

EXILE

Novella

Mark Cullen

assisted by

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*With thanks to <http://members.netscapeonline.co.uk/jeremyalansmith/level9/exile.htm> for putting up the
original text.*

Prologue

There are some individuals whose actions mark them as unfit to live within a civilised society. Your crimes have been of a horrifyingly barbaric nature and throughout this trial you have failed to exhibit even the slightest vestige of remorse. Although it gives me no pleasure to pass such a sentence, we must act to protect the Innocent We decree that your presence within this society can no longer be tolerated.'

(Extract from Trial ZZ5732Beta, taken from justice Directorate tapes).

AS the 'Pericles' moved into orbit around the alien planet, Commander David Sprake stood at his viewing screen, lost in thought. He knew that his career in the Force, and his prospects for promotion, depended on this mission. This was the one that mattered, the one that everybody back home would analyse in detail. For this was the Columbus Force's five hundredth mission.

Sprake's mind ran over the history of the Force. In the twenty first century, the population explosion drove humanity out into the galaxy in a desperate search for planets to colonise. A powerful group of influential people collaborated to form a military organisation which could explore uncharted space with maximum efficiency. This organisation was the Columbus Force, and its backers - an uneasy alliance of the wealthy and the intellectual - pooled their resources in the search for habitable worlds. They found no planets similar to the Earth. The vast majority could never be suitable for humankind, while those that were could sustain only an uncomfortable existence in drab, hermetically sealed environments.

The search, however continued. Once a planet was located, an initial unmanned probe (known colloquially as a dwarfie) would establish whether there was any possibility of it supporting human life. If this proved favourable, a manned probe would follow to explore the new discovery in more detail. These were the Columbus Probes.

One such follow-up craft was the 'Pericles'. When a dwarfie returned favourable data from a large planet, the 'Pericles' was launched on the long journey to the new world, named Phoebus. Its mission: to investigate and to report.

Sprake was snapped out of his reverie by a call from Spiegel demanding that he check the armoury before they landed to make sure all weapons were in working order 'Ever the optimist, aren't you, Spiegel?' Sprake replied. 'I'll be right down'.

Sprake was the highest ranking Columbus Force officer on board. A tall, silver-haired man in his late thirties, he had attained the rank of Commander unexpectedly after many years of undistinguished service as a second-in-command on other ships. While serving as Deputy Commander on a mission to investigate an unknown planet, Sprake was forced to assume command when his superior officer was poisoned by an alien gas. Sprake's remarkable courage and

valour in sealing infected corridors and saving the rest of the crew led to his immediate promotion.

Chief Scientist on the 'Pericles' was Professor Hans Spiegel, an abrasive, middle-aged man of German extraction whose arrogance made him the least popular crew member. His scientific brilliance was renowned but Sprake had never trusted him and did not relish the prospect of having to rely on him in a crisis. This mission had been very much a project of Spiegel's, and he was the crew member most eager to reach the planet.

Ship's doctor was Lieutenant Christine Pieters, an attractive blonde woman in her late twenties, who was also an expert on hydroponics. With her she had brought a pet, which she discovered on another planet. This was a small, affectionate creature known as a furling. A ball of lavender hair, its tiny face rarely visible, the animal purred and seemed to be a distant cousin of the Earth cat. She had named it Fluffy.

Ship's psychologist was Captain Sun Pahn, a temperamental Chinese who would be called upon to build up good relations, if possible, with any alien life forms that might be encountered on the planet. During the 'Pericles' lengthy journey, Pahn had succeeded in establishing a good relationship with Christine Pieters, and there had been some talk of marriage.

Ship's geologist: Captain Colin Lowry, a quiet, elderly scientist whose role would be the testing of samples from the planet's surface.

Deputy Commander was Lieutenant Anthony Nash, a tall, calm officer with a military background and a record of impeccable service. He had helped to draw up the most recent edition of the Columbus Force Directives Manual.

Also on board were Miss Tessara Swift, a cheerful, pushy young journalist assigned to the mission in accordance with the Columbus Force's standing agreement with the Information Directorate, and Acting Lieutenant Zinc Baker, a hot-headed whizzkid fresh from college and in training for eventual command.

This was the full human complement of the crew. In addition there were ten robots, five of them of the Velcro design, that is with the facility for speech and a degree of intelligence. On landing, the robots would undertake all tasks involving manual labour.

As the 'Pericles' prepared to attempt a descent, Commander Sprake found himself at the viewing screen, gazing at the deep red surface of another planet hanging like a hungry spider in the endless, engulfing night of Space. After two decades in the Force he still felt a sense of wonder at sights no human had previously witnessed, and experienced a thrill of discovery when exploring a new planet. Sprake was not driven by a philanthropic desire to find a place his fellow humans could call home, but by the ceaseless quest for the novel and exciting. He looked up at the mysterious mass looming large on the screen and felt his heart begin to beat harder

as a robot began the countdown to planetfall....

Day One - Planetfall

(Computer Note - Editorial: Commander Sprake's reports begin here).

"Planet: Code H247A79. Name: Phoebus. Mission: to make an intensive study of planet to determine its suitability as a colony. Reporting Officer: Commander David Sprake. Reporting frequency: Daily.

"We have landed, but it was not easy. The planet seems to be rather more hostile than the unmanned probe suggested. As we descended the ship was battered by extremely fierce winds which for some reason had not been detected by the dwarfie..."

The winds were so powerful that at one point they threatened to blow the ship out of control. Sprake, sitting in his command chair, felt the ship lurch and shouted at Lowry for an explanation.

Lowry spoke without lifting his head from his console. 'We're being blown off trajectory, Commander'.

'Well -' Sprake cut short his reply as an enormous lurch threw him out of his seat. People fell to the floor and warning klaxons sounded.

'Spiralling out of control', reported the computer in an infuriatingly calm tone. 'Stabilizing Servos malfunctioning.'

Sprake dragged himself up and wedged himself into a gap in the control panel. The ship was heading towards the planet's surface at a wild rate - if he didn't act they would all be dead in seconds. For a brief, terrifying moment Sprake's mind went blank. He stared at the rows of lights and switches, his head flooded with panic and his training lost in a mental whirlpool of frenzied confusion. As the powerful ship plummeted towards the planet's surface, Sprake held himself upright, his hands tightly gripping the sides of the console, his knuckles white.

For a few seconds the console in front of him made no sense. Sprake forced himself to concentrate, tried to turn his mind to the flight principles that had been drilled into him... Spiegel's voice hollering 'Do something! You're going to kill us all!' roused him and he grabbed the seldom-used Manual Stabilizer.

'Give me manual control!' he barked.

'We're not going to make it!' shouted Pahn.

'Computer! Manual control!' bellowed Sprake above the din of the winds buffeting furiously against the ship.

'Manual control,' confirmed the computer.

'Right.' Gritting his teeth, Sprake peered at the small screen on the console which showed the ship's position. There she was, and there was the wind; the savage, relentless wind that swept the planet's surface. Their only hope was to stop the descent and try to push through the wind looking for a clearing, if there were any.

Sprake grasped the Stabilizer and, summoning all his strength, pushed it to its highest level. The ship's engines screamed their strained complaint, but slowly, interminably, the 'Pericles' came to a halt.

Sprake instantly moved his hands to the direction levers and sent the ship on a horizontal course at maximum thrust. The crew members who had managed to remain standing during the descent were knocked to the floor by the sudden shift. Only Sprake, wedged into the console, stayed on his feet. The squeal of the engines as he pushed them to maximum capacity accompanied the raging winds in a nightmarish cacophony. Suddenly they were out. The winds had stopped, the ship was safe. Sprake immediately cut the acceleration and pressed the Descent Stabilizer. The ship lost height and, with one final shudder, came to a halt on the ground.

People pulled themselves up and gave vent to a communal sigh of relief. Acting Lieutenant Baker, his relief spilling into laughter, said, 'Are we dead? I never thought Heaven would look like this. I imagined there'd be a few more beautiful women around'.

'If we're dead, Baker', said Sun Pahn, 'we must have gone to Hell. Because he's with us.' He gestured at Spiegel, who was brushing himself down. Baker laughed, while Spiegel greeted the jibe with a baleful glare.

Sprake asked Lieutenant Nash where they were. Nash reported that they had entered the only area within reach of his scanners where strong winds were not howling across the planet's surface. This was a strangely calm gap approximately half a kilometre wide. 'Great flying, Commander,' he added, grinning.

Thanks. Let's have a look at this place. After that descent I'll be extremely happy to get my feet on solid ground.'

Following the noisy descent the quiet peace after they landed seemed almost eerie. Touchdown was completed successfully although the landing gear sank very deep into the surface gravel. Sprake led a party out to begin their preliminary exploration. Professor Spiegel refused to come. He had taken an irrational dislike to the planet, based on the fact that the dwarfie hadn't registered the winds and what he called 'intuition... a feeling that we will have trouble here'.

'You wanted to come to this planet, Spiegel,' Sprake observed. 'The background reports I read stated that you were very keen to join this mission.'

'I was keen to join any mission,' replied the professor 'The funding of my various projects has been temporarily suspended while the Force investigates some ludicrous allegations of misconduct, so I have nothing else to do at the moment. The allegations are, of course, quite without foundation.'

'Of course.'

Spiegel spent the rest of the day in the ship's lab continuing his experiments on service robots. This was a pet project of his although he refused to tell anybody exactly what he was doing.

Sprake gazed at the landscape before him. A barren desert, a lifeless empty nothing. The ground was uninviting, treacherous soft mud, black as a magpie's wing, dotted with gravel. It stretched out before them, an infertile void, broken only by the occasional rocky knoll jutting up from the harsh surface like a broken tooth out of a dead man's gum. The only plants to be seen were a few small, pale green bushes and clumps of moss, pitifully weak apologies for foliage, growing in the shadow of the rocks.

The air was clammy, somehow unpleasant, calm yet stagnant. And cold. Very cold. Sprake pulled his suit tight around him and shivered. Sun Pahn spoke first.

'Well, here it is, people. The garden of Eden.'

Sprake looked up at the sky. It was a savage dark blue roof over a grisly world. Black clouds swept through a brutal, tempestuous sky. In the distance on all sides they could hear the winds. Winds of hate. Winds that battered the rest of the planet, that beat unremittingly across its scarred surface in a ceaseless turmoil. The 'Pericles' may have landed in a clearing, but there was little there to cheer its crew.

They stood in silence, a small lonely group, shivering and huddling instinctively together as they surveyed their new home. A vacant, bleak landscape, that somehow exuded an almost physical misery.

Sprake gulped. Was this blackness, this cold, cheerless, dead planet, to be the new Earth for their people?

Only Captain Lowry found the environment interesting. He spent the morning collecting soil and rock samples, then swiftly arranged his drilling apparatus near the ship and began the process of boring into the ground. 'He's been boring for years', remarked Spiegel. The nonvocal robots were digging out rocks, under the supervision of Robot Stuvo, who was as usual berating them for their supposed indolence. Also involved was the robot they named Chatter. This robot had been

designed as a vocal, but last minute difficulties with its design prevented the Vocprog from being input correctly. Sleek and compact, it carried out its tasks with supreme efficiency, but its inability to speak clearly meant that its comments often emerged as a garbled babble. It won everyone's affection on the first day of the mission when, after everyone had endured Robot Stuvo's complaints for hours, it responded with the uncharacteristically audible 'Shall I eliminate source of unessential noise?'

Lunch took place, as usual, in the ship's small refectory area. Sprake had hoped to organise a meal outside, but the planet surface was so uninvitingly arid that nobody wanted to eat there. The crew sat around the table, eating in silence for some minutes. The initial relief that had swept through them when they landed in one piece had been dissipated by the disappointment of the planet's surface, and the atmosphere was gloomy.

'Cheer up,' Sprake exhorted. 'You can't judge a book by its cover.'

'You can't judge a Commander by his clichés,' murmured Spiegel.

'We've only seen a small section of this planet. There's much more of it, you know. Other parts may be completely different.'

'The Commander's right,' said Baker through a mouthful of hydroponic lettuce. 'Think how the geography of the Earth varies between continents. There might be a paradise here somewhere.'

'You can't judge a book by its sycophantic reviews.'

'What are you on about, Spiegel?' Baker snapped angrily. 'Why are you always so sour and pessimistic? You criticise everybody, you hate everything, you never offer valid suggestions of your own...'

