and ready for the final phase."

"The weapon? At last?"

"Yes, General, the weapon."

"How wonderful."

"General?"

"Yes, Director."

"What was all that stuff about sceleratus particles?"

"I have absolutely no idea!"

"Ha, ha, ha, ha!"

"Ha!"

Curtaine was woken with a kiss. He tried to open his eyes but found them to be stuck shut.

"Hey, take it easy!" It was Miette's voice.

"Wh, what?"

"Hush," she said softly. "It's all right. You jumped and landed badly, remember?"

"Not really."

"You hit your head."

He felt a wet cloth brush over his eyes and he became aware of how painfully dry his mouth was.

As if reading his mind he felt Miette's hand lift his head slightly and a cup was pressed to his lips. "Drink this," she said. He took a cautious sip and then grabbed the cup and drank the whole lot in one go.

"Take it easy," she said, and then, "Try opening your eyes."

He opened first his right eye and then his left and looked straight into the dust-red face of a smiling Miette. "What happened to you?" he said, attempting a weak smile.

"Oh!" she said, and laughed. "I forgot! The quake disrupted a lot of dust and sand and we got coated a little."

"A little? You look like you've been dipped in red ink."

Miette laughed her odd emotionless laugh again.

"Where are the others?" said Curtaine.

"They've gone searching for all the other supplies that we dropped when we were running and also to see if they can get back to where we set camp to check if anything's salvageable there."

Curtaine sat up and looked around, not that there was much to see. The air was still a little misty with particles of dust. Small stones and pebbles were littered everywhere and the whole scene was covered in Sabaku's characteristic red dust. It was quiet, too – eerily so. Not even the wind was stirring.

"This looks like something out of a dream."

"I wouldn't know," said Miette. "But I understand the metaphor."

"Miette?"

"Yes," she said and turned to face him.

"Was it my imagination or were you kissing me when I came round just then?"

Miette looked down at the ground and a wave of reddened dark hair fell across her face. "I didn't mean to, I was just..."

"It's okay," said Curtaine and thought that if she had been able to she would have blushed.

She did not look up as she said, "I'm sorry if I did the wrong thing."

Curtaine laughed. "Hey, don't worry, you didn't!" He reached over and touched the underside of her chin, gently lifting her face up so that she would look at him. "You did nothing wrong," he said. "Do have feelings for me? Do you have feelings at all?"

She opened her mouth to talk and then closed it again as if considering her response. "I think so," she said finally. "But I'm confused."

"Confused? About what? About me?"

"Sort of," she said and looked away again, pulling back from Curtaine's outstretched hand. "I mean I'm not sure if I feel close to you because I have some affection for you, or because you were the one who purchased me and you were the first person I ever met."

"What does it matter? I mean surely..." He was interrupted by the sound of Hanikku and Wellin as they approached.

"Hey! You awake?" called Wellin.

Curtaine looked around and waved to them. "Hello," he called back. "I'm fine, I guess. You two don't look as red as we do."

Hanikku laughed as she reached Curtaine. "We washed," she said.

"And we've brought you both some water too," said Wellin, opening his bag and dropping a collection of canisters at his feet. "There's enough there for washing as well as drinking. The water in the lake's pretty red but we managed to filter some of it."

"Are you two all right?" said Hanikku. "You look kind of serious."

"Well, we did all just nearly die for the second time, but apart from that I guess we're all right. Did you recover any of the supplies?"

"Not much, I'm afraid," said Wellin. "The area where we had set camp was completely razed. We got these canisters from where you dropped them, the few medical supplies we grabbed and that's about it really."

"How many medkits do we have?"

"Just the one."

"Any tools?"

"No. "

"So what in the name of Memory are we supposed to do now?"

"You're the captain, you tell us," said Wellin.

Curtaine looked at the ground for a moment before slowly raising his head to look at the other three. "We have enough water to last us the day?"

"Yes," said Hanikku. "And as long as the filters and purifiers in those canisters hold out, we have access to as much as we need."

"All we need then is food and a new shelter. Wellin, do you fancy attempting to construct something?"

Wellin nodded. "I guess some of these rocks could be put to some use," he said moving his arm in a sweeping motion.

"Good, then you'll need Miette's strength. Hanikku and myself will go fishing and harvesting."

"I think this is going to call for some serious improvisation," she said with a laugh.

