

Earth to Earth
by
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Foreword

This the second book in the JET! trilogy, is a continuation of Sirk's adventures in time and space. This story shows Sirk at his resourceful best, as he battles to defeat The Powerful One for a second time. However, determined to succeed in their new world he goes on to rebuild the Earth as a place where people can live in peace, harmony and prosperity. I hope you enjoy it as much as JET!.

Phil Phoenix.

Dedication

This book is also dedicated to my lovely Maria, she has made me happy. An amazing lady, she one of a kind. I could never find another like her.

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EARTH TO EARTH

It occurred to Sirk that facing the seventeen-hour wait before they entered the wormhole was equivalent to at least three working days, and having run out of conversation he and the prof. fell silent for almost half an hour, then finally breaking the silence Sirk requested the professor's choice of beverage - tea or coffee.

'I'll have whatever you're having.' replied the professor not wishing to put Sirk to any trouble. Leaving the helm Sirk made his way to the galley, and returned a minute later with two steaming mugs of coffee. Sitting at the helm he handed the prof. his drink, then taking a sip from his own placed it on the console; and for a few seconds watched the steam rise from the cup. Thanking Sirk for his hospitality Professor Patenil followed suit, then placed the mug in his left palm. Staring at the instruments for five minutes neither uttered a word, then something dawned on Sirk that had previously escaped his attention.

'Prof., when we arrive back on Earth, do you think the Men will give us a hostile reception? I mean we'll be living with them permanently this time, do you think they'll see us as too much competition for food and land, or anything else for that matter?' said Sirk inquisitively.

'Personally I think they'll welcome us with open arms,' replied the professor, 'especially after what you've done for them... besides, we can show them how to increase their crop yields, so I don't really

see it as a problem.'

'Yeah, I guess I'm trying to cover every angle,' replied Sirk, 'I just don't want anything goin' wrong.' Falling silent again Sirk's eyes locked onto the supercool, he'd purposefully left it aligned to condition himself mentally for the wormhole, and welcomed the professor's company on the bridge as a necessary distraction from the vagaries of space-boredom. Chiming up with its latest report the computer brought Sirk back to full alert.

'Attention - information - time extrusion fifteen hours - imminent!' Time passed slowly on the bridge, and both felt they were in their own private time warp. Had Sirk been on a solo journey like his last he'd have injected the commensurate 100 milleparts of sleep than suffer the consequences of space madness. As far as he was concerned the latter was not an option so he and the prof. spent most of their time talking trivia to ward off the effects of hyperspace travel.

'Attention - information - time extrusion thirty minutes - imminent!' Chimed the computer for what seemed like the millionth time. The professor had nodded off, but rather than wake him Sirk went about his checks for their pending entry into the wormhole, and as the professor had insisted on watching the big show, five minutes before entry would be time enough to wake him. With their long wait almost over Sirk felt things were at last starting to happen, and with a mere months travel after exiting the wormhole he would finally see his friends again. His checks complete he sat back and thought about Raff, Hepra, Kiska, Gorn and the

others, and wondered how they all were. His mind's eye visualised their prosperity, and among other things an abundance of food and water would be theirs, then suddenly he remembered Tim who had sadly perished in their battle to destroy The Powerful One, an evil bastard if ever there was one! Remembering his first sight of that overgrown slug it was the most hideous thing he'd ever seen, and wondered again how that could ever have been construed as human!

'Yeah, a real piece of shit!' said Sirk aloud, and in the process woke the professor, who jumped visibly at hearing Sirk's voice.

'Sorry prof.,' said Sirk. Then thinking he'd missed the wormhole the professor's eyes suddenly went wide with fear, and noticing his expression Sirk reassured him he'd woken in time, then, turning to the Holochart they studied the on-screen star map.

'Attention - information - time extrusion fifteen minutes - imminent!' Very soon the professor and Sirk would have their sanity tested to the severest limit, and it would be the longest six minutes of their journey. One minute dragged after another, and apart from the futility of being conscious over the last few weeks, both knew there was worse to come.

'Attention - information - time extrusion ten minutes - imminent!' Another millennium had passed since the computers last Announcement. As they approached the wormhole the Diamond Dart had been travelling for more than six months, and things on board could have been better, but Sirk was glad when everyone was out for the count, as that was the only time he didn't have to contend with the same

barrage of questions, the popular one being 'How much longer?' This time he'd woken them a week early, but had a specific reason for doing so, and it was simply that he didn't want his friends going through the horror of death should anything go wrong in the wormhole, so having dispensed their measured dose of sleep they were again out for the count. The only person exempt from sleep at this juncture was the professor, and as he'd quite rightly pointed out, he had trained Sirk to cope with the "trauma" of going through a wormhole without being subjected to a total mental breakdown. Finally agreeing Sirk allowed him to remain on the bridge during the episode, but only after the Professor had mentioned that being an old man he was unlikely to get another chance to see it first hand. Going aft Sirk went to check that all was well with his unlikely crew. Nearer to death than life they lay perfectly still, their skin pale and waxen he knew his decision to tell them they would be "asleep" rather than comatose had been a good one. As with the others Cita's breathing was almost imperceptible, and lying sealed in her cot he thought how beautiful she looked. The loneliness of space had dragged by hour after hour, and having gone through a lot of his old music collection Sirk had temporarily exhausted his taste for it. Talking with the professor they discussed the situation back on Earth before they'd escaped the clutches of Tranter and the UWF. The professor however vindicated Bloomberg and informed Sirk he was apparently telling the truth, neither Bloomberg or Myloff for that matter wanted any involvement in sending him on that mission as a

dupe! Reminiscing for a while Sirk realised the professor was right, plus, he remembered from the beginning it was Tranter he'd mistrusted, but at that time Sirk had no idea the situation was that serious.

'Attention - information - time extrusion five minutes - imminent!' Mentally logging the freshly imparted info from the ships computer Sirk continued chatting with the professor, and asked him why it was that the only race to survive the holocaust were the Scots, if you could call it survival! The professor deliberated for some time, and thinking he'd forgotten his question Sirk was about to repeat it, when suddenly clearing his throat the professor sat bolt upright.

'It's hard to say exactly,' he started, 'what is curious is that they were between the epicentre of two blasts, they should've been wiped out!' The only thing that springs to mind is that seconds before the missiles impacted, the UWF deployed the Depol... so with the planet rotating the missiles hit targets much farther north than their intended destinations. The Depol had definitely changed the missiles trajectories, and therefore detonated at a more vertical angle. The fact that the Depol had vectored both missiles north might be why they were saved from the blast of both. Another thing we must bare in mind is that mountain you spoke of, if it's as high as you say it is, if they were on that particular piece of land at that time it's that that may have been saved from the tidal wave. The Men's grotesque appearance is obviously the result of radiation, and it strikes me they were lucky to have survived at all!' 'Yeah, I understand what you're saying prof.,' replied

Sirk thoughtfully, 'but I'll say one thing, they've somehow retained the humanity that we've long forgotten.'

'What exactly do you mean Sirk?'

'You remember I told you when I first discovered them, or should I say they discovered me, I was beaten half to death, well once I'd got to know them I found them to be a kind and courteous race.... they had a grace and awareness I hadn't seen in many years without any cynicism at all. After I'd recovered they explained to me that Mak had mistaken me for The Powerful One, and that was why I was given such a hard time!'

'Attention - information - time extrusion - one minute - imminent!' Again he logged the info to his subconscious, and Sirk began wondering if they'd ever get their final cue.

'Are you ready for this professor?' asked Sirk, still concerned as to whether he was up to it.

'Don't worry about me, I'll be alright!' replied the professor with dignity. Sirk admired the professor's tenacity, he was a tough old bugger and there was no denying it.

'Attention - information - time extrusion - thirty seconds - count down continuing!'

'Twenty five seconds!'

'Twenty seconds!'

'Fifteen seconds!'

'Ten seconds...nine.... eight.... seven.... six.... five.... four.... three.... two.... one.... zero!'

'Penetration attained!' Smiling suddenly Sirk wondered if the UWF had thought carefully enough about that announcement, then looking through the

supercool Sirk and the professor noticed the stars had stopped striating.

'For a split second I thought we'd stopped!' declared the professor, his eyebrows raised in amazement, 'it had me completely fooled, I didn't realise....' the professor's voice trailed away.

'Quite something isn't it.' said Sirk, and still in awe of the spectacle. 'Is your head aching yet?'

'Hull pressure increase, twenty five bar!' chimed up the computer.

'Now you come to mention it Sirk, yes it is!' replied the professor looking very pained. Now striating in reverse the stars had the professor entranced, and both felt the sensation of travelling in reverse!

'Well, this is what a time extrusion looks like professor.' declared Sirk, then left for an instrument check; but the professor was now totally transfixed by the display in front of him.

'Holy shit, it really does look as if we're travelling backwards!' The professor's use of profane language was somewhat of a rarity; Sirk smiled!

'Unnerving isn't it.' replied Sirk, and remembered his first encounter with the effects of the wormhole, 'I almost turned back last time, had I done so we wouldn't be sitting here now! Now you know why I would have preferred to sedate you.'

'Yes! I can see that now - but I'm glad you didn't.' replied Professor Patenil grinning impishly, a quick look at his face and Sirk decided it was time to realign the supercool. 'However I don't like this headache much!'

'I think I've had enough of this for now.' said Sirk, putting the onus on himself to spare the professor's

feelings.

Yes, I think you're right Sirk.' replied the professor agreeably, expecting a vehement protest Sirk's element of surprise was short lived for the fact that both he and the professor were aware of its effects on their psyche. Then, as the stars disappeared behind the changing Supercool, like Sirk's, the professor's eyes eased immediately. Their heads however continued to ache abominably!

Giving periodic updates on their progress through the tunnel the onboard computer made Sirk impatient, and with minutes ticking away like hours after what seemed like a lifetime the computer finally heralded their exit.

'Align Supercool!' ordered Sirk, as the stars began striating in the normal direction, and as the pre-determined portion of the hull became transparent again, the professor clapped his hands once as Sirk blew thinly through his lips.

'Thank God that's over.' said the professor quietly as Sirk nodded his agreement.

'Ship's computer!'

'Your request?'

'Convolut thirty-four immediately and give me an ETA to target!' ordered Sirk.

'Compliant - convolut 34 attained - ETA, two months 2 days 4 hours and twenty six minutes.' Came the immediate response. Checking the time they'd spent in the tunnel Sirk noted that the onboard calendar now read 12/7/100,074; looking satisfied Sirk turned to the professor.

'It looks as if we're on course for home,' he informed the prof., 'our time in the tunnel was

exactly that of my last journey, and the calendar shows we're in the correct time zone.' Given his normally modest expression Sirk thought he detected a trace of smugness on the professor's face, after all, it was essentially "his" ship!

'God do I feel hungry!' announced Taniche looking decidedly pale. Having aroused everyone from their cots Sirk herded them into the galley for a "load o' bollocks" meal!

'Don't worry,' declared the professor, 'I've been busy preparing something for everyone, come on - get stuck in!' Grabbing a plate each they all ate heartily, but a few seconds later a grimace befitting the ugliest gargoyle beset every face.

'Sorry,' said Sirk smiling laconically, 'now you know!'

'Did you eat this stuff on your last journey?' asked Arin.

'All the way there - and back,' replied Sirk resignedly, 'not good is it?'

'Christ, they should've given you a medal just for eating this stuff,' added John, 'let alone the mission itself!' The professor smiled sardonically at John's comment.

'By the looks of it we didn't get everything right!' he confessed. Laughing at his quip they realised that this was an admission of failure on the professor's part, but with the realisation they would soon be liberated from the confines of the Dart made it a more cordial atmosphere.

An hour later Sirk told them it was time for their last bout of shuteye, and the general reaction was one of expected reluctance. On the grounds that they

still faced two months travel, Sirk re-iterated they were all untrained in hyperspace travel, and it would be foolish for anyone to remain conscious, even for the last leg of the journey. Ten minutes later the last of the protestors was out for the count.

‘Now it’s our turn.’ Announced Sirk holding the syringe ten millimetres from the professor’s arm, then climbing obediently into his cot the prof. made himself comfortable, then joined the others in their near death state. Following suit Sirk was surprised at the readiness with which the professor had agreed to his administered dose, but he liked the prof., he was one of the old school, a gentleman. Although admitted inwardly he wasn’t too keen on his granddaughter, the independent and wilful Taniche, who one day would take a large fall. To all intent and purpose she appeared to know what she was doing, and where she was going, until the Dart’s arrival in her sleepy little village in the heart of rural Devon several months ago; now she was not so self-assured!

The inevitable bleep started its waking process on the occupants of the Diamond Dart, and stirring slowly their eyes opened on this the last wake period of their epic journey, from one world - to the same world! A journey that not one of them, including Sirk, would have ever dreamt they’d make! Already on the bridge Sirk talked to Cita about their pending arrival on Earth, when Taniche walked in and gave them a broad smile.

‘You look happy.’ stated Cita, and was about to ask her why.

‘Yes I am,’ she replied quickly, ‘I wanted to thank

you Sirk... and apologise for my earlier behaviour.’
‘You already have,’ replied Sirk reminding her of her of her remorse at their journeys outset, and concluded the conversation, ‘well... least said soonest mended!’ Feeling happier she joined her grandfather, as John Mycker arrived on the bridge and expressed his curiosity at the gravitational vortices, and whether they would seriously affect the safety of the Dart.

‘Serious... yes they are John,’ replied Sirk honestly, ‘but when I left last time I found a way to avoid them, so I would imagine it’ll be as safe going in this time... well that’s the theory.’ As he walked away Sirk noticed John’s concern and added, ‘don’t worry John, I will get us down.’

‘Computer!’

‘Your request?’

‘On manual - give me full control.’ commanded Sirk at the helm again and went through his pre-entry checks. Indifferent to its ocean-like vastness the little ship sped through space, and once again life on board had broken the silence of space, a silence that would drive one mad should they be careless enough to ignore proper precautions; but thanks to man’s ingenuity the Dart was capable of travelling across the universe in seven months! Unfortunately man’s ingenuity hadn’t extended to making peace with his own kind, and having all but destroyed himself had left a handful of the human race to realise its full potential. As the Dart had literally saved their lives the realisation of this was not lost on Sirk, and he would go on to realise that for a long time. Unseen in the vastness of space the insignificant little ship

ped towards its destination, and seemed indifferent to meteorites and cosmic dust bouncing from its hull; only neutrinos got through! With every nanosecond that passed they were closer to mother Earth, the planet they'd left six months before. Having completed his checks Sirk Announced there was time for one more meal before their entry into Earth's atmosphere.

'Oh no - not that Recon again!' said the prof. despairingly.

'You know that's all we've got prof.!' said Sirk smirking, and realised that they were now suffering as he had! 'Now I know there's a God, anyhow it's that or go hungry.'

'I'm beginning to wonder if hunger is the better option!' rejoined the professor without grinning; but nevertheless when it was served the professor ate his chow readily, and for that matter so did Sirk!

'F---n' shite!' muttered Sirk under his breath, then having finished, placed his knife and fork on his plate.

'Sorry I didn't catch that.' said Cita pretending she hadn't heard him.

'Nothing.' replied Sirk, not wanting to reiterate his statement for fear of upsetting her, and grinning let her carry on eating.

On the bridge again Sirk had put the star map on screen and requested an ETA from the computer.

'Four hours twenty three minutes and fourteen seconds.' answered the computer in its usual tinny cackle. There was more than enough time for the others to finish their meals, after which Sirk would give them a briefing about entry into the Earth's

atmosphere, so remaining on the bridge he checked and rechecked every reading on the console, then verified it with the computers database. He wanted to be one hundred percent sure that if something did go wrong it wouldn't be an error on his part, and dreaded the thought of the others demise because of his negligence. Diligence would rule his life for the present, so that if the worst happened at least he would die without carrying the can for their safety; which was always of prime importance.

They listened intently as Sirk explained how gravitational vortices could affect the Dart, but despite his attempts to reassure them there was a good deal of concern among the ships complement.

'ETA please?' asked Sirk of the computer.

'One hour thirty seven minutes and fifty eight seconds!' It was time for Sirk to decide if he would take the ship in manually or on auto, if things did get rough he could always switch to manual and bring her back under control, but at least this time he wouldn't have those infernal mountains to contend with! Walking to the console Cita put her arm through Sirk's, and looking down at her he smiled wanly as she gave it as big squeeze.

'You're worried about re-entry aren't you?' she asked in a low voice.

'Yeah, but don't let the others know, I don't want them panicking,' replied Sirk earnestly, 'the vortex has a tendency to move about, so I don't know where it'll be at any given time!'

'Don't worry love; I know you can do it... and I won't say a word. I have complete faith in you my darling, after all if you can return to me after what

you went through, then this'll be a doddle.' He was touched by her faith in him, and thought a woman like her was rare in his time, and divorce being readily obtainable in five minutes, or was, after what had happened divorce was no longer necessary!

'I love you,' said Sirk suddenly, 'I haven't told you that since we started out have I?'

'You've had a lot on your mind, I don't expect you to tell me you love me every five minutes!' she told him lovingly.

'Yes but it's been more like seven months than five minutes!' he told her self-effacingly.

'I agree... but we were unconscious most of the time!' They laughed together for the first time in ages, when suddenly the computer chimed up with an update they'd been waiting for.

'Destination on screen!' commanded Sirk, and in a flash they observed a beautiful silver globe hanging like a jewel suspended in the black velvet void of space; it was their mother planet, and despite man's best attempts to destroy her she had survived! With a breathable atmosphere, crops to sustain them and water for their thirst, and they silently thanked God Sirk had had the foresight to bring them here. Their landing this time would carry one significant difference however, no UWO or UWF, no Tranter and military escorts, rules or regulations - just themselves and the Men.

The next few minutes would be Hell for Sirk, and he knew better than anyone what would happen should they encounter a vortex, and, should their situation deteriorate would they even survive? Having no choice but to face down the challenge

that was his and his alone, he would have to run the gauntlet!

'Earth environment - one minute - immanent!' announced the computer suddenly.

'Right here we go then!' said Sirk, with his jaw set for the pending entry into Earth's atmosphere success he determined would be his, and hadn't brought them all this way to die! Switching on the exterior microphones it was only a few seconds before they heard the hiss of air sear against the hull of the Dart, which would grow rapidly into a deafening roar. Sitting grimly at the helm Sirk said a silent prayer that everything would go with them they held their breath against the first sign of a vortex. Holding a steady course the Dart plummeted toward the planet's surface.

Suddenly the Dart tilted to port, the computer quickly corrected and re-established her trajectory, and unaware the eyes of others were fixed rigidly on him Sirk's heart was in his mouth, and hoped he wouldn't crack under pressure. Poker-faced he watched the onscreen display, but gave nothing away as another jolt hit the Dart, again to port, although not as severe as the last it was enough to unnerve the occupants of the Dart! Again the computer corrected her course, but was then hit by a severe jolt to starboard, and as she cried out in anguish the professor put a reassuring hand on Taniiche's arm, then having put the Dart on course once again the computer had the situation well under control. After that the Diamond Dart suffered no more from the vagaries of the gravitational vortex.

‘On manual!’ ordered Sirk, then took the control in his left hand.

‘Compliant!’ replied the computer; Sirk felt the stick lighten in his grip. Taking her down to five thousand feet he brought her into level flight, and hovering over the shattered remains of the great dome of New York he put the ship on levit. Fixing the exterior cameras on the city below its image came onscreen, and they stared transfixed at the hologram of a city they’d once known as one of tall buildings, and green open spaces. Remembering his childhood, as a boy Sirk had witnessed the lowering of the single crystal dome, when engineers had used two hundred Gravicopters to drop it neatly into place, an engineering feat that had never been equalled, let alone beaten! It would never be equalled now - or bettered! Having been built originally to preserve the ageing skyscrapers, the “new” green belt areas were rearranged aesthetically to make them more appealing to city dwellers.

‘There you are, that’s what our wonderful Depol did for us!’ Staring incredulously at the relic in front of them which had once been known to them as the largest city on Earth, it had been a thriving bustling place that had now been laid to waste! Increasing the magnification they observed streets littered with decaying transport and crumbling buildings, then to add a surreal touch to the reality of it, a wind blew up lifting debris and dust from the ground, .

‘I wonder... if it was worth *really* it?’ asked Sirk sarcastically.

‘Well it’s done now,’ added the professor, ‘we have to find a way of rebuilding our planet - and never

ever forget what has gone before!’

‘I wonder if we’ll ever learn from our mistakes!’ rejoined Sirk.

‘Surely this our golden opportunity,’ added Cita, ‘surely it’s up to us to educate the next generation that war is *never* the answer; we must teach them reason, not confrontation!’

‘I sometimes wonder if it’s man’s nature to wage war!’ replied Sirk negatively.

‘That doesn’t sound like the Sirk I know.’ cut in Arin, thinking his brother needed a psychological boost. Feeling a trifle sheepish after his brother’s comment Sirk had to admit he was right, but there again, historically man had always gone to war for one excuse or another; be it greed, poverty or religion! Why should he change now? With that thought he took the Dart back to ten thousand feet and headed for the place they would call home for the rest of their lives, Scotland!

THE WELCOME

Flying east at sub-warp speed the West coast of Scotland appeared on the horizon, and as they flew overhead a coastal mist gave the remains of Oban an eerie appearance, then banking sharply to starboard they headed for Glasgow - or where it used to be! A minute later Sirk saw the craters that held so many nightmarish memories, and remembered the beetles and their fearsome pincers, but then, considering the amount of natural anomalies here, or should he say man-made anomalies, he found it hard to believe this was his home planet. Remembering those beetles suddenly reminded him of that outsized Anaconda, with its ideas on closing its seven-foot gaping jaw around Sirk for its midday meal! Then there were those lion-sized tortoiseshell and white cats, and those cats were the only creatures on this planet that had showed him anything other than hostility. Heading south Sirk brought the Dart over that precipitous mountain, that had nearly claimed his life on more than one occasion, and still bearing the scar he saw again the scree the Dart had careered up that had crippled the ship in the process. Clearing the cliff at the southern end of the valley he saw the village in the lower crater, where the Men and their families dwelt. Taking her down slowly he stalled her flight at fifty feet, and brought her into stationary mode once more, then powering up the hologram and camera he panned it through three hundred and sixty degrees - but the place was deserted! A feeling of foreboding hit him, something was drastically wrong here, the Men and their

families should have been going through their daily routine, but there was on one! Fixing the camera on Raff's hut he studied it for nearly half a minute, then panning around once again still found nothing.

Having no idea what had happened to the Men or their village, the signs however pointed to the fact that they'd left in a hurry, and had taken nothing with them as their personal effects appeared untouched. It was thought Sirk like a dry land Marie Celeste, but zooming closer he realised the village hadn't been lived in for some considerable time, and rain drops in the dust on their crude little tables bore witness to the fact that something wasn't quite right! Had they found somewhere else to live, but if that was the case, why had they left their belongings? The whole scene screamed trouble at him!

'I'm going down!' announced Sirk suddenly. Taking the dart down to twenty feet he went to the armoury, and selecting a Pulsar pistol opened the hatch.

'I want you all to stay here, John, keep en eye on the scanner for anything hostile, Arin, watch my back, if you see anything move on the ground warn me!' With that he ran down the walkway to set foot on Terra Firma for the first time in seven months, to walk on the planet they'd left for dead seemingly a hundred thousand years ago! Walking slowly to Raff's hut Sirk started his surveillance, and stopping outside his eyes caught sight of a meal that had barely been touched, a few mouthfuls were all that were missing from the green, time-shrivalled bread roll. It was evident the Men had left in hurry, then peering carefully through the door he saw something he prayed wouldn't be there - the gift of a light bulb

from The Powerful One! Sirk's heart sank, and he knew instantly that somehow this insidious bastard was still alive, and knowing his friends were captive again out of vengeance this time The Powerful One had taken them all! On his return here he'd hoped to see his friends living peaceful and prosperous lives, but now it seemed he was destined to fight again to free his little companions; the people he'd grown to love and respect. One thing he was certain of, he wouldn't give up until every last one of them was free again!

It was futile hanging around the village, although he already had a good idea he'd have to find out where they were being held, then plan a campaign to free them from their shackles. Returning to the Dart his first priority was to make sure he kept a low profile, and didn't want to erect a hoarding to let The Powerful One know he was back. Walking on to the bridge he closed the hatch and sat at the helm, then lifting off he took the Dart back over the ridge and into the valley, where that precipitous mountain and the trees surrounding the southern end would hide them. Getting her as close to the tree line as possible Sirk put the Dart on levit at two hundred feet, then leaving only essential services running he powered her down from operational mode. Handing control to the computer he turned to face the others. 'Well... we're down but not out, but - we do have a problem, and it's this... it appears The Powerful One is probably still alive! Having told you all there is to know about the village, you may remember I told you about those bulbs that the PO put in every hut... well I've just found one in Raff's hut, and

have every reason to believe they're also be in the others!'

'Any ideas about where the Men might be?' asked Arin.

'It's possible he'll have imprisoned them in the old furnace, or maybe the museum, but I can't be sure 'til I take a look.'

'Well you can count me in, replied Arin, 'and I'm sure John will muck in as well.'

'You can bet on that,' cut in John, 'I'm not missing out on all the bleedin' fun!' With that Sirk thanked them for their loyalty.

'PO is not to be trifled with,' said Sirk with emphasis, 'so I'll have to plan this very carefully, but as we can't do anything right now, I suggest the next thing we do is eat.' Going aft to the stowage area he took the litepole down to the powerhouse. Powered by the ships drive the Litepole was simply a beam of light controlled by Tachyon particles from the drive unit, by exerting downward pressure enabled the user to descend, and conversely upward pressure allowed your ascension. Going through his supplies Sirk checked everything from coffee, tea, Recon and Regen to medicines and armament, and anything they would need in the coming season of conflict. Whilst checking the inventory his mind wandered back to the time he'd cornered PO just fifteen months before, and having blasted him in to the middle of the next century remembered how his bubble had exploded in a very satisfactory fashion. It was then that Sirk pondered how this over-sized turd could still be alive, but the fact stared him in the face that it was at least probable, so he would

have to hunt him down and destroy him all over again - but this time he would make sure!

Arriving back on the flight deck Cita informed him that dinner was on the table, and asking if it was actually a “dinner” she shot him a glance, the one she reserved for him alone - when he’d gone just a little too far.

‘It’s what you’ve given me to work with, so eat, or go hungry!’

‘Sorry love,’ he said regretting his jibe immediately, ‘I know you’ve done your best, it’s just that I’m getting fed up with eating shit!’

‘Well as I’ve cooked it, it’ll be the best shit you’ve eaten in a long time!’ joked Cita remaining poker-faced. Bursting into laughter Sirk put his arm around her shoulder, and guided her into the galley to join the others in a great plate of shit!

At Sirk’s suggestion they retired early that evening, a good nights sleep was imperative as they would be a busy the following day. Having closed the hatch for safety he made for the sleeping quarters, and considering that suffocation was not an option he turned up the air-con, now they were back on Terra Firma there was no way they could sleep with closed cot lids without an injection of sleep! Switching off the light was followed by the commensurate coughs, sniffs and throat clearings before they were overcome by slumber and silence finally reigned; all except Sirk who lay awake thinking about PO! His minds eye ran over the sequence of events from the time he’d blasted the fat bastard from the face of the Earth, until he found that piece of his finger on the floor of the take-off

ramp. There was no way he'd missed! Perhaps it wasn't The Powerful One at all, perhaps it was some other evil bastard, but if so - who? Waking with a start Sirk felt the tension in his body, even now his mind was still wary, and with PO still permeating his subconscious he recalled the nightmare in detail. Relaxing purposefully he took a deep breath and got out of the cot, then walking to the galley he made everyone a... breakfast?

'Come and get it! If you really want it.' First out was Taniche followed by Odin and John Junior, who ate as if they actually enjoyed the stuff! Unable to believe his eyes Sirk stared at them as if they were mad.

'Something wrong?' asked Taniche seeing the look on Sirk's face.