'Pessimism is realism, boy,' snarled the German. 'If you live long enough, you'll soon lose that ridiculous naive optimism of yours.'

'You do seem to be something of a fatalist,' observed Sun Pahn.

Spiegel chuckled humourlessly. 'Well, well. Even the Chinaman stops stuffing his face long enough to join in the character assassination.'

Sprake buried his head and concentrated on his meal as the argument raged on. His attempt to raise spirits had engendered yet another bitter row. He had hoped the bickering would stop once they landed. He caught Tessara Swift's eye. She was watching proceedings carefully. Sprake wondered what her bulletins home sounded like. As far as crew relations were concerned, they were hardly likely to paint a cheerful picture.

By evening they had found little of interest so spirits were flagging, until Captain Sun Pahn and Lieutenant Christine Pieters announced their intention to marry. This cheered them all up.

Sprake arranged for the robots to spend the night (which lasted six hours) digging deep into the ground to check for water or useful minerals- as yet there was no significant evidence of either being present.

"The terrain is bleak... the windy environment has limited the surface vegetation to tough grass and small bushes. The ground is dark gravelly mud. The air is breathable but weak, for strenuous activity space suits providing oxygen enhancement are necessary. Crew members, particularly Acting Lieutenant Baker, enjoyed themselves by flying about using the jetpacks, relieved to have some freedom after so long cooped up on the ship. The scanners tell us that the gravitational acceleration at planet surface is 7.8 metres per second per second.

"Overall It doesn't look promising... perhaps we are wasting our time here..."

Day Two

"Today we made our first discovery. I was on the ship when I heard cries of excitement from outside..."

Captain Lowry had been taking bore samples when the ground gave way to reveal a deep pit below the surface. One of the robots fell in but fortunately Lowry was safely away from the hole at the time. Hearing the excitement outside, Sprake rushed out from the ship to find Spiegel and Baker engaged in a heated argument. There had been tension between them ever since they met. Spiegel's abrasive arrogance and Baker's endless youthful enthusiasm had clashed, causing countless rows.

Now they were bellowing at each other about the pit, violently disagreeing on the best way to investigate it. Sprake hollered at them to shut up and Spiegel gave him a look you could slice bread with. Sprake pushed past them and jetted down into the dark hole himself. Tessara Swift was already there, having jetted to a ledge near the bottom, taking photographs for the Information Directorate. Sprake landed next to her and looked around. They were in a steep-sided pit some four metres in depth. The ledge protruded from the wall of the pit, and, Sprake realised as his eyes became accustomed to the gloom, it led to an opening in the wall through which he could see what appeared to be a cave. 'Come and have a look at this!' he shouted to the others, who followed him down as he walked along the ledge...

The cave was lit by a curious luminous green moss clinging to the walls. The

ground was littered with rocks and small bushes. At the rear of the cave was the entrance to a tunnel which was just large enough for a man to pass through by bending his back. Baker volunteered to go into the tunnel alone, but Sprake would hear none of it. Spiegel called Baker an 'ambitious military careerist' which provoked another argument; it was hardly a fair remark - Spiegel might be a prize-winning biologist (his work on the marine life of Armatax 17 had made him famous) but Baker was no mere soldier, as his research on cryogenics testified.

Eventually Lieutenant Nash had to step in as the row seemed liable to spill over into violence. Sprake assembled a party to explore the tunnel, comprising himself, Spiegel, Christine Pieters, the Robot Stuvo and a nonvocal defensive robot. Nash was left in charge.

Baker complained bitterly about being left out. Although he didn't deserve the barrage of abuse Spiegel fired at him, Sprake mused, Baker could be very immature, with an undisciplined eagerness that could well lead him unprepared into danger. Until Baker learnt to rein in that enthusiasm, Sprake doubted that he would be suitable for command.

They called this first discovery Banquo Cave. They discovered that it led down into a network of caves and tunnels below the planet's surface. (There was no Columbus Force policy on the naming of locations found on alien planets - this was left up to the Commander. Sprake, a Shakespeare buff, liked to name such locations after characters from the Bard's plays.)

They moved cautiously down a rocky slope into the first long, dark tunnel ahead of them. The moss provided lighting. Silence surrounded them like a glove.

'It's good to get away from those winds,' Christine Pieters smiled.

'Quiet!' barked Spiegel angrily. 'We shouldn't chatter like schoolgirls. Anything could be up ahead of us and any conversation could let it know of our presence. Voices can be heard for hundreds of metres in a cave system like this.'

'I was only making an observation,' Christine retorted, her eyes flashing.

Some dust, dislodged by the activity, fell from the cave ceiling onto Spiegel. As he brushed them off his suit he looked up at Christine, a scowl colouring his thin, malevolent face. 'Somehow, I think I can survive without your inane observations.'

'See here, Spiegel - '

Sprake stepped forward. 'That's enough, children. Professor Spiegel may have the courtesy and tact of a drug-crazed bull, but on this occasion he's right. Let's keep conversation to a minimum.'

They moved onward into the caves to continue their investigation. They were below ground for the rest of the morning.

The jetpacks enabled them to fly around the tunnels and caverns. Here and there they found constructed walls sealing off caves. It seemed as though the planet had been the base of a mining community, however there was no sign of any resource that might have been mined, although they did trace water - there were occasional pools located in the darker recesses. Most of the caves were dimly lit by the luminescent moss. Due to the weakness of the air they needed their suits and backpacks.

I am fascinated by this veritable warren of a cave system and wonder what has become of its inhabitants. Certainly there must, at one time, have been habitation by an intelligent civilisation. Where are they now? Why is there no sign of them on the surface or in the caves we have explored? Have they simply moved further down into the heart of this mysterious planet?"

Day Three

"We have decided to set up our base in the cave system. There is evidence that the ground can support food crops - Lieutenant Pieters has managed to grow some plants from the ship in the caves here.

"Spiegel is conducting experiments on the air to see if it could be altered. As he never ceases to boast he was once part of the legendary team that devised the Enegel Atmosphere Purifier which has enabled us to make the air breathable on numerous planets.

"He also worked on the Sunbather[Computer note - Editorial: 'Sunbather, slang term for the process patented by Prof. E. Lomas, Cambridge Univ., 2173, which can change atmospheric conditions and weather on many planets. So he thinks that given time he might be able to enrich the air with more oxygen and remove those winds from the surface.

"So the planet looks good for colonising, initially underground habitation is advised though. Much of today was spent moving equipment down to the larger caves near the surface, I always find removing the non-essential superstructure of the ship a tedious chore so I kept out of the way.

"Tess Swift came to me to report that her jetpack had failed. Like the rest of our jetpacks, it is of the new Gothard design which has not previously been used on a Force mission. We tried changing the Power Pack, but that didn't work. This is worrying. I hope there isn't some design fault that will affect the others.

"Miss Swift seems to be a typical journalist, pushing past everybody else eagerly whenever anything new is discovered. I wish the Columbus Force could negotiate more restrictions on the freedom of the press."

As he left his cabin after speaking to Tessara Swift, Sprake heard Robot Stuvo shouting at Nonvocal 4, an unfortunate robot which had been malfunctioning since they left. Nonvocal 4 had developed a fault in its manoeuvre program and frequently bumped into people and furniture. If he'd had a robotics expert on board Sprake would have had it repaired, if only to stop Robot Stuvo complaining about it. The pair of them were busy removing some of Christine Pieters' medical cabinets to take down to the caves.

Christine was in the ship's Sick Bay, feeding Fluffy with some sweets. The creature purred contentedly. Suddenly its manner changed to one of anger, and it began to squeal. Christine looked up to see that Spiegel had entered the room.

'Have you got anything for this cut?' he asked. 'I had a slight argument with a door'

'Oh dear,' said Christine. 'You really shouldn't argue with your intellectual superiors, Spiegel.' She reached for a dressing and handed it to the professor

As Spiegel moved to the table to apply the plaster, the furling bit his hand. Spiegel recoiled and rubbed the injury, looking with hatred at the bundle of fur 'Can't you control that confounded little rat?' he demanded.

'Sorry, Spiegel. He's never done that before.'

'It had better not do it again,' threatened the German as he stormed out.

The day was not without further arguments. Spiegel dominated proceedings, managing to have his computers and workbenches moved first, although by mid-day Sprake persuaded him to lend his personal robots to assemble teleport termini in some caves. These would be necessary for the nonvocal robots, which were not equipped with jetpacks, and would also save the crew from clambering up and down.

Spiegel had assembled all his equipment in a large cave which he seemed already to consider his private laboratory; when Captain Pahn tried to install a scanner in it

Spiegel shouted abuse at him. 'Keep out of here, you slant-eyed imbecile!' roared Spiegel. 'If you interfere with any of my experiments I'll make you wish you never set foot on this stinking planet.'

The other crew members noticed how immaculate and expensive Spiegel's equipment was; even his two personal robots were ultra-modern Remrobs with the sleek design associated with top casing designer Terence Prince.

'They must have cost a fortune', thought Sprake. Rumour had it that Spiegel was working in his spare time for Proton Chemicals, who were highly generous to their trusted employees. The stories said they were involved in illegal corpse revival techniques but Spiegel wasn't likely to have any qualms about that. 'He's got about as many principles as a fish has got feet', Sprake commented to Lowry.

'Yes', replied Lowry thoughtfully, 'Professor Spiegel isn't particularly concerned about using his scientific skill to benefit humankind.'

The installation of rooms within the caves continued. Christine Pieters supervised Stuvo, who was making alterations to the cave she had decided she wanted to occupy. The first task was to put in a door. For this a hollow was dug into the wall. The door would be activated by touching a panel, causing it to slide open into the slot. The rock formation forced Christine Pieters to install a horizontally sliding door.

After this Stuvo was instructed to build a wall to support a section of the cave roof which Christine thought looked unstable. 'Get a move on, Stuvo,' she admonished the robot gently, as it wedged the last few bricks in place.

'I'm going as fast as I am programmed to, madam. It's not easy, you know,' grumbled Stuvo.

'Just hurry up, I've got some cabinets I want you to put in next.'

'Do this, do that. Don't you ever get tired of ordering me around?'

Christine laughed, looking up from the microscope she was fixing to a workbench. 'You really are the most insubordinate robot I've ever met, Stuvo. Who programmed you?'

Stuvo turned from the wall and began to clear away his tools. 'A Professor Stevens at the Oregon Institute of Leisure Robotics. Perhaps you've heard of him?'

'The Professor Stevens? The Nobel Prize-winner of 2248?' asked Christine with interest. 'He made you?'

'Oh yes,' said Stuvo, warming to his theme and with, Christine thought, a note of pride in his voice. 'I was one of his personal robots. Accompanied him all over the Earth. He exhibited me at the Paris Leisure Robots Collection. He never asked me to build walls.'

'Well, times change, Stuvo,' said Christine, zipping up her space suit and pulling on her helmet. 'In robot terms you're now almost obsolete. Never mind - I still like you.'

'Thank you, madam.'

'Now clear up that mess,' Christine said, pointing at the various tools Stuvo had left on the cave floor, 'I want this place spotless by the time I get back.'

'Harrummph!' replied the robot. 'Yet more orders.'

Christine smiled as she walked to the door 'That one isn't an order, Stuvo. That's a request. So can you do it. Please?'

'As you put it that way, certainly, madam. I must say it makes a refreshing change to meet a human with some manners.'

Later in the afternoon Sprake came across two robots arguing. Robot Stuvo and the robot they nicknamed Toff were loudly disagreeing about the most expedient way to unpack some boxes. Toff had been programmed with the personality of an English aristocrat of the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries. 'Egad, sir', it was saying, 'would you have me remove the highest box first? You're a disgrace, sir, a disgrace to your school and your regiment!'

'I do not comprehend', said Stuvo flatly.

'Gad, sir, would you have me challenge you to a duel?'

Sprake separated the pair before they attacked each other. Robots like Toff, given colourful programs, were briefly entertaining but could become tiresome. He preferred straightforward non vocals. They were much less trouble.

A few minutes later Nash reported that two of the nonvocal robots had vanished. A brief search of the 'Pericles' and its surrounding area failed to produce them. An exasperated Sprake, collapsing into a chair on the command deck, pulled off his helmet and ran a hand through his greying hair

'This is ludicrous, Tony. How can we lose two robots?'