Near to the shore of the lake, Hanikku knelt in the red sand and pulled the roots of a shrub from the earth. Her hands were covered in the ruby coloured dirt and it looked strange on her blue skin. She looked up to see Curtaine carefully wading into the water of the lake. "These roots will be fine eaten raw, I think," she called out to him.

"Good," he said and then slipped and fell backwards fully into the water. Hanikku laughed and ran over to help him, dropping the roots on the ground.

"Are you okay?" she said as she grabbed his arms and pulled him up. He spat water out and shook his head, showering Hanikku with red spray.

"Urgh, just about," he said and sat in the water rubbing his face. "I guess my fishing skills aren't up to much."

"What were you trying to do?" said Hanikku, still laughing. "Catch something with your bare hands?"

"Yes!"

"I think we should find something you might be able to use as a spear, and also try to get some wood for a fire so we can at least cook it if you *do* manage to catch something."

Curtaine stood up and shook more water from his tattered uniform. "I agree. But at least my clothes got a wash!"

"And you have too! Which is a good thing as you were starting to smell bad."

Curtaine laughed as they walked back to where small patch of five or six stubby trees grew. "Do you think we will ever get off this planet?" he said.

"There's always hope. But seeing as our only chances at the moment depend on a passing spacecraft scanning the planet for humanoid life forms and then rescuing us, there's not a great deal of hope, I must admit."

"What's Antila like?"

Hanikku stopped and looked at Curtaine. She had a wistful look about her. "It's beautiful," she said. "There's nowhere else quite like it."

"Go on," said Curtaine. "Tell me more."

"The city where I live, Atika, is on the island of Kireyna Onano in the southern hemisphere. Kireyna Onano means 'elegant woman' and Atika is the seat of power for Antila. It's where Director Ermanno governs from. It has these wonderful slender white buildings that tower into the sky. Ah, the sky, the purple sky. I suppose that's what I miss the most, and

this time of year it would be the most clear and the most radiant. When I think of home it's the sky that I remember most clearly. I miss my friends, I miss my family and I miss my bed. I miss waking up to dawns so beautiful that they would make you cry. I miss sitting on the grass in the grounds of my residence and listening to the sounds of the nearby stream. I miss... I don't know, I miss it all. I wish I were there now."

"Right now I wish I were there too. It sounds like a very special place."

Hanikku placed her hand on Curtaine's arm. "Thank you," she said. "And I mean that. I will take you there some day. I promise."

"I'll keep you to that promise."

Hanikku smiled a modest smile and they walked on to the trees. They were stumpy and sat like crouching beasts on the fallow ground. Several branches had fallen and lay on the earth. Curtaine picked one up and examined it. "These will do fine for firewood," he said. "But they're far too brittle to use as spears."

Hanikku reached up and twisted a long, thin branch which broke away from the trunk easily. She pulled some of the rough bark away from one end of it and handed it Curtaine. "Here," she said. "Try this."

He accepted the makeshift spear and walked back to the lake. Hanikku watched him with fascination as he stalked the shoreline and scanned the surface of the eater for movement. *This human*, she thought, *is interesting*. She had always thought of humans as being cold and disagreeable, but she had never actually met many before. Curtaine had recently changed her opinion a little. *Maybe he's not so bad after all*.

Curtaine lunged at the water and yelled a whoop of triumph. "I've got something!" he shouted and he lifted the stick out of the water to reveal a long, lean snapper. It jerked and flipped its tail as he waved it in Hanikku's direction.

"Well done," she said. "That looks like it will feed us for tonight at least." She reached down and picked up a bundle of dry wood and then collected the roots she had picked. Arms full, she walked to Curtaine.

"Are we done?" he said, a large proud smile on his reddened face.

"I think so."

"Let's get this baby back to the others then." And he waved his catch around above his head in celebration.

Miette handed Wellin another small rock and he huffed as he piled it on top of the small pile they had

erected. It roughly resembled a wall and would provide some nominal shelter from the wind should it decide to blow their way. It was mid-afternoon and the sun was still high in the sky, illuminating them harshly.

"It's not much is it?" said Wellin as he wiped sweat from his face.

"Considering the materials we have at our disposal, I don't think it's too bad," said Miette, placing her hands on her hips defensively.

"I suppose you're right." He sat down on the sand and looked at the horizon just in time to see Hanikku and Curtaine approaching from over the brow of a low hill. Miette looked too and a mimic of a frown spread across her forehead.