'Yeah, you look as if you're really enjoying that crap!'

'Not so, but I am hungry, and I intend to fill my stomach, even if I puke the lot up after!' she replied seriously, then looked up at him under her eyelids. For the first time he'd seen her lighter side and laughed as he left for the bridge, largely to avoid facing the mass grimaces of the others as they masticated their first chore. Once on the bridge he brought the ships systems online again.

'Ok, we'll have to vacate this area,' he told them as they finished their breakfast, 'until I've decided what I'm gonna do.' Then, herding them onto the bridge, he got them seated and started his take-off procedure.

'Everyone strapped in?' All nodded in the affirmative.

‘Computer!’

‘Your request?’

‘360 degrees lateradial gravity!’

‘Compliant!’ Feeling the gravity belts push them gently but firmly into their seats the occupants of the Dart felt the ship shoot skywards to thirty thousand feet in a matter of seconds, then bringing the helm to port through ninety degrees he set her on a southerly course.

‘Half warp!’

‘Compliant!’ Flying above the English countryside the occupants of the Dart didn’t get a glimpse of it, and before they even got a look at the on-screen hologram they’d arrived in the Mediterranean, and with that Sirk put her on levit over a giant dust-bowl!

‘You’ll probably remember this as the Mediterranean Sea!’ said Sirk as they gasped in horror at the reality that now faced them. Not a drop of water to be seen, and all that met their eyes were three rusty spars that once formed the combings of a cargo vessel, a trio of sentinels jutting skyward as a stark reminder of what had been!

‘Not even a puddle!’ declared Taniche.

‘A hundred thousand years changes everything my dear.’ her grandfather told her. Noticing the hull temperature had risen distinctly Sirk increased the Aircon to compensate.

‘Any ideas on what we can do about this over-sized pile of blubber?’ asked Sirk, but having taken them by surprise for a few seconds his question had them wondering as to what he was referring.

‘If we can find out where he is perhaps we can blast

him long enough this time and make sure he's dead!' suggested John eagerly.

'Why don't we use the ship's probe to locate him, then, when we've found him we can decide our plan of action at that stage.' declared the prof.

'Nice one prof,' replied Sirk excitedly, 'but there is only one flaw in that idea,'

'What exactly is that Sirk?'

'As he's in that building we'd have to get in at close range to use the probe, and unfortunately they're fitted to the hull.' Looking at the ceiling for inspiration the professor thought for a while.

'How about this,' he said suddenly, 'if we detach the probe from the hull I can attach it to one of the Jetpaks, then adapt the remote to control it, then we can fly it to any destination of our choice!' Looking proudly around the professor watched as the others readily agreed it was their only chance of covert surveillance.

'Brilliant prof., I like it,' said Sirk agreeably, 'even if you did sound like a travel brochure, but can you adapt the remote successfully?'

'Yes it's not a difficult job, the only difficulty is getting a drive and receiver for the Bakpak; I'll have to find a way of attaching it to the thrust control on the 'pak.'

'There's a spare remote in the cargo bay, could you use that?'

'Yes, that would be ideal,' replied the prof., 'all we need now is a drive.'

'I don't know of anything we could use for that.' confessed Sirk racking his brain for a solution, for the moment he was stumped, but, necessity being

the mother of invention he was certain something would turn up. Needing a coffee he walked to the galley to find Cita had pre-empted his thought, and had a mug waiting for him.

‘Thanks angel, do I need this!’ said Sirk earnestly taking a sip of his favourite brew.

‘Things not going very well then?’ asked Cita, wishing there was something she could do for her man.

‘No... I can’t seem to find anything to use as a motor for the Bakpak.’

‘I wish there was something I could do,’ she replied touching his hand. There was something electric about her touch, it was as if he’d been touched by a live wire, and nestling into his arm she rested her head on his shoulder, then putting his arm around her shoulder Sirk responded.

‘I know sweetheart... it’s got me stumped I must admit.’ he told her. Then downing the remains of his coffee made his way back to the bridge, sitting at the helm he closed his eyes and tried focusing his mind on a way around this poser when suddenly the answer hit him like a ton of bricks. Of course, the Replicator! It would mean a trip to the museum, but if he could get his hands on it he could replicate the hydro-pump that circulated their Regen! A brief consideration was given to using the onboard pump, but was quickly dismissed on the grounds that they would have no drinking water while the pump was out of service, and would seriously jeopardise their position if for any reason they lost the Jetpak. Telling the professor of his plan he asked Arin to accompany him as lookout while he recovered that

invaluable piece of equipment.

‘Of course I will bruv.’ said Arin without hesitation. ‘If we go in after dark it’ll be safer, less chance of being seen by PO.’ said Sirk seriously; he had no misgivings about the threat that that over-sized slug posed to them. Walking to the armoury he took two Pulsar rifles from the rack, and checking the charge rate was full he replaced the cells in the rifle’s stocks, then taking two Bakpaks checked they were operational. Returning to the bridge Sirk unravelled his plan and told Cita they would be gone for some time. Having removed the probes from the ships hull John and the professor had taken them to the cargo hold which would double as their workshop.

‘You’re sweating!’ declared Sirk, seeing John and the professor walk on to the bridge.

‘It’s not exactly cool out there, protested John, ‘give it a try yourself!’ Although he’d laughed Sirk knew the value of what they were doing, but just couldn’t resist taking the piss, then latching onto his joke they burst out laughing as John’s hand came up with a bottle of Regen, which he squirted directly into Sirk’s face! Running to the galley to arm himself Sirk was too late as John had got the better of him, so after a good dowsing and a bit of horse play things then calmed down. Everyone had enjoyed the clowning around, and it was a welcome break from the tensions that until now had permeated the ships compliment, but the pressure on them now to defeat PO was telling!

With everyone seated it was time to return to the valley and make their first move, and with lateradial gravity holding them firmly in their seats Sirk took

the helm. Informing the computer he would fly in manual mode the he took the Dart to thirty thousand feet, then swinging her around headed North, and within seconds like a hawk the ship dived behind the tree line and out of sight. On their return Sirk and the professor got down to work with John assisting where necessary. As darkness fell Sirk and Arin donned their Bakpaks, and saying goodbye to the others they took off for the museum, during their flight Sirk wondered if he could remember how to navigate the catacomb, and remembered what Raff had told him on his last mission.

‘Get lost in there and you’ll end up going mad.... or starve to death!’ Approaching the cliff face he suddenly remembered there really was nothing to worry about, the damage done by PO’s missiles had blown half the cliff away, and on top of that his own Pulsars had blown away a lot of the take off port when he in turn had blasted PO into eternity - or so he’d thought! Fortunately they were able to set down directly on the floor of the science museum, where Sirk would obtain the Replicator. As their feet touched Terra Firma it was deathly quiet and eerie, and killing the power to their Bakpaks exhibits from a time long dead stared unseeing and mute at eternity.

‘Come on,’ he whispered to Arin, ‘it’s this way.’ With caution as their byword they set off into the science museum as fast as they could, at every turn they stopped to listen, and occasionally the odd inexplicable sound reached their ears, as if someone or something was watching and stalking them from the darkness beyond. Reaching the bottom end of

the science museum Sirk went straight to the spot where he'd found the Replicator on his last visit. with many memories flooding back it seemed like they'd happened a thousand years ago, and in that respect they had, although in reality it was a hundred times that!

Covered in dust it was still there, as it had been when he'd last seen it, but there was now a fitting attached to the side of it, that he knew wasn't there the last time he'd seen it! A laser socket had been attached to it, but for what reason? Having to get it back to the Dart as soon as possible he didn't have time to figure it out right then.

'How do we carry this thing?' asked Arin seeing the size of it.

'Don't worry mate it's quite light, there's a recessed handle just a few inches down from the top.' Having found the handles he and Sirk easily lifted the Replicator, carried it silently and swiftly along the hall with its incredible vaulted ceiling.

'Hang on Arin,' said Sirk suddenly, 'we could use the Backpacks through here, it'll save us a lot of time.' Powering their Bakpaks they flew across the two thousand foot long room in a matter of seconds, and on reaching the edge of the hall Sirk held out his hand as a signal to slow down, then making sure it was clear he gave Arin a signal that all was well. Speeding into the night they crossed the crater and over the deserted village, and noticing a trace of damp on the air set his alarm bells ringing; his memories of that awesome rain were suddenly paramount. A whole fortnights rain of cataclysmic proportions without let up, and knowing they had to

get back to the Dart before it started he urged Arin on, should they fail they would both literally drown in mid air! One or two spots were followed by a few more, then gaining in momentum it became a steady downpour, but as they passed through the breach in the cliff Sirk knew they didn't have far to go, and could see a faint glimmer from the Dart's lights as the heavens opened up. Using the Airhat he radioed ahead for someone to open the hatch. Grabbing the remote John had it opened in seconds, then the deluge started, but they were in sight of the ship as the cricket ball sized hail fell in earnest. As soon as they'd touched down John shut the hatch as a few hail stones bounced across the deck, then as John and the professor took the Replicator down to the cargo hold Arin and Sirk got out of their suits. Setting it up they started replicating the hydro pump that John had removed earlier that afternoon.

'I'll have to synchronise the power between the ship and the Replicator.' declared the professor.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Synchronise power input and output between the ship and the Replicator.'

'Compliant!' Switching on the Replicator the professor breathed a sigh of relief as it whirred into life, then placing the pump on the platform John watched as the professor started the replicating process. Promising to make a replica to their pattern the unit whispered as they stood watching, and to their utter relief a ghost of the hydro pump appeared on the opposite platform, and forty five minutes later the two green lights pulsated slowly on the

machine. Sixty seconds later they and they were pulsating with increasing rapidity and intensity, then having synchronised a minute later they stopped as two steady green lights told them it was ready; switching the unit off John then lifted the copy from the platform to find it perfect in every detail.

‘We’re in business, ‘he told Professor Patenil, ‘I’ll refit the original while you take this one up to Sirk.’ Twelve days later the rains had stopped and they had a working model, or so they hoped! Opening the hatch Sirk led them outside for a demonstration, and warning Odin and John Junior to stay close to the ship he watched the professor take out the modified remote. Setting the Bakpak on the ground Sirk watched as the professor pressed the “open” button on the spare remote, but instead of the hatch opening they saw the Bakpak lift successfully into the air, then putting it in forward flight the prof. watched as it took off north toward the mountain, and the scree that had almost claimed Sirk’s life! Little boy with a brand new toy! That was the professor, and becoming accustomed to the controls he forced them to duck with great satisfaction by buzzing it over their heads.

‘I think that’ll fit the bill!’ he declared proudly.

‘Looking at what you’ve just put us through it would certainly appear so.’ replied Sirk admiring the prof’s capabilities.

DICTATORS ARE BORN OF GENIUS

They dined late that night, if you call nine o'clock late, and everyone felt hungry until the Recon was served up - piping hot! Expectant smiles were instantly wiped from faces as Cita recognised the problem immediately, but before she could say one word Sirk announced he'd procured something to make it a little more palatable, and disappearing into the galley he returned a few seconds later brandishing a three litre bottle of red wine!

'I took this from Tranter's desk, well.... he can't drink anymore!' Silence ensued for a few seconds before they realised what Sirk had said, then shortly after it dawned on them Tranter had been dead for a very long time; they burst into laughter. After an hours talking joking and banter, the professor's face showed evidence that he was ready for bed, and informing their offspring it was time for them to become horizontal John and Mayan ushered Odin and John Junior to the sleeping quarters, and their adamant attitude meant their children's moans went unheard. Seeing Cita's hand touch Sirk's under the table Arin took the hint and declared he also was ready to hit the sack, and having noticed Arin's move Taniche discretely followed him to the sleeping quarters. Looking into Cita's eyes Sirk saw the burning passion within, so standing up he took her to the hatch and walked her down the escalator, then using his remote closed the hatch.

'I thought you said it wasn't safe out here?' she questioned.

'You're safe enough as long as I'm here, basically I

said that for the sake of the kids.’ replied Sirk, ‘anyhow, now the rain’s stopped so let’s take a walk.’ Satisfied with his answer they walked silently through the tree line, and ten minutes later were standing on the river bank at the spot where Sirk had bathed on his initial mission; again it haunted him like the ghost from another life. Standing on the bank for a few moments they stared at the reflections of the two moons in the rippling waters of that slow moving river, then without warning Sirk stripped off. With her love of skinny dipping Cita smiled at him for a second then followed suit, and within seconds both were wearing their best birthday suits! Taking her hand Sirk walked her to the rivers edge, where they waded into the unusually warm water, and seeing the look on her face Sirk explained briefly his theory of why it had become so warm. Having other things on his mind he didn’t dwell on the subject for long!

Swimming around for fifteen minutes Sirk suddenly lunged at her, and opening her arms he glided into her embrace. Kissing her passionately for a while he planted his feet firmly on the river bed, then lifting her gently upwards she wrapped her legs tightly around him as if she would never let him go. Thrusting himself into her she moaned huskily as she wrapped her arms around his head and pulled his face into her ample breasts. Not having made love for a while he resisted the temptation to rush, and mostly wanted Cita to enjoy it. As Cita let go her frustration they came together in a unified explosion of sheer ecstasy, and Sirk felt her make him wet in the most sensual climax she had ever

experienced! Clinging to each other for more than two minutes they finally relaxed their grip and taking Cita with him fell back into the current. Unnoticed by Cita his tears were washed away by the buoyant waters that supported them, but sensing something was wrong she watched Sirk's eyes cloud with thought.

'You know,' he said in a broken voice, 'I thought I'd lost you forever when I returned from my last trip.'

'What d'you mean?' she asked as her brow furrowed with concern.

'That Jaceon Kramer creep,' he replied, 'I didn't know what to think when I heard you'd remarried, I nearly died!' Casting her gaze into the friendly liquid in which they floated, Cita sought the right words.

'I was forced into that marriage by Kramer, he was so powerful even the authorities were afraid of him; he raped me every time he returned from one of his death fights, *and* gloated about the power he held over me. Whenever I heard he was coming home I resorted to cunning and guile, and made excuses to be elsewhere, but at the end of the day that only made him angrier, and as you know he'd beat me up in his bid to control me. You have to believe there was no complicity on my part, I knew that one day you would come home, I never gave up on that belief.'

'We'll never be apart again my little angel,' he told her, then looking deep into her eyes, 'on that I give you my solemn promise!' looking into his soul Cita gave him her answer without saying a word, and Sirk knew their love would last forever.

THE SEARCH FOR THE MEN

Waking early his eyes wandered to the cot opposite where Cita lay, and already awake her long black hair flowed carefree over the pillow as she smiled that smile he loved so much, then mouthed the words "I love you" through the canopy. Releasing the lid of his cot Sirk swung his legs to the floor; stretching as he did so. A moment later Cita's cot lid ascended, and they embraced for a full minute.

'Goooooooood morning!' said Sirk grinning.

'Goooooooood morning to you!' replied Cita, then took his hand and led him from the sleeping quarters.

'Let's go for a walk.' she said suddenly.

'But I'm starving,' said Sirk half joking, 'I'd like something to eat first!'

'If we go for a walk first, I can promise you a breakfast you'll never forget!' she said emphatically, how could he refuse? It would have to be done! As the others slept blissfully they walked to the river, and both silently recalled the previous night, but with food no longer a priority a different form of hunger took over! Letting her clothes lie on the ground where they fell he watched her strip, then as her panties fell to the ground it was too much, and he was in the river before you could say Powerful One, (suffice it to say that Sirk had a powerful one!), making love again, it was more frantic as the night before, and with her tongue closing rapidly on his tonsils Sirk wondered if Cita was Hell-bent on choking him! Running his hands down her back to

the cheeks of her beautiful bum he lifted her from the water and thrust himself into her. Wrapping her legs around him this time she moved rhythmically up and down, while Sirk gently ran his tongue around her nipples, then as her body went rigid they suddenly came in unison, and coming as she never had before a muted scream issued from the back of her throat.

Walking back to the ship it was evident the rain had stripped the leaves from the trees, and Sirk was thankful the weather had come and gone without repercussion. Bending to the ground Cita picked something, then proceeded to pick more.

‘What the Hell are you picking?’ asked Sirk with a furrowed brow.

‘In case you hadn’t noticed I’m actually picking mushrooms!’ replied Cita cheekily.

‘Oh. you are?’ retorted Sirk. ‘Well perhaps I’d better make you eat one!’

‘You wouldn’t dare!’ she said goading him.

‘Oh no? Watch me!’ Picking a particularly large one he chased after her through the grass listening to her girlish giggles as she ran. Feeling Sirk’s hand on her shoulder she put up her hands in mock defence, and to avoid his attempt to force feed her swung her lovely head from side to side. Switching his attack below he stuffed it between her breasts and squeezed! By this time she was hysterical as tears of mirth ran down her cheeks Sirk repeatedly squeezed until the hapless fungus was almost unrecognisable! Whenever Sirk relented Cita would retaliate immediately, and in turn Sirk would restart the mushroom crushing machine!

‘Had enough?’

‘No - I’m not finished yet!’ she cried hysterically. The mushroom crusher went at full speed!

‘Ok, ok, oh alright... I give in, I can’t stand anymore!’ gasped Cita finally relenting. Kissing passionately they suddenly remembered the mushrooms they were supposed to be picking, and with the jocularity over they searched for more of the new addition to their breakfast.

‘Where are you going now?’ he asked as Cita walked toward the trees.

‘Never you mind Mr. Notaani!’ she replied. Sirk was starving, and wanted his breakfast - now!

‘You don’t have to come if you don’t want to!’

‘I think it might be wise if I did,’ said Sirk suddenly, ‘have you forgotten, those cats live in there!’ As he uttered the words the male cat appeared from nowhere, his eyes fixed on Cita. The cat was massive, and being old was probably not intent on attack, but taking no chances Sirk walked forward to make sure the cat saw him. The beast lumbered towards him, and as it got within a few feet the hair on the nape of his neck stood on end. Stopping suddenly it looked at Sirk with its big soulful eyes, then sitting on its haunches - it yawned! Showing its fearsome incisors he wasn’t sure what to do for a second or two, but the situation was taken out of his hands when the cat suddenly got up and brushed against him! Almost losing his balance under the cat’s weight it dawned on him this was the same cat whose cubs he’d saved on his last mission! He was here to say - hello!

‘It’s ok, he knows me!’ said Sirk, and laughed at the

look of horror on Cita's face. Reaching down Sirk stroked it's mane, and the big cat simply rolled playfully on to its back.

'Yes, I'm sure you're very nice, but I don't think I want to play with you, that could be fatal!' Looking intently to the north the big beast suddenly got up, its eyes searching the trees. Something was disturbing the shale, the cat was off at rate of knots, and grabbing Cita's hand Sirk ran the few yards back to the Dart.

'God that was scary!' she said walking through the hatch.

'I don't think there's much to worry about with that one, but the cubs are probably a different matter all together... I guess they're fully grown now. They might not recognise me now, so it's probably best not to take any chances.'

Breakfast was a treat to put it mildly, the Recon eggs and bacon Cita had cooked with mushrooms and a few herbs she'd found, made it the first meal they'd enjoyed since the onset of their journey, and all gave Cita their heartfelt thanks.

'I think a round of thanks is overdue to someone else.' said Cita earnestly, and looking perplexed John raised an eyebrow, then catching on, nodded in agreement.

'Sirk, we've been sadly lacking in manners,' said John openly, 'we haven't thanked you for the foresight you showed, also, how you got us away from Earth without too much fuss - thankyou Sirk.'

'Yeah, thanks Sirk, and Cita - that was a superb breakfast, I only wish I'd got to you before Sirk!' They laughed at Arin's joke.

‘Who knows, if you’d have been up before seven this morning the story might have been different,’ countered Sirk, ‘and uh, don’t embarrass me like that again!’ The one thing Sirk hated was praise, as he and Arin were brought up not to seek glory or aggrandisement it made him feel uncomfortable. No one seemed keen to leave the table that morning, they talked for an hour before Cita mentioned the popular chore of - washing up! Talk was mainly about the mission ahead to find the Men and The Powerful One, and what they’d do when they found them.

‘So what are we going to do today?’ asked Arin. Outside of checking our new toy again, nothing! We can’t use it ‘til after dark, so we’ll just take it easy for the time being.’ announced Sirk casually. Full of mischief as little boys should be, John Junior and Odin suddenly ran onto the bridge.

‘Uncle Sirk,’ asked John J, ‘can we go and play outside?’

‘I guess it’ll be ok, but tell your Mum and Dad yeah? Hey boys, make sure you stay near the ship!’ he shouted after them. Hoping they would let them play their games (whatever they were) as little boys do they ran off to beleaguer their parents. While the boys played happily a few yards away Sirk, Arin, John, and the professor were busy checking the Ionjet, while Cita and Taniche kept an eye on both the boys and the men! With blue sky and hot Sun the morning air was clear and fresh, but for the fact that their minds were on the pending conflict with the Powerful One, it was almost like a holiday. Blowing across their faces a zephyr fanned them briefly

against the hot morning Sun.

‘We’ve perfected it,’ said the professor proudly, ‘but there’s only one thing wrong!’

‘What d’you mean?’ asked Sirk.

‘We have no guidance system!’ answered the professor contrarily. ‘But don’t worry... I’ve already worked out the solution!’

‘For Christ’s sake prof.! For a minute you had me worried!’ said Sirk frowning. The professor allowed himself a grin of satisfaction, and being very dry his sense of humour was still able to fool them!

‘What have you got in mind?’ asked John.

‘It’s simple,’ he answered holding up a sight from one of the Pulsars, ‘I’ll rig this to the Jetpak, connect it to a sender, then we can watch its flight path on the ships hologram.’

‘Prof., you’re a genius!’ declared Arin, and was amazed at the professor’s ability to overcome seemingly impossible tasks.

‘Come on, there’s no time to waste,’ he said urging them to join him in their makeshift workshop. Back on board they set to work on the conversion, and two hours later it was securely mounted on the Jetpak. Out in the valley once more they set about launching it on its maiden voyage, while Sirk stayed on the bridge to check it visually on the hologram. Using the modified remote the professor powered up the Jetpak, and used the reset button to switch on the sight..

‘It works! It bloody works!’ cried Sirk running out, then took the remote from the professor.

‘Go and have a look!’ he shouted boyishly. Running to the walkway they vied for pole position around

the hologram.

‘It’s as clear as daylight,’ shouted John from the hatch, ‘we’ll be able to see everything!’ Lunch came and went, and the afternoon was spent lazing around and orating funny stories about their various life experiences, and occasionally resulted in total hysterics. Recounting his experience in the auditorium when Tranter had his gun on him, Sirk had recalled the part where John had shot Tranter in the hand, and he’d whined and screamed for a medic.

‘Get me a doctor! Get me an ambulance!’ screamed Sirk mimicking his voice, and made every “S” whistle! Tears rolled down every cheek until complaining of aching ribs Cita declared she’d had enough.

‘Time to get the dinner on.’ she announced, then as she ‘rose from the grass Sirk watched her walk to the ship, and couldn’t help thinking how beautiful she was, and how lucky he was! Served thirty minutes later, dinner was a more palatable occasion now that Cita had been able to work her magic with various herbs she’d found in the meadow.

‘Where are John J and Odin?’ asked Mayan suddenly.

‘I thought they were on the bridge!’ replied Arin concernedly. Already halfway to the bridge Sirk returned seconds later looking decidedly ashen.

‘They’re not up there!’ he told them gravely. ‘They can’t be anywhere on the ship!’

Come on,’ said the professor urgently, ‘this could be serious!’ Before the escalator had materialised they were running full tilt towards the ground, and it was

obvious the boys had seen their opportunity and gone to play elsewhere. They were nowhere to be seen, and shouting at the tops of their voices got no reply. Running to the armoury Sirk returned with three Pulsar rifles.

‘Let’s go!’ he said decisively. Taking a gun each, John and Arin slung them over their shoulders.

‘Where should we look first?’ asked Arin, already walking towards the shale slope with its sparse covering of trees.

‘Keep going Arin,’ said Sirk hurriedly, ‘I think that’s where they would have gone!’ Watching them leave, Taniche, Cita, Mayan and the professor, prayed they would return with their two errant infants. Halfway across the plain, Sirk, Arin, and John, suddenly saw two tiny figures running towards them, and right behind them was a very large predator, and having encountered one of these before, Sirk was the only one that didn’t gasp. The massive Anaconda was directly behind them, which prevented Sirk getting a clear shot at it, had he fired at that moment he may have hit one or both of the boys! Running quickly to his left for a better sight he brought the Pulsar to his shoulder and aimed, then suddenly his peripheral vision picked up two figures running rapidly towards the giant snake, it was the giant tortoiseshell and one of the cubs, and running fearlessly into the attack the old male successfully drew the snake away from the boys while the younger cat ran towards Odin, then picking him up in its huge jaws ran away from the that fearsome snake.

‘No - wait!’ shouted Sirk, seeing John with his gun

to his shoulder, 'don't shoot, he's bringing him to us!' Doing as Sirk bade John watched incredulously as the young lion ran towards them. Dropping Odin to the ground in front of them it turned like lightning and ran like the wind to rescue John J! While this was going on the old male was tackling the awesome beast with the ferocity of a cat some years its junior, meanwhile Sirk waited patiently to get a clear shot at the jaws of the monster. Drawing its massive head back for another attack Sirk unleashed a bolt, but in that same instant the stentorian beast struck and moved away from the bolt, the head and shoulders of unfortunate cat disappeared into its massive jaws, but when Sirk finally got a good sighting and got off another round it was too late! The cats claws retracted, and with a final whimper it died instantly, as did the Anaconda! The Pulsar bolt from Sirk's second shot had struck through the eye, and had blown its brains halfway to Hell, a split second too late!

Standing transfixed Sirk took in what had just happened, as the young cat that had rescued John J and Odin walked slowly over. Opening its great jaws it let out the most pitiful cry they'd ever heard, and walking to the beast Sirk slowly held out his hand so as not to alarm it, as he stroked its head the cat smoothed against him and whined pitifully at the loss of his father. The ensuing commotion had now brought out his mate and cubs, so thanking the cat for saving the boys Sirk watched it disappear into the tree line with his family, and was still baying long after it had disappeared from sight.

'That is the most amazing thing I have, or ever will

see, in my whole life!’ said Sirk turning to Cita, but she was on her knees sobbing, then feeling Sirk’s reassuring hand on her shoulder she stood up and buried her head in his chest.

‘Eunectas Murinasis!’ said the professor.

‘Eu what?’ asked Sirk, wondering if the prof. had lost the plot

‘That’s it’s Latin name, although I think that one was maximus!’

‘You mean the snake? Well you live and learn!’ said Sirk incredulously, then turning to Cita, ‘sorry love... I wish you hadn’t had to watch that.’

‘It’s alright, I’ll get over it... they’re such beautiful cats, I’ve never seen such intelligent animals.’ she said wiping her hand across her eyes.

‘Well... I guess we’d better bury the poor beast,’ said Sirk with a degree of melancholy.

‘Yes, that would be right and proper.’ added the professor, ‘but we don’t have any shovels!’ Picking up his Pulsar Sirk blasted the ground a few feet away from where the cat lay, and after a few minutes had made a grave big enough to bury it. Placing the beast in as reverently as they could Sirk then used the Pulsar again to cover the grave. With two pieces of wood they’d found on their little adventure John J and Odin had made a cross, and had tied it together with a piece of cable they’d found on the Dart. Giving Sirk a pensive a glance they worried in case they’d taken something of importance, but Sirk just smiled to reassure them they’d done the right thing. While Mayan, Cita, and Taniche said a prayer for its soul John placed the cross at the head of the grave, this was the most

sombre occasion they'd experienced so far.

'What did you mean just now when you said that was the most amazing thing you'd ever seen?' asked Arin.

'The last time I was here,' replied Sirk, 'if you remember I rescued that lion's cubs from a severe goring by a bad tempered hog, and during the same attack a third cub lost its life. It remembered! It remembered me! Don't you see, by rescuing John J and Odin he's returned the favour; the cat that just died was the father, who thanked me last time for saving three of his cubs. None of us have anything to fear from those cats now - I'll guarantee it!'