Nash, equally baffled, shook his head. 'I don't know, Commander'

'There must be some explanation for it.'

'The last time anyone remembers seeing them they were digging near the entrance to the cave system. All I can think of is that they've malfunctioned and wandered off across the surface or down through the caves.'

'Well, it's not important, but it is a nuisance. Let's hope it doesn't happen to any of the others.'

Sprake arranged for the customary defensive safeguards to be installed. At strategic points around the perimeter of the base he placed Gun Turrets. These weapons, nicknamed Burgers, were heavy cylindrical devices which responded

to the approach of any unidentified life form by firing a stun bullet in their direction.

The crew discovered the presence of radiation in the caves. Their Geiger counters had begun to register it as soon as they moved out of Banquo Cave, but at that level it was extremely low. The deeper they explored below the surface, however, the greater the incidence of radiation, although it was still low enough to be safe. Sprake instructed Lowry to inform him immediately if anyone encountered a dangerously contaminated area. Also in some caves they found glowing rocks composed largely of coronium which, Spiegel observed, could be converted into nuclear fuel without much difficulty.

Over dinner Captain Sun Pahn regaled them all with tales of his Chinese heritage and the many illustrious names in his family's history. This led to everyone talking about their families, apart from the naturally shy Lowry, who excused himself, and the perpetually antisocial Spiegel, who left after the first course, calling the meal 'inedible garbage.'

Day Four

'Tremendous excitement today. There is life here in the form of small humanoids. Christine Pieters called in with a garbled message from the deepest cave we have so far explored, saying she'd been attacked by some creatures but had held them at bay...'

When Sprake and the others got down there they found a group of ten ape-like creatures. Each was about one metre in height, covered in thick yellow hair, and wore a fibrous light blue tunic. The head had a large skull with a domed forehead and a bulbous, boneless nose. They looked to be physically weaker than an adult human. As the crew members arrived, they herded together at the cave mouth, emitting a series of high-pitched squeaks.

They gave the impression of being decidedly unfriendly but, thought Sprake, were hardly likely to endanger the mission.

'They rushed at me', Christine informed the others, 'so I had to kill one with my icer'. This had caused the aliens to stop instantly and transform into the scowling mass they saw before them, huddled together in the mouth of the cave. When Robot Stuvo followed the others into the cave, the creatures squealed with fear and something close to recognition. 'It's almost as if they have encountered robots before', murmured Spiegel.

Suddenly the aliens ran together towards the cave entrance, and people stepped forward but Sprake shouted 'Stay where you are!' The creatures fled out of the cave, throwing a few desultory stones back as they ran.

So ended the morning's excitement. Spiegel dragged away the body of the dead alien for analysis, while Sprake discussed with Sun Pahn the possibility of winning their friendship. 'There's little chance of that', said Pahn, 'they're savages, incorrigibly hostile'. Sprake wasn't so sure. He felt Pahn was probably biased - his first wife had been torn limb from limb by an ape-like being on Beta Stroten. A passing Professor Spiegel opined that these entities were 'brainless monkeys' who should be 'systematically wiped out'.

They named the cave where the encounter had occurred Polonius Cave.

Lieutenant Nash and Stuvo spent the day exploring the caves to the west, but found nothing exceptional to report. However Nash's jetpack inexplicably stopped working and he had to take Robot Stuvo's. Stuvo made his disapproval known in no uncertain manner. When they returned to Banquo Cave, Sprake called out to Nash. 'Have those nonvocals turned up yet?'

'No, Commander. Can't find them anywhere,' answered the Lieutenant, adding 'Pity it wasn't a vocal that went missing,' with an irritable glance at Stuvo, who was still complaining about being deprived of his jetpack.

The others continued to dismantle the ship and install equipment in the caves, also Captain Lowry busied himself putting in some airlocks there to seal off various caves so that masks would not be needed in them. Sprake offered to assist him but Lowry declined, as always preferring to work alone.

Spiegel instructed his robots to remove a section of the ship's engine and install it in the cave he had commandeered as his laboratory. This section had been damaged by the battering they suffered from the winds, so Spiegel decided to effect the necessary repairs. He had not seen fit to request Sprake's permission to do this, but Sprake chose not to argue the point. There had been enough ill feeling already on the mission, without exacerbating the situation by debating a minor breach of protocol.

During the afternoon Spiegel returned to the ship's Sick Bay to change the dressing on his hand. He found it empty apart from Fluffy who lay on the table. The animal quivered as Spiegel approached. 'Well my pretty, all alone are you?' Spiegel murmured, gazing contemptuously at the cowering furling. 'I think it's time I taught you a lesson, don't you?'

He noticed a hammer that lay on a nearby table. Smiling broadly, Spiegel's hand closed on the weapon and raised it above his head. 'Bite me, would you, you vicious little beast?'

The animal squealed in terror, but at that moment the door opened and Christine entered. 'Spiegel! Put that down!' she shouted.

Reluctantly Spiegel lowered the weapon. 'What do you think you're doing?' said Christine, scooping the terrified pet into her arms. 'Get out of here, you sadistic bully!'

Spiegel headed for the door 'That animal should be destroyed,' he said as he left, 'it could carry diseases.'

Later that day Nash informed Sprake that he had seen some birds in Polonius Cave, small white creatures with long wings that flew away at speed when they saw him. He reported them to be very similar to some species of bird found on Earth.

The contrast between metal and stone in the caves made them aesthetically attractive. Some of the crew planned to start sleeping there once Lowry installed the airlocks, as they found the space preferable to the cramped conditions of the ship.

Day Five

"Today robot Toff and I joined Nash and Pahn in their exploration of the tunnels and caves to the west. We came upon a particularly long passage ending in some caverns, where we discovered a strange rune-engraved slab on the ground. It is made of some metal alloy unfamiliar to us and it could be a portal leading down somewhere, since we can find no other exit from the cavern it is in. Above the cavern was a hole in the roof through which we could see the savage winds blasting across the angry star-scattered sky."

There were symbols carved on the slab, they had no conception of the meaning. Captain Pahn who majored in Cryptology resolved to try and unravel the mystery. Robot Toff, asked if any such code was registered in its memory bank, replied, 'Fraid not, old kipper. Doesn't mean a bally thing to me. Bit of a puzzler, what?'

No amount of force could move the slab, they even tried plasma guns to no avail, these failed to even scratch the surface. Not a mark was made. The ground around it was nearly as hard. If it was a portal, whoever closed it clearly wanted the entrance to stay sealed. As the caverns had ended with no apparent way to continue any further to the west, the slab was their only hope for progress in that direction.

Sprake observed that it might be worthwhile dismantling the 'Pericles' Molecular Transducer and reassembling it down there. 'If that doesn't blow the damn portal open then I'm a Dutchman', he added.

At this point Sprake's communicator crackled and he heard the voice of Acting Lieutenant Baker 'Commander there are some more of those imp creatures back here, but they aren't causing us any problems'. Sprake hurried to the nearest transporter booth and teleported back to find another group of the aliens in a large cave they had called Nimoy's Cave. This collection had green hair and red tunics and carried no weapons. Indeed they seemed to be terrified of the crew, whimpering and squealing with fear. When Tessara Swift took a photo of them they leapt in terror.

'Put that camera away!' ordered Sprake but she ignored him. Christine Pieters offered the strangers some fruit, they snatched it and gobbled it down.

'Commander,' said Sun Pahn, 'this tribe are of the same species as the ones we encountered yesterday, but are obviously less hostile. I wonder if the two tribes get on with each other?'

They spent the rest of the day making friends with the creatures, who were very curious about their new acquaintances.

"The imps, as we have taken to calling them, can be endearing but they do have a habit of stealing things! I lost some Power Packs and later found that an imp had concealed them, together with various other items it had purloined, in a hole. The green imps have become friendly toward us, and have taken a particular shine to Christine Pieters, perhaps because she made the first gesture of friendship."

Most of the crew were smilingly pleasant to their new friends in return, excepting Sun Pahn who recalled his wife's fate and Professor Spiegel who was as aggressive as ever.

Day Six

"Woke up to find a green imp in my bedroom rifling through my cabinet! When I shouted he fled like a frightened gazelle but with one of my best shirts in his hand. Later I saw him dancing about in the shirt to the obvious amusement of his cronies".

Christine Pieters discovered that a gold locket, in which she kept a prized photograph of her parents, had disappeared from her cabinet. Guessing that the culprit was an imp, she searched their hiding places. She found an imp clutching the locket. As she approached it leapt into its nest where it lay cowering. Christine had, however, come prepared. She held out a handful of sweets and indicated that her price was the locket. The imp happily threw it over and greedily snatched the sweets. Christine smiled as she watched the creature chewing. The imps loved to eat and offering food was a sure way of persuading them to do something.

Later that morning, the crew discovered to the east an enormous shaft with a powerful wind surging up it. The shaft was pitch dark and, they estimated, at least two hundred metres deep. If you leapt into the shaft, the strength of the wind kept you floating suspended in mid-air. As they were unable to drop anything into the abyss, Lowry provided a method for estimating the depth. He exploded a small grenade at the top of the shaft. This sent sound waves down to the bottom which were reflected back, and, having timed the echo and measured the speed of the air-flow at the top, he went to the nearest cave and determined the speed of sound in the stationary air there. By comparing the two he was able to estimate the depth of the shaft.

Acting Lieutenant Baker had tremendous fun in the shaft, floating for nearly an hour at one point. When he tired of this he asked Sprake if he could explore beyond the deepest caves they had discovered. Everyone said he was too naive and inexperienced to lead any expedition himself, but his enthusiasm won Sprake over. Sprake dispatched Vocal Robot 2 to accompany him on a trip into the intertwining caves and tunnels below them, while the rest of the crew would explore to the east.

Out to the east they found the yellow imps dwelling, a spartan collection of rocks and plants interspersed with tables and chairs which they presumed had belonged to the mining community.

Watching the imps sitting in a circle around a table to eat their meal of plants and grubs, in the shadow-filled half-light, Sprake felt an exhilarating fascination creep over him. The imps, their small faces glinting in the luminescent glow emanating from the moss, forced the food into their mouths and, when the meal was finished, each licked its partner's paws clean.

'This is why I'm here,' Sprake said quietly to no-one in particular

'What's that, Commander?' asked Sun Pahn, who was standing next to him.

'Fascinating, isn't it Pahn?'

Pahn smiled to himself. He was used to seeing only the world-weary, cynical veteran side of the Commander's character. It was good to know even a Force Commander could be thrilled by the wonders they were witnessing.

They were snapped out of their reverie by Sprake's communicator which brought the voice of Lieutenant Nash, asking them to return immediately, his voice being almost drowned out by the sound of Baker singing loudly and discordantly at the top of his voice.

There was no transporter nearby so Sprake asked Lowry to install one. 'Can you rig up a pass control round it so that the imps don't stumble in and start teleporting all over the damn planet?'

'I'll do my best', replied Lowry, pleased to have a challenge to undertake.

Arriving back at base they found Baker, clearly in some sort of stupor, slumped on the ground mumbling to himself. Nash reported that Baker had returned in this condition from his exploratory mission, his pockets crammed with an odd mushroom-like plant.

Ship's doctor Christine Pieters examined Baker and analysed the plant. Her report: that Baker was suffering from a drug-induced trance, and the plant possessed qualities similar to those found in Earth hallucinogens. Simply, Baker was stoned. As the evening wore on he recovered sufficiently to reveal that he had seen the plants and felt compelled to inspect one because of their similarity to Earth mushrooms. As he did so he trod on the edge of the plant, at which point it exploded, showering him in fragments.

The result was a hallucinatory stupor, in the course of which he imagined Vocal 3 to be a bear attacking him and fired his icer at it (this damaged the robot beyond repair).

Sprake noticed Spiegel carrying some laser cutters into a teleport booth. The Commander smiled as he watched Spiegel disappear, presumably returning to his laboratory. If only he would disappear for good, Sprake mused.

He walked into Polonius Cave, where Lowry was huddled over a bench studying some geological charts. As they began to discuss them, an ear-splitting scream rent the air. Grabbing their icers they ran into the adjoining cave where they found Christine Pieters and two long, slimy maggot creatures. Christine had screamed when she saw the maggots crawling into the cave but had quickly recovered her composure and was covering them with an icer

The maggots were not an attractive sight. Each was one third of a metre in length, with yellow, slimy skins. They had no eyes but each possessed a large mouth, opened to reveal a set of very sharp white teeth.