"They took their time," she snorted.

"What do you mean?"

"They only went to look for food and they were gone for two hours and nineteen minutes."

Wellin looked up at Miette. "Hey," he said. "What's the problem?"

"Nothing!"

Confused, Wellin looked back at Curtaine and saw that he was waving something in the air above his head. "Well, at least it looks like they caught something." And he turned his attention back to straightening the rocks in the red wall.

"We have fish and roots," announced Curtaine as he reached Miette and Wellin.

"And firewood," added Hanikku, dropping the bundle of wood to the floor.

"Nice wall," said Curtaine with a hint of sarcasm in his voice.

Miette had turned away and did not look around at Curtaine. Wellin patted the top of the wall with the flat of his hand. "It's the best we could do," he said. "Think of it as being less of a shelter and more of a wind breaker."

Curtaine smirked at him. "I guess," he said.

Hanikku knelt down on the ground and began to untie the bundle of dry wood, piling it up in a cone shape to build a fire and surrounding with a ring of stones to contain it. "You did a good job here," she said to Miette as she worked.

Miette turned her head a little. "As good as you?" she said.

"You must've worked pretty hard here."

"As hard as you? How hard have you been working?"

Hanikku stopped piling the wood and stared at Miette. "I, I don't understand," she said. "What do you mean? We've all been working pretty hard."

Miette turned to face Hanikku and leaned forward

to whisper. Ensuring she was completely out of earshot of Wellin and Curtaine she hissed, "How hard have you been working on James?"

Hanikku pulled back in surprise. "What!" she exclaimed.

"Your face is flush. If my nose were able to function within normal human parameters I would have been able to smell your hormone levels from the other side of planet." Her face was contorted into an expression of anger. It looked odd on her usually blank face.

Hanikku was shocked. "What are you saying," she said. "Are you malfunctioning again?"

"I have never functioned better! I am..."

She was cut off by Curtaine. "What the hell is going on now?" he shouted.

Miette's face changed instantly into her usual expressionless appearance. "Nothing," she said politely. "We were just..." And she looked up to find that Curtaine had not been addressing her at all. He was not even looking at her. Instead he was staring at the sky with a very worried look on his face. The others followed his lead and looked at what he was staring at. Approaching the surface of Sabaku at an extremely high velocity was a small object that was leaving a long trail of white smoke. Wellin instantly jumped up. "It's a missile!" he said. "Someone's firing a missile at us!"

Miette stood too and looked at it. "We're safe," she said. "Following that trajectory it will miss us by a long way."

"So who's firing missiles?" said Curtaine.

"Maybe it's not intended for us," said Hanikku.

As they watched the missile hit the surface in the distance. It exploded on impact and sent a small cloud of red dust flying into the air. A few seconds later the sound of the collision reached them.

"It sounded very muted," said Miette.

"It sounded like an explosion," said Hanikku.

"I have very sensitive ears. Something was wrong with that missile."

"What do you mean, Miette," said Curtaine.

"I'm not sure. Look!" She pointed at the far off point where the dust cloud was puffing out like a balloon. Encroaching above the mass of airborne dust was a secondary cloud of dust, stark-white against the scarlet horizon.

"Oh no!" said Miette.

"What is it?" said Wellin.

"I'm not sure how to break this..."

"Miette," said Curtaine, grasping her arm and shaking her. "What sort of missile was that?"

"Well," she said slowly, "unless I'm very much

mistaken it appears to be some kind of biological weapon."

"What?"

"I believe that secondary cloud is..." She paused and stared intently at it, her keen eyes analysing the sight. They all stood in silence as she scanned and calculated. "That's not an ordinary cloud generated by an explosion or displacement of earth and sand. It's spores... it definitely looks like it's some kind of powder probably containing viral spores." She turned her head to look at Curtaine. "A plague, perhaps, some kind of pathogen or maybe it's successive fever, that would make more sense."

"Successive fever?" said Hanikku.

Miette looked up at the sky and lifted an arm. "The wind direction is not favourable," she said. "I suggest you find somewhere to hide, somewhere that we can seal."

Looks of genuine fear had spread over the faces of the other three.

"How long have we got?" said Wellin, shakily.

"An hour. Perhaps ninety minutes at the most."

"Is there anything in the medkit that you could use? Is there any possibility of a vaccination?"