Deflated by the happenings of the afternoon one felt like talking as they walked sombrely back to the Dart. Silent appreciation was shown to the Recon Cita had worked her magic on for dinner that evening, and once finished the men went to the bridge to discuss their pending rescue mission. This time Sirk would have to make doubly sure he had destroyed the grossest thing that creation had ever produced! He, or it, had to be nature's worst mistake, and was plainly a curse sent by some dark force to plague the Men! However, if Sirk had his way it wouldn't be for much longer. Waiting always has the effect of slowing things down, and Sirk swore blind the sun was setting slower that evening! flying the Jetpak before dark would increase the chances of it being spotted the Powerful One, and that could only mean one thing, game over! Without doubt the Men would suffer as a direct result, and he couldn't take that chance. The sun's dying rays were watched by all, but Sirk was the first to move as he

got up and walked to the supercool.

‘Computer!’

‘Your request?’ said the tinny voice.

‘Align supercool.’

‘Compliant!’ The remaining daylight was blocked out by the supercool as the ships lighting came up.

‘Do we need to have the supercool aligned?’ asked John.

‘Light from this ship carries a long way,’ replied Sirk, ‘I don’t wanna take any chances on that fat bastard sussing us out!’ Realising the wisdom of Sirk’s thinking John helped the professor carry the Jetpak outside.

‘Let’s go!’ were the only words he spoke, as Arin and John placed the Jetpak on its rather uneven base; the professor retrieved the remote from his top pocket. Satisfied everything was ready Sirk and Arin went back on board to turn on the hologram while the professor and John stayed with the Jetpak.

‘Ok, let it go prof.’ whispered Sirk over the ships Tannoy. Pressing the “open” button that had now been renamed “propulsion” the professor and John watched as it soared skyward, then putting it on hover the professor and John went back on board. Handing the remote to Sirk they sat at the helm and watched its progress as it passed swiftly over the village and onto the cliffs, then to its ultimate goal, the Smelter. As it flew towards the cliffs there were thankfully no signs of hostile craft, so taking it over the crest of the cliff he flew it towards the museum.

‘Stop!’ shouted Sirk suddenly, ‘I’ve just remembered something... come back down to that opening, that’s it... now, keep going... yes there it is! See that

opening just ahead? Go through that and you should be in the museum.'

'I thought we were heading for the Smelter?' asked a slightly baffled professor Patenil.

'Yeah, but I just remembered it's quicker through the museum, and - there's less chance of being seen! It leads to a balcony above the Smelter, the Men took me there on my last mission. We can get a good look at what's going on from there.' Passing through the science museum they guided the Jetpak to the right and into the dark hall, then on to the balcony at the far end. Suddenly Sirk recalled his last encounter in that hall, when he'd heard the noise from the smelter he'd stopped, and being in total darkness Gorn had walked into his backside and panicked, then proceeded to beat the Hell out of his ass!

'What are you grinning at?' asked Arin.

'Oh, just a funny memory,' replied Sirk keeping his eyes on the hologram, 'I'll tell you about it later.' Reaching the end of the hall the Jetpak was now a few seconds away from telling them the full story!

'Stop it right there!' ordered Sirk tensely. 'Let's go in slowly, I want to take a tentative look first, nudge it forward until you get a good view of the smelter.' The prof. obliged, and stabbing the button he inched it forward to the edge of the balcony. As it cleared the wall, the full horror of what had happened to their little friends loomed large on the hologram! The smelter had been extended by one hundred feet to increase the production capacity of what the Men called "yellow metal", and the furnaces to the right had been moved across and positioned alongside the others. The real horror came when they looked to

see what had taken their place, the insidious fat bastard had installed more cages, each one housing one of those fearsome beetles! It was then Sirk realised what The Powerful One had done, tethered to a small railing in front of each cage, was the family of the worker responsible for that furnace, and in order to keep them working the mere threat of their families being devoured by those beetles kept them working long after they would have normally given up! Then he saw it, the Powerful One! Sitting in his bubble at the far end of the hall he watched the days proceedings from above as he had when Sirk first arrived, with those twin machine guns mounted either side of the bubble. So! He hadn't destroyed him! Somehow, *it*, had managed to survive, although at this precise moment in time he couldn't figure out how, but his friends were in dire trouble! Several of the Men were weakened and flagging under the heat, but kept on slaving in order to save their families from a death worse than ten nightmares!

'Ok prof. let's scan the hall,' said Sirk, wanting to get the full picture before making a decision, 'scan the roof, floor and both sides, I wanna see if there are any points we can exploit to gain an advantage.' Deftly manoeuvring the Jetpak from side to side the prof. then tilted it up to the ceiling, but the only openings there were the vents that exhausted the fumes from the furnaces, so using the Dart as a surprise attack weapon was out! The situation was not good, and Sirk silently admitted he would be hard-pushed to come up with a novel plan!

'Ok prof., pull the Jetpak back out, we'll have to

think carefully on this one!’ said Sirk candidly. ‘We can’t use surprise as a weapon, the first thing he’ll do is release those beetles - and that is unthinkable!’

‘Can we distract him somehow,’ whispered Arin, ‘if we can lure him away from the smelter...’

‘Yeah, nice one bruv,’ said Sirk sincerely, ‘I’m glad you’re on my side!’ Steering the little sky-spy back to the Dart John opened the hatch and caught the little snooper as The professor flew it in.

‘So what now?’ asked Cita, ‘worried about the Men and their families.

‘I don’t know yet sweetheart, a think-tank is in order, let’s pool our ideas and see what we can come up with.’ Sitting around the console no one said a word for more than a minute, the situation had paralysed their minds, and it seemed not one of them could come up with a solution.

‘I do like your idea of luring him away from the smelter Arin,’ said Sirk suddenly breaking the silence.

‘I must confess,’ added the professor, ‘I can’t think of anything better.’

‘Hang on,’ cut in John suddenly, ‘why don’t we use the Jetpak to distract him?’

‘You might have something there John!’ replied Sirk as a smile played on his lips, ‘the question is how to use it in a way that will hold his attention.’

A BARREL OF BAD APPLES

With the extreme situation of the Men playing on their minds the occupants of the Dart slept fitfully that night. Up and dressed at 6.30 the following morning Cita cooked breakfast, and as the aroma reached the nostrils of Taniche and Mayan it brought them to the galley fleet of foot.

‘You should have told us Cita,’ said Mayan, ‘it’s about time we took a turn at cooking!’

‘It’s ok, besides I enjoy it, and as I was already up...’ replied Cita without finishing her sentence.

‘Well I can’t cook as well as you,’ cut in Taniche, ‘but I can sure lay a table!’

‘That must leave you a bit sore!’ said Sirk making them giggle. Breakfast over the little band of refugees went about their toiletries in readiness for the coming day, and having successfully carried out their ablutions Sirk and Arin walked to the bridge, where Sirk unconsciously switched on the hologram.

‘We have to distract The Powerful One’s attention 100% for any attack plan we use!’ said Sirk.

‘I agree, we’ll have to use it in such a way he won’t be able to take his eyes off it, once we’ve got him hooked we can get the Men to safety.’

‘We hope!’ said Sirk, who was gravely aware of the dangers involving that bubble-bound slug.

‘I think I can help there,’ said the professor walking onto the bridge, ‘if I convert the Nitesite to emit a holographic image into the smelter, will that distract him long enough for you to get the Men out?’

‘I sure hope so prof.,’ replied Sirk emphatically, ‘as it’s the only plan we’ve got, and we ain’t got time to

think of another - I vote we go with it!

'I'll go along with that!' added Arin.

'Count me in,' said John walking onto the bridge, 'whatever it is!' They laughed loudly at John's quip. Then explaining quickly Sirk gave John the low-down.

'Well, we've got a lot to lose, but... let's go for it!'

'Ok, we're all agreed then,' said Sirk finally, 'all we need to think of now is an image that will hold his attention.'

'And hope it gets him out of the building!' said John as an afterthought.

'Good point John,' replied Sirk, 'but what in Hell's name are we going to use for an image?'

'How about you Uncle Sirk?' they hadn't seen John Junior walk onto the bridge.

'Unfortunately John J,' explained the professor, 'the Powerful One knows Sirk, and would shoot the Men on sight if saw his image.'

'I think I know what we can use.' said Arin suddenly.

'Well come on don't keep us in suspense!' joked Sirk.

'What does he value most of all?' asked Arin smirking.

'Oh God yes!' said Sirk suddenly cottoning on. 'Gold!'

'Great idea,' said John suddenly, 'but how do we get an image of gold!'

'Let's try the ships memory banks!' said the professor suddenly.

'Well done prof., that's gotta be it, let's get going, we've got no time to lose!' Running aft Sirk fetched

the Jetpak while the professor modified the Nitesite; seeing Sirk return to the bridge John pulled him aside.

‘We should find a way of contacting the Men and warn them of what we’re gonna do.’

‘You’re right John,’ said Sirk giving it due consideration, ‘the question is how? They’re under his eye twenty four hours a day.’

‘I don’t think so,’ replied John, ‘think about how long the Men have been working in there.’

‘Ok, go on.’

‘Well it strikes me he must have got a bit complacent, and he’s got to be working them in shifts, otherwise they’d have been dead long ago!’

‘Hot shit! You’re right John, so what you’re saying is, when they’ve finished their shift, they’re locked up somewhere.’

‘Exactly!’ replied John, ‘so all we need to do is locate where he’s holding them, and warn them of what to expect.’

‘Again - how?’

‘I think the professor can help us there.’ said John, finally.

‘Thanks John, *that* is brilliant.’ said Sirk admiring John’s tactical brain. ‘Before we deal with The Powerful One we’ll send them a hologram of me!’ Walking to the professor they challenged him to take on their plan.

‘Yes, that’s easy!’ said the professor agreeably. Looking deflated Sirk and John thought they would never see the day when they would catch the prof. out. ‘We’ll use the onboard cameras to project your image Sirk, and then switch to the memory banks to

project the gold!' Despite his years he still had the zest for a challenge, and without hesitation got to work. Staying out of the professor's way was always best, especially when he was engrossed in a project of a "delicate nature", and possessing the occasional volatile tendency he was capable of losing his temper when things didn't exactly go his way! Having reminded the professor he'd said "It's easy!" Sirk then immediately regretted it!

'Of course it's easy,' shouted the professor, 'it's the problem that's difficult!' replied the professor by way of reprimand! Remembering that Sirk turned away smiling, and knew the professor would crack the problem one way or another.

'I think the professor needs some time to himself,' said Sirk herding the others to the bridge. They'd have to find something else to do until the Jepak was ready.

Lunch arrived, and the professor's ire had cooled somewhat, and having solved the problem that had hampered him for more than two hours he was now in a more amiable frame of mind.

'How's it going prof.,' asked Sirk daringly, 'are things ok now?'

'Yes thank you Sirk,' answered the professor flatly, 'sorry about my temper earlier, it was a particularly difficult task, almost had me beat for a while!'

'So are we in business?' asked Arin interestedly.

'I think it's safe to say, in another hour I'll have it finished.'

'Well done prof., we owe you a lot, we couldn't have done it without you.' said John with genuine praise in his voice.

‘So we can go tonight?’ asked Sirk, keen to rescue his friends from captivity.

‘Yes!’ said the professor without elaborating. That evening everyone was tense with excitement at the pending incursion into the smelter. To make things worse, and being typical little boys, John J and Odin found as much mischief as their little minds could conjure up! Making a face John Junior pulled down his lower eyelids with two fingers while the other pushed up his nose, then Odin responded by poking John J in the eye. John J retaliated by tweaking his little brothers nose.

‘Cut that out - now!’ shouted John out of character, ‘find something quiet to do, both of you!’

‘Easy John,’ said Sirk as quietly and diplomatically as he could, ‘we need to keep our cool now, they’re only letting off steam.’

‘Yeah you’re right, sorry boys.’ said John, bitterly regretting his outburst, ‘sorry Sirk, you’re right, we need to keep our wits about us now.’ Taking the boys to the galley Mayan hoped she’d find something to occupy them, anything that would curtail their mischievous ways. Five minutes later all was very quiet in the aft quarter, and Mayan must have found something fairly potent that had obviously pleased every one else; although they all loved the two “little Hellers” as they were affectionately known, there were times when they could be very tiresome.

At seven thirty they were all on the bridge to see the Jetpak lift off, and watched with fascination as it disappeared into the night sky. Finally preparations were in hand to bring down their enemy, and all had

agreed it would be prudent to take the route through the science museum as they had previous evening.

To monitor proceedings Sirk set it down deftly on the balcony floor to keep it out of the Powerful One's line of sight, and watched through the hologram as the Men were subjected to more physical torture by that insidious fat slug! An hour had passed when suddenly they bore witness to a gruesome event involving one of the Men at the far end of the smelter, having fallen through sheer exhaustion it was plain to see he was in extreme difficulty getting back on his feet.

'Start work - *now!*' boomed the familiar voice of the Powerful One, 'you know the consequences!' Struggling valiantly to get back to his feet exhaustion had overtaken him, and deciding he was bored the Powerful One thought he'd have some fun, and released the door of the cage opposite the furnace, within seconds a beetle had launched itself at the little man's family. Trying bravely to shield her children his wife fell prey to those fearsome pincers, and screamed in agony as she died! It then made straight for his two children, who in Sirk's estimation were no older than two and four, and within seconds their little lives had been snuffed out! Bursting into tears, Cita, Mayan, and Taniche, comforted one another at the callous loss of life.

'F----' bastard!' shouted Arin in total disbelief.

'Christ Sirk, I didn't think he was that bloodthirsty!' shouted John; his face distorted with rage.

'Now you know,' replied Sirk coldly, 'he values nothing - except gold!'

'He has to be the biggest total shit of all time!' said

the professor whose use of profanity was rare. By ten o'clock the Powerful One had herded that shift off duty, and the next appeared to take their turn for a dose of the same treatment!

'I saw Raff go off with that shift,' said Sirk, 'I think it's time to make our first move.' While the Powerful One was busy overseeing the next shift, Sirk seized his opportunity. Taking the Jetpak over the railing he flew it to the floor below. His luck was in, as they watched the last of the Men enter their huge prison cell, their cowed bodies told Sirk they'd given up, there was no sign of dissent from them. As the Ionjet approached the cell where the Men were held captive Sirk had no doubt they were thinking of better times, and pondered as to why they had been subjected to a second term of harsh treatment by the Powerful One. They were existing in hope that one day someone would rescue them; someone like Sirk!

On the bridge everyone held their breath, and watched as the Men eyed the Jetpak with suspicion, and in case one of them decided it was another of the Powerful One's spies Sirk kept it near the ceiling. It appeared however they were more in awe of it than anything else, and waiting for his cue from the professor Sirk quickly stood in front of the camera.

'Alright Sirk, you're on!' said the professor suddenly.

'Raff, are you there?' he asked, hoping to establish a quick link, and wanting as little excitement or noise as possible realised the noise from the smelter would drown out any noise they were making.

Suddenly his little friend walked into view, wearing a look of disbelief on his gnarled little face.

‘Yes - it’s really me Raff, I’m not with you now, but I’m not far away, you’re watching an image of me projected from the Dart. Now - what I want you to do is to get your people out of there, and up to the dark hall that we walked through last time I was here... can you do that? Also, can you warn the others working in the smelter - right now!’

‘Yes I can Sirk... is that really you, have you come to get us out of here?’

‘You f-----’ bet I have, look Raff, we don’t have much time, so can you get going right away?’

‘Ok - hot shit! We’re going now Sirk!’ replied Raff; as a spark of life rekindled in his little red eyes.

‘One thing before you go,’ asked Sirk finally, ‘are Gorn and Kiska with you?’

‘Kiska is working now... but uh, Gorn is dead Sirk, killed by the Powerful One.’ Exacting a picture of total revenge in his mind the Powerful One would pay with his life this time thought Sirk. Mentally checking himself he thought he’d despatched him last time, so there would have to be no question of it this time!

‘Ok my friend, I’m saddened to hear about Gorn, but I will see you later.’ As Sirk walked back to the console the professor switched off the camera.

‘Ships computer—’

‘Your request?’

‘Bullion image - on screen!’

‘Compliant!’ The image appeared instantly, they studied it carefully looking for anything in the image that might give their ploy away, and declaring they

were satisfied, agreed it was a go situation.

‘Ok. let’s get the Jetpak back to the balcony!’ Set for revenge this time Sirk would let nothing get in his way!

‘The boys are asleep now John,’ said Mayan, coming from the sleeping quarters.

‘Thank God for small mercies!’ declared John grinning. ‘They sure were a trial today!’

Floating towards them in his bubble the camera on the Jetpak watched the Powerful One surveying his workforce to make sure no one was slacking. Upon reaching the balcony end of the smelter he turned the bubble and headed back down, then seizing his opportunity Sirk aimed the laser directly at one of the vents in the roof.

‘You ready prof.?’

‘Yes!’ came his firm reply.

Ok. let’s start the ball rolling.’ Like magic the pallet of gold bullion suddenly appeared, as if it had come through the vent, then slowly lowering the image into the smelter Sirk brought it into The Powerful one’s line of sight. At first they thought he hadn’t seen it, and just as they began to think it wasn’t working the bubble stopped! Taking the Dart out of the valley Sirk flew her right up to the doors of the smelter, then putting it on levit he waited for the doors to open.

‘Ok prof., bring the image through the doors, and we’ll teach this piece of shit a lesson!’ Thirty heart-stopping seconds passed before they saw the doors slide open. As he clapped his eyes on the Dart the look on his face was nothing short of incredible, then turned rapidly from disbelief to total rage.

Quickly realising he was face to face with an old and dangerous adversary, his face suddenly softened to one of almost passive submission. His brow then furrowed, and the crew of the Dart saw the most malicious grin they'd seen in their lives, without his knowledge the professor had turned the camera on Sirk's face, and had projected it directly in front of the Dart.

'So, that is what you look like!' boomed the Powerful One, but several seconds had passed before Sirk realised what the prof. had done. Knowing PO wouldn't be able to see them through the supercool, placing Sirk's image in front of the Dart was a good move on the prof's part, and Sirk decided he'd take full advantage of it!

'You got in my way once before,' said Sirk menacingly, 'but this time, and at this distance, I won't miss - you're going to die!'

'Oh I don't think so.' replied PO calmly. Expecting him to squirm, or make a deal to save his filthy skin, and Sirk was taken aback by his "Mr. Cool" attitude. 'We'll see about that!' The ships Pulsars were on full power, and Sirk blasted him with six bright blue streaks; the bubble erupted in a blue vapour, the Powerful One had gone! As the dust settled Sirk used a single bolt to blast away the captive chains from the Men and their families, they were free! As their mandibles reached menacingly through the bars of the cages, the beetles frantically grasped for the little people as they ran for their lives, but Sirk only had one message for them, the thin blue line spat death at each and every one of them, as Arin and the others watched smoking carcasses collapse

right in front of their eyes. It was after that, and to their utter disbelief, the Powerful One reappeared right in front of them!

‘I did tell you - but you didn’t believe me - did you!’ he boomed angrily. Knowing what he’d done, and what they’d seen, they stood transfixed and speechless on the bridge. To all intent and purpose he had defied the laws of nature!

‘Yes - funny isn’t it?’ boomed PO’s voice again. A second time the bubble exploded, and as blue vapour showered the Dart with debris once again PO disappeared! With an unwavering gaze they watched the empty space with bated breath. Then, to their utter dismay the Powerful One reappeared again!

‘Ha ha ha ha... do you like it? Go on, kill me again - I don’t mind - really!’

‘They say there’s a bad apple in every barrel!’ said Sirk trying provocation as his next weapon.

‘I’m a barrel of bad apples?’ asked PO with his baleful glare. By this time Sirk was baffled, and just a trifle unnerved, how was he to despatch an enemy that wouldn’t die?

‘Let’s get out of here!’ he said suddenly, and taking the Dart up fast they suddenly found themselves at ten thousand feet, then putting the Dart on levit he turned to face the others.

‘I’m sorry, but this is going to be a much harder task than I thought.’

‘Can we do a deal with PO, perhaps he wants peace as well.’ suggested John innocently.

‘One thing I *can* tell you John, he won’t do a deal when he thinks he’s winning!’ replied Sirk decisively. ‘We have to find a way of defeating

him!

'Yeah, but what I don't understand is how he survives the Pulsars.' said Arin frowning deeply.

'Wait a minute, he doesn't survive them' said the prof. turning to face them, 'he's found a way of replicating himself!'

'Holy f---n' shit!' said Sirk, spitting out the words vehemently, 'of course, he's found a Replicator! Hang on, there was only one! So how could he have it when we used it to replicate the hydro pump?'

'Hang on again,' said Arin suddenly, 'didn't you say there was a strange fitting on it that you didn't recognise?'

'Nice one Arin,' replied Sirk sardonically, 'He is a clever bastard isn't he? Somehow he's managed to replicate the Replicator!'

'If that's so,' added John, not to be outdone, 'when you blasted him he had nothing left to replicate, so...'

'That also means he's been in the science museum, and he knows his way around in there, and as the Men are in the dark hall which is adjacent to it - they are in very grave danger!' His response was immediate, and taking the Dart down over the museum he circled 'round to the remains of the take off port. It had been repaired! It was then he saw the silos!

'Oh shit! We have got trouble with a capital T, that bastard's got nuclear weapons!'

'I'll go in and disarm them if you like Sirk.' offered the professor bravely.

'Can you do that prof.,' asked Sirk looking worried, 'I've heard they're tricky things to play about with!'

'I'll take care of it.' replied the professor decisively.

A SAD OCCASION

The time to move fast was now, as the fate of the Men was in their hands! They had all agreed that PO might kill the Men and their families out of anger or spite, even if it meant having no one to run his miserable little satanic mill. So being mad enough to do it Sirk armed everyone, including the professor 'Cita, keep an eye on things outside for me, let me know if anything develops.' Giving his final instruction Sirk opened the hatch, then, with tools in one hand and Pulsars in the other, they powered up their Ionjets and floated down to the arena of hostility. Touching down a few seconds later in the massive science museum Sirk led them to the Replicator; all they found was an empty space! 'You're right prof.,' said Sirk succinctly, 'he's perpetuated himself!'

'He'd need a very advanced computer to do the job.' added the professor. Hearing that was enough, and had Sirk running to the PC exhibition hall where there were close on two hundred exhibits for PO to chose from, but having got there he found another empty space! Certain it was a model capable of receiving multiple streams of information on particle replication, it was also one that professor Patenil would be very familiar with, as he practically invented it!

'We called that one the Reputor,' said the professor looking worried, 'yes... I see what he's done, he's rigged up the Replicator to the Reputor, he is very clever Sirk, he's entered his life criteria into the Reputor, so, if for any reason he is accidentally or

deliberately killed the Reputor receives a signal from his dying brain, and the replication process starts immediately, then, a few minutes later he's alive and kicking!

'*Clever bastard!*' said Arin slowly and deliberately. 'Well, we'll never underestimate him again,' added Sirk, 'he's also built up a considerable arsenal since I was last here with those atomic weapons!'

'What we have to do first is destroy the weapons, then the Reputor.' said John, putting his pennies worth in.

'You're right John,' agreed Sirk, 'they are the two key elements of our attack!'

'Come on,' said Arin urgently, 'let's get on with it!' 'Yes, but first we must get the Men out of the Dark hall.' With that they departed in silence to lead the little people to safety. Reaching the door Sirk's mental alarm sounded, there was something wrong, very wrong! An odour pervaded the air around the door, although recognising it he couldn't place it straight away.

'What's that smell prof.,' asked Sirk turning to the professor, 'I don't like it!'

'Christ - Cyanide! I'd recognise that pungent stink anywhere!' said the prof. with alarm written across his face.

'I hope you're not saying what I think you're saying!'

'Unfortunately - yes!' added the prof., 'I think he's gassed them!'

'F---n' butcher!' spat Sirk vehemently.

'He doesn't give a damn!' said the professor scathingly, 'an indiscriminate waste of life, but It'll

be a while before the gas clears and we can get in there.'

'Well if that is the case,' said Sirk coldly, 'he's the next to get wasted!' There seemed little point in waiting 'til the Cyanic gas had cleared, so returning to the Science Hall they reconsidered their position.

'I think our next move now should be to destroy the Reputor and the nukes at the same time, at least he won't be able to replicate himself.' This was now Sirk's prime target, he had to destroy the Powerful One this time, or he would be on their backs forever!

'Sirk!' came Cita's voice in his earpiece, 'the cameras have picked up some sort of flying machines taking off from that port we were at earlier.'

'How many?' asked Sirk quickly.

'I couldn't count them,' she replied, as Sirk sensed the fear in her voice, 'it could be two or three!'

'Ok honey, don't worry - ha! What am I f---n' saying, look realign the supercool so he won't see the ships lights then you'll be safe, remember - he doesn't know the whereabouts of the Dart.'

'How do I do that?' she asked tearfully.

'Ok hon, go to the console, you'll see a series of green pads, press the fourth from the left.'

'I've got it!' she cried triumphantly. 'Yeah ok hon, they've realigned now.'

'Good, now under no circumstances align until I get back - ok?' Motioning to the others their next task would be to find the Reputor - and destroy it!

'I think the best place to start will be the smelter,' offered Sirk as they made their way quickly through

the Science Hall.

‘I don’t think we’ll find it there Sirk.’ the professor informed him.

‘Why, where else would it be? He reappeared there when I blasted him just now.’ said Sirk looking puzzled.

‘It can be as remote as he wants it to be,’ said the professor apologetically, ‘but I don’t think it’s far away... if you remember it took him a while to reappear, so it might be close his take-off port.’ The professor’s analytical mind had been at work again.

‘Yeah, you’re right prof.,’ replied Sirk seeing the logic in the professor’s argument, ok, let’s head over there, but as there isn’t much cover we’ll have to be careful.’

‘What I don’t understand is why we’re walking,’ said John, worried about the amount of time they were taking to cross the Science Hall, ‘couldn’t we use the Ionjets?’

‘The Ionjets are down fifteen percent on power,’ said Sirk apologetically, ‘so we’ll have to reserve them for the return journey.’ Continuing in silence they reached the take off port, and seeing the gap in the wall he’d used on his last mission thanked God it was still there. Crouching low he motioned to the others to do likewise, then listening for any sound that might give away PO’s presence all they heard was the noise of those infernal jets taking off.

‘Sirk!’ said Cita anxiously in his headset, ‘I think they’ve spotted the Dart, I can see them coming towards us out of the northern sky.’

‘Are they diving at a steep angle?’

‘Yes!’

'Right hon, go back to the console,' said Sirk, now feeling anxious, 'remember the green pads?'

'Yes!'

'Ok, just below them is a red pad just left of centre.'

'Yes, I've got it!'

'Press it now!' said Sirk nervously.

'What do I do next?'

'That's it, the shields are up, you'll be alright, you might feel some buffeting if the missiles strike, but apart from that you're safe as houses, ok?'

'Right, thanks angel,' replied Cita sounding somewhat relieved, 'you alright?'

'Yeah, I'm ok, but how they lived with the noise of those jets in the twentieth century, I'll never know!' With that episode over he turned to face the others.

'I'm going onto the take off port now, hopefully when I return I'll have the Reputor, you all wait here 'til I get back.'

'Ok Sirk,' said Arin, 'how long shall we give you?'

'Twenty minutes - then get the Hell out o' here!'

'No way - if you're not out in twenty minutes, we're coming in to get you - and no arguments!' Accepting Arin's ultimatum Sirk was glad his brother was there for him. Peering carefully 'round the separating wall he disappeared onto the take off port. Pausing as he reached the screen, he listened again, then tentatively looking 'round the port was operational, and after the battering he'd given it last time, Sirk was amazed! Although in some ways he was grateful, as that was the only decent cover available to him. A cautious look around the screen told him PO was at the far end of the port, then to his relief he saw what he'd come for, the Reputor!