'Ugh,' said Christine. 'Charming little creatures, aren't they?'

The maggots were on the ground near the mouth of the cave. A richly noxious aroma emanated from them which made Sprake feel nauseous. Suddenly one of the maggots began to move speedily across the ground.

'Commander?' Christine asked, watching the creature's approach with a mixture of revulsion and fear.

'Kill it,' instructed Sprake. Christine fired her icer at the maggot, which immediately halted, the only indication that it was dead. Its compatriot crawled out of the cave, making a squelching sound as it moved.

'Right, someone take that away for dissection,' Sprake ordered, turning gladly away from the corpse. Lowry left to fetch a robot.

Some hours later Sprake stopped off to see how the dissection of the maggot was going. Sun Pahn had divided the creature's body into sections, and as Sprake approached he was absorbedly studying a sliver of its innards with a powerful microscope.

Sprake's face tautened involuntarily as he looked down at the remains of the slimy, repellent maggot. 'Well, Captain?' he asked, instinctively looking up from the repugnant corpse. 'Anything to report?'

'This is very intriguing,' said Pahn, his head still bowed over the microscope.

'What is?'

'Look, Commander' Pahn stood up and gestured to the stool. Sprake sat, while Pahn removed the slide and inserted one he had been examining earlier. Sprake bent his head, closed one eye and peered down through the glass. His throat tightened as a section of the maggot's pink internal organs leapt into focus.

'Not a pretty sight, Pahn. But what is it?'

Pahn perched himself on an adjoining stool and folded his arms. 'You see that tiny black dot in the centre?'

'Yes.' Sprake squinted at the dot.

'Look.' Pahn leant forward and adjusted the magnification. The dot was revealed as a perfectly spherical shape, deep shiny blue in colour almost metallic in hue.

'What is it?'

Pahn poured himself a glass of water and took a sip from it. 'I've no idea. I've never seen anything like it inside a maggot before. Or any other organic life form, for that matter I don't think it's natural.'

Sprake scratched his head as he left the lab. The planet was turning out to be packed with incident and mystery. It was a relief that evening, when the crew gathered and, for a time, forgot about the strange new world around them.

Sun Pahn and Christine were clearly very much in love, and were discussing a possible honeymoon on Disney planet. The evening was spent with the married and divorced members of the party (Nash and Lowry) discussing their

honeymoons around the blazing log fire (a portable authentic twentieth century model) that had been installed in the base.

"I have been notified that supplies are on their way. My orders are to continue exploration"

Day Seven

"Today we were attacked by another party of imps, in a cave out to the east which we have named Kennedy's cave. (I have decided to let my subordinates name caves, as they complained about my Shakespeare obsession.)"

This group were all slightly taller than the other imps the crew had encountered and were blue in colour. There were more of them too, about sixteen in total. They went for Baker, who sighted them first, but he jetted away. The crew decided to go after them. They advanced quietly along a tunnel, where they could hear the imps jabbering. The crew members concealed themselves behind a clump of bushes from which vantage point they could see into a huge cave which was evidently this tribe's dwelling. The imps were dancing around a roaring fire in what seemed to be a ritual of some kind. One was pounding rocks to create a basic musical rhythm. The fire caused flickering shadows to dance across the cave walls. It was a remarkable sight.

Suddenly a frenzied jabbering broke out behind the concealed crew, and they turned to find several other blue imps approaching. The noise interrupted the ritual, causing the main group to seize stones and spears and head towards them.

For a few seconds the Columbus Force crew hoped that the two groups were attacking each other, but this rapidly proved an overly hopeful assessment. 'Fire at will!' shouted Sprake. Despite his party's superior weapons they were outnumbered and in peril.

Spiegel's icer blasted a shot into one imp's head, and its comrades all froze to stare as it fell in agony to the ground clutching its crushed skull which the icer's beam had smashed a hole through. For a second it looked as if the battle had ended there, but the imps quickly recovered their nerve and charged from both sides. The icers blasted death but the imps hurled rocks as they fell. One caught Captain Lowry a harsh blow on the temple, and he staggered, dropping his icer.

'Move!' Sprake hollered, grabbing Lowry and pulling him along. The others followed, jetting off down the tunnel, leaving several imps dead and the rest howling with fury.

When the crew regrouped at the base, everyone was chattering with excitement. They looked warily at the handful of green imps around, but these seemed as amiable as ever Christine Pieters examined Lowry's head and reported that the injury was not serious.

Sprake and Baker turned off their jetpacks to conserve fuel but found when they tried to restart them that they weren't working.

"Could it be some effect of the atmosphere? We have no idea. It means that most of us are now obliged to travel everywhere on foot, which will limit our further exploration. Please send extra jetpacks as soon as possible."

Day Eight

What the hell, thought Baker The rest of the crew had him written off as an idiot anyway, so he might as well do what he wanted. And what he wanted to do was explore. Besides, if he did find something, his name would go down in the Commander's report. Mentioned in dispatches and all that. Very useful for the career of an ambitious officer.

Baker edged his way along a narrow tunnel at the end of Lear Cave and out into a cave at the end.

It was sizeable with several openings leading elsewhere. The walls were cracked, grey beneath the moss, and water dripped from the roof into pools in the dark corners. Baker walked through the cave with caution. He thought of his Force briefing on Solitary Exploration, and how his instructors had emphasised the need for vigilance and concentration at all times - What was that?

Baker whirled around. He had heard an unfamiliar noise, a sort of buzzing, emanating from one of the cave exits. Hadn't he? He stood absolutely still, his body quivering with tension. Now he could hear nothing. Had it been his imagination? He could have sworn...

Then it emerged. Baker leapt back in horror and nearly dropped his icer. Even when he had been drugged the previous day he hadn't imagined anything as horrifying as this. And this was real. A giant wasp the size of a large rock hovered above him. Its head was round, black, shiny, the size of a football. Its

body was divided into two parts, a short stubby torso and a long tail with a yellow ring. Its huge wings were long, thin and powerful. It had four yellow and black ringed legs that moved endlessly, helping it to balance in the air. The beating of the wings produced a buzzing sound whenever it moved, a sound that, echoing off the cave walls, resembled the loudest of drills.

Baker had never been fond of Earth wasps. But this monster was infinitely worse. Its sting might prove fatal. Baker stared into the creature's oblique eyes, hoping that this version of the insect might possess more intelligence than its Earth cousin. He entertained the notion that the thing might speak. 'A talking wasp? Pull yourself together,' he muttered. The only way it would express its intentions would be by actions.

Baker did not have long to wait. After hovering for a few seconds, looking down quizzically, the wasp launched into a downward dive towards him. The buzzing was deafening. Baker aimed his icer at its head, fired, and then turned and ran for his life. He heard the buzzing stop, but he did not return to see whether he had killed the creature. He ran at full speed through the caves, swearing loudly to himself.

As he ran into Banquo Cave everyone turned to look. 'Have you been near those plants again?' said Sprake angrily.

Baker fell gasping onto a rock, breathing fitfully through his straining lungs. 'Not quite, Commander,' he wheezed between gulps of air

"Baker set off to explore, alone and without permission, and as a result was nearly killed by a giant wasp. It is only his latest irresponsible action. Since this mission began I have noticed a tendency in Baker to drink overmuch and to gamble. While we were still at home he organised a drunken poker game with two security guards, and knocked one out in the resultant brawl.... after today's behaviour no-one respects him. I recommend that his Acting Lieutenant status be suspended after this mission.

"We have found that we can bargain with the green imps. Curiously they are partial to sweets, If given a chocolate they will leave your belongings alone. They are mischievous, they love to 'borrow' items and hide them elsewhere. One of Tessara Swift's skirts turned up in Captain Lowry's cabinet, this provoked some good-natured jibing from the other crew members. We believe the more hostile imps to have come up from deep underground since Lieutenant Nash reports seeing a blue imp crawling up the windy shaft."

Sprake omitted to mention in his report that he was worried by the content of Tessara Swift's news bulletins which she transmitted daily. She refused to let any of the crew hear these but Spiegel told Sprake that he was passing her cabin (she still slept on the ship, unlike most of them) while she was recording

and heard her refer to him as "an indecisive, uncertain commander."

Spiegel could, of course, be lying, mused Sprake. His hatred of journalists was renowned and he and Miss Swift had had several blazing arguments, with Spiegel making it perfectly clear that he considered her a kind of spy and, to quote one of his more colourful phrases, 'a prying little worm who should crawl under a stone and die'.

Sprake raised the matter with Miss Swift. 'I trust that you are aware of the Columbus Force view on mission news reports?'

'That the reports should not contain any of the journalist's personal opinions? Yes, I'm aware of that, Commander', she answered, smiling. 'Don't worry - I'm not including any'.

Looking into her attractive brown eyes, Sprake had no idea whether she was telling him the truth. He knew that this mission would be under the microscope back home and any unfavourable news could damage his career badly. If any such subjective opinions were appearing in her reports, on returning he would have to stress that they were her views only, not necessarily shared by anybody else there...

Down in Kennedy Cave, Baker came upon a squirming mass of maggots which moved rapidly towards him. He killed one and the others crawled out of the cave. Pahn dissected the corpse and reported that, once more, the maggot possessed a mysterious blue sphere.

They continued to explore, mainly in the tunnels off Lear Cave, finding them empty apart from abandoned mining machinery. They found more coronium rocks.

"Clever old Spiegel has modified robot Chatter's reactor to convert small lumps of coronium into pure energy. On command he can be made to release fully charged power pods which we can use to power all our equipment. Judging by robot Chatter's chirping he is rather happy about this arrangement. I suppose he enjoys the extra attention and the feeling of being useful - a basic need of all robots."

Day Nine

The charts spread out over the desk might as well have been in Serbo-Croat rhyming slang for all the sense they made to Sprake. A collection of tiny grey dots, their peaks and troughs forming patterns, they spoke volumes to a geologist about the make-up of the planet's rock strata but meant nothing to the Commander.

Sprake scratched his head and turned to the older man. 'Alright Colin, I'm baffled. What do they mean?'

Lowry leant forward eagerly. 'From these seismological readings we can tell that this planet has been in existence for eons. Look at this.' He pointed to a jagged line along the bottom of the page. 'Something hard hit this place then, about ten thousand years ago. Probably a meteor storm.'

Sprake's communicator crackled and brought the voice of a breathless Lieutenant Nash. 'Commander, we've hit trouble.'

'Go ahead, Tony.'

'We're in Pascal's Cave. We came upon a group of blue imps eating a dead green imp.'

'Charming. What happened?'

'They attacked us. We killed one or two and the others fled. I thought I saw something in the distance...'

'What?'

'I'm not sure... it might have been an imp. But it was green, bright green. And it looked tall. Two metres maybe. It fled with the others.'

'Interesting. Can you install a transporter down there?'

'Will do.'

Later that day Christine Pieters' jetpack became the latest to fall victim to the strange phenomenon afflicting them - leaving the crew with only two working units.

Day Ten

"The green imps' stealing and general mischievousness is beginning to annoy some people. There have also been some accidents. One of them stole a grenade today and blew itself up... made a hell of a mess..."

Day Eleven

"A quiet day during which tests continued..."

Colin Lowry and Spiegel were locked away in their respective laboratories, conducting experiments. Pahn and Christine Pieters reorganised their cave living quarters. Nash ran a routine check on all the robots, including Robot Stuvo who complained bitterly about the indignity of being lined up with 'all those tinplated dustbins'. Baker was 'interviewed' by Tessara Swift, this consisting of Baker boasting about his supposed military achievements for two hours before trying unsuccessfully to persuade her to join him for dinner in his quarters.

Sprake discovered a huge nest hanging from the roof of Pascal's Cave. It hadn't been there before. Presumably it was a giant wasp's nest, constructed with incredible speed. Staring up at the massive collection of twigs and leaves, Sprake decided to leave, as its occupant could return at any moment.

He went down to Nimoy's Cave where Nash was installing a transporter. Clambering awkwardly over some jagged rocks, Sprake cursed the malfunctioning jetpack that had caused him to travel everywhere on foot.

'What about the jetpacks?' he asked Nash. 'Any theories?'

'You should get more exercise, Commander,' Nash said dryly, as Sprake puffed from the exertion of the difficult journey.