"It's unlikely given the timeframe and the uncertainty of what it is we're dealing with, but give the medkit to me and I'll examine it as we move."

"Okay!" said Curtaine, trying his best to sound authoritative, "let's gather the water canisters and bring those roots. Leave the fish."

Everyone scurried into action and within seconds they were moving away from the red and white dust cloud at the pace of a steady jog. As they ran, Miette fumbled with the medkit and hurried to construct something that might save her friends' lives.

Within the hour they had reached the shore of the lake. Miette instantly began scanning the seaweed-heavy surface, turning the now modified contents of the medkit over and over in her hands. Exhausted, Wellin slumped to the ground and held onto his head with his hands. "This can't be happening!" he said. "We've been through too much."

Curtaine put his hand on his friend's shoulder. "It's not over yet," he said. "Miette! Any suggestions?"

"Yes, Captain," she said, turning to face him. "Although you may not like it."

"Try us," said Hanikku.

"Given the urgency of the situation I have determined that we have enough time to find a cave or dig a burrow..."

"A burrow?" said Hanikku.

"...The only option would be to take shelter there." She pointed at the lake and everyone looked.

After a moment Curtaine said, "In the lake?"

"That is correct."

"Ah, Miette," said Wellin, slowly. "I know that androids don't require oxygen to breathe, but we do."

Undaunted, Miette continued. "The lake will provide you with adequate protection from this airborne virus. And while you are down there, I will be sending a distress signal."

"What do you mean a distress signal?" said Curtaine, his brow creased with growing confusion. "You mean to say that you're able to send a signal for help?"

"That is correct."

"Why did you wait until now to tell us that?" said Hanikku, throwing her arms up into the air in outrage.

"The power needed for me to adapt my internal sensors to generate a signal strong enough to travel any beneficial distance will require a total and irrecoverable shutdown of my systems."

"NO!"

"I have not wanted to do this until now as I think I have been more use to you all operative."

"How irrecoverable?" said Curtaine.

"Absolute. The procedure will destroy my memory, my circuitry and my cerebral processors."

"But..."

"Under the circumstances, I have no other choice."

"But..."

"And besides you can always buy another me once you have been rescued."

Curtaine stared at Miette, his mouth sagging open in disbelief. "I cannot allow this," he whispered sharply.

Wellin and Hanikku stepped forward. "Great!" said Hanikku. "I'm not sure we have too much time for tearful farewells..."

"Hanikku!" said Wellin, fiercely.

She shot Wellin a sour glance and looked back at Miette. "Thanks, Miette, you've been a great help," she said quickly and emptily. "So how are we getting into this lake?"

Miette looked at Curtaine, aware of his obvious pain. In the split-second that it took her to turn away she had reviewed every second that they had spent together and rated each experience accordingly. At the very top of her catalogue of experiences was the time when James had first switched her on and she had lifted her eyelids and looked at his shining blue eyes. This, she supposed, was the moment that had

defined her existence. Not staring out at the stars through a small porthole as the *Swinburne* soared away from the spaceport on Kurelin VI. Not the moment when she first felt that she really belonged with the crew. Not the time she had spent debating Ularian philosophy with Wang Chen on the beach on the shores of Panthalassa on Shumi planet. Not even the time when her senses had touched with James' when she had kissed his lips not four hours earlier. No. The moment her circuits and processors had selected as being the most meaningful, the most artificial life-affirming, was the moment when she had first taken in the sight of his distinctive, chiselled face and bonded with him in that crucial instant. She knew that it was her programming that made her react to him in this way, he was her owner, after all. But that did not make it any less real, and weren't humans programmed the same way?

"I was just coming to that," she said, her voice void of all emotion. "As we fled I took the opportunity to modify some of the items in this medkit." She held up the long white plastic box in one hand and flipped open the lid with a single movement of her forefinger. With her other hand she removed a small metallic object about the size of a small food can and held it up for all to see. "You place this in your mouth. It's a makeshift breather. There's no filter as such, but each of these modules has a tiny internal syringe which will allow you to extract oxygen gas from the water in the lake. There's one each."

"Will it work?" said Wellin.

"In theory, yes, but not for long. You should be able to inhale water through your nose and have it processed in your lungs as naturally as the air around you. But you need to come up for real air and discharge the liquid from your lungs at some point. I suppose you will know when. I have had limited resources and the chemicals that I utilised were only medicinal. I have no idea how effective its practical use will be." She looked up at the sky and the approaching cloud. "You have approximately five minutes left. I suggest you get a move on!"