Every jet was now air born, so his next problem was a complete lack of cover, and he had to get that Reputor! Desperation drove him now, and Sirk made his mind up he would have to destroy it from his present position, so bringing up the Pulsar he took aim, and as he was about to squeeze the trigger he suddenly stopped. It occurred to him the Pulsar's blue trace would give their position away, then remembered the old saying "Genius is born of necessity", easing his finger from the trigger he recalled that fateful night he and the Men had crossed the crater the last time to give PO a belting. Unclipping the Illumin from his belt he fastened it to the nitesite and switched it on. Pressing the reducer pad on the Pulsar he watched the readout come down to forty percent; he would melt the bloody thing! Aiming the illumin beam down the trace would render it invisible. He squeezed the trigger. Thirty seconds passed before anything happened, but as he watched the top corners of the Reputor slowly began to distort, then rapidly disintegrated into a pile of dust, but the laser connecting the Reputor to the computer hadn't extinguished; the Reputor had been destroyed! In times to come Sirk knew they would have needed that, and would have been invaluable in creating their new world, but now it was lost!

The Reputor was now a pile of carbon on the floor of the take off port, the job was done, and crawling back through the separating wall he gave the others the thumbs up!

'You did it!' said Arin triumphantly.

'Yes, it's done! Now, before we destroy PO we must

get back to the dark hall, and find out what's happened to the Men!' Moving silently back through the science museum they hoped by some miracle their friends would still be alive. Approaching the huge door Sirk sniffed at the air, then, to be totally sure asked the professor his opinion, and after mimicking Sirk assessed it to be safe.

'Expect the worst Sirk, it will not be a pleasant sight!' added the professor. The "daylight " beam from his illumin showed them the worst, strewn across the floor their little bodies lay rigid and contorted in their death throes. Vacant eyes stared at them from all angles, when suddenly Arin noticed their bloodied and broken finger nails.

'They'd obviously tried to scratch their way through the doors and walls!' said the professor flatly.

'That bastard must have told them what he was going to do!' added John, then brought to their attention a single severed limb on the floor.

'Without doubt a sad occasion.' said the professor sombrely.

'I doubt if they'd have thought of cutting off their limbs,' said the professor sadly, 'besides, it wouldn't have served any purpose.'

'I can't see any others.' said Sirk moving the illumin beam around the floor, then, the beam's penumbra picked up something that immediately attracted Sirk's attention. A torso with its left leg still attached lay a few yards away from the other bodies.

'There is only one thing that could cause injuries like that; f---n' beetles! said Sirk angrily. 'The doors weren't sealed, so how did he keep them in here?

‘I think you will find the beetles might be immune to cyanide!’ the professor informed them.

‘What’s more - where the f--- are they now?’

‘God! He is one mother-f----n’ bloodthirsty bastard!’ said Arin spitting symbolically in PO’s eye.

‘How are we going to bury them?’ asked John, and realising he had a point Sirk knew they deserved better than being allowed to rot where they lay.

‘We’ll bury them here!’ said the professor, ‘there can’t be a more fitting tribute to them... than to be buried in the very place that gave them their education and wisdom. After all, they had what we never had, true humility!’

‘Yeah, that’s a great idea prof.,’ agreed Sirk, his face ashen at the sight of his little friends lying dead before him. He would never be able speak to them again, or laugh at their antics and enjoy their sense of humour!

‘We’ll seal up the door, and the balcony at the other end, it’ll be their tomb.’ said John, then walking away without saying a word Sirk shouted after him.

‘I’ll be back in a minute,’ came his hasty reply as he disappeared into the science museum, then returning a few minutes later asked the others to follow him. Remaining tight-lipped the others tried prising information from him as to what he’d been doing. Leading them through a half hidden door at the far end of the Science Hall, he showed them yet another hall; one Sirk had never been in!

‘Look!’ said John triumphantly. ‘History in the making! A flatbed truck, cement mixer, bricks! All we’ll need to do the job, I know they’re old, but we’ve got nothing else!’

‘That’s great John,’ said Sirk in agreement, ‘we can use all that.’ Looking around it was obvious to them this hall was dedicated to building history, and was a real bonus as far as they were concerned! As Sirk ran his eye over the contents for future reference, he realised that bricking up the dark hall would make only a minor dent in the contents of these exhibits.

Having finished their first job as builders, or perhaps more accurately Arin’s first job, he being the only one who had knowledge of ancient building techniques, while Sirk, John, and the professor acted purely as labourers. It was a passable job, and the walls at least were vertical! Having finished John suddenly walked off in the same direction again!

‘Where are you going now!’ asked Sirk, puzzled as to why John had this sudden urge to run off.

‘I’ll be back soon, don’t worry!’ came John’s definitive answer. Knowing John and his capacity for secrecy Sirk gave up trying to get anything out of him, and carried on with the task in hand. When John hadn’t reappeared, after twenty minutes Sirk began to worry, when suddenly they heard an almighty crash followed by a blood-curdling scream! Taking off like a load of jack rabbits Sirk risked his Ionjet to get there, but reaching the end of the hall there was no sign of John.

‘Where the f--- are you John?’ shouted Sirk at the top of his voice.

‘I’m in here Sirk! get in here quick - there’s a beetle!’ Turning in the direction of John’s voice Sirk floated into the hall, where a beetle was trying desperately to extricate John from a pile of rubble that had collapsed on top of him. Bringing the butt

of the pulsar to his shoulder, he squeezed the trigger immediately, and as the thin blue line made contact with its horny carapace he kept his finger on the trigger for a full twenty seconds; it screamed in agony as the high voltage seared its flesh. He was taking no chances where one of his mates was concerned, then finally collapsing in a dismembered heap its pincers clattered loudly as they made contact with the floor. Having fallen right across him a large beam had brought with it a pile of rubble - but the beam was an effigy of Christ on the cross! Arriving a few seconds later Arin and the professor had their guns ready for action, but seeing Sirk had already despatched his adversary, ran over to help him remove the carcass of the beast, and free John from his would-be tomb!

‘F---n’ Hell John! I thought we were gonna have to bury another one for a minute! Well? Go on then - thank the rubble for saving your life! It formed a barrier between you and that beetle, if it hadn’t been for that you’d have been a gonner!’

‘Yeah, talk about lucky, those things are a nightmare!’ said John, visibly shaken after his ordeal.

‘What were you doing in here anyhow?’ asked Arin, John then pointed to the cross that had saved his life a seconds before.

‘Saved by the Lord!’ exclaimed the professor.

‘You could say it’s prophetic.’ agreed Sirk.

‘I thought you didn’t believe in God?’ asked Arin, on hearing Sirk’s uncharacteristic oration.

‘No... what I said was, I don’t believe in religion, anyhow, what did you want that cross for John?’

‘To put in front of the door... where we buried the Men?’ he emphasised, they all stared at him half-cocked.

‘Yeah, that’s a really nice tribute John, they would have appreciated that.’ said Sirk earnestly, ‘anyhow we have another job to do, so we’d better get on with it!’ It was a job none of them relished, and diffusing ancient atomic weapons would be very risky, it not fatal! As the silos were situated between the take off port and the smelter the take off port is where they would have to keep a wary eye out for PO., and knew that schizo would be in a red hot rage by now. As PO had had a new door way knocked through which they came across purely by accident, in order to gain access from both the take off port and the smelter, finding the entrance to the silo stacks proved to be a bigger problem than they’d thought. Hurrying through to lead his mini army to its first stack Sirk nearly goofed big time, to his right was a glass panel separating them from the control room, and was where PO would launch the missiles! Worse still, sitting in his bubble as large as life was PO himself! As he was facing away from them Sirk signalled to the others to get out quickly. ‘Shit! What do we do now?’ whispered Sirk.

‘Stay low,’ replied Arin, ‘it looks to me like he’s taking readings of some sort at the moment... we’ll wait him out.’

‘My guess is he’s taking fuel and payload readings,’ said John, using his knowledge as a flight controller, ‘I reckon he’s gonna launch a couple of those at the Dart!’ Sirk didn’t argue, after all, John knew his onions on that subject, and also knew PO!

It was almost forty five minutes before PO had finished his readings, then having entered all information into his computer he left by a door at the far end of the control room; one Sirk hadn't realised existed.

'That door PO just went through, it must lead outside the building.' said Sirk, and should they need to leave in hurry thought it might be of use to them!

'Arin, keep an eye out for that bastard in case he comes back mate?'

'No problem bruv!' replied Arin. The professor and John got to work de-activating the first of the missiles, and opening the first stack John allowed the professor to enter first.

'Shit!' Another rarity from the professor!

'What is it prof.,' asked John, his brow furrowed with fear.

'You know what these things are, do you?' he asked John, his face ashen with fear.

'Enlighten me!'

'These... are none other than the Cathan missiles - hyper-nuclear!' hissed the professor.

'F--k me! They are more than capable of destroying the Dart!' declared Sirk, and knowing the women and children were on board his face suddenly lined with worry!

'Won't the shields withstand the blast from those?' asked Arin.

'No! These bastards destroy electromagnetic fields as well, I've gotta get back to the ship, all the jets are back in the hangar, and I think John is right, he's going to attack the Dart with these!'

‘Where will you put her Sirk? It’s all open ground out there!’ said John thinking the worst.

‘I don’t know yet, but I’ve got to get her out of the valley!’ replied Sirk strapping on his Ionjet, and a few seconds later was winging his way back to the Dart. After leaving John and the professor they continued diffusing the missiles, and knowing each one had to be treated with kid gloves, tense wasn’t a word they could lightly discard. One false move would send them straight to oblivion, and as there were twenty of them it was going to be a long job!

A few minutes later Sirk had almost reached the Dart, so rounding the fissure in the cliff he radioed Cita to open the hatch, but in his haste to get the ship out of the valley his timing was slightly out, and collided with hatch before it was fully open!

‘You ok?’ he asked Cita quickly running to the bridge.

‘I’m ok darlin, how about you?’

‘I’m alright, but we’ve gotta get the f--k out of here - quick!’

‘What’s the matter hon?’

‘We’ve just found out PO’s got Hyper-nuclear weapons - ships computer!’

‘Your request?’

‘360 degrees lateradial gravity - on manual - Tachypas drive in!’

‘Compliant!’ Twisting the stick Sirk felt the Dart react to his command, then tilting the nose up the ship soared to ten thousand feet.

‘Hold station!’

‘Compliant!’ The Dart went to levit status.

‘What are we doing?’ asked Cita looking worried.

'I've gotta think of somewhere you'll be safe, oh uh... you won't be meeting the Men from the smelter... that fat bastard has killed every last one of them!'

'Whaaat?' hissed Cita through clenched teeth, 'what kind of f----n' monster is he?'

'Yeah.' came Sirk's mono-syllabic reply, and was still clearly stunned by the genocide they'd witnessed earlier.

'I gotta think where we can hide this damned ship... where he won't find it.'

'Can you hide it in the woods above the village?' suggested Cita, trying desperately to help.

'No hon, - too sparse, he would see it readily there, and on a slope it would be a sitting target... wait a minute... the spray coming from the waterfall at the top of the valley, he won't f----n' see her in there!' said Sirk triumphantly; and before anyone had time to blink the Dart was on her way down again. Bringing her in from the west he brought her in to level flight and over the scree, then along the valley floor he slowed to a crawl and edged her nose into the heavy mist. Turning the ship through one hundred and eighty degrees he set her facing nose out to the valley.

RUNNING THE GAUNLET

Attaching his Jetpak he headed for the hatch, then kissing Cita he left without saying a word. Needing to know how John and the professor were getting on he headed straight for the silos. On his arrival he saw them working on the fourth of the deadly missiles, but it wasn't until he was right behind them he realised they were standing stock-still, and knew instinctively something was wrong!

'Ha ha ha ha, ha ha ha! Spinning around he looked into the eyes of that evil bastard once again, there was no mirth in his laughter, or on his face, his whole persona exuded death!

'I knew you would return, because you are an honourable man, you just had to come back to rescue your friends - didn't you?' Pre-empting what would come next Sirk dived back through the door, and thankfully that dreaded pink gas went wide of the mark. He'd come close to ending up like John and the professor, and remembered the effect it had had on him last time. The professor and John stood motionless like a pair of tailors dummies where the gas had frozen their muscle mass! Although they wouldn't be able to see what was going on around them Sirk knew they could hear everything around them, but luckily this time he was too quick for PO, one up to Sirk! All he had to do now was stay one step ahead of him, and it would be ten minutes before the professor and John recovered from the gas, so he'd have to move fast in order to cripple PO's operation, but the question was, how? It was

then he realised Arin was missing, but where in Hell's name was he? Knowing he wouldn't desert his post Sirk feared PO might have already killed him, and if that was the case Sirk vowed he would make sure PO died slowly, very slowly!

His decision made Sirk left for the take off port, and spiking the jets he thought would not only show PO he meant business, but would seriously reduce his arsenal. It was time for guessing games, and knowing he was out to destroy his precious jets PO would come looking for him, and would certainly turn up on the take off port with Sirk! Rounding the hole in the wall on the left side of the port Sirk waited to see if he would take the bait, but there was no sign of him. About to walk onto the apron he suddenly saw a bubble float into view containing one fat bastard, and Sirk watched as PO scoured the port looking for him. It was a turkey shoot! Bringing up the pulsar he pressed the pad for automatic/repeat fire and vaporise, then let loose a fusillade of bolts - it was a direct hit! Careering backwards Sirk knew that dose would render it useless for half an hour. Running out he watched as PO glared balefully at him, then giving him the one-fingered salute fired the Pulsar once more directly into the jets intake. Now suffering from metal fatigue the turbines blades would be useless, the next time they were powered up would simply disintegrate. Knowing he had only half an hour Sirk went straight to war on each engine in turn, and was about to fire his seventeenth bolt when he felt a tap on his shoulder, as the Pulsar had drowned out all noise he hadn't heard approaching feet, and spinning 'round in

alarm he came face to face with Arin!

'F---n' shit! Talk about a scare, for a minute I thought you were PO!' said Sirk grinning, but was happy to see his brother was ok.

'Sorry bruv,' replied Arin, 'I thought I'd come up here and ruin his f---n' jets, but - you've beaten me to it!'

'Great minds,' said Sirk grinning again, 'better finish the job quick I think John and the professor will be coming 'round about now, and we'll have to help them finish off those missiles.' Ten minutes later and the job was done; those jets would certainly never fly again!

Returning to the silos they were met with looks of bewilderment from John and the professor, who looked distinctly groggy after their dose of nerve gas.

'What the Hell happened?' asked the professor.

'PO's using a sort of nerve restrictor,' replied Sirk, 'I had a dose of it last time I was here, it'll wear off in fifteen minutes.'

'Thank God for that!' said John, although still suffering considerable pain from his ordeal he was relieved the effects were only temporary.

'Come on, we'd better get these things out of commission before that big shit comes 'round!' said Sirk half joking.

'You're right Sirk,' agreed the professor as worry clouded his face, 'we can't afford to have one of these things in the sky! We all know what happened last time they made contact with terra firma.'

Following John into the silos the professor continued working, his understanding of this

technology had enabled him to work faster, and had now completed four. By the time they had finished the seventh missile PO suddenly appeared from nowhere! Floating into the control room in his bubble the automatic door closed quickly behind him. Turning to face them he gave them another of his baleful glares, and another of his evil grins, as evil went he certainly had the edge on the "Bloodletter"!

'So... you thought you had me beat - did you?' said PO menacingly, 'well... I'm going to teach you *all* a lesson now, it's punishment time! I know where your ship is... and I'm going to launch one of those little babies at it, I wonder... is there anyone on board who would die if I did so?' Lunging forward Arin took a pot shot at him, but the bolt merely ricocheted off the protective partition and almost hit one of the missiles!

'Shit! We're lucky that didn't trigger the launch mechanism!' said Sirk pulling Arin out of harms way.

'He's bluffing,' said Sirk in a low voice, 'he hasn't got a clue where the Dart is.'

'I don't think he's bluffing about launching them though!' said John seriously.

'Neither do I!' replied Sirk. 'He knows that wherever one of those things detonates the result will be devastating!' Having thought that Sirk suddenly realised he ought to be somewhere else!

'I gotta get back to the ship, while I'm gone you'd all better stay out of sight, we don't want you catching another dose of that nerve gas now do we?'

'If we get a chance we'll try and deactivate some

more missiles.’ said John, and thinking of Mayan and the boys he was desperate to put them all out of action; if anything happened to them because of those things...

‘Only if the chance presents itself.’ said Sirk finally, then left hastily for the ship before PO launched the first missile! Jetting back across the southern crater he entered the mist, and with the hatch already open he was able to glide straight onto the platform and make for the bridge. Sitting at the console he powered up the Dart, and was about to take her out of the mist when Arin came through on the receiver. ‘Sirk! He’s launched one - the bastards launched one!’

‘Ok bruv, I’m on it, I’ve got an idea, I think I know how to deal with this, is he still -’

‘F----n’ Hell! he’s launched another - he’s f----n’ mad!’

‘Ok, there’s no time to loose now, contact me if he launches another!’

‘You got it!’ replied Arin. Aligning the supercool he took the Dart out of the mist and put her in a vertical climb at half warp. With a cargo of women and children he was about to face one of the deadliest weapons man had ever created, and somehow had to find a way of beating these things!

‘Arin, did the missiles launch in a vertical trajectory?’

‘Yes, he hasn’t changed the angle of the silos!’ said Arin.

‘Thank God!’ replied Sirk, ‘at least that gives us a little more time to play with!’ Pressing the holograph control pad he swept the skies, and within

a nanosecond they had picked up the two missiles; he locked the scanner to them.

‘Ships computer!’

‘Your request?’

‘The two craft on the holograph, identify and classify as “enemy”!’ Instructed Sirk.

‘Compliant!’ replied the ever dutiful computer. Turning back to the helm he raised the holosite, and locating the missiles from the holograph he put them onscreen.

‘Surely you’re not going to fire at them in the atmosphere?’ asked Taniche in alarm.

‘Only as a last resort!’ replied Sirk emphatically, and hoped she wouldn’t have another attack of nerves! The tone of his voice wasn’t however lost on her, and letting him get on with the task in hand she remained silent. The first of the missiles was now very close as Sirk brought the Dart in behind it, then lowering the ships speed to match that of the missile he flew under the projectile. It’s flight path was now levelling out, and Sirk knew it was bound for an undetermined target. Opening the onboard cameras he used the upper hull lens to guide the Dart directly under it.

‘Sirk... what are you doing?’ asked Cita, registering what he was about to attempt.

‘Don’t worry hon, I do this for a living!’ he replied smiling at her. When faced with mortal danger Sirk was always at his most flippant! The Dart was now dangerously close to the missile, and almost nonchalantly he edged the Dart even closer as the women sat petrified at the thought of colliding with that missile, and all that that implied! It was ironic

thought Sirk that they'd come here to escape these bloody things in the first place, and here he was chasing them through the skies of their new world! It would be a tricky manoeuvre, should he nudge the missile too hard he could put it out of control, but knew also he had precious little time to deal with this one, as there was another waiting for him! Contact! He'd just touched the missile with the tip of the Dart's starboard wing, his speed now locked to that of the missile he gently lifted the Dart's nose, and set the missile on a new course - for outer space!

'I hope it's carrying enough fuel to get it out of the atmosphere!' said Sirk.

The second of the missiles was going to be a much bigger task, having already peaked on its flight path it was now on a downward trajectory, and was heading straight for the valley floor! Putting the Dart into a vertical climb he veered to port, then flying alongside the missile he closed in gently, and repeating the process he hoped would render this one harmless as well! Bringing the starboard wingtip under the arrow of death he gently eased the Dart into level flight, but his altimeter showed just two thousand feet and Sirk wondered if this time he would make it! Knowing he wouldn't clear the mountain it was all but over, and had to attain four thousand feet to get away with it, and too much upward pressure would put the missile out of control! Still easing the missile up he veered to starboard and saw the rim of the crater loom large in the holograph. Still flying at half warp the fuselage screamed against the rocks on the crater's rim as it

scuffed the underbelly of the Dart, and still nudging the missile upward he prayed it had enough fuel left to fly safely from the atmosphere!

‘Sirk!’ came John’s urgent voice over the Tannoy.

‘What is it John?’ replied Sirk in a voice which said “don’t disturb me at the office”.

‘He’s launched another! It’s target is the Dart Sirk - do you know what I’m saying?’

‘Shit! yeah, I know what you’re saying John,’ replied Sirk now looking distinctly worried. ‘He knows I’ve got this one in tow, and at this speed he knows I can’t outrun his new launch!’ Beginning to think the end was nigh, had he been outsmarted by PO? F---n’ NO!

‘John - put the professor on quick!’

‘What is it Sirk?’ asked the professor’s comforting voice.

‘Am I right in remembering these missiles have gyroscopic guidance?’

‘Yes, that is correct!’

‘Bless you prof.!’ said Sirk and switched off.

‘Good luck!’ said three voices in unison. The third missile was closing rapidly, but remaining calm Sirk put a few feet between the Dart and the missile, then dropping his speed he waited until he was clear of the missiles exhaust and pulled in behind it. Just then its motor spluttered, its fuel spent he was now in big hot shit!

‘YES!’ shouted Sirk at the top of his voice; Cita and Taniche jumped visibly. As the rocket’s airspeed slowed he moved the Dart in closer to the exhaust, and crying in terror Cita and Taniche thought they were going to die! The Dart’s nose wedged straight

into the missiles exhaust, and Sirk estimated the aerodynamics of the projectile would lend it to much higher speeds; so putting the Dart up to warp one he headed for the stars! A quick check on the holograph showed him the third missile was no more than one hundred feet astern!

They had come very close to Annihilation! With his new air speed he easily outran the third missile, and simply allowed it to “home” in on him as he flew from Earth’s gravity. Now it was crunch time, and Sirk had to put a lot of distance between the Dart and the second missile until he knew they were safe, but having dropped back ten miles he fired a single bolt, then suddenly veering to starboard he swept ‘round and came in behind the third missile... more of the same! The explosions from both were cataclysmic, the Dart rocked twice before the shockwaves finally died.

‘F---n’ Nora!’ said Sirk looking shaken, ‘I’m glad they went off outside the atmosphere!’

‘Yeah, last time the didn’t!’ said Cita succinctly. Breathing for the first time since the chase began, Cita, Taniche, and the kids were looking at him as if he’d lost the plot.

‘You’re mad!’ said Cita.

‘You’re alive!’ replied Sirk

‘How are things down there?’ said Sirk switching on the mike.

‘Ok Sirk, the prof’s jammed PO’s frequency - he won’t be launching another!’

‘The sky is blue...’ sang Sirk, remembering a line from a twenty eighth century song. ‘We’re on our way!’ It was time to get that ugly fat bastard - PO!

ROCK 'N' ROLL TRIUMPH

Hovering obediently on levit Sirk told the women to stay onboard, then leaving the Dart with a Pulsar rifle under each arm ten minutes later he crouched alongside Arin.

‘What’s the latest?’ he asked his brother.

‘He’s just sitting there glaring in our direction, and hasn’t said or done anything.’

‘Prof., how did you manage to jam his radio frequency?’

‘Well dirk, I surpassed myself this time,’ announced the professor proudly, ‘having the Jetpak with us I used it to contact the computer on the Dart... then instructing it to locate his frequency I jammed it with the last used jamming device, and it came up with... I’m Still Standing, did you say that was an Elton John song?’

‘You’re absolutely right prof., Elton John it is,’ replied Sirk, and admiring the mind of this old man he laughed at the irony of it.

‘What you did then saved us all!’

‘Yeah, a stroke of genius prof.,’ added John, ‘of course, you also had a little help from Elton!’

‘Now, how in f---’s name are we gonna get him out of there?’ said Sirk, looking at the professor, well he usually came up with most of the brilliant ideas!

‘That is our biggest problem at the moment, he’s got us by the balls!’ said the professor, and again his unusual use of profanity raised their eyebrows.

‘Anyone else got any bright ideas?’ asked Sirk looking at them in turn, but Arin and John simply nodded in the negative. Crouching behind the

entrance wall the four of them thought long and hard about their predicament, but no answers came forth.

‘As I see it,’ started the professor suddenly, ‘we need to destroy the rest of those missiles, his computer, and of course PO himself, although not necessarily in that order. He has three items of protection, that damned glass shield, his machine guns, and of course... that nerve gas! So... we either entice him out, or, we go in!’

‘He knows if we go in, he can use the machine guns and the nerve gas on us - that’s for sure!’

‘Ok, as we can’t use the Pulsar to break that glass, is there another way it can be smashed?’ asked John.

‘Too dangerous John,’ replied Arin, ‘to do that we’d have to show ourselves, and we’d fall pray to that gas again!’

‘Alright, one thing is for certain, we can’t wait him out,’ stated Sirk emphatically, ‘we don’t have time on our side, and we don’t know how long he can stay in there.’

‘Wait a minute,’ said the professor, ‘what’s behind the control room?’

‘It backs on to the smelter - I think?’ replied Sirk, curious at the professor’s question. ‘In that case there must be access from the rear, I think you’ve got something there prof..’

‘Even if we get in there he’s still got that f---n’ nerve gas.’ said John, reminding them of that particular hazard.

‘Wait a cotton pickin’ minute,’ said Sirk thoughtfully, ‘I think what the professor has in mind is the element of surprise - am I right?’

‘Yes!’ said the professor testily wishing they would

keep up.

‘Something has just occurred to me,’ said Arin suddenly, ‘with that glass partition between him and us, how did he manage to get John and the professor?’

‘That’s easy,’ countered the professor, ‘he injects it into the aircon, which is conveniently ducted from the control room into the silos!’

‘Crafty bastard!’ replied Arin, slightly embarrassed at not having seen that for himself.

‘Ok, I say we take a look at it, as he can’t see us out here, we’ll let him think we’re still here.’ said Sirk with finality. Five minutes later standing at the rear of the control room Sirk looked around for anything that might constitute a trap.

‘John, get over to that door and keep your Pulsar trained on it, if it opens it can only be one perso - uh thing, PO! Let him have it! Arin, you and I’ll go through this door, and take a look at what cover we’ve got, prof., back up John, if PO comes out do the same!’

‘Well I’m not going to stand and grin at him!’ replied the professor scathingly. Placing his palm on the pad, the door slid silently open, but there was no sign of PO, and followed quickly by Arin Sirk stepped inside. Waiting briefly Sirk then signalled to Arin to make his way to the far end of the control room, and silently nodding his assent Arin ran swiftly along the walkway. Moving forward Sirk could just see the curvature of PO’s bubble, and in it sat a fat impatient bastard. That thought Sirk would work in their favour. All he needed was one good shot to disable his bubble, and finish off PO once

and for all! Moving to the rear of the control room he switched on his intercom.

‘Arin,’ he whispered, ‘what’s it like your end?’

‘Pretty good bruv,’ there’s an empty shroud up here, I’m in it now, although he can’t see me, I’ve got a good field of vision, he’s down your end at the moment.’

‘Yeah, I can just see the top of his bubble, he’s getting impatient... I’m gonna make a move, one good shot if you know what I mean, when the bubble careers to your end, let him have another one, ok bruv?’

‘No sweat!’ replied Arin. Returning his gaze to the front of the control room Sirk could no longer see the bubble, then suddenly it was right in front of him, with PO grinning menacingly; bringing up the Pulsar Sirk fired from the hip, and watched as the piercing blue trace slammed into the bubble, but instead of propelling the floating sphere towards Arin, it hit the glass partition! Beating a quick retreat behind the computer banks Sirk tripped over something on the floor and fell heavily, and rendering him non compos mentis for a few seconds in a flash PO saw Sirk’s predicament, and knew he could finish him off! Suddenly another bolt slammed into the bubble, Arin had nailed him! Rotating slowly backwards PO was left strapped in his seat upside down, and Arin shuddered involuntarily at seeing his slow evil grin! Wasting no time he let rip until his pulsar was spent then dropped it to the floor. By this time Sirk had come to and was back on his feet again, and running full tilt at the bubble he reached through the bubble and

caught hold of PO's grubby T shirt, and with great difficulty dragged him out. It was at this point Sirk realized PO was so heavy he was unable to stand! His weight was such his legs could no longer support him, and it occurred to Sirk that the bubble was affectively his only way of remaining mobile!