'That's not a theory, that's a statement of the painfully obvious.'

'It's true all the same.'

'They told me you were a health freak. If we had reliable jetpacks I wouldn't need to climb around like a mountain goat.'

'Well, they are a new type. It's probably a design fault. Gothard's don't have any of the top designers anymore, they can't afford the big salaries. They're cheap - that's why the Force use them.'

'Right. Let's see the transporter then. That had better work.'

The transporter Nash had installed in a corner of the cave had a programmable destination. The commander tested it empirically by programming a return to Banquo Cave. He shivered as the molecules of his body separated. It was not an experience the Commander relished. Within seconds his molecules

reassembled in Banquo Cave, to the amazement of a imp standing nearby.

Sprake stepped out of the transporter and flipped open his communicator.

'It's okay, Tony, you've still got a job. The device works.'

'Damn. I was hoping your molecules would be stuck in a wall somewhere and I'd have to take over as Commander.'

'That's not funny, Tony. My sense of humour must have got stuck in a wall somewhere. See you later.'

Day Twelve

"The living quarters in our base below the surface are becoming familiar, almost cosy, to us now. Everyone is in good spirits, feeling that the mission is a success, and this evening we held a party to celebrate."

Music for the party was provided by Tessara Swift, who played the electrolute, and Colin Lowry, who brought his synthesizer from the 'Pericles.' Everyone enjoyed themselves apart from Spiegel, who made a brief appearance to complain about the noise before retiring to his laboratory.

Several of the green imps watched the party, gazing in awe at the raucous revelry of the crew. Sprake discussed the imps with Sun Pahn who said that he was now able to distinguish between them from their voices - the grunts and squeaks varied in tonal modulation - but not from their bodies, as they seemed to be physically homogeneous. He also believed them to possess empathic qualities. He had noticed that sometimes an imp would adopt the mood of a human near to it.

After a few hours all serious discussion was abandoned and Nash organised a game, the object of which was to find the most ludicrous name possible for the planet.

The party went on late into the night...

Day Thirteen

"Exploration continues on the lower levels. Colin Lowry told me today that he is writing a book about his years in the Force. He hopes to make enough money from it to retire and pursue his own geological interests. He says this mission will provide an excellent final chapter for the book."

Day Fourteen

The sound of the transporter caused a wasp, hovering over the water, to fly away through the fountains. The newcomer stepped from the transporter, feeling refreshed and rejuvenated by the experience of matter transference. He glanced down briefly, as if checking that his molecules had reassembled themselves satisfactorily, before striding over to inspect the waterfall.

He looked up, up, to the peak, some six metres above his head. The magnificent cascade of water poured furiously into the black, bottomless pool in front of him. The jets streamed down with pitiless, relentless force, an unceasing liquid inferno. He stood at the very precipice of the ledge, so that the splashing water could pummel his face and soak his suit. It felt cool, superbly refreshing, and for a few brief moments he felt almost a part of it, almost an extension of the terrifying underground waterfall, at one with the primeval forces of Nature itself...

He tore himself away from the torrent, and jetted up through the caves until the roar of the water could only dimly be heard. As he reached his destination, a booming voice greeted him.

'Ah, my friend. You appear to be dripping wet. You have been examining the waterfall?'

'I have.'

'You must alter the destination of your transporter. It would be much more useful, and safer for you, if you could come directly here to my humble abode.'

His friend nodded. 'I will make the adjustment. That waterfall is spectacular. I've never seen anything like it below ground.'

'Magnificent, is it not? Beautiful, yet terrifying. Beauty can so often be terrifying.'

'And terror, beautiful?'

'Quite so.' The man in the green space suit sniggered as he pulled up a small cage, which he quickly opened. A maggot crawled out onto the stone floor of the cave.

His associate flinched. 'That is horrible.'

'A little creation of mine.'

'You made the maggots?'

'Yes. There were a few natural ones here when I arrived, but they were grotesquely boring. I have improved them. I have built a machine that manufactures them. Watch this. Kill!'

At the command the creature moved swiftly forward, its teeth glinting savagely in the shadowy gloom. Its creator laughed as his visitor cowered away shouting 'Get that away from me!'

'Stop!' barked the man in the emerald green suit, and the maggot came to a halt.

In the dank shadows at the rear of the cave, a small imp crouched, eating a handful of leaves. The maggot's creator raised an imperious arm and pointed. 'Kill!' he repeated, a look of malicious glee on his brutal face.

The maggot writhed across the ground, its mouth opened to reveal a set of razor sharp white teeth. The imp stumbled to its feet, squeaking with terror as it realised what was happening. It tried to evade the advancing monstrosity but the maggot suddenly leapt across the cave and buried its teeth into the imp's stomach. The imp howled in agony as its bowels were ripped open and the maggot pushed it to the ground. The watching men stared in awed fascination as the salivating beast consumed its prey. Within seconds the maggot had stripped the imp of its skin and had progressed to the skeleton.

Tiring of the display, the maggot's creator proceeded to weightier matters. 'How are our friends from the Force?'

'Hopelessly innocent, and paralysed by their bloated self-satisfaction. They suspect nothing.'

'Excellent.' We shall continue as planned until we are in absolute control.'

The man looked affectionately over at the creature he had created, which was still gnawing at the imp's body, chewing the bloodied bones with a mindless, brutal intensity.

Some hours later, Sprake sat in his cabin on the 'Pericles', sending a message back to his superiors.

"Baker has gone missing. He had a furious row with Spiegel down in a low-level cave, apparently on the subject of Twentieth Century politics - Spiegel's hobby is history and he has a particular interest in that catastrophic period. Baker stormed off. As yet he has not returned and does not respond to his communicator."

Baker's disappearance left Sprake with a difficult dilemma. Was it some

typically adolescent outburst of Baker's? Was he just brooding in a distant cave? Or had something terrible happened? Should he organise a search party?

Sprake resolved to wait until the following day to see whether the errant young officer returned. Spiegel, predictably, was quite unconcerned. 'We're better off without him,' he commented. 'The youth was a total incompetent.'

Sprake noticed the use of the past tense. 'What do you mean, was?'

Spiegel's lips curled into a cold, humourless smile. 'Wishful thinking. I expect he's been killed by someone or something down there.'

'You don't have an ounce of compassion in your body, do you Spiegel?' the Commander retorted angrily. 'One of our party may be dead and all you can do is laugh. You're the most callous man I've ever had the misfortune to meet.'

Sprake was shocked by the intensity of Spiegel's reply. Drawing himself up to his full towering height the professor, quivering with fury, pushed his thin, cruel face into Sprake's. His slate grey eyes burned with a searing hatred as he spat his words out between gritted teeth. 'Am I, Sprake? Offended your precious moral sense, have I? You soldiers and your moronic morality. You'll wipe out a planet if your superior orders it, but you profess an endless compassion for your fellow man. You sicken me.'

'I've watched you on this little joy ride, Sprake. Do you want to know what I think of you? I think you're an obsequious Columbus Force toad, a worthless, snivelling whiner obsessed with his own career. A wet, whimpering lackey who isn't fit to command a dog. Of course you're no scientist. You don't have the brains to understand it and you sneer at those who do. I'm glad that kid's gone, but I'd much rather it had been you.'

Spiegel ended his tirade by lifting a drinking glass from a table and heaving it against a wall, where it shattered into a hundred fragments. Sprake had to step back to avoid a flying shard.

After Spiegel left, Sprake got Robot Chatter to clear up the mess. Sprake sighed. To see ourselves as others see us. Perhaps there was some truth in Spiegel's outburst. His career was important to him, there was no doubting that. But surely that didn't make him an obsequious toad and, what was it, a whimpering lackey.... he was thinking too much and his head hurt. He needed some sleep.

As Sprake was about to turn in for the night Lieutenant Nash called to say that the teleport in Polonius Cave had been found smashed to pieces.

Day Fifteen

A space ship without a Destinator is not a space ship at all. Without that vital component the craft cannot take off. Deprived of its Destinator, the craft is no longer mobile. It is stuck. Trapped.

Its occupants are marooned.

Sprake could hardly believe what he was hearing as Nash provided him with a garbled version of the facts. The Destinator was gone. Someone or something must have boarded the ship during the night and taken it. The forcefield had somehow been deactivated and the console housing it broken into without the alarm being triggered.

Sprake left his room at a run, heading for the hastily convened crew meeting on the ship's command deck. Everyone was present, and the mood was verging on panic. 'Any sign of Zinc?' he asked Nash.

'No. Nothing.'

'This is your fault, Sprake,' sneered Spiegel. 'With only a skeleton crew on the ship, anyone could get aboard!'

'You were the person most keen to leave the ship and set up base underground, Spiegel. How could we man the ship when most people wanted to live in the caves?'

'You should have refused to let them move. I need to be down there. This pair of nurses don't.' He waved a hand dismissively at Christine Pieters and Sun Pahn.

'We've got as much right to be down there as you,' said Christine sharply.

'Who could have taken the Destinator?' asked Sun Pahn. 'We're trapped here now. There was a tremor in his voice, and his hands were shaking.

'A blue imp?' suggested Tessara Swift.

'No,' Sprake decided. 'Removing the Destinator without activating the alarm requires a high level of skill with electronics. The imps couldn't be responsible.'

'Never mind who did it!' shouted Sun Pahn, his body shaking with emotion. 'The point is we're trapped on this horrible planet!'

Everyone began to talk at once. The problem with small groups like this, thought Sprake, was that one person's panic could spread like wildfire to the others. The volatile Sun Pahn was shouting and screaming about their predicament, and his mood was contagiously spreading.

Sprake shouted to make himself heard above the din. 'Listen to me! I said listen!' The noise abated slightly. 'Right, so we've lost the Destinator, a key part of the guidance system. But there's no point in standing here shouting at each other I'll send an urgent message to the Force requesting that a replacement be dispatched immediately. I suggest, rather than sit twiddling our thumbs waiting for it to arrive, we set out to look for the one that's been stolen. And for Baker.'

There was a rumble of assent. Sprake organised a search party and they teleported down to Banquo Cave to begin the search.

After a few hours fruitlessly combing the caves they had previously explored, they reached the rune-embossed portal out to the west which they had been unable to move. To their surprise they discovered that it had been mysteriously opened, revealing a steep slope disappearing down into cloying pitch darkness.

Lowry stepped into the opening and held out his Geiger counter, which produced a rapid clicking sound. 'The radiation level down there is dangerously high,' he remarked.

'We should return to the ship,' offered Spiegel. 'Seal ourselves in and request assistance from the Force. We have no idea what we're dealing with.'

'I don't know...' said Sprake hesitantly.

'That would be contrary to the Force Directives Manual,' Nash observed. 'Under Sub-Section 42B it is our duty to search for any missing crew member.'

'Pahh. The soldier boy speaks,' scoffed Spiegel. 'Always go by the book, however stupid it may be.'

Nash let the insult go. He volunteered to enter the dank chasm that had opened up before them.

'Dashed good show, old bean,' said Robot Toff. 'I'd go m'self if it weren't for this gammy leg. You're a gentleman, sir.'

'Alright Tony,' said Sprake. 'But put Toff into defensive mode and take him with you. Be careful.'

'Yes. I'd be devastated if anything happened to you,' said Spiegel, his voice dripping with sarcasm.

Arming himself with a heavy duty, combat situation icer, Nash stepped forward into the tunnel, accompanied by the robot. He disappeared into the pitch blackness before them and for a few seconds they heard his footsteps echoing on the hard rock floor.

When he later went through the sequence of events in his mind, Sprake wasn't sure what happened first. But the brief gurgle of excruciating pain from the tunnel was followed instantly by the appearance of the most terrifying creatures Sprake had ever seen.

Two of them were imps. But imps unlike the ones the crew had encountered before. Their arms had been torn off and replaced by elaborate metal projections which served as weapons... in their claw-like hands they carried blasters of unfamiliar design... their hair was yellow like other imps, but they were considerably larger... there were ghastly, ragged scars on their heads surrounded by clotted blood...

But it was their faces that were most hideous. They were bursting with explosive hate, their features contorted into frenzies of uncontrollable rage...

They were the faces of the damned.

But even more nightmarish was the creature hovering in the air above them. A robot taller than any man, its silver body dovetailed into a long metal spike that was either a balancing device or a weapon. Its torso was a battered, bloodstained collection of rusting sheets of metal. A barrel-like projection extended from its chest. Its head was triangular with a twisted gargoyle-like face and black eye slits.