Hanikku stepped tentatively forward and took the breather from Miette's hand. She turned it around with her slender blue fingers and looked at it with curiosity. Then she looked up at the ominous pink cloud. "Well," she said, "it doesn't seem like we have much choice." She took the other two devices from Miette and tossed them to Wellin and Curtaine. Wellin plunged the breather into his mouth and closed his lips around it. He mumbled something unintelligible to Hanikku and she nodded and popped her device into her mouth as well. She

shrugged and walked into the water with Wellin, leaving Curtaine and Miette standing on the shore.

"Five minutes?" said Curtaine, his voice lost behind welling tears.

"Four minutes and thirteen seconds, actually."

"M–Miette." He took her hand and squeezed it hard. She returned the gesture and Curtaine grabbed hold of her with his hands and flung his arms around her roughly, dropping the breather to the ground. He pulled her as close to him as was physically possible and kissed her with every muscle, nerve and blood vessel in his body. After just a few seconds of passion he pulled away and picked up the breather. He dusted fine red sand off it and looked at Miette one last time. "It sounds like a cliché," he said with a tremor in his voice, "but I hate long goodbyes."

"James..."

"Goodbye," he said and shoved the breather into his mouth. Miette watched as he walked into the lake and she did not take her eyes off him until the top of his head had disappeared under the water. "Goodbye, Captain," she whispered. "Goodbye."

Immediately, she began the process that would shut down her systems and convert her into a distress beacon. In the few seconds that it took to complete the operation she did not waste time on reminiscences and regrets and it was with near suicidal detachment that she closed her eyes and allowed her flaccid body to collapse to the ground, sending a billow of powdery red sand into the air. It was only at the last moment that her instantly active long-range sensors detected one hundred and thirty-seven satellites orbiting Sabaku, but it was far too late for her to respond or even care.

Even if any of them could have withstood the pain of the dirty, contaminated water in their eyes, it would have been impossible to see anything in the murky shallows. Curtaine, Hanikku and Wellin kept in contact through touch as the chemical from the breathers injected into their gums at a steady and controlled rate allowed them to absorb the minimal amount of oxygen they needed to live. At first each of them had choked and gagged as their lungs filled with the filthy liquid. They had to hold back waves of unbearable nausea. The sound of the water rushing in and out of their ears made the experience even worse. As the fear of drowning subsided, they relaxed as best as they could and waited. At one point, Curtaine thought he felt something brush past his leg and he jumped reflexively.

Time passed slowly for the trio and, just as hypoxia was threatening to take them all, Curtaine

signalled with a touch that they should rise and see what was happening.

Hanikku was the first to break the surface and, after coughing the water from her lungs, she breathed the air in deeply, airborne virus or no airborne virus. Curtaine and Wellin followed, exhaling the filthy liquid and inhaling the air.

"How long were we down there?" choked Wellin.

Hanikku coughed and spat before answering. "It felt like about an hour," she said.

"Yuck," said Curtaine. "Let's not do that again."

"Agreed," said Wellin, doing his best to force a smile through his discomfort.

The three of them swam a little and then waded the rest of the way to the shore. Curtaine looked up at the sky. "I don't see any cloud," he said.

"Perhaps it's passed over," said Hanikku.

"How can we tell?" said Wellin. "Is a virus like that invisible?"

"I'm not a biologist, Amis," said Curtaine, looking around. "Where's Miette?"

Wellin pointed inland. "There she is. Or what's left of her."

Curtaine hoisted himself out of the water and dashed over to where Miette was prostrate. Her body had fallen in an awkward position, with her left leg twisted behind her back in an impossible position. Scorch marks lined her mouth, nose and eyes where her internal circuits had burned out. There was no movement at all from her. Curtaine grabbed her shoulders and shook her. "Miette," he said. "Miette? Are you still in there?"

Hanikku and Wellin approached. "She doesn't look good, James," said Wellin, softly.

"Miette?" repeated Curtaine. "Miette?"

Miette's right arm twitched slightly and Curtaine shook her again, this time more forcefully. Her head turned slightly and her mouth began to move a little. Her jaw slowly opened and closed three times before emitting a low electronic moaning sound. "Miette, are you alive in there?"

"I, I, I," groaned Miette. Her voice was deep and artificial sounding. "They're, they're."