'I suppose you're going to kill me?' said PO sullenly.

'That's the general idea!' replied Sirk decisively.

'W-we can still do a deal!' added PO suddenly, and hearing that Sirk knew he was very keen to save his miserable skin.

'Well now, what did you have in mind?' asked Sirk feigning interest.

'My gold... you can have twenty five percent of everything I've got!'

'Bollocks!' replied Sirk spitting the expletive at him, 'what's to stop us taking the lot?'

'You don't know where it is,' said PO thinking he was getting somewhere.

'So you really think we want your precious metal do you?' replied Sirk ridiculing his attempts at appeasement.

'Look, just put me back in my bubble and I'll show you where it is!'

'*You* murdered my friends!' said Sirk accusingly.

'How d'you plead... guilty, or not guilty?'

'What d'you mean?' asked PO warily.

'I think you know what I mean... *don't you?*' asked Sirk, challenging him, then bellowed. '*Did you think you could buy the lives of my friends with your gold?*' Realising he was stumped for a way out PO fell silent, and relinquished the moral high ground to

Sirk. Sneering at him Sirk brought his pulsar up to carry out the execution.

‘They’re not all dead!’ said PO suddenly.

‘Do you think I’m gonna fall for that one?’ replied Sirk cynically.

‘It’s true!’ retorted PO. ‘I can show you where they are.’

‘You’ll tell us where they are - eventually!’ said Sirk menacingly.

‘If you kill me I won’t be able to tell you where they are, and you’ll never find them by yourself.’

‘What d’you think prof., is he bluffing, or should we listen to him?’

‘I don’t know to honest,’ answered the professor, and carefully considered PO’s statement, ‘it’s just possible he could be telling the truth... many people do when their necks are on the line.’

‘Ok, in case you are telling the truth we’ll go along with it.’ agreed Sirk after much deliberation.

Walking into the bubble Sirk systematically tore out the two Browning machine guns from their mountings either side of the bubble.

‘Alright Shithouse,’ said Sirk, with PO still sitting on the ground Arin had re-armed himself and had his pulsar pointing directly at his head, ‘where’s the control for that nerve gas?’

‘What nerve gas?’ asked PO feigning ignorance. Spinning swiftly ‘round Sirk smashed the butt of his pulsar into PO’s neck behind his ear. Slumping forward his eyes glazed over for a few seconds as blood trickled down his fat bulky neck.

‘Now. Do I have to ask you again?’ asked Sirk angrily, and was just itching for a chance to finish

him off.

'There's... there's... a lever, on the right of the console... green - lever.' Looking into the bubble again he spotted the lever PO had referred to, and systematically tore it out.

HELLO FRIENDS

Coming around slowly the first thing Sirk noticed was Arin, John, and the professor, who were still unconscious. Still unsure of his whereabouts or what he was doing, then it all suddenly flooded back like a kaleidoscope setting its pattern. Tearing the lever from the nerve gas weapon had triggered it off and gassed them all, and suddenly he knew he had to retrieve his gun before PO came 'round.

'Hello friends!' came the chilling voice of PO and still sitting beside his bubble. 'Had a nice sleep?' Still dazed Sirk stared at him, and wondered why he hadn't been affected by the gas. It was then a chill ran down his spine - PO had all the pulsars! Weighing up the situation Sirk realised he'd blundered - big time! He'd underestimated PO again, and this piece of crap he knew was far from stupid! Holding a pulsar pistol in his right hand he had a rifle slung over his shoulder, and it was glaringly obvious to Sirk he was familiar with close quarter combat tactics. Hoping he'd be holding a rifle his heart sank, and it was to his dismay that he realized PO knew exactly what he was doing!

'We'll just wait for your companions to come 'round,' said PO menacingly, then I'll tell you what we're gonna do.' Trying to goad him into making a mistake Sirk sat glaring at him, that way at least he'd have half a chance of disarming the hideous bastard, and regain the initiative! Remaining seated on the ground PO wasn't tempted by his ploy, and waited patiently 'til John, Arin and the professor came 'round, and when they did their expressions

told Sirk they knew they were no longer in charge. 'Right,' said PO suddenly, 'have we got ourselves together?' No one answered, so, assuming they had he continued his resume, 'you will all help me back into my bubble, while I hold this pistol to your head,' then pointed the snout at Sirk, 'if anyone tries anything stupid - *you will get it... instantly!*' For a while it seemed they were all in for a sticky time, and Sirk had already considered that they might be forced to work in the smelter, and all that went with it!

Moving alongside PO as instructed, Sirk felt the end of the barrel touch his temple, and felt PO's vice like grip on the back of his collar.

'Now - the rest of you help me back into the bubble, and remember... don't try anything, or he dies!' Doing as they were bade the professor John and Arin realized there was little point in risking Sirk's life, as PO clearly had the advantage they could only hope their chance would come again.

Back in his little cocoon PO kept the pistol religiously close to Sirk's temple, then ordered them to leave the control room by the same door they'd entered. So as not to antagonize PO they moved slowly as their minds worked on a way out of this mess. Passing the roof of the smelter Arin glanced at the carnage of what had happened in there. The little bodies of the Men, their wives and children still lying on the floor where they had fallen twenty four hours previously. Walking slowly the trio descended to the main smelter floor, then turning left along the main wall of the smelter fifteen yards further on they turned left again, with the bubble containing

the obscenity that was PO floating beside them he still held the pistol tight against Sirk's temple. Turning casually 'round to assess the situation PO told him swiftly to face the front, and motioning with the pistol at Sirk's head emphasised his intent; John quickly did as he was told. It was then that Sirk realized where PO was taking them, and remembered the last time he was down here, to help Raff rescue his cousins from the store room that PO used as a prison.

'Stop!' ordered PO suddenly, they didn't argue. 'Now, you,' he said pointing at Arin, 'there's a set of keys up there on a hook, to the right of the door, open it!' Removing the keys from their resting place Arin put them to work, and a few seconds later the door swung open.

'Now - all of you get in there!' Following his orders to the letter no one dared do anything that would jeopardize Sirk's life. Once the others were inside Sirk was ordered to move slowly away from the bubble and join the others. Being too large to go through the door PO was forced to take the bubble as near to its frame as possible; Sirk also did as he was bade.

'You'll stay here until I have decided your fate!' boomed PO.

'Seeing that you've got the keys... we don't have much choice do we.' said Sirk sarcastically, and again tried goading him into making a mistake, but his attempt was futile as PO merely grinned; he wasn't biting today! As the door slammed shut the fusion key hissed slightly as it secured them in the dank dismal cell.

‘Well, this is a welcome surprise,’ said Sirk turning to Raff, ‘we thought that “shit” had killed you all!’

‘He has killed our brothers from the smelter, we don’t know how or where he killed them, but he told us that they are all dead!’ replied Raff with remorse.

‘We know where they are,’ said Sirk sadly, ‘he used a gas to kill them... but we have given them a proper burial... we sealed the entrance to the dark hall where he killed them, it’s now their tomb. Fetching a crucifix to put up outside John was attacked by a beetle and nearly lost his life, it was a close run thing.’

‘Thank you Sirk, thank you all, especially you John for risking your life, you have done them a great honour.’ replied Raff, who was grateful to Sirk, and the companions he’d returned with. Spending the next ten minutes introducing them all he explained to Raff that the professor was to them as Tim was to the Men, a wise and knowledgeable one. After that it was time to think of more serious matters, and to find a way out of their predicament without letting PO know what they were up to!

‘We have been scraping out the mortar between the blocks for a long time.’ said Kiska enthusiastically.

‘Good man!’ replied Sirk, and was impressed by their fortitude and endeavour, ‘where exactly?’ Pointing to a block near the ceiling and to the right of the doorway, Sirk could see straight away it was directly above where the fusion keys hung on the wall outside.

‘That’s excellent.’ cut in Arin, also aware of what they were planning to do.

‘How in Hell’s name did you manage to get up

there?’ asked John, noting the height of the ceiling; and was astounded by their ingenuity considering their lack of height ‘We climb on each others backs until we gain enough height to do the job.’ replied Raff, laughing at John’s question.

‘How long did you manage stay up there?’ asked Arin, also astounded at how these incredible little people had carried out this feat of endurance.

‘When one of us tires we all stop, and when we have all recovered we continue.’ replied Hepra, as John shook his head in sheer amazement.

‘So how far have you got with it?’ asked Sirk finally.

‘We’re almost through now,’ said Raff proudly, we’ll be able to reach the keys in a few days time, it was Kiska who did most of the scraping, as he is the most athletic of us.’

‘Oh yeah,’ added Sirk grinning, ‘I remember that time in the military museum when he scaled that wall with incredible agility!’ Grinning proudly Kiska was keen to get on with it, and like the others wanted to get out of that place and return to the village with life in the norm.

‘We need a plan that will work one hundred percent.’ said Sirk emphatically.

‘If we can get out couldn’t we just go to ground?’ asked John as an off-thee-cuff offering.

‘The only trouble with that is - PO has all the weapons, and *we need to get them back!*’

‘How about... we set a trap,.’ came John’s second offering, ‘if the Men create a diversion, one or all of us can set about tackling PO.’

‘Yeah,.’ replied Sirk, ‘that could just work! Raff,

when we finally get the door open give me a chance to find somewhere to hide, then on my signal make as much noise as you can.'

'Yes, I think that would work.' said the professor in agreement.

'Ok, if we're all happy with that, all we have to do is work out where we'll do it.' said Arin, looking around for signs of dissent, but there were none.

'Right, I propose to get on the balcony at the end of the dark hall, which as you know is directly above us, I'll be out of sight up there, but remember, make as much noise as you can, then, when PO comes to investigate I'll jump into the bubble and disarm the bastard!' said Sirk in conclusion.

'Hot shit!' said Hepra with excitement. Laughing at his expletive the Men remembered when Sirk had first used it on his last mission.

'Let's get some shuteye,' added Sirk, 'we'll need a lot of stamina tomorrow.' No one needed telling twice, and despite the cold they settled on the floor hoping sleep would be theirs.

NO MORE SHIT FOR BEAKFAST

Bleak eyes stared at one another, no one it seemed had had a good nights sleep, but there was no time to ruminate on what might have been, having as they did a task to perform. Standing up Sirk stretched for a long while to get oxygen into his muscles, Raff, Kiska, and the professor were the next to attain the perpendicular, and after a few minutes all were standing, and wondered what they should do next.

‘I think it might be wise to wait ‘til PO has brought our breakfast before we start the escape.’ said Raff, suddenly.

‘We get breakfast?’ asked Sirk sarcastically.

‘If you can call it that,’ cut in Kiska, ‘but it gives us the shits!’

‘We could always hurl it at PO,’ added Hepra, his sense of humour sharp as ever.

‘What is the breakfast?’ asked Sirk.

‘No the shit!’ replied Hepra making everyone laugh.

‘Ok, I think that’s very wise Raff,’ said Sirk with irony after the joking had died away, ‘but we don’t wanna get caught with our pants down.’ It was sometime before they heard the fusion key in the lock. By this time they were hungry and looking forward to having something in their bellies.

‘Get back against the wall!’ barked PO, and watched carefully as they walked to the rear wall of the cell, a long trolley then moved automatically into the room. It was laden with something resembling porridge, but there the similarity ended. The door had slammed shut and PO had left, so having eaten

their “porridge” it was sometime later when they realized that Kiska wasn’t joking about it giving them the shits! To say it was disgusting would have been complimentary! However, when you’re hungry...

Half an hour later and several grumbling stomachs aside it was obvious they had eaten something that hadn’t agreed with them!

‘Anyone got any Recon?’ asked Sirk smirking ironically. However, putting their situation aside they were committed to make their plan work and get out of that place, but most of all - they had to get PO! Already three deep Hepra scaled the backs of the others, as Sirk, John, Arin and the Professor watched in amazement as he scraped away at the block they’d worked on previously. An hour later they saw Kiska slide the block clear of the wall and drop it unceremoniously to the floor.

‘Even you won’t get through that!’ said Sirk studying the small gap they’d manufactured.

‘Don’t worry,’ replied Raff, ‘it will be easy to remove the other blocks now, the wall is only one coarse deep.’ Like a man possessed before Raff had finished speaking Kiska had torn two more from the wall, then having made a hole big enough to pass through he peered carefully out; there was no sign of PO. Watching in amazement as Kiska disappeared through the gap they heard his feet hit the floor outside.

‘F--k!’ came the loudly whispered expletive; Kiska had winded himself on landing.

‘You ok Kiska?’ asked Sirk from the other side.

‘It was higher than I thought - hot shit!’ Seconds

later they heard the fusion key hiss in the lock as Kiska opened the door that stood between them and freedom!

'Right, I'm off,' announced Sirk, 'as soon as I'm up there I'll give you three low whistles ok?' Nodding their assent seven minutes later Sirk had the scaled girders that framed the furnaces, then, shinning across an adjoining RSJ he reached the balcony above. Hearing Sirk's signal Raff waved his little army into the gangway where they made the loudest cacophony since time began! In less than a minute PO's bubble appeared - as intended! His face contorted in crimson rage! Up on the balcony Sirk watched as his opportunity drew near, and as PO approached with a pulsar rifle levelled at the Men he saw John, Arin, and the professor, but by the time he'd realized Sirk was missing it was too late. Remembering he would be unable to penetrate the bubble by using brute force Sirk pointed his toes pointing downward and dropped feet first into the bubble.

Suddenly he at PO's side and held the sharpened handle of a spoon to PO's neck.

'Go on, fire, and I'll guarantee that this will definitely puncture your jugular!' said Sirk decisively.

'And you would gamble on the lives of your friends?' replied PO in his usual menacing tone.

'I don't have to, but, will you gamble on yours? We've destroyed the Replicator, so this time you *will* die! And I'll have the greatest pleasure in spilling your claret!'

'And I'm supposed to believe that am I?' sneered

PO.

‘That’s up to you, but if you think about it, what were we doing while you were in the take off port?’ Looking straight ahead PO finally relinquished his hold on the Pulsar, and quickly grabbing it Sirk turned it on him and ordered him from the bubble.

‘I can’t move outside the bubble.’

‘Exactly! You catch on quick - I like that.’ replied Sirk menacingly, and let him know that in no uncertain terms would he redress the balance again!

‘Oh - and another thing... we ain’t eatin’ no more shit for breakfast!’ With great difficulty PO slid across the bubble, and on alighting from the bubble slumped heavily to the ground. Retrieving the remaining pulsar rifles and pistols from the bubble Sirk placed them on the ground.

Turning to face PO Sirk told him he was going to die now, very painfully! Before Sirk had a chance to fire a thin blue bolt hit PO right between the eyes, and he screamed momentarily as it slammed into his head, then in slow motion his body slid to one side, and lay precariously against the bubble where it fell! Putting him out of contention for eternity his body smoked profusely from the ferocity of the high voltage charge!

‘What the f--k!’ came a gasp of amazement from Sirk.

‘Hot shit! I made it work!’ said Raff proudly, then placed the gun on the ground.

‘Oh well, someone had to do it!’ said Sirk, and on reflection realized his little friend had more right to revenge than he did! Just in case it replicated for a few moments they stood watching his carcass, but

his it didn't move... well just once, with a dull thud it rolled over under it's own weight, and this time PO was very definitely - dead!

GENESIS REVISITED

As suggested by Kiska there was no other way but to burn PO's carcass where it lay, but to make the job easier Hepra suggested they should bury him in pieces, but as no one fancied the task of dismembering it he was the only volunteer. For obvious reasons the body would have to be disposed of quickly, and having been to the take off port it was Raff on his return who eventually poured kerosene over it he'd retrieved it one of the jets, then, in true ceremonial style he used Sirk's pistol to ignite it!

'F--k you, you fat shit bag!' he shouted as the high octane fuel took hold, 'your shit's more than hot now!'

'Not only that, but you f----n' stink!' added Kiska as the smell of burning flesh reached his nostrils. No one could resist laughing at that, and they did, fit to break their ribs!

'Just like that old November 5th... uh, Guy Fawkes night they had years ago.' said Sirk suddenly, '*That* has got to be biggest guy ever though!'

'What's going on honey,' came a familiar voice through Sirk's intercom.

'Sorry angel, we're just having a jamboree with PO!'

'*What?*' shouted Cita in disbelief.

'No, he's not, we are, he's dead! Raff's just set his body alight!'

'I'm glad I'm not there.' she replied, shuddering at the thought of all that burning flesh.

'You all ok up there?'

‘We’re alright, we were wondering what had happened to you.’

‘It’s a long story, I’ll tell you when I get back to the ship.’ Telling Arin where he was going he made his way back to the take off port, and approaching the Dart he vaulted up the walkway and made for the bridge.

‘I’m impressed!’ he told Cita walking to the console. ‘Why?’

‘You’re getting good at opening the hatch, your timing is impeccable.’

‘You cheeky bastard! What do you think I am - a Doorman?’

‘I hope not, if that’s the case I’ll have to divorce you - I’m not that way inclined!’

‘Arin!’ said Sirk, opening a channel to his brother.

‘Yes mate?’ he replied instantly.

‘I’m taking the women to the village, then I’ll come back for the rest of you, after that I’ll airlift the Men back as many as I can at a time, so tell them to make their way to the take off port.’

‘Ok Sirk, it’s done.’ replied Arin. With the women safely in their seats Sirk killed the mike, and took the Dart down to the crater where they would live until they decided their next move.

Several trips and an hour later and Sirk had everyone back in the village, with food being the “priority” item on everyone’s mind. Except for Hepra and Kiska one thought that had escaped everyone, and that was to light a fire! To make sure no one was missing Raff attempted to head count the Men, while Hamys had gone to the plantation to see what could be rescued from the ground, he

returned very excited at what he'd seen!

'Raff, there are many fruits and vegetables ready to eat, but we'll have to be quick or they'll perish!'

'That's good!' replied the little chief. 'We'll have to find a way of preserving them.'

'I think we can help there !' said professor Patenil.

'I saw several fridges up in the museum, one or two that might still be serviceable.'

'In that case all we need to do is get them down here.' said Sirk thinking ahead; using the Dart would make light work of it. The scene was now one of domesticity, as Cita and Mayan showed Taniche how to use the recon unit, the Men had gone to harvest their crops, while the womenfolk were busy cleaning their huts, and mending anything that needed a stitch or two. A few hours had gone by when Raff suddenly announced he had something to say, and satisfied everyone was present he started.

'I have realized that as PO was officially killed this morning our celebration when Sirk was here last time was maybe... slightly premature,' then pausing momentarily he looked around to see if anyone had guessed what he was about to say, but they merely looked on expectantly, 'it appears we'll have to have another celebration, to mark the second passing of our history's most notorious bastard! And... it will be tonight!'

Remembering the last party Sirk informed Arin and the others of what to expect after the cheering had died away, and wasn't so sure he wanted to party again - this soon! Then, what the Hell, you're only here once, and hangovers don't last forever! Apart from that he realised it had been almost two

years since the last one, and few light years! Hurriedly building another fire it was duly lit, as pots and pans were filled with peeled vegetables they were garnished with freshly picked herbs, fruit was baked into pies and tarts as Cita showed the village women how to prepare sweet pastry. As parties go it was a raging success, the Men gorged themselves and drank far in excess than was good for them, but shit, it wasn't every day you rid the world of the Powerful One! Once again the sound of music filled the air, as the Bagg musician made his entrance. Humour made its appearance as the Men stuffed their clothes with leftover vegetables, as Hepra and Kiska set about another impersonation of PO, and wobbled around until they lost their balance, on purpose, then moving sluggishly along the ground they emulated PO out of his bubble as their audience rolled around in hysterics!

'I'm too fat to move - and too fat to live!' cried Hepra.

'Well... if you're too fat to move, you can't get to the food, so that means you can't eat,' said Kiska placing an old stethoscope on Hepra's chest, 'I detect no signs of life in there... no, I'm afraid I'll have to pronounce you dead PO!' Then without warning there was an almighty bang from the outskirts of the village, and turning with fright to see what it was, they heard something whistle its way skyward, then as they looked skyward a million colours suddenly cascaded above the village. Looking on in horror they suddenly saw Sirk's grinning face, and with that the Men rapidly put a grin on their own faces, after all, they couldn't let

their hero see that they'd lost their cool.

'Where in Hell's name did you find those?' asked John as Sirk returned laughing into the light of the fire.

'I found them in the museum a while back, so when Raff Announced the party just now I thought it might be good entertainment.'

'For a few seconds it scared the living daylight out of me I can tell you!' replied John returning to a jocular mood, as Mayan ushered a loudly protesting Odin and John Junior all the way to their bedrooms.

'Sirk, that song he's playing, it sounds somewhat familiar?' asked the professor.

'Yes so do I, but it goes much further back than the twentieth century... no one really knows how old it is.'

'It's called "Auld lang syne",' cut in John, my ancestors were from Scotland!' There was no stopping them, now in full swing drinks were poured liberally in all directions, *and no one* was allowed an empty glass! It amazed Sirk to see how well the professor was keeping up, and didn't appear to affect him much for someone of his age, but Sirk inwardly admitted even *he* was feeling more than a little woozy!

'I'm pissed again!' said Hepra sitting beside Sirk. 'I like pissed... I think I'll find out how to make this shtuff!' Then appearing from nowhere Raff sat heavily alongside Hepra.

'Thish ish really the shtart of a new beginning Shirk, dontchoo agree?'

'I couldn't agree more.' he replied, 'I guess you could say it's Genesis revisited.'

‘Hotch shit!’ said Raff, his speech getting more slurred by the minute. ‘Yessh, that’s it - Geneshish revisheratated!’

Shielding his eyes from the morning sun Kiska made his way to the fire, and his mind carried one thought - food! At least, that’s what he told himself, but after four mouthfuls of cold vegetable stew he threw the lot up over a totally unaware Hepra, who in turn proceeded to give him a bloody good hiding. Woken by the commotion, another of the Men came out to calm things down, and - got embroiled in the fight. Pinning Kiska to the floor Hepra continually punched him until he considered he’d had enough, while the poor little sod screamed in agony! Then letting him go Hepra realized it wasn’t his punches that Kiska was screaming at, but the fact that Hepra had pinned him down over the embers of the village fire! Although the hot ashes had done some damage to his clothes, it wasn’t serious, and Kiska was very relieved that it was only his pride that was dented, and burnt! Everyone watched as Kiska walked to his hut with two very red cheeks - on his ass!

‘De-ja vu!’ said Sirk quietly as he left for an early morning stroll. Having had a rude awakening life stirred very slowly that morning, small wonder! Having been up for more than an hour Sirk walked around the village, and just for fun counted the empty whisky bottles on the ground, and by the time he’d gone full circle he’d counted no less than two hundred and thirty six! A night to remember!

By midday most had recovered, or as good as, and Sirk grinned as he realized that where the Men were concerned, you couldn’t tell if their eyes were

bloodshot! Although he considered they had a slight advantage as his own eyes were considerably vein threaded! Although he was lucky inasmuch as he had Cita to cook him a breakfast; which always stood him in good stead.

CIVILISATION

Sitting around the fire with Arin, John, and the professor, Sirk wanted to discuss their future, and the prerequisites for a more civilized and secure life for them all. Also joining them were Raff, Kiska, and Hepra, and knowing the professor's extensive knowledge would be invaluable, their agenda covered housing, food sources, and how to sustain and guarantee future crop growth.

'To kick off,' started Sirk, 'I think it would be a good idea to look at different ways to build us stronger dwellings, anyone want to elaborate on that?'

'I think we should take another look in the museum,' advised John, 'we'll probably find tools, plans, equipment and anything else that's likely to help us.'

'Good idea John,' said Arin, 'we should also look at power sources, sewage and water supply.'

'Sewage!' echoed the professor suddenly. 'Yes... a very good point, we don't want to make the same mistakes they made in the twentieth century, I propose we look for information on alternative living from the twentieth century, as some of our ancestors had some very smart ideas... we could use them to great effect.'

'I think we're putting the cart before the horse,' said John in contention, 'wouldn't it be better to find a better spot to live first, then decide what we're going to build.'

'Good point John,' said Sirk, 'we can't stay here in the wet season can we?'

‘No, definitely not,’ replied Raff with certainty, ‘every wet season we have to move to the caves, if we stayed here we would perish!’

‘Ok, I think we’d best adjourn this meeting and look for a suitable site, everyone happy with that?’ said Sirk to round things off; everyone agreed. ‘Right, we strike out tomorrow.’

That afternoon they took it easy, the only work done was when Sirk and the professor paid Raff a visit to discuss the final details of their expedition. When all loose ends had been tied Raff suddenly produced a bottle of the amber nectar left over from the previous evening.

‘F---n‘ Hell,’ said Sirk staring at the unopened bottle, ‘don’t you ever stop?’

‘Hot shit! I knew you’d be pleased.’ replied Raff grinning. As the three of them took lengthy swigs from their glasses Sirk had to admit, it did feel *good!*

‘You know Sirk,’ said the professor suddenly, ‘I’ve given some thought to your question... you asked me how our good friend Raff and his people survived the missiles - and the tidal wave.’

‘Yes I still haven’t figured that out,’ replied Sirk, ‘tell me all about it prof..’

‘I think what happened was... as you remember, the UWF activated the Depol as soon as they’d heard the Cathan missiles had launched. Well... the impact from the two missiles would have been considerable, and I think... that as both blasts were simultaneous it lifted the earth between the blasts at the same time as the craters were formed, and I think the Men’s ancestors were on that piece of land when

it happened, they were if you like, lifted above the tidal wave if you see what I mean. That is why they survived, and that is also why today we see that incredible mountain and the valley in between the craters, and you have to admit, it does separate them. So that is why they're alive today, but regrettably they have suffered from the effects of radiation.'

'The tidal wave presumably being caused by the Depol.' said Sirk, pre-empting the professor.

'Partly,' replied the prof. pensively, 'although the Cathan missiles would have had a lot to do with it as well, you could say it was a joint effort!'

'What sort of luck is that, good or bad? Although if you put it in context, the Men don't know any different, so I guess they're happy the way they are.' replied Arin pensively.

'I suppose so,' agreed the professor, 'did you by any chance notice the state of the polar caps when you first landed here Sirk?'

'No, 'fraid not,' said Sirk, 'the Dart was out of control, I didn't have time... besides, I came in on a westerly course, why do to ask?'

'Since we are roughly now where Spain should be,' explained the professor, 'that also means both polar caps have moved, so it could just be, we'll find a better climate and greener pastures by flying north.' Agreeing with the professor Sirk then declared he was hungry, and added that he was certain he heard Cita mention food. In their final conclusion Sirk, Raff, and the professor agreed that whisky in large doses definitely increases the appetite!

A considerable amount of food was consumed that evening, accompanied by, more whisky! However, all good things

must come to an end, and by ten o'clock most of them were ready to hit the sack, and Raff reminded Sirk that that is what he should do! It was done.

Dawn saw a glorious sunrise with a crystal clear sky, so having breakfasted those involved with the expedition took a dip in the river. Boarding the Dart for more northerly parts they left John and the professor with the women in the village, while Arin joined Sirk, Raff, Kiska and Hepra. Ascending vertically the ship from view, then swinging her onto a knew compass bearing Sirk headed north to start their quest for lands anew.

'Sirk, can you put up an old map, one that existed before they used the Depol?'

'Yeah, no problem, it'll be on the computer banks... what do you want it for Arin?'

'If we can determine where the North pole used to be, then we should be able to calculate the amount of rotation the planet suffered.'

'Oh, I get it, then, determine where the new pole is.' Putting a map from the ships computer on the holograph, Sirk took a compass reading and their present position, then logging it to the computer flew due north. A few minutes later they hovered over Glasgow's original location.

'We've travelled nearly two thousand miles mate!'

'In that case the new North pole must be almost in the Barents sea, which means that that area probably looks like it used to in the last ice age, Russia, and the US, joined together permanently.'