The crew froze as the terrible trinity emerged from the tunnel. The robot spoke in a harsh, grating voice.

'We meet at last. Face to face, as it were. I am your nemesis. I demand vengeance!'

'Who... are you?'

'I am the Grim Reaper, my friend. I am Napoleon, I am Hitler, I am Ghengis Khan, I am God. For many long years I have waited. Now I will have my revenge. At last... at last!' The voice narrowed into a hiss, then turned into a manic insane cackle.

Sprake turned to the others. There was sheer naked terror in their eyes. 'Run!' he screamed.

No-one needed to be told twice. Those that retained jetpacks jetted away, the others ran. The imps went for them. Lowry turned to aim his icer. The beams had no effect. He stumbled and one of the imps seized him, then began to tear at his throat with its metal hands... the others knew there was nothing they could do for him. His screams echoed around the cave walls like the wailings of a condemned soul.

They ran towards their base at a furious pace. The caves rang with the sound of screams and the murderous roaring of the imps. Sprake felt his heart pounding, a stitch developing in his ribs but he pushed himself on... the imps were giving chase. The crew knew there was no time to operate the transporters so they raced past them.

Robot Toff pounded past Sprake. It possessed, as did all its class of automaton, the ability to run faster than any man. Toff must have eluded the killers, thought Sprake. If only Nash had escaped and the robot been destroyed.

An imp caught Christine Pieters and her screams made Sprake's blood run cold. He arrived at the base with the others hard on his heels. Tessara Swift, who had remained in the base, stood taking photos of the deranged imps.

The survivors rushed in. 'Seal the airlocks!' someone shouted. Sprake leapt for the console and hit the switch. The doors slid shut.

They stood wheezing with the effort, gulping air into their lungs, trying to understand the events that had engulfed them. The sound of the imps had died away now, leaving the silence they were used to outside the base. But now the silence was different. Now it was doomsday, forbidding, terrifying. The enormity of what had happened had yet to sink in. In a matter of minutes their friends, Nash, Lowry, Christine Pieters, had been lost. Why, Sprake's mind screamed. Who was killing them and why?

Sun Pahn was weeping. He had collapsed into a chair with his head buried in his hands, and was sobbing uncontrollably. He looked at up at Sprake, his eyes brimming with tears. 'Where's Christine? Christine!'

Sprake laid a comforting hand on his shoulder, then moved away. There would be time for grief later Right now Christine was lying in a bloody mess on a cave floor, ripped apart by an animal, and if they didn't keep their heads they would meet the same fate.

The Commander approached Spiegel, who was slumped across a computer keyboard. 'Are all airlocks sealed, Spiegel?'

The Professor ignored the question. 'You're an imbecile, Sprake,' he sneered, his thin, bearded face twisted with fury. 'A careerist yes-man. Unimaginative, cowardly, weak. You're so concerned with your stinking career and what your superiors might say that you've endangered our lives. You should have slaughtered every imp we saw

'That's contrary to Directives,' said Sprake quietly.

'So what?!' Spiegel roared, his fists clenched and his face taut. 'The imps are against us. They're trying to kill us!'

'The normal imps were no problem. The ones we've just encountered are different... mutated by the radioactivity perhaps... and you saw those scars on their heads...'

'We should have exterminated all of them! You're a nobody, Sprake, a worthless cretin posing as a commander. You can no longer rely on my support on this so-called mission. You've blundered terribly. If I had my way we'd put you up against the nearest wall and gun you down. Then we'd search out every last imp and slaughter them until these caves ran with their blood!'

'You listen to me, Spiegel - '

'Quiet, both of you!' Tessara Swift shouted suddenly. 'Look at the computer!'

The two men broke off their argument and turned to the computer next to them. On the screen letters were slowly appearing. 'what the...' murmured Sprake. They all gathered around, even Sun Pahn, to watch in amazement as words began to form....

After a minute, the words ended. The message that had unfolded before them read: 'Greetings, my friends. Did you think you could escape me by retreating to your base? You cannot. There is no sanctuary, my friends. I will have my revenge. Revenge is a noble emotion. Triax will not be denied. I repeat - there is no sanctuary.'

'This must be from that robot thing that spoke to us at the Rune Cavern,' said Sun Pahn.

'That was only a robot, operated by its programmer,' said Sprake thoughtfully. 'I think the programmer is the mind behind all this. What's that name - Triax. Does it mean anything to anybody?'

The others shook their heads. 'Right. Sun, can you run it through the other computer's memory bank to see if we've got any trace?'

Tearing his mind away from his dead fiancée, Pahn moved to the other machine and rapidly input his password.

For a few seconds his hands ran over the console with the familiar practised ease of a master pianist at his keyboard, then he turned eagerly to the others. 'Commander, there's a record here.'

They gathered around the computer to read the screen. 'Triax: name adopted by criminal of late twenty first century. True name unknown. Responsible for barbaric genetic experiments. Imprisoned victims in order to tamper with their brains and bodies in an attempt to create a race of ruthless killers. Trials recorded on Justice Directorate tapes ZZ5732. His sentence was exile into Space, alone in a Prisoner class vessel with pre-set coordinates.'

'Now we know who we're dealing with,' said Sprake.

Exile into Space was never a common sentence for criminals. The everyday lawbreakers - robbers, thieves, smugglers, killers - were imprisoned in huge establishments on specially-constructed islands in the middle of oceans. For the most heinous and barbaric, however, this was not considered punishment enough. As a series of debates had failed to win the restoration of the death penalty, the other option, for many years, had been exile.

Criminals of this type were sent into the dark night of Space in small, primitive capsules, with pre-set coordinates, powered by booster rockets. The course would be straight ahead, aimed at a distant galaxy, with no possibility of turning back. They would be provided with food and power to last them one year, but it was estimated that no criminal would live that long. The finite electricity supply would be the first thing to go, leaving the occupant in constant darkness. Top criminal psychologists advised that this sensory deprivation would drive the prisoner insane, and that most would subsequently take their own lives. It was the widely-held belief that this was an inhuman punishment which had eventually caused the exile system to be abandoned.

Death had not come to the man who called himself Triax. Somehow he had managed to land on the planet, where it seemed that he had established a base, developed robots and experimented on theimps. The deranged imps who attacked the crew, with their terrible scarred heads, had to be the product of Triax's bizarre experiments. Clearly, he was not a man to be trifled with.

And now he had set his sights on the crew.

'He must have stolen our Destinator,' said Tessara Swift.

'Yes. I wonder why...' Sprake pondered. 'To trap us here, perhaps...'

'Initially. Then when he's slaughtered us he'll use our ship to return to Earth,' said Spiegel.

'How do you know that?'

'It seems probable,' replied Spiegel with a leer.

Sprake wondered briefly what the cryptic rejoinder meant, but dismissed it as irrelevant. He had never understood Spiegel, why should he start now?

'What are we going to do, Commander?' asked Sun Pahn, his voice trembling. He was a broken man.

'We'll try and contact this lunatic,' said Sprake forcefully, settling himself at a computer keyboard. 'I'd like to meet him face to face.'

The others formed a group around him as he input a message. 'Hello Triax. Commander David Sprake of the Columbus Force ship 'Pericles' here. How about a meeting to discuss things? That's if you dare to show your face. So far we've only encountered the creatures you employ to do your dirty work for you.'

Sprake entered the message and sat back awaiting the reply. Within seconds words began to appear on the screen. 'Greetings, Commander Sprake. Of course I know who you and your friends are, I have been monitoring you ever since your arrival on this charming planet of mine. Very entertaining it has been, as well. I have no objection to meeting you. On the contrary, I will find it positively stimulating. I receive so few visitors. Any social call is welcome, however brief. And believe me, Commander. Yours will be brief. But Triax is generous. You can name the time and the place.'

Sprake's hands moved speedily across the keyboard, fashioning his reply. 'If you know so much about us you'll know which cave we call Lear Cave. I'll see you there in six hours. Don't be late.'

The communication ended, Sprake told his colleagues that he and Sun Pahn would go to meet the madman. The object would be to try some psychology on him, attempt to get him talking about his childhood and what caused him to grow into the maniac that he had become. If they could take him prisoner, they would bring him back. If not they would try to kill him.

They had six hours to wait. The other crew members, exhausted from the day's events, attempted to sleep. Sprake and Pahn, standing guard, discussed in detail what they would say to Triax if they were given the opportunity to speak. The plan agreed upon, they stood in brooding silence. Sprake felt his eyelids, heavy with exhaustion, begin to close....

Day Sixteen

"Stupidly I fell asleep... I feel better for the rest though. Pahn and I are about to leave the base for our meeting with the mad criminal Triax. If we fail in our mission we will be killed and this will be my last ever report..."

Sprake turned to face the others. Sun Pahn was armed with grenades and several icers. Spiegel looked drawn and haggard, but still as hostile as even Tessara Swift looked terrified. Her hair was bedraggled and her eyes were rimmed with tears. The robots, however, were the same as ever. 'Dashed good luck, old boy,' said Toff. 'The feller's a blackguard. He deserves a dam' good thrashing.'

'Right. Open the airlocks, Spiegel.'

'Good luck,' whispered Tessara Swift, forcing a smile.

'We'll need it. Ready, Sun?'

The Chinaman nodded grimly. The airlocks slid open and they made their way cautiously into the tunnel beyond. The airlocks slid shut. Holding their icers in front of them, they proceeded slowly. All was quiet. There was no sound and no sign of life, not even of normal imps. Their footsteps echoed loudly. The crew no longer had any operable jetpacks so they had to travel on foot all the way.

Arriving at Lear Cave, they found it empty. 'Come on out, Triax!' shouted Sun Pahn. 'We're waiting for you! There's no need to be shy, you gutless murderer!'

'Shut up,' said Sprake tersely. He looked at his companion. He had to bring Pahn because he was a psychologist and might be able to win over the criminal's unbalanced mind. But it was clear that Pahn was himself a long way from calm balance. Always temperamental, Christine's death had driven him to the very brink of hysteria.

Suddenly a panel in the cave wall pulled back and the hideous robot they had seen before emerged. It hovered above them, its narrow eye slits terrifyingly blank and the sheer metal spike it possessed hanging perilously close to their heads.

The two men took an involuntary step back. Sprake could feel his heart beating fit to burst. He hollered at the robot. 'I thought we were going to meet you, Triax, not this heap of scrapyard metal! We don't want to talk to your lackeys!'

'Are you frightened to show yourself, Triax?' shouted Sun Pahn.

The robot spoke with the same soft, faintly sinister, English voice as before. 'How loudly you shout in a feeble attempt to conceal your fear.'

'You're the one who's frightened, Triax!' screamed Sun Pahn, his furious, raging voice echoing round the cave. 'You're a gutless woman killer. You're scum, you're filth, come out here and I'll tear your kidneys out and nail them to the wall!'

Sprake rolled his eyes upward. 'Great psychology, Pahn.'

An imp emerged from the panel. It was short and squat with strong, muscular arms. One hand had been replaced by a long steel knife. On its head it bore the scars that marked it as a victim of Triax's appalling experiments and its mouth slavered with globules of saliva pouring down its body. Its dark eyes seethed with a monstrous rage.

The robot spoke. The voice was now angry. 'Do you dare to bandy words with me?'

Suddenly the robot attacked Sun Pahn and the imp came for Sprake. It grabbed the Commander round the neck and they fell to the ground, grappling. Sprake struggled to free his arm so that he could fire his icer, but their bodies were pressed together, and all he could see was the imp's twisted, snarling face. It was trying to bite him. Sprake pulled his head back, trying to keep out of the creature's reach, but the imp was stronger than him. Its cavernous mouth opened and its sharp, pointed teeth closed in on Sprake's throat....

'Leave him alone.' The voice provoked an immediate reaction in the imp. It pulled back, climbed off Sprake and stood up. 'Go back,' ordered the voice. The imp walked away.

Sprake staggered to his feet and looked at the tall man who had appeared before him. He wore an emerald green space suit, which had a visor over its face, so that its occupant could not be seen. The voice was the same as the robot's, so Sprake took this to be Triax, the madman trying to kill them all. He was holding an icer.