"Ha!" shouted Curtaine. "You survived it! Can you hear me?"

"They're com–com–coming," said Miette, her voice pitching from deep to high.

"Miette? Who's coming?"

"A, a, a ship. A ship, ship is coming."

"Who are they?"

"There are satellites. I can't see."

"You can't see the satellites?" said Hanikku.

"I, I can't see anything..."

Curtaine lifted Miette up and pulled her leg back to where it should have been. He held her across his chest with his arms wrapped tightly around her. She did not speak again and remained motionless. Exhausted, the group sat on the red sand in the hot sunlight, the ambient sounds of Sabaku invading their space and the stench from the lake desecrated their nostrils. None of it seemed to matter though. All they had had been destroyed one way or another. They had no food, no clean water and they were all possibly infected with a deadly virus which had been released by, as far as they could tell, a biological weapon. Someone had tried to kill them all and they had almost succeeded, and if they were infected they might have succeeded after all.

They sat this way and pondered an uncertain future for the next three hours. Nothing much was said as all the conversation seemed to have ebbed away. It was with unimaginable relief when, from a distance, they saw the sign they been waiting for all these weeks. A small spacecraft was approaching from across the lake. Wellin and Hanikku stood, while Curtaine remained seated, still nestling Miette in his arms.

"Well, well, who's this?" said Hanikku.

"We need to be careful," said Wellin, "they might not be friendly."

The spacecraft looked battered and it landed just a few paces from where they stood. It was a personal transporter, similar to the ship Hanikku had crashed on Sabaku, suitable for deep space travel but more competent on shorter missions. It had a person-sized hatch on the starboard side and a wide green window-panel wound around its front. Enamelled in green across the dirty, grey metallic surface was the word *Maldek*. Hanikku and Wellin stared in silence as the hatch hissed and slowly opened out. Atmospheric gas spilled out and as it dissipated it revealed the figure of a man, standing in the doorway. He was tall and dressed in yellow overalls. His skin was almost completely white and he had three red stripe markings across each cheek. He was also completely bald with distinctive twin ridges along the top of his head. He stared at Hanikku and Wellin for a moment, his red albino eyes boring into them. Eventually he smiled and raised his hand in greeting.

"Hello," he said. "I picked up a distress signal and scanned three bio signs. Do you need assistance?" His voice was light and almost musical-sounding.

"Hello," said Wellin. "Yes, we've been stranded here for weeks."

"Months," said Hanikku. "I'm Hanikku, this is Amis and that's James and Miette over there."

"My name is Mour Erparts. I only scanned three bio signs and yet there are four of you."

Curtaine looked up and tilted Miette so that the alien could see her.

"Ah!" said Mour. "I see you have a medical model. I have the exactly the same model. Hayden!"

A woman appeared at Mour's side. She was identical to Miette in every way except for her hair. Whereas Miette had dark brown hair, Hayden sported flame-red locks.

"We may have been infected by a biological weapon," said Hanikku.

Mour smiled. "A biological weapon? What have you been up to?"

"We don't know," said Wellin.

"If you are infected I'm sure we can fix it, right Hayden?"

"Right!"

"We'd better get you on board. Are there any more of you hiding away? Do you have any belongings?"

"No and no," said Wellin.

"Then what are we waiting for?"

Everyone piled into the *Maldek*. Space was limited inside but they were made as comfortable as Mour could manage. Mour revealed that he was from Abraxas, a planet on the outer rim of the galaxy and that he had been returning from delivering supplies to a small farming community at the Silverband cluster when he had detected their signal. As they left the planet he showed them the satellites that he had seen orbiting Sabaku.

"I've never seen so many in one place," he said. "It looks like you were being watched."

Hayden tested the trio for infection and delivered the medication that was necessary before getting to work on fixing Miette.

"She is pretty messed up," she told Curtaine. "But I'll do my best. I'm amazed she survived at all, converting her systems the way she did should have destroyed her completely."

Curtaine smiled at Hayden. It was strange seeing a model the same as Miette and he wondered what Miette herself would think once Hayden had fixed her vision. As they sped through space on route first to Antila, Curtaine watched Hayden as she worked on Miette's scorched head and body. *I thought I'd lost her*, he thought. *I really thought that she was gone*. He looked at her gentle face and closed his eyes, physical and nervous exhaustion finally catching up with him.