'Christ! In that case where in Hell is the South pole?'

'I would take an educated guess that it's further into the south Pacific, close to New Zealand?'

'So the planet hasn't rotated that far then?' asked Sirk..

'No, it's better than I expected.' replied Arin.

'Is it possible, we could rotate it back to its original position?'

'The Depol is still in orbit,' replied Sirk, then having given

it some thought, 'there again I think not, if we did that it would mean more tidal waves, and us living up here in the ship for a few years, 'til everything settles down again, no... let things stay as they are, I think.'

'Yeah, you're right bruv.' agreed Arin seeing the logic in his brother's reasoning. Looking for a suitable site for the remainder of their time on the planet the Dart flew off, it would have to be a safe place in order to bring up their young ones, and teach them the right way to do things, no more environmental cock-ups, no more wars, common sense would prevail in this world. A tract of land suddenly appeared on the holograph that shouldn't have been there, and unable to find it on the map Sirk wondered what had happened to this part of the world, had there been an earthquake since the Depol? If so, had it pushed up another continent? It was to say the least a very large area with no visible horizons.

'Wait a minute,' said Arin suddenly, 'this isn't the result of an earthquake or anything like it... what we're looking at is the polar cap with out the icing! Don't you see? Now its further south the rise in temperature has melted what was left of the old ice cap... that is of course after the Depol had done its damage!'

'Holy shit! Yes, I see what you mean bruv.' Taking the Dart down for a closer look it was mostly forestation, although there were a few glades and clearings in evidence the trees were surprisingly dense.

'This would be ideal!' declared Arin.

'On the face of it I would tend to agree with you, let's take a closer look before we make our minds up.'

Taking the Dart into a particularly large clearing he powered down the ship, then he, Arin, and Raff went aft to the armoury, and selecting three weapons Sirk handed one each to the other two. Opening the hatch with the remote they watched the liquid escalator stabilise, and descending cautiously to ground level they held their

weapons at waist level in the unlikely event they might come under attack, but the only thing that attacked them was a deathly silence. Nothing moved, squawked, or roared, not even a squeak! Back on board they were soon airborne again, then flying in ever increasing circles they checked out the possibilities. Further west a large tract of open land on a gentle incline came into view, and just west of that was a moderate sized waterfall, which was certainly large enough to power a generator. Bringing the Dart in on levit Sirk switched the exterior cameras on to take a closer look.

'What do you think, will that suit our requirements?'

'It looks shit hot to me!' declared Raff, making Sirk and Arin laugh, but finding them such a prestigious place to live he thought of the honour it would bring him.

'Yeah, I reckon you've just about hit the nail on the head!' added Arin looking around at the spectacular beauty of the spot they might soon call home.

'You wanna know something?'

'What's that?'¹ asked Arin.

'We've got a logistical nightmare in front of us now.'

'How come?'

'We've got to get all of us, the Men, their families, their belongings, and the kitchen sink up here!'

'Shit!' I hadn't thought of that, how the f--k are we gonna do that?'

'I don't know, but we'll have to think of something.' With that Sirk took the Dart off levit, then putting her on course for the village he flew south again. Sitting around the fire with the villagers that evening they discussed what they'd seen that day, and that in their opinion it was a safe bet for a future home. Later that evening Sirk and the professor talked at great length on their pending logistical problem, and one they would face in the very near future.

'Again, I think the answer lies in the museum.'¹ came Professor Patenil's final offering for the evening.

'That's not a bad idea prof., I certainly can't think of a better

one, anyhow, I reckon it's time for touch of shut eye.' Tomorrow would be another day of logistical thinking, and apart from that Sirk had had enough; he was knackered! The inhabitants of the village slept peacefully that night, and with no more Powerful One to make their lives Hell were sure they would for the rest of their lives, which would allow the Men to build for the future, and they had their friend Sirk to help them.

Another blue sky, another hot day, however, this morning was different, this one would herald a new beginning. Breakfast had been consumed at a leisurely pace, as everyone talked about the task ahead and the prospect of a new life in a more green and verdant land. Talking about the trip to the museum, Sirk, Arin, and the professor were looking to seek out building materials, and the logistics of moving it to their new land, but all agreed it would be prudent to see what the museum had to offer.

'We can use the cargo bay in the Dart, it's quite large.' said Arin.

'Yes, but I think we will require far more space than that,' replied the professor, 'I think we should go to the museum first, and see if it has any transport exhibits we could use to our advantage'

'Ok,' cut in Sirk, 'let's get Raff and the others up there now, we might have to improvise but we'll get there if we stick at it!' Joining them on the Dart, John, Raff, Hepra, and Kiska, just made it at the last minute.

'Come on ya lazy gits!' shouted Sirk over the public address watching them run to the walkway. 'Move those legs!' 'Sorry lads, domestic problems, all ok now!' said John, excusing his lateness. With the hatch closed the Dart lifted into the air, and a few seconds later touched down on the take-off port. Walking to the Buildings exhibition hall the museum seemed somewhat eerie, but surprisingly found it far bigger than the others.

'I don't know who the archivist was for this place, but he was

very diligent his work,' commented the professor, 'but someone else must have continued this work long after his lifetime, I would say he trained his apprentices well, this was a labour of love if ever I saw one... there's so much here, covering every facet of society, over so many centuries!' They'd rummaged around for over an hour, when suddenly John called from a doorway on the other side of the hall.

'Hey, come and have a look at this!' Being the first to arrive Sirk and Arin saw something that nearly took their breath away.

'What did you say about the archivist's labour of love?' asked Sirk, as the professor finally joined them.

'Good God! That's exactly what we're looking for.' replied Professor Patenil. Staring them in the face was a large domed building, one that would certainly house some of them, but they would have to find alternative buildings for the others.

'The question is,' mused Sirk, 'how do we decide who lives in this - and who doesn't?'

'Why don't we replicate it!' added Arin suddenly.

'Regrettably I destroyed it if you remember, along with PO.'

'Or did you,' cut in professor Patenil, 'if he replicated himself, I wouldn't mind betting he also replicated the Replicator - as well as his computer!'

'No wonder they call you a genius prof.' said John dryly.

'Oh, so you recognise the fact at last?' asked the professor in retaliation.

'Well as we seem to have many genii among us, perhaps one of you would like to decide when we're gonna start work!' cut in Sirk, also dryly, and taken aback it wasn't 'til they saw that familiar faint smirk at the corner of his mouth they realized he was joking.

'I think Sirk and I should go and look for the replicated Replicator!' suggested Arin.

'Yeah ok,' agreed Sirk, 'but first we've gotta find the

paperwork relating to this building.'

'There must be a reference to it here somewhere, let's have a look on the shelves, John, see if you and the prof. can find a file on it.' suggested Arin, and scouring the shelves for a full hour they searched for anything that might give them a clue as to how this building could be dismantled, but it was the professor who first to hit pay dirt.

'Come and have a look at this!' said the professor. Taking the file from the professor John found it contained advertising pamphlets from the nineteen eighties.

'Look at it, this is incredible, they were way ahead of their time!' declared Professor Patenil.

'A bit out of my league,' confessed John, 'so I'll have to take your word for it.'

'What I'm talking about is their construction methods, why didn't they all live in buildings like this?'

'You tell me prof.' replied John, as Sirk and Arin returned from their expedition.

'Any luck?' asked the professor.

'No, I think we were running up a blind alley!' said Sirk mentally reassessing their situation.

'How about you guys, found anything yet?'

'Yes, well almost, ' replied John, 'the prof's found some papers relating to this dome, but we can't read the manufacturers plate on the structure... it's suffered damage at some time.'

'Let's have a look.' asked Arin being a well travelled man, 'I reckon it could be... uh... Monterrey?'

'Oh shit, yeah, I hadn't thought of that.' replied John sheepishly.

'One genius less among us!' said the prof, just loud enough to be heard.

'I can see I'm gonna have to watch you - *Mr* Patenil,' returned Arin, quick as a flash. 'So you had no luck... finding the Replicator?'

'No, we looked everywhere, but... nothing, bugger all!'

replied Sirk feeling dejected.

'Did you look in the control room?' asked the professor.

'It wouldn't be in there surely!' replied Sirk.

'Why not? It would have been a safe place as far as PO was concerned, and would afford him good access whenever he needed it.' Accepting the professors reasoning Sirk and Arin left again to search for the elusive equipment. After they'd gone the others continued their search for more history on the domed structure. In case Sirk and Arin had no luck finding the Replicator it was imperative they find out how to dismantle it, especially if they were to transport it to the land they'd chosen as their new home. Twenty minutes later John got lucky, and had found a full set of instructions on building and dismantling the dome. Taking a thorough look through them Professor Patenil remained undisturbed for over fifteen minutes, they were learning!

'This company were way ahead of their time, this concept has been very well thought out, and it'll be a definite bonus in the wet season, yes, we can use this!'

'Why the wet season especially prof.?' asked John.

'Wind! Being dome shaped they'll be extremely wind resistant, and that means there's little chance of them being damaged or blown away!' replied the professor

'And here's some more good news.' said Sirk as he and Arin appeared in the doorway, 'you were right prof, we had to tear the place apart to find it, PO was a wily bastard to say the least, but on this occasion he did us a very big favour!'

'So I've been looking for these instructions for nothing!' said John slightly annoyed.

'On the contrary mate, although we can now replicate it we'll still need the instructions, as we'll have to replicate the components rather than the complete building, but we can now make as many copies as we like!'

'Ah, one thing springs to mind,' said Arin suddenly, 'what

are we going to do about the base that's required on which they stand.'

'Then we'll replicate them as well!' said the professor with a great deal of authority.

'Hoping to regain the status of genius again prof.?' said John rekindling the earlier banter.

'I don't have to John... you see - I never lost it!' replied the professor making them laugh. The day was passing rapidly so Sirk suggested they get cracking as they still had to find a way of getting the Men and their families to their new found home. Looking at the shopping list their next item was to find a source of power for their new homes. Suddenly Sirk realised they had none of the necessary equipment to wire up these dwellings, plus, they certainly hadn't seen any electro-radio installations from his own time. The professor came to the rescue once again.

'We can replicate the one on the dart, they'll do exactly the same job.'

'What including the receptors?'

'Yes, why not, after all being a radio signal voltage and amperage won't affect it.' replied the professor in his usual knowledgeable way. It was late in the afternoon when Sirk suggested they call it a day, and all were glad to head back to the village. As the Dart arrive Cita cheered up considerably, it would be nice to have the company of the man she loved again, although she accepted readily having to do what was necessary for their survival she couldn't help feeling lonely while Sirk was away. The evening however *more* than made up for it, but exhaustion finally forced them to succumb to that most precious of pastimes - sleep!

SUNDAY AFTERNOON JAUNT

The following morning everyone was up early; Sirk made sure of it! Working his way around the village he proceeded to waken the inhabitants by banging a stick on the side of every hut until he heard verbal's from within, then went about disturbing the slumbers of the occupants in the next hut! Breakfast was a surly affair, as everyone it seemed was complaining about the new alarm clock! Smiling inwardly he listened to moans from every quarter, and following up Sirk's good work Raff hadn't missed much, as with much venom he followed on behind for the benefit of those who were a little hard of hearing! Eight thirty saw the same crew board the Dart and head for the museum in search of a vehicle to transport the Men to their new destination, and the first to arrive at the aerospace hall was Prof. Patenil, who was as keen as mustard to see what it was all about. Staggered by the sheer size of the place, and the number of quality exhibits it contained, his eyes resembled organ stops gyrating in their own axes as he ogled biplanes from the early nineteen hundreds; to the Terra-fighters from his own time. 'I've never seen anything like this!' he said eventually, and found it almost impossible to take it all in at one sitting! 'It's stupendous, bloody stupendous!' 'Now you know how I felt when I saw it for the first time!' replied Sirk walking toward the top of the hall. 'There are also six off-shoots from this hall, three on either side, all given to aerospace history!' Following Sirk, Raff took Hepra and Kiska with him. 'We'll search in here Sirk.' said Raff proudly, as he took charge of his little party. 'Here, take this Raff,' said Sirk handing his little friend a pulsar pistol, 'just in case!' 'Shit hot shit!' said Raff, exploding with excitement, and was cock-a-hoop that Sirk had trusted him with a Pulsar, and was

something that would make him a legend among his people! Things were quiet for hours, no one found anything, and no one said anything. Then as midday approached Professor Patenil heard voices shrieking with laughter in one of the anti-rooms, and it was clear that Raff, Hepra, and Kiska were up to something that obviously amused them. Standing alongside the professor, Sirk, Arin, and John wondered what all the commotion was about, then without hesitation walked in the direction of their noise. On entering the hall, Raff, Hepra, and Kiska were engaged in acrobatics on a kiddies bouncy castle from the twentieth century, that had erroneously found its way into the wrong department, well, nothings perfect!

'Do you intend using that to get you and your people to our new home?' asked Sirk, smiling broadly.

'Hot shit! This is fantastic Sirk, come and join us!' demanded Kiska, but having more pressing problems at hand he declined, plus, as yet they were nowhere near solving them, and his chrono reminded him that the time had passed noon!

Turning to follow the others back to the main hall Sirk spotted a number of large sheets behind the Men, it wasn't the sheets themselves that intrigued him, but the sheer size of them.

'Hang on lads, I'd like to take a look at these, I'm curious as to what they are.'

'Just a load of f---n' old dust sheets, what do you want with those?' asked John, but Raff, now also curious about the sheets joined Sirk, and this being more relevant the bouncy castle had suddenly become obsolete! On approaching the sheets it became immediately apparent, they hadn't just been draped over whatever exhibit lay under them, but had ropes attached through eyes sewn into the material. Pulling back a corner of the sheet revealed a cylinder of massive proportions, with a porthole window next to a door, but before he was able to investigate further the dust they'd

disturbed hit Hepra's nostrils which caused him a violent sneezing bout, and following suit a few seconds later Raff and Kiska gave rise to much laughter with Sirk and the others. 'Shhh! Quiet!' shouted the professor, trying to calm them down, 'listen... I think I know what this thing is!'

'What is it then prof.?' asked Sirk, his brow furrowed with curiosity.

'The answer to our problem... I think! Have you ever heard of the Graf Zeppelin?'

'What the f--k is that?' asked John, completely mystified by this seemingly unpronounceable name.

'It was an airship, I think from around nineteen hundred or so, from what I can remember, it was a German machine that was used for the transportation of people and cargo. As I remember from my school days they were hydrogen filled which gave them incredible buoyancy, and were powered by a piston engine - a radial type I think - to propel it forward.'

'So what you mean is, if we can get it going, we could use it to take the Men to the new land!' said Arin catching on quickly.

'There's only one thing,' cut in Sirk, 'how do we get a thing this size out of the building?'

'The same way they got it in!' replied the professor, and waited to see if anyone else was quick on the uptake, but silence ensued for nearly thirty seconds, but they were all stumped by this one - including Sirk!

'We could float it out... by inflating the balloon!' said Raff suddenly.

'Well, it looks to me like you've beaten all the so-called brains to it Raff!' replied the professor dryly, and promptly put Raff into orbit! Fancy that, out-thinking his hero! Grinning at the tenacity of this little man they stood in awe at his incredible speed of thought.

'Well, we're gonna have to brush up lads. Raff caught the lot of us out that time!' declared Sirk.

'Not so!' said John, eager to regain some "street cred", 'how do we get it through the door?'

'Knock the f—n' thing down!' replied Raff instantly, and now everyone laughed at John's expense. At first feeling slightly offended a he saw the funny side and joined in the laughter; his philosophy being, if you can't laugh at yourself you can't laugh at anyone else! Plundering the building section for implements of destruction they came across a number of sledge hammers, the job would take some time using those, but with everyone involved they would at least get it done that day. However, John would have his revenge, and realising he'd been absent for some time Sirk suddenly heard a deafening noise from the other end of the hall, and as the noise got nearer and louder suddenly an old JCB circa twentieth century roared towards them with John's face beaming from the cabin.

'Out the soddin' way all you geni! Let someone with brains get in there!' he shouted over the din from the diesel engine. In less half an hour there was a gap big enough to get a partly inflated balloon through., and it was time to look for the gas!

'We have got some, haven't we?' asked Sirk sheepishly.

'I thought you'd checked that out.' replied Arin.

'I thought you'd done it!' countered Sirk. 'Anyone know if there's any hydrogen cylinders around here?'

'Uh no, I'm afraid I don't.' replied John, as everyone looked in one direction.

'Don't look at me! I can't think of everything... I don't know if there are any either!' answered the professor bluntly. Standing around looking glum it was predictably quiet as the party pondered their current predicament!

'What do these cylinders look like?' asked Hepra.

'A bit like those under the balloon, only a lot smaller, about this big.' answered the professor holding his hand three feet

from the ground.

'I know where there are some of those!' declared Hepra proudly.

'Lead us to them!' said Sirk urgently, and allowing his little friend access to the gangway Hepra led them to the Science Hall, where to their delight they found nearly eighty cylinders stacked against a wall; most of them unused! Picking up a cylinder in each hand, everyone started back to the aerospace hall.

'Where d'you think you're all going?' called out Sirk suddenly as everyone looked at him incredulously. 'Why not let John get the JCB, then you can stack the cylinders on one of those pallets over there!' Suddenly it was the others turn to look sheepish.

'I'll fetch it!' called John, who was keen to get out quickly and save some face. Reappearing a few minutes later, and driving the noisy "infernal" combustion engined JCB as fast as he could, he pulled up sharply scattering everyone before him!

'Come on then, let's get this lot loaded!' he said emphatically as the others eagerly loaded as many cylinders as possible onto the ancient wooden pallet. The loading finished John jumped into the cab, and raising the forks clear from the ground he swung it around to return to the take off port. Unfortunately not having had instruction on forklift driving he not only hit a stanchion, but he also didn't know about tilting the load, so the whole lot ended back on the floor and the JCB suffered a large dent!

'I reckon we put too much on,' announced Sirk obviously, and seeing the dent in the bodywork, 'also - I don't think that forklift is new anymore!' They laughed loudly as the last cylinder clattered noisily against the wheel of an old bi-plane across the gangway.

'Wait a minute, look!' shouted Hepra suddenly. Looking in the direction he was pointing a few yards away stood six metal crates, 'If we load the cylinders into those, we

could do the job in half the time!

'Nice one Hepra,' said Arm, 'another victory for the Men?' Ten minutes later and all six crates were loaded, and jumping on the JCB John ferried them to the aerospace hall - without further mishap. Half an hour later John and Arin looked at each other in dismay, and having discharged the last cylinder the dirigible had barely inflated!

'Looks like we're knackered!' declared Arin looking at Sirk, and hoping he'd come up with a solution.

'No good looking at me bruv, I'm brain dead too!' he told Arin then turned to the professor.

'I don't know what we can do now, outside of making the damn stuff!' said the prof. dejectedly.

'Wait a minute! Just suppose we could find the raw materials to make it?' blurted out Sirk suddenly, 'the Science Hall - surely we should find it in there? If the curator was as meticulous as he supposedly was, we ought to find both chemicals and equipment!'

'Let's not waist any time, come on, let's take a look at least!' said Arin urging them on. Taking off at break-neck speed they ran all the way, with Raff, Hepra, and Kiska trailing sadly on their stumpy little legs they were no match for Sirk and the others.

'A first for these "Men" I think!' said John triumphantly watching their breathless arrival.

'We let you win!' retorted Raff, grinning broadly as he walked in. The next two hours were spent searching the Science Hall from top to bottom, inside out and upside down, but it was fruitless! Nothing remotely resembling equipment or raw materials presented themselves to the search party. Totally exasperated Sirk sat on an old box wondering what they could do next.

'Hang on a minute, I think we're searching in the wrong place.' said Professor Patenil suddenly, 'we should be looking in the Industrial hall!'

'Nice one prof!' shouted Arin, and already on his feet Sirk went Hell for leather down the hall with the others not far behind; again the Men were left trailing. As John and Arin arrived close behind Sirk, puffing profusely the professor followed in a few seconds later .

'Did you let us win this time?' laughed John, as once more the Men arrived out of breath.

'We're using tactics!' declared Kiska, bending double to catch his breath. Laughing at his sense of humour everyone knew when he got going Kiska was nothing short of hilarious. Another search started, another two hours spent, and still nothing presented it self! Declaring their search useless and time consuming Sirk realized they'd have to find some other way of transporting the Men and their families to the new land. Jumping up suddenly and waving his stumpy little arms in the air Raff had them thinking he'd lost the plot, so calming him down Sirk asked why he'd got so hot under the collar.

'The Annexe!' he shouted, 'there's an Annexe at the top of the hall, quite a big one, I remember Tim telling me about it some years ago!'

'Ok,' said Sirk resignedly, let's take a look.' After their last two attempts at running an indoor marathon no one ran this time as they were very close to being shattered.

'Raff was spot on, it's there alright!' shouted Arin as the others quickly followed him through.

'This is it!' declared the professor, look, straight ahead, *that* is an industrial hydrogen plant!'

'f---n' brilliant!' declared Sirk running again, and getting there first John looked at the plant as if it was some kind of God..

'So, now we can *really* get cracking!'

'I'm afraid not John,' cut in the professor, 'the plant is fine... but there are no raw materials!' At his wits end and very frustrated Sirk picked up a steel bolt from a pile on the floor and hurled it at one of the pressure vessels, and

making contact with the huge vertical sausage it sounded like a church bell sounding, and almost deafened them as it echoed around the building for almost half a minute. Picking up a bolt apiece and keen to emulate their hero once again, the Men did likewise. The resultant noise almost blew their eardrums!

'We'll have to call it a day now,' declared Sirk, 'we've been at it far too long - and I'm hungry!' No one argued the toss on that one; appetites won hands down. Taking a short cut through the Transport hall, Hepra had a brainwave, which reminded Sirk how resourceful the Men could be.

'Why can't we use that?' he asked, pointing at a Magnetran from Sirk's own time.

'Nice thought Hepra,' answered Sirk regretfully, 'there's only one thing wrong.'

'What's that?' asked Arin, curious as to why it was unusable.

'Those things need a core magnet to drive them, and... we don't have one!'

'Oh yes we do!' chipped in the professor quickly, 'and we're heading for it right now!'

'How do mean prof?' asked Sirk, his brow furrowed like a well ploughed field.

'The Diamond Dart! It drives the onboard gravity, and it produces enough power to drive two of those things!'

replied the professor pointing in the direction of the Magnetran

'So we can tow it?' asked John, as his eyebrows touched his hairline.

'Wherever the Dart goes, the Magnetran will follow!' answered the professor knowledgeably.

'Let's get some grub!' said Sirk smiling. In a few seconds they'd covered the thirty five miles to the village that Sirk and the Men had taken three nights to cover; three nights that none of them would forget for a long time! The aroma of hot food had them hurrying to the centre of the village, and as they sat around the large camp fire the women

dished up plates of hot stew for everyone.

A NEW ADDITION

Despite their diminutive size, Raff, Kiska, and Hepra had enormous appetites, and after two helpings of stew they rolled on their backs holding their respective stomachs. Considering the possibility they might burst Sirk also feared they might even end up looking like PO, but should that happen he also knew they would never have to stuff their clothes with vegetables to emulate him again, as that would spoil the fun!

'That's why you can't run as fast as us!' quipped John.

'Not true!' replied Kiska. 'We're merely building up a *gigantic* store of energy, so the next time we run against you, we'll give you a sound f---n¹ thrashing!' Everyone laughed as Sirk conjured up a cartoon image of the event, and imagined their little legs rotating at fifty thousand revs a minute to just overtake them had tears rolling down his cheeks!

'I'm slightly preppers!' she announced out of the blue. With an inane grin on his face Sirk sat mute for a few seconds, and gave her the impression he hadn't heard right. 'How... slightly? Definitely slightly, or probably slightly?'

'Definitely slightly!' said Cita, smirking.

'You mean, as in having a baby - preppers!' he asked quietly, 'like, after nine months you get a huge lump type preppers, that suddenly disappears?'

'I think you've got the idea.' replied Cita. Standing up he looked straight ahead and turned to face the Men.

'Christ - I'm gonna be a dad!' shouted Sirk, and suddenly everyone wore an expression of total disbelief.

'Well... congrats!' said Arin, the first to express his delight at the good news.

'Here here!' shouted John, and echoed by the professor. Headed by Raff The Men cheered wildly at the news their hero had joined them in regeneration.

'This calls for a celebration!' declared Raff.

'Oh no!' said Sirk quietly, 'not a-f----n' 'gain?'

'What d'you mean?' asked John hearing Sirk's remark.

'Remember the last one?' asked Sirk with woe written over his face.

'It was that bad!' replied John recalling the PO celebration.

'No... it was that good!' replied Sirk grinning.

Wondering what would happen next they didn't have long to Wait as Hepra reappeared from his hut with a case of whisky, and was followed hot-foot by Kiska and Raff who were similarly laden. It became suddenly obvious that half the occupants of the village were intent on getting as pissed as they possibly could, as they *all* brought out case after case and dropped them right in front of Sirk and Cita.

'Oh shit! I'm beginning to see what you mean.' said John warily. 'Christ, they've got enough to sink the navy here, where did it come from?'

'It was in the museum originally, their ancestors told them it should be brought down on the understanding it would only be opened when the 'Powerful One had been destroyed.'

'And as *that* celebration has already taken place...' replied Arin letting his voice trail. Sirk grinned at him.

'Ah! I see.' replied Arin, but added nothing further. Before they knew it, mugs of all description were plied around the camp, and the first two were for Sirk and Cita.

'I don't think I'd better have any.' said Cita, thinking of her unborn infant.

'Will one drink hurt?' asked Sirk and looked slightly worried, in case Raff took offence at a refusal.

'I suppose not, as it's very early stages.'

'If you feel you'd rather not-

'No it'll be fine - honest.' said Cita interrupting Sirk., but making her drink last most of the evening seemed to satisfy everyone, but Sirk, Arin, John, and even the professor were putting away more than their fair share, needless to say

Raff, Kiska, Hepra, and most of Men were by this time well inebriated, and beginning to wobble.

'Ash thish ish alsho our lasht night in our old home... I think Bagg mushic ish called for!' declared Raff suddenly, his voice now slurred from over indulgence. Leaning toward Arin, Sirk explained in a low voice how playing the bagpipes had evolved, and, gave him firm instructions not to laugh when observing the size of the pipes in relation to the player, and also suggested he inform the others - rapidly. Out they came in all their splendour, but Sirk had to admit that despite the amount of drink they'd had, the pipers playing had improved somewhat, they'd obviously been practicing!

'The piper is excellent Raff.' he said, leaning over to pay his compliment.

'Tankyou Shirk, yesh, I apologishe for the lasht effortsh you were shubjected choo,' replied Raff with pride in his voice, 'Hepra found shome old mushic sheets, so we shtudied them for a long time, and... the piper eventually grashped how to read them.'

'You don't need to apologise Raff, from what I know those things are very difficult to play, I think old music is brilliant, especially when you've been subjected to that f---n' crap we had to listen to!'

'What the f-k wash that?' asked Raff, curious at Sirk's outburst, who then attempted to explain to Raff the sound of Tone music, but as Sirk finished his appraisal Raff's face was one of total bewilderment.

'Shounds like a load of cold shit choo me!' replied Raff, raising an eyebrow.

"Hot shit! quipped Sirk quickly. They laughed 'til their ribs ached, and Sirk realised Raff had had far more whisky than was good for him! No sooner had the thought entered his mind, than Raff slid gently sideways from his little seat, and ended up face down on the ground with a happy grin on his face. Picking him up Kiska and Hepra ceremoniously

carried their respected leader to his hut, where Sheel laid him on his bed.

'Time to hit the f---n' shack! Hot shhit!' he said drunkenly, then passed quickly into oblivion.

'I think it's time we did likewise.' said Cita, and looking at his chrono Sirk's thoughts drifted to their monumental task the following day. Saying goodnight to all and sundry they walked to their hut, and on the way Sirk realized he was also suffering from inebriated pedestrian mis-management.