Sprake glanced over at Pahn. He was dead. His eyes stared lifelessly and there was a trickle of blood dripping from his mouth. The robot hovered above the bloodied corpse.

Sprake looked at Triax with hatred. 'You animal,' he said savagely.

Triax laughed chillingly. 'I consider that a compliment, Commander. Now I think it's time you paid a visit to my home.' He gestured with his icer to the panel in the cave wall.

Sprake moved forward into the recess. Triax followed him. A primitive transporter stood in the shadows and the two men stepped into it. Triax hit a switch and their molecules began to separate...

Within seconds they had reached their destination, appearing in a transporter located in a dank cavern. The light was so bad that Sprake had to concentrate to see clearly. He surmised that they were now much deeper into the cave system. Triax gestured with his icer.

Sprake stepped into the hidden cave. It was certainly impressive. Much larger than any the crew had seen on the planet, its walls were lined with wooden tables on which were stacked innumerable items of scientific equipment - microscopes, petri dishes, test tubes and bottles containing liquids of all colours. The cave walls and the tables were stained with liquids including, Sprake noticed with a shiver, blood.

The cave floor was littered with all manner of furniture. As well as tables and chairs there were knives, crudely manufactured guns, icers, plates and towering consoles of bloodstained machinery the purpose of which Sprake could only guess at. The dominant decoration, however, was a collection of mounted imp heads which adorned the walls. These were horrific enough to cause the Commander to take a sharp intake of breath.

'Welcome to the court of King Triax,' said his captor. Sprake turned to see the killer removing his spacesuit helmet. Triax was revealed as a man perhaps two metres in height. His face was fat with a thick black beard. His dark curly hair was uncombed. A deep brown scar disfigured one cheek. His unblinking bloodshot eyes had the crazed stare of the fanatic.

'I've tried to make it cosy,' he said, glancing around the cave. 'It's rather nice, don't you think? Now then, would you care for coffee? Or something stronger? By the way, I'll have your icer.'

Sprake reluctantly handed his weapon over. Unknown to Triax, however, he had a small icer concealed in his waistband. If Sprake could get him talking maybe he could find a moment to pull it out and fire...

'I don't want any of your drinks, Triax, or whatever your name is. I just want to know why. Why have you killed my crew members?'

Triax's moment of affability vanished as suddenly as it had appeared. 'Revenge, Commander. That's why, if you must have an explanation. Revenge is my lust, my need, my food and drink. For fifty years I have waited here, preparing for this moment, and now I WILL EXACT MY REVENGE!'

'But why us? What have we done to you?'

'Your race condemned me to an existence in Space, trapped in a Prisoner class Vessel. That was a transgression, and you will all pay the price for your error!'

'But you were a criminal...'

'A criminal?!' Triax roared. 'I am a scientist! My experiments are a way forward, they show that we can beat Nature, that we need not be satisfied with the bodies that we have been given, we can adjust them, improve them!'

'But the people you captured and tortured...'

'You cannot make an omelette without breaking legs, Commander.' Triax cackled at his sick joke. 'I needed raw material for my experiments. They would not come willingly, so I had to take them by force. It is unimportant, they were of no consequence. I cannot let a few whimpering people stand blocking the march of science. No-one stops Triax!'

'How did you get down to this planet?' Sprake asked, genuinely fascinated by the maniac's story.

'Ah, a stroke of luck. My ship, my prison, collided with a small meteor and was knocked off course. It crash-landed on this planet, the winds preventing it from burning up as it descended. Summoning all my strength, I crawled from the wreckage into the caves. Oh, the pain of it haunts me still. I rescued what equipment I could from the crippled ship and set up my base down here. It was not long before I was using my expertise to build robots and to conduct experiments on the inhabitants, the imps and wasps and birds.'

'Why?'

'My work is my life! As long as I live it lives. I soon found that I was able to make changes in the character of these creatures by adjusting their brains.'

'What about the mining civilisation? Was that still here when you arrived?'

'No. You must have noticed the high level of radiation in the lower caves. I think that must have wiped them out. If they weren't capable of space flight they couldn't leave, and there was some sort of nuclear explosion the immediate radiation level would have killed them all.'

'Did you say you've been here fifty years? That's not possible. You only look about forty, maybe forty five years old.'

Triax smiled narrowly, revealing a set of brown and yellow decaying teeth. 'I am eighty seven. It's a fortunate side effect of the type of radiation here. A small amount permeating through the skin over a long period of time drastically reduces the ageing process.' His voice took on a harsh, bitter tone. 'Yes, for fifty years I have been trapped here, Commander Sprake. Fifty years lurking in these caves, brooding on my wrongs. Fifty years to plan my terrible revenge. And believe me, Commander, it will be terrible. I am returning to the Earth. When I arrive they will

learn to whimper with fear when they hear the name Triax. I will be their king, their emperor, their God!"

'And you intend to use our ship?'

'Very perceptive, Commander. I do indeed. But first I must rid myself of yourself, and your remaining crew members.'

'You're going to kill the rest of us? And we were getting on so well.'

Triax ignored the sarcasm. 'Not all of you, Commander. You can join us now!'

A door slid open and Spiegel walked into the lab.

Sprake was aghast. 'Spiegel... what the -'

Much to Sprake's amazement, Spiegel was smiling broadly. 'Hallo, Lord Triax.'

'Hallo, my friend.'

'Commander, meet my collaborator.'

'Your collaborator?'

'Yes. Tell him, my friend.'

The German took a step forward, a smile of pure malice on his face. 'It is true,' he said.

'Spiegel! What... have you been helping this lunatic?'

'I have indeed.'

Sprake leapt at the professor and clasped his hands around his throat. Spiegel fell to his knees, choking as he tried to tear Sprake's hands away before they squeezed the life out of him. 'You filth!' Sprake shouted. 'You've helped to kill my crew!'

'That's quite enough, Commander.' Triax dragged Sprake back, allowing Spiegel to stand up, spluttering and rubbing his bruised neck.

'But why, Spiegel? Why are you in league with him?'

'Simple,' answered Spiegel, quickly recovering his composure. 'Genetic engineering is an interest of mine. I started off tampering with animal foetuses... gradually I became more and more fascinated by the work, and came to realise that what I really wanted to do was experiment on human beings.'

Spiegel pulled up a chair and slumped into it, rubbing his weary eyes. 'Ah, it is a relief to stop performing.'

'You could have been an actor on the stage, Spiegel!' remarked Triax with a throaty chuckle.

'But why are you working with him?' demanded Sprake.

'Let's call it instinct, Sprake. An instinct that told me we would make a formidable team.'

'We great scientists have such instincts,' boomed Triax from a stool which he had settled onto. 'They set us apart from ordinary mortals, the faceless mass of human mediocrity. We are separated by our genius!'

'Quite right, Triax,' agreed Spiegel. Sprake noted an undertone in Spiegel's voice. These two had joined forces but their relationship did not seem a particularly easy one. While Spiegel was amoral, brutal, Triax was terrifyingly insane. It seemed to Sprake that Spiegel was repressing his own egotistical nature when in Triax's company, allowing the exile to be, or seem to be, in charge.

'Our plan,' Spiegel elaborated, 'was to eliminate the 'Pericles' crew. That has now almost been achieved. Next we will return to Earth where we will build an army of warriors-'

'And I shall be their Emperor!' said Triax exultantly.

'Indeed you will,' said Spiegel. Sprake thought that Spiegel intended there to be a different outcome. Probably he would kill Triax and become leader himself. For the time being he was humouring Triax's monstrous conceits. 'And I will be your deputy.'

'No.'

For a second there was silence. Spiegel, looking unsure of himself for the first time, turned to look at Triax. 'No, Lord Triax?'

'No,' confirmed Triax, moving his icer to a point directly in front of his collaborator. 'I don't trust you. You will turn against me. You must die.'

'Die? Me?' Sprake had never seen Spiegel look frightened before. But now he was terrified, a pitiful spectacle as he fell to his knees, pleading for mercy. 'But we are a team... we work together... please Triax... not me...'

There was only contempt in Triax's eyes as he stared down at the man cowering

before him. 'You are of no value,' intoned Triax, his deep grey eyes glistening with fanaticism and the scar on his cheek a vivid, glowing red. 'Did you think Triax would adhere to a bargain made with a worm like you? Adios, my friend.' The icer hung over Spiegel's twisted face...

At that moment Sprake, who had been working his hands around slowly to the back of his waist, pulled his icer and fired. The shot caught Triax in the arm and he roared with pain. 'Spiegel! Run!' Sprake shouted. As Triax staggered back, holding his wounded arm, Spiegel rose from the ground, and the pair of them fled.

Sprake had no idea what to do when he reached the base. Could they keep Triax and his creatures out? That would be their only hope. There was no chance of beating Triax in the caves. He had been there half a century and knew them like the back of his hand. He probably had other secret panels and concealed rooms all over the place.

As Sprake ran puffing into the tunnel leading up to the airlocks, he flipped out his communicator. His stomach had a stitch and his legs were wracked with pain but he forced his body on, as he could hear the grunts of the imps and the exhorting commands of Triax as his pursuers thundered through the cave behind him. 'It's me! For God's sake open the airlocks! But be ready to close them as soon as we're in!'

As they approached Sprake saw the airlocks begin to rise and the comforting light from the base flooding out. If he could just keep going for a few more seconds...

They raced into the enveloping yellow light of the base and came to a halt. Tessara was the only human left there. She and the robots were huddled in a corner. Tessara looked at Sprake, terror in her eyes. From the open airlock Sprake heard Triax bellow 'In there! Quickly, you morons!'

Sprake, barely able to speak because his lungs were in such pain, gasped, 'Spiegel, don't just stand there, man! Close the doors!'

Spiegel's hand hit the console and the airlocks slid shut, with the thumping footsteps of their pursuers mere yards away.

Sprake sank into a chair. What now?

'Pahn?' Tessara asked. Sprake shook his head.

Pulling out his icer, Sprake pointed it towards Spiegel, who had fallen into a chair. The traitor had recovered his icy composure and his face wore its customary sneer. 'Put up the defences, Spiegel. Then you've got some explaining to do.'

'Yes sir,' leered Spiegel, moving to the central console.

'Activate the turrets, put them into Kill mode.'

Spiegel's fingers punched the appropriate keys. 'Right. I've got the burgers frying.'

'Hilarious,' returned Sprake. 'That should keep Triax and his cronies out for the time being.'

Oddly, the clamour outside had died away. No sound could be heard. Removing his helmet, taking care to keep his icer trained on Spiegel, the Commander rubbed his weary eyes. 'What's he up to now?' he pondered aloud.

'I should think he's returned to his lab to tend to his wound,' answered Spiegel. 'Whatever he says about the ageing process slowing down here, Triax doesn't have much energy. Our little adventure will have exhausted him. I imagine he'll rest for a time, planning his strategy for overpowering us. After all, we're not going anywhere.'

'Never mind that. I want to hear your explanation, you stinking traitor. What's your excuse for joining that maniac and helping to kill our people?'

Spiegel shrugged. 'I have no excuse, Commander. I am, as you know, a scientist. I am totally dedicated to the advance of science. I don't subscribe to the same morality as other men. An arbitrary system of moral values is not a necessary part of the scientist's equipment.'

'However I did make a mistake in siding with Triax, I accept that. I now realise that he is a mass murderer whose activities can only damage the development of science.'

'You've changed your tune. If he hadn't turned on you you'd still be behind him all the way.'

'No. I knew that he had to be stopped, and that my arrangement with him had to be terminated. I planned to turn him over to the authorities at the earliest opportunity.'

Sprake eyed his adversary suspiciously. Could he believe him? 'How did you find out about Triax anyway?'

Spiegel leaned back in his chair and yawned.

'Genetic engineering is a fascination of mine. On Earth I studied it and worked on it obsessively. In the course of my research I studied the careers of all previous experimentalists in the field. Triax was by far the most fascinating. I read of his

exile and one day, for no particular reason, I decided to calculate the course his capsule would have taken. While doing so I noticed that the capsule would have been on a collision course with a meteor. The two must have collided and the capsule would have been deflected from its original trajectory.

'There were a number of planets in the vicinity of the incident, this one being the nearest. As I sat in my laboratory, poring over the charts, a bizarre notion entered my head. Suppose Triax's craft had crashed onto a planet. He might have survived, and might have been able to continue his experiments with whatever life forms were on the planet.'

'Not very likely,' interjected Sprake, his voice laced with contempt.

'Perhaps not. After all, even if this had occurred, I thought Triax would probably have died long ago - I knew nothing of the radiation here. This was the largest planet in the quadrant,' continued Spiegel, 'So I thought it a strong possibility that the capsule crashed here. As luck would have it, I heard that the Columbus Force was planning an expedition to the very same planet. I made immediate plans to join the crew.'

Back on Earth I have some very powerful computers, Commander. More powerful than any legally owned by private individuals. Using these I was able to intercept the messages from the dwarfie that came here, before they got back to the Columbus Force. The dwarfie had registered a large amount of electrical activity on the planet. When I saw that I was enthralled. It might mean that Triax was alive.

'I felt I had to go there to see for myself. The chance to work with the estimable Triax - the most intelligent scientist in my chosen field - was an opportunity I was unable to resist. Besides, with that investigation into my work, my experiments at home had been stopped and I had plenty of free time. I had nothing to lose.'

'Go on.'

'I didn't want anyone else reaching my conclusions about Triax's presence on the planet, so I tampered with the messages coming back from the dwarfie, removing all mention of electrical activity before the messages were heard by Force officials.'

'Then, as you know, I managed to persuade the Force bureaucrats that I was the ideal Chief Scientist for the mission. I secured my berth on the 'Pericles' and bided my time.'

'When we arrived, I was almost as ignorant of the situation here as yourself. At first, seeing the horrible wasteland of the surface, I was greatly disappointed. What could there be of interest to me on such a planet?'

'But then we discovered the cave system. After a few days I began to venture off alone, down into the caves. Imagine my delight when I met...'

'Lord Triax.'

'As he usually calls himself Yes. He raised his weapon to kill me, but then I said 'Are you Triax?' and we began to talk. He has an enormous ego, which was boosted by my talk of studying his work. 'All true scientists know of me!' he said. The man is consumed by egotism, awash with self-love.

'I was overjoyed to find him alive, of course,' added Spiegel. 'We adjourned to his base and became engrossed in discussion, exchanging our stories. We discovered a mutual love of genetic experiment. He had worked on the creatures here and had even managed to make one or two robots, but he could progress no further. Until we arrived.

'I began to help him. I stole some robots-'

'So that's where they went.'

'to assist. I took him tools and equipment. But, all the same, I didn't trust him. I suspected that, if we did get back to Earth, he would resent having to share his glory with anyone. He might well turn on me. As a precaution I removed one of the ship's engines and took it to my lab.'

'The one damaged in the landing?'

'That's what I told you. It wasn't actually damaged. I removed it in case Triax turned against me. He lacks the knowledge to replace it, and, without it, the ship can't leave. He would need me to refit it. Or so I thought. But he's gone over the edge. He doesn't seem to care anymore.

'How did you get down to his lab without the rest of us noticing?' queried Sprake.

'I installed a transporter in my lab, behind a locked panel. Nobody knew it was there. It took me down to Triax's lab, and one of those rather primitive transporters Triax has managed to lash up there brought me back.'

'God, what a mess,' said Sprake, exasperated. 'So you and Triax, the dynamic duo, intended to return to Earth where he would reap revenge for his supposed ill-treatment and you would help with his genetic engineering experiments.'

'That's right. And anyone who objected to Triax becoming ruler of the planet would be thrown to the maggots. Triax is responsible for them as well. He has a

machine that manufactures them.'

There was no time for any more conversation. The madman was back. The door began to give way under a furious battering from the imps. Triax's enraged voice could be heard exhorting them to push harder 'Well, it looks as if rest time is over' said Sprake. 'I don't trust you, Spiegel, but we're going to have to work together to beat him. Is that transporter in your lab still usable?'

'Yes.'

'Then go through the rear door, run to your transporter and teleport down to Triax's lab. Do as much damage as you can down there. Kill as many imps and maggots as possible. Try and destroy the maggot machine. I'll try and keep him busy up here.'

Spiegel moved from his seat, pulled on his helmet and left the cave by the manual rear door.

'What do you want me to do, Commander?' asked Tessara.

Sprake attempted a comforting smile. 'Just try and stay alive.'

Spiegel moved quickly through the caves to his lab. He inserted the key in the lock, and a panel slid back to reveal the concealed transporter. Spiegel stepped inside. As an afterthought he closed the panel, locked it with the key then pushed the key into a pocket of his spacesuit.

Seconds later he appeared in a cave many kilometres further below the planet's surface, and moved forward carefully. This was Triax's domain and you never knew what danger might lurk around every corner.

Spiegel moved through Triax's lab without encountering any assailant - the imps and robots were all with their beloved leader. Racing through the rooms, he hurriedly cannibalised an icer so that it would explode, thus destroying much of Triax's equipment. The eerie sight of severed imp heads mounted along the walls made even Spiegel's skin crawl with revulsion. Of the stolen Destinator, without which the 'Pericles' could not leave the planet, Spiegel could find no trace. Triax must have hidden it elsewhere - if they survived, they could search for it later.

In a room near the waterfall, an elaborate machine had been developed by Triax for the purpose of manufacturing maggots. Even as Spiegel desperately pushed against the unyielding stone door, the process was continuing. Powered by a generator, the machine produced maggots which were carried through a plastic tube into the transporter which carried them west to the Maggot Cave. Spiegel had found the door locked and was unable to force his way in. He realised that his only

hope was to destroy this appalling device with the grenade.

Spiegel hurled the bomb at the door and threw himself to the ground as the shuddering explosion rocked the caves...

At the same moment, Sprake was realising that the doors of the base would not withstand the battering it was taking for much longer. The imps, pushed on by Triax, who could be heard screaming at them hysterically, had dented the door and it was only a matter of time before they broke in.

'Do we stand and fight?' demanded Tessara Swift.

'Why not, m'dear,' said Robot Toff. 'Queensbury Rules, of course. No gouging or poking, after all we are gentlemen.'

'No,' said Sprake decisively. 'We run. Pick up your icer and follow me.' Sprake rose and opened the manual door on the other side of the cave. It revealed the biggest imp they had yet seen, a huge brown monster standing some three metres in height, which filled the doorway with its terrifying bulk.

'Triax has realised there's a back door to this place,' muttered Sprake.

Tessara screamed. Sprake fired his icer, time and time again, but it had no effect. The creature advanced into the room. At that moment the airlock gave away and two other imps pushed their way in, followed by Triax. 'Now my friends,' said Triax between deep gulps of air, his voice triumphant, cruel, brutally malevolent. 'I will not be cheated of my revenge. I WILL NOT!'

Down in the caves, the smoke cleared to reveal the door standing intact. Spiegel cursed and realised that the only action he could take now was to wipe out the worms located in the Maggot Cave to the West. He began to make his way to it.

Eventually Spiegel got there without incident. A huge cavern, its floor a deep lake, a featureless expanse of water broken only by a jutting rock forming a small island. It was filled with maggots which swam in the lake or piled up on top of each other on the rock in a fetid heap of vile disgust. Some attempted to climb out to attack Spiegel, straining their putrid bodies and grimacing with their ravenous teeth.

Spiegel had brought a flame throwing device from the lab. He lifted it and fired it into the mass of bodies. 'Take this, my beauties,' he shouted as the flames caught them and turned the maggots instantaneously into a terrifying inferno of fire. As their bodies were engulfed the creatures squealed with agony, feeling their skins burn and shrivel as the roaring yellow flames caught them. But even as some maggots died in the blazing conflagration, others were teleported in.

Leaving the maggots ablaze, Spiegel ran from the room towards the transporter that would take him back to the safety of his laboratory. He stumbled over a rock and fell to the ground. After a few seconds, shaking his groggy head, Spiegel prepared to climb to his feet.

As his eyes rose from the ground, he saw two large, brown, hairy feet in his path. Spiegel looked up to find an angry imp looming over him. 'Get away from me, you hairy oaf!' he shouted. 'I am Professor Spiegel, Lord Triax's friend!'

But Triax had clearly informed his henchmen of the changed relationship. The imp made for Spiegel with a murderous look in its eyes, and Spiegel turned on his heel and ran for his life. He thundered through the caverns with the imp in close pursuit. They raced through a cave full of sleeping birds, who flapped their wings with fright and excitement as the noise woke them. Approaching Triax's transporter, Spiegel reached for his key, but it wasn't there - he must have dropped it!

His only terrified hope was to outrun the creature. The distance between them was increasing; Spiegel could hear the imp grunting with the effort of running at full speed. He began to slow down.

Suddenly he found himself spinning through the air. He had tripped over a stray vine. He tumbled to the ground with a painful thud. Desperately he tried to get to his feet but his right leg was twisted and he couldn't stand on it. Spiegel hobbled agonisingly across the cave, but as he did so the imp pounded in after him. It bore down on him, raising an icer.

The blast caught Spiegel in the head. He screamed his last protest, a look of excruciating pain on his face, as his burning eyes turned to jelly.

Up in the base, Sprake had activated the microphone in his belt to send his final, desperate message to his superiors. 'Help us, for God's sake, help us!'

'I will not be cheated of my revenge!' Triax was bellowing. 'I will have my revenge!'

He raised an icer and fired at Tessara Swift, who was thrown by the force of the blast across a table. Then, slowly, he brought the icer around to face Sprake.

They were both out of breath. Triax's brow was beaded with sweat. His eyes had taken on a blank glazed look that was scarcely human. For a few seconds neither man spoke. Toff and the other robots had herded themselves into a corner. The deranged imps were standing awaiting their leader's command.

'Go ahead, Triax,' spat Sprake. 'Fire.'

Triax's mood had swung, yet again. Now he seemed calm and serene, and he chose his words slowly and thoughtfully.

'No, I do not intend to kill you, Commander I want to involve you in my experiments. You will be my raw materials. And the next recipient lucky enough to participate in Triax's journey to knowledge is to be you, Commander Sprake. I've got a special one lined up for you. How would you like your brain put inside an imp's head?'

'What?!'

Triax's eyes were aglow with the bright enthusiasm of the fanatical. 'Yes! The first joining of a human with an imp, of the intelligent with the savage!'

Sprake stared incredulously at his enemy. 'You're mad, Triax. Completely insane.'

Triax threw back his head and laughed. 'Mad, am I? No, I think not, Commander, I occupy the grey area between madness and sanity. And it is there that most geniuses are to be found. Now then. Over to the table, Commander. Prepare to say goodbye to your body!'

Sprake had often thought about death. Cold, unrelenting death. How would it feel? Slowly, interminably, the icer swung to face him. 'Now, Commander,' said Triax. 'We must return to the experiment I was about to begin before I was so rudely interrupted.'

Sprake knew he had a choice. He could go along as Triax's prisoner, and have his brain installed in an imp's head in a gruesome experiment by this crazed madman. Or rather than suffer that awful fate, he could raise his icer to his head and take his own life.

It did not take Sprake long to make the decision.

Epilogue

Why me, Finn asked himself. Why is it always me?

He knew, of course. One reason only. He was the best.

The Columbus Force had a crack squad of highly trained individuals who were called upon whenever a particularly critical problem had to be resolved. They had each spent ten years receiving a thorough training in as many skills as the Force could drive into them.

Mike Finn was the best the squad had to offer. When Commander Sprake's terrifying reports were broadcast, Finn was returning from a mission in the same star quadrant as Phoebus. He was immediately ordered to change course. A senior Force admiral gave him an intensive briefing over the Spacelink. Finn informed his superior officer that, in the course of his recent mission, he had lost most of his weapons. The admiral insisted that he undertake the task nevertheless; back-up could follow from Earth. His mission: to travel to Phoebus, to rescue any Force survivors, and to overpower Triax...

Now Finn was in his compact ship, insulated by a forcefield that prevented detection, on a top speed course for Phoebus. He looked out at the universe. Somewhere out there was his home, the majestic globe of Earth. It was just another planet, Finn thought. How small. How insignificant. To think down there we get worked up over things that you realise, when you get up here, just mean nothing... his mind turned to his latest mission. Save our people, kill the aggressors, oh and while you're at it find out the meaning of life, Mike old man...

Finn turned his thoughts away from the Earth and looked through his front screen at the panoramic immensity of space, a black sea as beautiful as life and as silent as death. Somewhere up ahead was the planet Phoebus. Finn gritted his teeth. He had a job to do.

END