'You're not much better than Raff.' commented Cita reaching the door of their hut.

'That stuffs incredible, I think I've had too much!' said Sirk drunkenly.

'Is that an understatement or what?' added Cita as he made for the bed.

No sooner had his head hit the crude pillow than he was gone, and Cita lay thinking for a while about how they'd ended up on Earth over one hundred thousand years in the future, and realised that if she thought about it long enough she'd probably frighten herself to death! Anyhow, she had Sirk, and now that they were going to be a family she would have all she ever wanted in life. So concluding that she *was* fairly happy, she drifted off.

At sun-up the hardier villagers had already dragged themselves back to reality, and looking much the worse for wear were unhappily going about their various chores, whilst dodging several "pavement pizza's" as they went! Following Cita out of their hut Sirk's head thumped like a jack-hammer.

'Serves you right you f---n' lush!' she taunted him.

'If you're not careful I'll put you over my shoulder, take you down to the river, and give you a f---n' good soakin'!

'You and who's army?' she said over her shoulder as a direct challenge. The lack of a reply didn't register with her and didn't hear him come from behind, then suddenly finding herself over his shoulder realised she was rapidly

approaching the river.

'Now, what was that you said?' he teased her.

'Nothing, I didn't say a word!' she pleaded, and laughed 'til tears ran down her face, whilst praying he would spare her a dowsing, 'I didn't mean it honestly, you're not going to throw me in are you?'

'No, I'm not, I've got to take care of you now our little chap's on the way, think yourself lucky you're in that condition my good woman, if you weren't you'd have been in there by now!' he said feigning a "Tranter" voice, then lowered her gently to the ground.

'I hadn't thought of that,' she confessed, 'It's nice to know you're thinking of my welfare.'

'Of course I am ya silly woman, what else would I be doing?' Feeling her tug at his arm, he turned to look at her, then suddenly throwing her arms around his neck gave him the most passionate kiss he'd ever known.

'Hot shit! What was that for?'

'That's for being you!' she said smiling radiantly.

'Holy cow,' replied Sirk happily, 'I'll have to be me more often! I'm going for a swim, I've gotta get rid of this head, it feels like someone's using my head as an anvil!'

'I'll get rid of it if you like, I've got a good sharp axe!'

'Don't push your luck!' he said grinning at her and dived in. Thirty minutes later having dried and dressed himself he returned to their hut, where a hot breakfast was waiting for him. Cooked in Cita's own delectable style he eagerly downed every scrap! As the last morsel entered his chewing machine, the professor thrust his head through their doorway.

'Ready?' he asked.

'Shit! You're in a hurry aren't you?' replied Sirk, astounded at the professors enthusiasm.

'One minute wasted is one minute lost!' he advised them. Sirk considered his statement for a moment, and thinking sensibly, had to admit he was right!

'Two minutes!' he said, then quickly kissing Cita goodbye he followed the professor out of the hut to see Arin and John arrive looking decidedly sick..

'Christ, is it cold life, or warmed up death?' asked Sirk dryly as they smiled wanly. A few minutes later Sirk put the Dart on levit over the take-off port.

'Arin, you and the professor get to the Magnetran, John, I'll need a good operations manager to oversee things, while I pilot the Dart over the transport hall.' As all had agreed Arin and the professor walked to the hatch.

'Aren't you forgetting something?' asked Sirk, raising and eyebrow. They looked at him blankly.

'The arsenal?' he added quickly, questioning their rationale.

'Shit yeah,' said Arin suddenly, 'good point Sirk, there could be some of those f---n' beetles out there!'

'Right!' Checking two pulsars he handed one to the professor and left for their destination. Fifteen minutes later the onboard radio came live, it was Arin asking Sirk to position the Dart over the transport hall, and following his instructions Sirk heard the professor ask him to switch on the energy shield. Another long wait, nearly half an hour this time, and Sirk began to wonder if everything was alright, when he heard the professor's voice again.

'Sirk, sorry we've been so long, we've had a few problems... the Magnetran won't energise, is it possible to put a pulsar into it?'

'Not from here, why not try your handguns... if that doesn't work, we'll have to rethink the whole thing.' The airwave went dead again. Returning to the Magnetran the professor aimed his pulsar at the huge magnet inside the bow, and gave it a five second pulse - nothing! Arin stepped forward.

'Hang on a minute prof., let me have a go.' Setting his pulsar on ten seconds he switched off the pulse, and gave it a full power blast. Suddenly the Magnetran shot twelve inches off the ground!

'It's alive!' shouted the professor with glee, and having

forgotten the public address system was switched on and nearly deafened Sirk in the process!

'Ok, that's great,' replied Sirk laughing, 'now all you have to do is navigate your way out!'

'Sirk, if we give you blow by blow instructions can you guide us?' asked Arin.

'Let's hope it doesn't come to that!' replied Sirk.

'Come to what ?' asked Arin.

'Blow jobs!'

'Oh yeah, very f---n' funny!' said Arin laughing. 'Are you ready? Ok, let's go! Forward twenty feet... right ninety degrees... ok, now just keep going until I say stop. Taking the Dart slowly forward Sirk hovered over the massive roof of the transport hall; then several minutes later Arin's voice instructed him to slow.

'We're at the entrance, it'll be touch and go here for a while.' said Arin. With his eyes glued to the two rear view monitors Arin watched carefully as he manoeuvred it through the gigantic doorway. After several attempts and having to reverse twice they took a different tack, then watched as the giant Magnetran slid into view from the broken masonry of the Science Hall; to see daylight again for the first time in over one hundred thousand years! The massive transporter was capable of carrying four thousand people, which was more than enough for the seventeen hundred or so Men and their families who would travel on it. 'Ok, sit back and enjoy the ride,' said Sirk, 'The ship will navigate from here on in.'

Ten minutes later Sirk put the Dart on levit, and the stentorian Magnetran dwarfed the Dart that hovered beside it, as Arin remarked it was like watching an ant tow an elephant!

'Your carriage awaits Ma'am!' joked Sirk as Cita ran to greet him, and at the same time take in the spectacle of this monster from *their* bygone age, then agreeing with John they *were* hungry, food should be consumed -immediately!

Food! It's always been your weakest point Sirk,' joked Arin. 'I never eat anything else!' declared Sirk, and tucked into a new member of the menu, a pastry jacket filled with vegetables and herbs, it appeared Cita had been inventive - again! As lips were licked and fingers wiped all agreed they were something to behold.

'Professor, I've been meaning to ask you for sometime,' said Sirk pausing for a moment, 'why are the lights still working in the museum?'

'I've no idea Sirk,' came his reply, but his face gave away the fact that something had registered, 'wait-a-minute! No, I'm wrong! If what I'm thinking is right we may have a bonanza on our hands!' he said, and looked around for everyone's approval.

'What exactly *are* you thinking professor?' asked Sirk impatiently.

'Oh, sorry... it's just that, I think, we may have stumbled on a source of endless energy... *nuclear fusion!*'

'But who could have built them,' asked Arin suddenly, 'they certainly didn't exist in our time!'

'It's my opinion that they were built by the "Wise Ones" as the Men call them.'

'So, what you're saying is, if we can locate the source of the museums lights.....we might just have an eternal energy source!' declared John.

'Well if that's the case, it can't be far away, I wouldn't mind betting, the 'Powerful One' was using it to smelt his gold!' added Sirk.

'You could be right Sirk,' replied the professor, 'he would have made good use of an source of energy like.'

Time-wise they had done well, and all agreed they would delay the move for one more day. The "dome" house had already been stored in the Replicator's memory for their arrival, as were many types of food that preserved where necessary would vary their somewhat narrow diet. Another supper, a good nights sleep, and they were ready to play

"hunt the energy source". A full crew landed on the take-off port the next morning, and Sirk, Arin, John, and the professor with Raff, Kiska and Hepra, set off to find their source of endless energy.

'Sirk, I remember Tim saying, there's another hall somewhere, I'm trying to remember where.' said Raff suddenly. Standing with his legs slightly apart and a furrowed brow he ruminated on the problem, and refused to move until he'd solved the mystery of the "missing" room. 'Ah,' he said suddenly, 'I think, if we go to the end of the aircraft hall... there should be a door in the corner, we never went there before Tim died, but it might be worth a try.'

'Well done Raff,' said Sirk, 'anything's worth a try at this moment in time, let's go!' Setting off in the direction of the Aircraft Hall it was only a matter of seconds before they remembered their journey would be protracted - by short legs! However, time has a habit of passing quickly when discussing the merits and de-merits of the various exhibits in the hall. Before they knew it they were facing the door that Raff had mentioned, and Sirk wasn't in a mood to wait, so bringing up his pulsar he blasted the lock; the door flew from its hinges. Like other halls in the museum the lights still glowed in this one, but being totally empty falling dust would have echoed around it for an hour!

'Oh well, that's f---n' that then!' declared Sirk resignedly.

'Sorry Sirk..' said Raff, hoping his friend wasn't too upset.

'Don't worry mate!' replied Sirk, 'as I said, it was worth a try.'

'Wait! I've just remembered something else, said Raff suddenly, 'at this end of the civil engineering hall, there's a door that's never been opened, do you think that would be worth a look?'

'I reckon!' replied Sirk as they walked in a new direction. Another ten minutes saw Sirk blast another door into the middle of the next century!

'F---n' bingo!' he shouted triumphantly. Pleased they'd been successful this time, pleased Raff, who was glad Sirk had found what he wanted. Staring them in the face was the largest array of heating and energy plant anyone had ever seen, although Sirk had noticed that this hall was different, where this one was octagonal the others were rectangular. 'Why *is* that Prof.?'¹ asked Sirk, baffled by the difference.

'It seems to me the energy we require is right in the middle of this hall, and is obviously now an exhibit in its own right, but they built the other halls on the eight sides of the octagon.' replied the professor with a throw-away gesture.

'Oooh, f---n' clever aren't we!' said John, which was his way of informing the professor that not everyone had his brains. The professor merely laughed and apologised for his superior manner.

'The next job is to get the bastard out of here!' said Sirk, wondering if it was even possible.

'It will be a problem -I think.' added the professor.

'No it won't!' declared Sirk suddenly, 'We're forgetting the replicator!'

'I wouldn't advise that!'¹ replied the professor quickly.

'Why not?'

'You are dealing with the very heart of universal matter, any attempt to store something like that in the Replicator would start off a chain reaction that would be far more devastating than the Depol!'

'Like what?' asked Sirk totally mystified.

'If you were to replicate that fusion unit, knowing they work on the principle of creating energy by the subdivision of atomic particles, it would go on replicating itself all over the universe!'

'Shit!' said Arm swallowing a very large lump in his throat.

'You mean we came that close to oblivion!'

'Don't worry,' replied the professor, feigning smugness, 'I'm here to make sure things like that don't happen!' No one didn't cottoned on for a few seconds 'til John laughed, then

the penny dropped, and all faces cracked with laughter from ear to ear.

'We'll hold you to that Professor Patenil!' joked Sirk, but was grateful for the professors intervention.

'So how do we get it out?' asked John.

'I'm afraid we're going to have to take the roof off!' came the professor's reply.

'Why can't we tow it out using the Dart's force field?' asked Sirk, thinking it would save precious time.

'As I said, that's why I'm here... to make sure things like that don't happen!' said Professor Patenil, repeating his previous statement, and grinning like a Cheshire cat.

'Oops a-f---n'-daisy!' came Sirk's reply, 'I take it that is that also dangerous - yeah?'

'Yes, if you subject it to magnetic forces it will have the same effect as a solar flare from our own sun... that, in turn would effect a massive explosion, which in turn, would certainly be the end of us!'

'So - we've got to physically lift it out?' asked Arin.

'Yup!' replied Sirk, then wondered how in Hell's name they were going to undertake such a task. I've got nothing on board to lift that thing out of here, even if we had a rope there's nothing to attach it to!'

'I think we should get on with the move,' suggested Arin, 'perhaps we should sleep on this, and come back to it later?'

'You're right Arin,' agreed Sirk, 'as long as we get the dwellings erected we can manage for a while.'

'It'll take us at least twelve days to put them up as things are now,' added the professor, 'even with the Replicator loaded to maximum!' Leaving the museum they headed back to the ship, and a few minutes later were back in the village, where the professor instructed Kiska and Hepra on how to operate the Replicator.

'They are very quick on the uptake,' he told Sirk after he'd finished, 'I can't believe how fast they learnt to use the Replicator!'

'I can,' replied Sirk, raising an eyebrow, 'they're smart cookies... let there be no doubt about that!' On board once again, they left for their new land, where Kiska and Hepra would start erecting the domes, while Sirk and the others loaded people and cargo to ferry them to the new land.

AMATEUR BUILDERS

The Dart touched down in the small clearing, the place where they hoped to live in the not too distant future. Alighting from the ship Raff pointed out something that no one had thought of, something that immediately had the others raising their eyebrows!

'This ground is not f---n' level!' he declared with a look of horror on his face.

'Shit!' said Sirk propelling the word at the speed of light, and was unable to believe he'd missed something as basic as that!

'What do we do now?' asked Arin.

'Back to the museum!' said John, 'it's the only place we're gonna find anything to remedy this situation.'

'He's right, everyone back on board!' added Sirk, and they found themselves unexpectedly returning to the museum without lifting a single sod!

'Amateur fuckin' builders!' said Sirk vehemently, and cursing his own stupidity.

Back in the museum they headed quickly for the Civil Engineering hall, as Sirk and the professor searched one side, John, Arm, Raff, and the others searched opposite. Having searched for more than half an hour suddenly Arin called Sirk across to look at something.

'Christ! I think that'll do it, what do you think professor?' asked Sirk of the professor.

'It's perfect! And, we can use the Dart to lift it out, it's also computer controlled, although we will need to take those cutting heads with us, they're used to level the site by the looks of them.' Casting his knowledgeable eye over the controls in the cabin, from what he could see once they'd had chosen their site and the "set up" for the machine, the arm would extend outward from the main plant and the

heads would cut into the earth. The designer of this machine had included a very clever touch that appealed to the professor's inventive mind, those being small integral cutters at right angles to the main cutting head that cut the foundations to plan measurements.

'After careful consideration, I am convinced this is exactly what we're looking for!' declared the prof.

'Right!' said Sirk quickly, 'there's no time to lose, I'll bring the Dart over while you give me guidance.' Ten minutes later Arin heard Sirk's voice on his intercom.

'Let's do it!'

'Ok Sirk, you can lift it ten feet safely, go forward forty feet and swing her ninety degrees to port and you're in the main walkway, from then on in it should be plain sailing.'

'Well done bruv, here we go!' The Dart's powerful magnetic field lifted it easily from the floor, then following Arin's instructions he manoeuvred it out and down the main walkway. After which he had to negotiate the Science Hall, but in just over an hour it appeared in the open again for the first time in a millennia. Boarding the Dart again they were back on course for their new home. The professor hadn't missed a trick, and had found and brought along the instruction manual. The cutting heads had been built into a cleverly designed arm at the side of the main plant, that could be extended forward in order to acquire the cutting head anywhere on the site. While perusing the instruction manual Sirk looked over the professor's shoulder.

'What worries me is what happens to the earth when the cutters have excavated it, do we have to remove it ourselves?'

'Hang on Sirk, I'm just coming to that... no, it seems... yes, there's a vacuum facility inside the cutting head that sucks the earth out through the centre at an angle, it's then trapped by a hood, collected, and fed into a holding tank, which when full are emptied into lorries as they were then known and dumped... somewhere.'

'That's something we don't have prof.,' said Sirk, thinking they were stumped again.

'No matter, we'll use the Dart to get rid of it.' said the professor coolly. It occurred to Sirk there was seemingly nothing this man couldn't do, and quickly! One question he would never have to ask was *why* he was a high professor, as the answer was glaringly obvious.

'Find a large square container, energise it with the Dart's Gravitor, as soon as it's loaded fly it away from the site... rotate the Gravitor field until it's totally inverted, and bingo - one empty container, no more earth!'

'Christ prof, why wasn't I born with a brain like yours... anyhow, we're all systems go then?'

'I'd say so.' replied the professor quietly. Wasting no time Sirk called Raff over and asked him to get the others, they were start now! Re-appearing a few minutes later with Kiska and Hepra Sirk had already opened the cargo bay doors, and hovering slowly over the giant excavator the Dart energised and lifted it clear of the ground.

Having touched down at their new base and de-energised the excavator Sirk moved the Dart away from the site and put her down.

'John, can you stay with Raff, Kiska and Hepra, and help them if they meet any problems?'

'Sure mate, I'll take care of everything!'

'Good man,' said Sirk, he'd always liked John, if for no other reason he was decisive and never made problems where there weren't any. Unloading the Replicator, food and drink, Sirk started by telling them they would need to erect 287 dwellings, and their task would probably take about twelve days.

'The prof's loaded all info into the excavator's computer, so all you need to do is oversee the operation, any questions?'

'No, I think we can handle it.' answered John confidently.

'We'll be back for you at five this evening, however, if we get lucky finding a container - we'll be back sooner!' With that

Sirk, Arin, and the professor boarded the Dart and headed back to the museum. Once there Sirk was unsure where to start his search for something as unlikely as the container they needed, especially one that size; but logic told him his best bet would be in the construction hall.

'We still have to solve the problem of our energy source prof.'

'Don't worry, I've already taken care of it.' replied the prof, confidently.

'You've f—n' what?' said Sirk scarcely able to believe his ears.

'It's quite simple, you remember the second moon... well, that thing must have energy converters on board, so! All we need to do is convert the energy at source... using the "moons" satellite to beam it down to our converter... and there you are!' concluded the professor in his usual matter-of-fact manner, almost as if it was an everyday event.

'So we're taking a trip to the "moon" then?'

'Yes, as soon as we have about twelve dwellings erected, we'll rig everything up.' Returning with news of a large container, Arin, Sirk, and the professor told the Men about their find. 'It must be thirty feet long, about... twenty wide, with a depth of... I would say, fifteen feet.' Now they could move as much earth as they needed!

A few hours later Sirk and Arin boarded the Dart to collect their building crew, and touching down at 5.45 pm, found they were already waiting for him.

'What's this,' asked Sirk straight-faced, 'you should still be working, I'll have to dock your pay for this!'

'Do that and we'll strike!' replied John, in mock anger, 'that's discrimination of the worst kind, Raff, Kiska, Hepra, down tools - we're out of here!' Hearing that Sirk laughed, but Raff, Hepra, and Kiska, were totally bewildered by this sudden show of anger, but as Sirk laughed they realised this was another facet to his sense of humour, and for future reference Raff put it to memory.

'We've put up thirteen today,' one more than expected!' declared John. 'Raff, Hepra, and Kiska worked like demons.' 'Shit hot mate, good going, all of you.' said Sirk, and highly pleased with their progress he remembered the infamous rainy season wasn't far away. For now though it was back to the village for supper and a good nights sleep, as another day's toil faced them. tomorrow.

'It looks like we will be going to the moon tomorrow prof,' said Sirk grinning, 'John, and his excellent bunch put up thirteen domes today!'

'Well done those men!' added the professor. 'Yes, it looks as if you're right Sirk, we'll have to rig up the converter now if we're to see what we're doing after dark.'

The following morning Sirk woke early, and lying on his side for a while he watched as Cita slept, to him she was still the most beautiful woman in the world; if their miserable world was teeming with beautiful women, she would still stand out as the eye catcher. Subconsciously she must have sensed something and stirred, then turning slowly she opened her eyes and smiled at him.

'Penny for them.' she said sleepily.

'It'll cost you more than that!' he replied, remembering how she'd ribbed him the previous day.

'My own husband profiteering?' she challenged him.

'I seem to remember you willingly took the piss out of me yesterday.' he replied emphatically.

'Oh, I see, so you're out to get your own back!' she said smiling.

'Something like that... yes!' With that Cita slapped her hand between his legs and squeezed hard, yelping with pain he begged her to let go, but the more he begged the more she squeezed.

'So, do I get them for a penny?' she asked, having got the better of him.

'It seems to me you've got them for nothing!' he replied in agony, and was very relieved when she finally let go.

'Well?' asked Cita waiting for his thoughts.

'If you must know... I was just thinking, that you, are still the most beautiful woman in the world, as far as I'm concerned.'

'Ahh, that's nice, in that case... I do love you.' she told him, then without warning rolled over and sat astride him, and as far as Sirk was concerned disobeying the laws of nature was a capital offence, particularly as she had already thrust herself down on him and was moving rhythmically up and down. Truthfully speaking he knew he hadn't stood a chance! So, late to work it was!

'I'm gonna keep making you pregnant if we go on like this!' he teased her after they'd made love.

'I can't get any more pregnant than I am now.' she replied truthfully.

'Maybe you'll have twins four months apart!' said Sirk quickly, and jumped out of bed before she could grab him again!

Emerging from his hut forty minutes later with Cita behind him Sirk found everyone waiting for him.

'I know we talked about going on strike yesterday,' joked John, 'but I've never heard of the boss going on strike before!'

'I didn't,' replied Sirk quickly, 'I was called to head office for a medical!'

'A physical I presume?' quipped the professor. Grinning broadly he kissed Cita goodbye and headed for the Dart.

'Well come on then, we've got a lot to do... we can't hang a round here all day!' said Sirk on the run. Reaching the top of the walkway he turned again, then giving Cita a final wave noticed she was beginning to get a little "large" in front; well, she was almost four months pregnant! Watching the giant excavator crawl to the next site the professor and Sirk stayed a while and stared in amazement. The massive cutting head sliced through the earth with commensurate ease as it took instruction from the built-in computer, and it quickly became apparent it also cut through rock!

'Come on, Cat Stephens is waiting for us prof.'

'Sorry Sirk, I'm not with you.' he replied.

'It's alright prof- bad joke!' Well, not everyone had heard of Cat Stephens, let alone his record Matthew and Son, least of all the professor! Shooting skywards again the Dart crackled like thunder as air filled the vacuum behind it. Approaching the satellite moon Sirk slowed their progress, then cruising in slowly he looked for the hatch they would need to get on board.

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Locate hatch, signal, and lock on.'

'Compliant!' Hurrying to the kitting section Sirk and the professor donned suits and helmets, then standing in front of the pressure checker both suits passed on a green light. Opening the hatch Sirk and the prof, jetted towards the satellite.

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Open the satellite hatch.'

'Compliant!' The ships computer had turned the hatch ninety degrees anti-clockwise, as they watched it open from its left-hung hinge. Once inside Sirk closed the hatch and hit the main power pad, then checked the breathable air supply. Amazingly it was still ninety seven percent! So this "thing" was obviously built for longevity.

'The Wise Ones as the Men call them were certainly clever bastards!' remarked Sirk, admiring their technology.

'Here we are,' announced professor Patenil, 'this is what we want.' Walking over Sirk looked at the converter.

'Is that all it is?' he asked, stunned by its diminutive size.

'Yes, once we've replicated it, we can take it back with us - then... we'll have power for ever!'

'Actually prof, I think we'll take this converter back with us... we've only got the one, if anything happened to it.'

'Good idea Sirk!' cut in the professor uncharacteristically,

but knowing his mind was on replicating the converter the prof. hadn't realised he'd interrupted Sirk. In his view that was something unforgivable and normally would have apologised, but having known the professor many years Sirk disregarded it. Half an hour later the Replicator's audio/visual display informed them their new converter was ready; so loading both converters and the Replicator in the Dart's cargo hold they returned to Earth.

Back at the site Sirk took the converter to John, and placed it ceremoniously on the ground in front of him.

'Is that all it is?' asked John incredulously.

That's exactly what I said!' replied Sirk laughing, 'It's such a tiny f---n' thing, you could almost wear it on your wrist!' Staring in disbelief at the small dome capped box John agreed, and with a small horn protruding from the top the four inch square piece of equipment would certainly make their lives much more comfortable!

'This one we'll have to keep under cover, according to the professor it won't stand up to the weather on Terra Firma, so we'll have to build an extra dome for it.'

'Ah! That'll be two extra then, as Raff told me that three of the Men went to the museum... and they found an exhibition hall for catering, the door was right in the corner of the hall that leads to the caves...I think.'

'F--k! I wish they hadn't done that, they know those beetles might still there!'

'Shit! I forgot about that, well, they're alright thank f--k!' replied John, feeling guilty about his oversight.

'Oh well,' replied Sirk philosophically, 'no harm done... and, we've got some more food to boot!' Back at the village the three Men who'd discovered the catering hall told Sirk they'd found a few of the freezers they'd discovered were still in working order! Immediately his mind started working on how many, and, would they all go in one dome!

'I'll take a look tomorrow,' he said, 'but for now, as it's ten o'clock, I'm for an early night!'

FOREBODING

On his way to the river the following morning Sirk heard very strange noises from Kiska's hut. Knocking on the door he hesitated for a moment, then realising it was someone in extreme pain entered to find Kiska's woman Vala leaning over him as he lay writhing on the floor in agony. Looking up she pleaded with him to do something, and seeing Kiska's predicament ran back yelling for Cita, and hearing him she ran out pulling her top down as she came.

'What's the matter?' she asked, her brow furrowed with concern.

'It's Kiska - there's something wrong, he's in *real* pain, can you take a look?' Without replying she ran straight over and asked Kiska the whereabouts of his pain. Pointing to his right lower abdomen gave Cita a clear picture of what was wrong with their little friend.

'Shit! I think he's got an appendicitis, and we don't have a doctor, and none of us have any medical knowledge.'

'I'll get Raff,' said Sirk suddenly, 'perhaps he or Sheel can do something.' Having got Raff out of bed, with vacant eyes he and Sheel followed Sirk to Kiska's hut, then hearing Cita's diagnosis Sheel ran straight to the high ground above the plantation.

'We will wait for Sheel, she has gone for the ingredients,' said Raff calmly, 'she will know what to do.'

'Have you dealt with this illness before?' asked Sirk, amazed at Raff's calm.

'Yes, Tim was the last illness we had, not long before you arrived last time, the old papers tell us what to use.'

'So you have medical knowledge?' asked Cita, wondering what form this "medicine" took.

'Medicine? I don't understand, what is "medicine"?' asked Raff with curiosity.

'It's the same your "ingredients" but we called it medicine in my time.' explained Sirk briefly, but was more concerned

with Kiska than terminology. Returning fifteen minutes later Sheel carried two bunches of what looked like weeds, and running straight to the fire threw the contents of a utensil on the ground and screamed at Raff to fill it with water, who in turn proceeded swiftly to the river. At this point Sirk realised they still had work to do, and suggested they go on to the site, and agreeing Raff told the villagers that Kiska was in good hands. Collecting the remainder of the crew they boarded the Dart with Hamys, who would act as Kiska's replacement until he'd recovered. and Sirk recalled he was one of a number of the Men who went bravely in to the smelter that fateful night, to rescue their distant cousins from the clutches of the Powerful One.

The giant excavator clattered once again, and the cutters sliced noisily into the hillside to clear another site, while Sirk and the professor went about installing the converter. A request came from John to empty the container, so obliging him Sirk left the professor to continue the installation. The container was full to the brim, so using the Dart's magnetic gravitor Sirk lifted it from the container clear, then noticed Hamys crouching by the front leg of the excavator, so radioing John asked him what was wrong.

'He says this place is dangerous,' came John's reply, 'he senses evil here apparently!'

'Look, I'll empty the container, and when I get back we'll talk to him, try and find out what you can while I'm gone.' Watching the makeshift skip discharge its load through the hull cameras Sirk closed the bay doors and checked his horizon, and for a fleeting moment thought he saw something move on the distant hills. After a quick glance back all however seemed normal, and being under pressure to finish the site and move everyone over he put it down to a figment of his imagination.

'He's scared shitless Sirk,' said John as Sirk walked into the excavator cabin.

'What exactly is it you that don't like, Hamys?' asked Sirk,

not wanting to get heavy, but also very aware of the pressure on them to finish before the rains came.

There is great evil here, I don't f---n' like it!' replied Hamys, and stared in genuine fear.

'If I go up in the Dart and fly around, and I don't find anything evil, will that make it ok for you?' asked Sirk reassuringly.

'No, the evil is not something you can see, it's something that creeps up on you - then it's too late!' replied Hamys, and Sirk really didn't want to hear that.

'Would you rather go back to the village?' he asked Hamys, thinking he could pick up a replacement at the same time.

'We should all go back, it's not safe here!' repeated Hamys. Looking skyward Sirk let out an audible sigh.

'I'm sorry Sirk,' said the little man, detecting Sirk's impatience, 'I've let you down, but I am only concerned with our safety.'

'No, *I'm sorry*, I was rude, I know you mean well Hamys... it's just that we've got a lot to do... and-'

'Really, we should not come here,' insisted Hamys, 'it's a shit-bad place!' Sirk confessed he hadn't heard that one before, and were becoming adventurous with expletives.

'Ok, decision time... John get everyone here, we're going back to the village!' Looking distinctly bewildered Arin and the professor followed John back to the Dart.

'What's going on?' asked Arin, 'why are we going back so soon?'

'Hamys has a foreboding about this place, he senses evil, I think we should go back and discuss it fully.' said Sirk emphatically.

'You're the boss!' said John walking up the escalator, as the workers took their cue to board the Dart.

Back in the village Raff called his elected council to a meeting, and with the villagers joining them they sat around the fire to thrash out the problem with Sirk.

'How is Kiska?' he asked Raff as he sat to preside.

'A lot better than you Sirk, Sheel's ingredient has pulled him through... so, Hamys has given a warning,' asked Raff with emphasis.

'Yes, he says that place is evil.'

'If that is what he says, then it must be so!' came Raff's reply, and took Sirk somewhat by surprise!

'But surely this is pure superstition?' said Sirk in conjecture, but his memory was suddenly jogged by that odd incident at the site that morning, when emptying the skip he thought he'd seen something odd, but that was only a figment of his imagination - surely!

'No, he's never been wrong! I have total faith in his predictions,' countered Raff.

'So you're saying that you won't be moving, is that it?'

'We would be *very* foolish to go against Hamys' prediction - *really f---n' daft!*' said Raff rounding off.

'I would like to know what form this "evil" takes, can he tell us?' asked Sirk, trying to put some credibility on this so-called prediction, and hoped he wouldn't be forced into dismissing the new land completely. Looking at Hamys Raff took his cue, re-iterating his earlier statement.

'It is a dark presence, that is all I can say, but it does exist!' said Raff. Nodding emphatically Hamys reinforced his statement, then turning to Arin Sirk whispered in his ear.

'Raff, I apologise for my rudeness, but there is something I must discuss urgently, as it's private would you excuse us for a minute.' Agreeing readily Raff watched as they went to Sirk's hut; and the last thing Sirk wanted now was to see the situation deteriorate.

After half an hour's deliberation a majority vote was in favour of continuing the project, so returning to the fire Sirk told Raff of their decision.

'I am very sorry, but I can't allow any of my people to go there,' replied Raff. His answer stunned Sirk, and it had gone exactly the way he'd dreaded.

'I don't understand,' said Sirk looking confused, 'you all

fought with me against the tyranny of the Powerful One, yet you cower in front of an unseen enemy - why!

'That is precisely it Sirk - unseen! We don't know what is out there, but if Hamys says it's very evil - then it is!' added Raff, and Sirk knew by Raff's voice he was totally sincere, and would not be dissuaded.

'Ok Raff., I respect your decision, if I can't change your mind then sadly we have to part company, and we have taken a unanimous vote to go... so I guess this is goodbye, we'll miss you and your people, but if there's anything you want, or need... I'll leave this radio with you - just give us a call.' said Sirk giving him the handset.

'Thank you Sirk, I wish you and Cita - all of you - good luck, I wish I could change your mind, as I fear for your safety... I really wish that you would stay, but as you said you respect my decision, then I also must respect yours, so... as you say, we must part company!'

'Well, with the dwellings we've put up so far it'll be more than enough for our requirements, so we might as well be on our way.' said Sirk finally.

It all sounded so final, could this be happening, or was it all just a bad dream, and could the Men survive without them? Although Sirk had to admit they hadn't done a bad job so far; albeit, with just a little help from him. On the other hand he considered, would they survive without the Men? Everyone exchanged farewells, then having shaken Raff's hand Sirk walked slowly to the Dart.

Several months had passed by, and it seemed almost as if the Men hadn't existed, as if somehow it was a different life, and they had only visited the village once in the last six months, and that was for no other reason than to retrieve some food, and a few freezers from the catering hall. The main gossip on their flying visit being Kiska, who had made a full recovery from his illness, There had been nineteen more births in the village, and Kiska hastened to inform them none were attributed to him. In turn Sirk told

them that Cita was very near her time, and was now like a sail in a strong wind! After half an hour they parted company, and returning to his new home Sirk was eager to see how his beautiful mother-to-be was coping. Putting the Dart on levit, and giving the usual instructions to the computer, he walked down the escalator. Grinning like a Cheshire cat Arin ran to meet him, and knowing he didn't get excited over trivia, with a grin like that Sirk knew it had to be good news! Grabbing Sirk's arm Arin almost yanked it from its socket as he pulled him toward his dome.

'She hasn't!'

'She has!' replied Arin.

'I told her to wait 'til I got back, she's getting selfish lately, It's a boy - yeah?'

'No, you've got the bonniest baby girl anyone ever saw!'

'Shit! That means I owe Cita twenty zillion dollars!' Running into the dome Cita lay on the bed with their baby daughter beside her wrapped in a white shawl, with her little face just visible. Running to Cita he kissed her tenderly, then putting his large hand to his daughter's face gently stroked her little cheek.

'She's just so... *perfect!*'

'A name is called for I think!' said the professor smiling at Cita, and returning his smile she transferred her gaze to Sirk.

'Sheel? After Raff's wife,' announced Sirk proudly, 'what do you think?'

'I think it's the most wonderful thing I've ever heard!' replied Cita looking down at her tiny infant, and it seemed all Sirk could do was grin. Happiness; a state of euphoria they would enjoy forever as far as they were concerned, then smiling broadly at each other they knew that nothing would spoil this moment.

'I've got the sneakiest feeling that Sirk's slightly happy.' commented the professor, and turning to John they both

nodded as they laughed.

'If he isn't happy now I don't think he ever will be!' replied John. From the corner of his eye Sirk fleetingly noticed Arin standing a little closer to Taniche than usual, and shot him a glance, and Arin catching his meaning returned a knowing smile.

'Well! I think this calls for something a little bit special.' announced John as the others looked on quizzically.

'What did you have in mind you devious bastard.' asked Arin knowing his capacity for being radical. Suddenly John's left arm shot out from behind his back holding a bottle of French champagne.

'Where in f---'s name did you get that?' asked Sirk, with an amount of accusation.

'I just happened to spot them while we were in the catering hall the other day... and, I thought they might come in handy one day.'

'Trust you,' countered Arin, 'you can always count on a boozer!'

'Hey that's not fair!' said Mayan in defence of her husband, 'only I'm allowed to call him that!'

'Well, as I seem to be guilty of the crime of procuring alcohol, I'll pour them out!' said John finally, who had also gone to the trouble of rescuing half a dozen flutes!

'I think it's a lovely gesture,' said Cita chipping in, 'and uh... no one else thought of it.'

'Hey! Don't encourage him, he's likely to bring in a whole case!' joked Sirk.

'Funny you should say that...' added John, then stared in disbelief as they watched him carry it from an adjoining room.

'Party!' he shouted, then, remembering the baby put his index finger to his lips.

'Well you're the one making all the noise!' observed the professor wryly. Several bottles later they were all fairly pissed except poor Cita, who sake of her infant remained

teetotal! Wandering into the cool evening air Arin lit a huge cigar and drawing on it exhaled heavily but didn't see Sirk follow him out.

'I forgot you liked those bloody things.' said Sirk, pointing at the rolled tobacco clenched between his teeth.

'Well, John isn't the only one around here who's resourceful!' replied Arin defensively.

'So, Taniche... you and she an item?'

'I guess we are, we've been close for some weeks now... and, I think she likes me.' said Arm, with some doubt.

'Crap! She's mad about you!' replied Sirk with confidence, 'A good looking bloke like you, yeah, you've got it made!'

'I'd like to think so!' said Arin ruefully.

'You seem doubtful, is there something wrong?'

'Well, it's just... she's very quiet sometimes, and uh, I just wonder what's going on in her head.'

'I don't think you've got anything to worry about... it's just the way she is, I noticed that long before we got here!'

'Yeah?... Maybe you're right.'

'I know I am!' said Sirk emphatically. 'Come on, let's go back and join the others.'

Conveniently siting their new home near a water source, waking early the next morning Sirk decided on an early morning swim, and realizing John was already up and a good twenty yards ahead of him called out for him to slow down.

'Come on slow-coach, get a f---n' move on!' taunted John.

'I'll beat you there you big f---r!' countered Sirk as they took off like a pair of Jack-rabbits. To their eternal surprise Arin passed the pair of them, and was in the water before Sirk and John had reached the bank!

'F---n' long-shanks!' shouted John as Arin dived in.

'Gave you a good lickin' didn't I?' retorted Arin.

'When it comes to swimming, I'll beat the ass off the pair of you!' said Sirk getting his penn'orth in, and with that they tore off down the river like three torpedoes - Sirk

won! At a more leisurely pace and chatting as they swam their strenuous exercise for the day was done.

'I'm going up to the satellite with the professor later on, we've gotta have a look at the relay, and switch on the converter, we'll need some power soon.'

'I've been chatting with Arin,' chimed in John, 'we're gonna have go at landscaping the area... you know, make it look a bit more attractive.'

'Regular little green fingers, is there no end to your talents?' countered Sirk.

'I wish we had TV,' replied John earnestly, 'I could do with one of those gardening programs, some good advice wouldn't go amiss right now.'

'You're right there John,' added Arin, 'I'm no gardener by any stretch of the imagination!'

'Hey!' cut in Sirk suddenly, 'you might have stumbled on something... there might just be something in the museum!'

Having dressed they ambled slowly back to their "dome" village, and talked about the possibilities of obtaining entertainment from the museum, if there was just one working Holotele they could replicate it! Walking from his dome the three of them summoned the professor and quizzed him about obtaining suitable equipment from the museum for replication.

'It's possible, yes,' he replied, 'if we can find it... we can replicate it, but something has been nagging at the back of my mind recently, and you've just jogged my memory, have you noticed there is no medical hall in there? I think it-'

'Shit!' interrupted Sirk, 'you're right... I've never given it a thought.'

'Hang on a minute, I've been thinking about the museum lately, and I'm wondering if it's possible there are two floors, which means another level exists... but where would we find the access to it?' asked the professor.

'As I remember, we were on ground level the last time we were there!' added Arin.

'I think the professor is saying the museum may have suffered from a massive ground shift when the Cathan missiles went off... it might be, the whole building sank to the level we see now!' explained Sirk.

'Holy shit!' said John, 'so we have to ask Raff to take us into the caves again?'

'Yes, I wouldn't want to go in there alone,' said Sirk thoughtfully, 'I wouldn't come out again! For now, we'll get the satellite up and running, then, once we've got the power on we'll make plans to go to the museum.' Their orbit had taken them halfway around the globe, then spotting the satellite they left and headed straight for it, and once inside the professor got to work on the relay. Within half an hour the prof. had it working, so radioing Arin asked him to check that the converter was receiving a full signal, but was informed it was not!

'Only one thing it can be,' said the professor quickly, 'the converter at the museum end is faulty!' A journey back to Earth found them in front of the fusion plant, and taking a sonic driver from his pocket the professor proceeded to undo the fasteners on the front panel.

'Aahhh, yes, I thought so, wrong frequency, ok Sirk, get hold of Arin and ask him if it's working now.' asked the professor. Arin confirmed in the positive.

'So, we've got power, all we need now is entertainment!' said Sirk with emphasis as they returned to the Dart.

Another evening drew to a close, and with bedtime becoming a ritual after the first had declared their intention to retire, the rest followed suit.

'That's why we need entertainment!' said Sirk announcing he was ready to hit the sack, and realised they had nothing else to do except sleep - or something!

QUALITY OF LIFE

To relieve the boredom that was creeping into their lives Sirk was keen to get anything that construed entertainment, as their days were becoming routine they'd arrived at the point where rebuilding the human race would really start, but knew also that he, Arin, John and the professor would have to sit and discuss the direction their lives would take, as they alone were directly responsible for shaping the future of their new world. Education was the key, and bigotry must *never* rear its ugly head again, hatred, greed, cynicism and fighting must be eradicated at all costs. Reason, compromise and conciliation were the key to a peaceful co-existence. That was for the future, but for the present they had to make their lives as comfortable as possible. Rounding up the others he bullied and cajoled them into leaving early for the museum, but the worst among them was Arin, who wanted to stay with Taniche as long as possible.

'The boy's got it bad!' commented John, as Arin finally made his way up the walkway. Laughing loudly Sirk never thought he'd see the day his kid brother would even consider settling down.

Reaching the village Sirk brought the Dart in on levit, and after their somewhat sombre parting they received a tumultuous welcome from the Men on their return, and like the whole village Raff was genuinely pleased to them.

'I have a request.' announced Sirk, after everyone was seated.

'If I can help, I will certainly do so.' replied his little friend, and to Sirk's surprise his pleasure at their meeting was reciprocated.

'Professor Patenil thinks the museum may have two floors, so we need someone who knows the caves well, and it might just be that access to the lower level is hidden in there somewhere.'

'I will escort you personally, it will be my pleasure.' replied Raff, and Sirk was mildly surprised at his readiness to help. 'Can we leave now?' asked Sirk wondering if he'd pushed his luck too far.

'I see no reason why not.' replied Raff agreeably.

'Thank you my friend, you don't know how much I appreciate this.' Flying south across the southern crater Sirk had a heart-stopping moment, did he see a bubble disappear over the rim? As there were more pressing matters at hand he'd have to investigate that later. Carrying them faster than lightning to the museum and mere seconds later they walked through the aerospace hall. Walking through the door Sirk remembered the first time he'd clapped eyes on that Gypsy Tiger Moth, and except for the fact that its wing tips were still resting on the floor, the only change he could see was that the lower port wing had finally parted company with its struts and the fuselage, and now rested on the ground. Other than that the remaining exhibits also appeared unchanged, and that included the exit to the caves! 'Ok, I can't stress enough the need to stick together in here, this catacomb is vast, and if you get lost in here you'll go mad before you die... and I can promise you one thing - you'll never find your way out!' he told them, then looked around to see if further clarification was needed.

'I would like to add one thing,' cut in Raff, 'if you feel at any time you need to stop, tell us... that's it.'

'That's a good point Raff, and one we should all heed! Remember, Raff knows these caves a damn sight better than we could ever hope to.'

'Ok, hot-shit!' said Raff jokingly, 'It's just like old f---n' times, follow me, I think I know where to start.' Knowing what to expect Sirk told them they'd be walking for hours, but thinking he'd overstated his case a little it hadn't sunk in. After an hour and a half John was the first to complain of longevity.

'We could be halfway there - I honestly don't know.' declared

Sirk.

'*Halfway there?*' he shouted. 'Is it really worth it just for holoTV and a bit of music?'

'It's not just the entertainment John,' replied professor Patenil, 'we're primarily looking for medicine... medical supplies and equipment.' Falling silent John couldn't argue against that, after all, supposing he needed medicines for Mayan, or the boys. Still unable to fathom out how Raff knew which way to go, they had only paused twice, and must have turned that many corners, but he couldn't have counted them on twenty hands, let alone two! Then, suddenly Raff came to halt.

'Yes.. I think we're here,' he stated, 'by f--k - I got it right!'

'I'm really f---n' glad about that!' admitted Sirk, and switching on his Illumin pointed it at a small entrance half buried in the ground, and being identical to those on the upper level it was unmistakably - a door!

'How in Hell's f---n' name are we gonna get that open?' asked Sirk.

'Kick it in!' said John, half joking. He should have known better.

'Brilliant! Well done John, 'at least we won't have go back for tools.'

'I was actually joking!' answered John.

'I know, so was I, we'll use old faithful here.' he said holding up the pulsar. 'Better get back!' Retiring to a safe distance Sirk gave it a twenty second burst, and thinking they'd have to wait for the dust to settle he was surprised to see it disappear into the new opening, and another good sign - he could see light!

'Hot shit! we're in!' said Sirk in total surprise, and they all became impatient to see what was in there. Dropping three feet to the floor Sirk told the others to get a move on.

'You oughta see this!' he told them, as Arin followed him through.

'Christ! it's a f---n' hospital in its own right!' said Arin in disbelief, as the others filed in behind uttering their own

expletives, they cast their eyes on exhibits that hadn't been viewed for more than one hundred centuries! Standing before them were medical instruments and medicines ranging from their archaic beginnings to Sirk's own time the thirty fourth century, and many from beyond! Doing what he did best Professor Patenil scoured around for any and all reading matter, manuals and journals and anything he could lay his hands on! Read first, practice after! That was the way he'd been taught, systematic, methodical, he'd always done things that way.

In case they held anything of vital importance or interest, while they were there Sirk informed him the professor he was going to check out any other halls that might exist. Walking along the hall his heart raced, and as the door at the other end beckoned felt like a moth drawn to a candle. What secrets would that door reveal when he walked through? He had no need for the pulsar this time, the handle gave easily under his grip; again the lights were on. Freezing on the spot he stood in total disbelief at the array of exhibits in front of him.

'Mecca!' Was all he could say. Equal in size to the others this hall was crammed with entertainment from time immemorial, record players, juke boxes, tape players, CD players, video cassettes, video discs, film cubes from the 27th century, holoplay from his own time, he'd seen nothing like this before, and with his voice near to hysteria he called to the others, and hearing his trouble voice they brought them running with their pulsars raised for action.

'What the f--k are you playing at Sirk? Shit - we thought you were being attacked by a hoard of beetles!' protested Arin. 'Sorry bruv, hey look at this, can you believe it? F----n' Hell, there are recorded programmes for every player in here!

'We won't go short of something to watch then?' queried John jokingly.

'Don't take the piss!' came Sirk's retort, 'this is Utopia!'

Before they knew it Sirk was rummaging through the exhibits to see what he could find, although they wanted to get on they knew it was no good dragging him away.

'Hey! Look at this, holoflms, plays, holodocs, everything we need!'

'Looks like that Replicator's gonna be red hot before too long!' said Arin, quickly calculating the number of sets they'd need.

'Music! Look at this, holoplays of Merrill E. Moore, Bill Haley. The Jodimars, The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, it's incredible!'

'No doubt we'll be hearing it in the not too distant future.' said John, *that* was one piss take too many.

'What do you wanna be when you grow up John?' asked Sirk grinning.

'A puff Adder.' replied John.

'What's *a* puff Adder?' asked the professor.

'He farts in the bath and counts the bubbles!' replied John, and as laughter erupted Sirk admitted he'd hadn't heard that one before; John had put one over them that time. Having collected what he needed they returned to the Dart, now at least they would have something to save them from the boredom that was now their way of life.

Descending from the ship Arin saw Taniche run from Sirk's home and immediately sensed something was wrong, and having seen them arrive obviously needed something or someone very quickly!

'Sirk, there's something going on!' shouted Arin through the hatch. 'There seems to be some sort of panic!' Leaving his highly prized collection of music he ran to see what Arin was talking about.

'Sirk! It's the baby - Sheel! Her breathing... it's erratic - and... she's got a temperature!' cried Taniche out of breath. Reaching the door Cita sat distraught with tears pouring down her cheeks.

'I don't know what's wrong, she was like this when I came in

to feed her!

'What in Hell's name are we gonna do?' asked Sirk, his question directed at no one in particular.

'We go back to the museum!' said the prof. suddenly, 'we're bound to find something there we can use.'

'You're forgetting one thing,' replied Sirk quickly, 'we haven't got a doctor to administer anything, we don't know how to measure doses - tablets or injections!'

'I still think we'd better look in the museum!' insisted the prof, 'it could be we'll find some manuals there.'

'Shit! Yeah, good thinking Prof,' cut in Arin, 'Sirk, you stay with Cita, we'll go - we'll find something!'

Nodding his assent he suddenly realised he was the only one who could fly the Dart

'I think that John, Arin, and I can manage between us, after all I designed the damn thing-' said the prof.,

'And from what I've seen watching you,' cut in Arin, 'I reckon we'll do alright.'

'Ok, I'll put her on open voice recognition, if you feel uneasy just put her on auto!' Frantic to be with Cita Sirk ran back to the house; the ship was no longer important, all that mattered were Cita and Baby Sheel.

'I'm looking for a Viramed,' said the professor flatly, 'as soon as we get to the museum, although I think that goes without saying we must find exhibits from our own time as soon as possible!' Silently nodding their assent to the prof, John and Arin were glad they'd had the foresight to mark the route to the medical hall, and realised it would've been impossible to find again without Raff, let alone go to the village and pick him up on route! Dropping through the aperture to the half-buried door they were in the medical hall again and immediately set to work, and would hopefully find the illusive Viramed. None of them were thinking systematically, and their search was undertaken randomly, then the professor's mind got into gear and suggested they search together, taking certain areas at a time. Method paid off immediately, no sooner had they started

searching through administration than they found several references to Viramed, although they found no evidence of the unit itself until John remembered something he'd found further down the hall.

'Where the f--k are you going?' shouted Arin, seeing him set off at high speed.

'Hang on... I'm not going far!' replied John, then tore into various exhibits, then looking at each other the professor and Arin walked down to satisfy their curiosity as to what he was searching for. Watching him search frantically for two or three minutes he stopped, and straightening up held a small object aloft.

'F---n' Eureka!'

'F---n' Eureka?' echoed the professor laughing at John's analogy, 'in my day it was just Eureka! Still... the times they are a changin'.'

'Never mind that,' cut in Arin, 'let's get the f--k out of here!' Leaving as swiftly as they'd come the Dart sped them back to the village and a small baby in need of a life-saving injection. Something Sirk would never have done is take the Dart in fast on auto, however the professor considered that this was an emergency and warranted the action! Close to making contact with Terra Firma they came in too fast and kicked up a storm of dust, but they were too busy opening the hatch to notice. The professor's old legs belied his age and running to Sirk's house appeared to take on the mantle of an Olympic sprinter! Holding the Viramed triumphantly aloft John saw Sirk framed by the door, but no one even noticed his body language let alone tears rolling freely down his cheeks.

'Sirk?' asked Arin, suddenly alarmed at Sirk's stance.

'It's too late.' he said quietly, then turning he walked back inside, 'I must be with Cita.' Leaving him to his grief they understood, and followed by John Arin was the first to break down, but remaining strong for his two distraught charges the professor put on a brave face.

A harrowing time would now follow for Sirk and Cita, and looking at their infants poor lifeless body Sirk put his arms tightly around Cita. Lying still in the cot that was her haven of safety baby Sheel had barely known life. Returning his embrace tears streamed relentlessly down her face as she cried bitterly, and their bodies shook with the remorse of total loss. Could God be this cruel? Could he take away their first-born? Their perfect tiny little baby who's life had barely started!

'Why, why, why?' cried Cita. As a mother she would feel her loss greater than anyone. Holding her tightly Sirk realised that what was to be a golden future for them, a new start, had suddenly been crushed beyond Redemption! Placing the cups of tea quietly on the table next to Cita's bed, the professor poured two generous helpings of brandy in each from his flask then left. Lacing three more cups he left for the front door and gave one each to Arin and John. Numbed by their loss the three of them sat staring into their cups; it was so final! Everyone was looking forward to seeing Sheel grow up, and to see her play with her brothers and sisters in the new generation! That had now been cruelly snatched away from them by an unseen hand, an evil hand, one that had denied everyone the pleasure they sought most of all, the happiness of raising children. Wanting to take away as much of the burden from Cita and Sirk as he could the professor pondered over the coming burial and service, with what they were going through they wouldn't want to cope with that. However, it could wait 'til morning, and as it would only upset them more there was no reason to hurry. Saying a solemn goodnight to John and Arin they returned his greeting, then the heartbroken professor walked silently to his dome without a backward glance. Feeling it was his responsibility to be a tower of strength he didn't want John and Arin to see his grief. The last light went out as John tucked in Odin and John Junior, then saying goodnight to Mayan he fell into a fitful sleep. The

darkness enveloped them all, including the tiny body of Cita and Sirk's baby Sheel, but she was with God now, and nothing could ever hurt her again. The following morning the professor stood and watched Sirk and Cita for five minutes, and going silently about their chores like two automatons neither of them noticed him. They weren't even thinking about what they were doing, and it was Sirk who first became aware of his presence.

'Professor,' he said flatly, 'What is it?'

'Sorry to bother you Sirk, I didn't want to intrude... in your moment of grief, but I'

'No! no!' interrupted Sirk, 'it's ok, really, we uh... we're just going to have some breakfast, why don't you join us?'

'Are you sure I won't be disturbing you?' asked the professor, ever mindful of other peoples feelings.

'How could you ever be in the way prof.?' answered Sirk, and despite his own misery made him feel welcome, 'tell you what... uh, why not ask John and Arin to join us, yeah, Mayan and the kids as well, would you mind asking them prof?'

'If you're sure, I'll be glad to.' answered the prof, and shuffled off in the direction of Arin's dome. Half an later everyone sat around Sirk's table, but there was nothing to say so no one spoke except to request condiments butter or marmalade.

'I think we should go back to the village!' blurted out Sirk suddenly, 'too many bad memories here.'

'I'll go for that,' agreed Arin, placing his hand on Taniche's arm.

'It's agreed then, we go back.' he said shakily, then looking for solidarity realised there was no need.

'I think it's for the best,' added the professor, 'I also think we should bury baby Sheel near the village, rather than bury her here I mean!'

'Perhaps Hamys had a point,' reasoned Sirk, 'maybe this place is evil... perhaps Sheel would still be alive if I hadn't

insisted we came here!

'No one's blaming you Sirk, we can all be wise in hindsight... it's an unfortunate, tragic accident.' said John in consolation.

'I'd like to leave as soon as possible, if no one else minds?' announced Sirk urgently.

'No, uh... I think we're all agreed.' answered the professor, speaking for them all.

'How are we going to take Sheel's body back?' asked Cita, then suddenly breaking down again fell into Sirk's arms and cried uncontrollably. Leaving the table Taniche left white faced without saying a word, and returned a minute later clasping a small parcel of tissue in her hand. Walking 'round the table she knelt beside Cita and put the parcel on her lap.

'What's this?' sobbed Cita fumbling with the tape.

'It's something I made for you - and Sirk,' said Taniche quietly sobbing, 'when you asked how you were going to take Sheel back to the village... I thought it would be appropriate to give it to you now.' Opening the little parcel Cita pulled the small silk body shawl from the tissue, not only was it hand made, but was trimmed with lace and was finished with button loops on a wrap-over flap, and Taniche had even trimmed the buttons in silk.

'It's beautiful... so... beautiful, I...' lost for words Cita was totally overwhelmed by Taniche's kindness.

'I'm sorry, I would have waited... if I thought it would upset you this much!' said Taniche ruefully.

'No, it's ok,' said Sirk reassuringly, his eyes red with grief, 'it - it's really beautiful, we both appreciate it, it's a lovely thought.' Suddenly overwhelmed John left the room, and letting him have his moment of grief alone Arin and Mayan said nothing. Leaving the room quietly Mayan wanted to be near her husband, who, standing alone at the edge of the village wasn't aware of her presence until her arm slid through his.

'I can't get over what's happened,' he told her, choking back his tears, 'we're so lucky!'

'Yes, we are,' Mayan agreed, 'I hope some of our luck rubs off on Sirk and Cita.'

'Yeah, I hope so too,' said John shakily, then cast his eyes upwards as if looking for divine guidance, but his eyes suddenly turned from sorrow to curiosity as he noticed something strange on the distant horizon above the tree line. What ever it was must be five or six miles away thought John, but what unnerved him was the contour of that distant horizon was changing shape, but a closer study showed it was in fact moving in their direction!

'Prof., can you spare a minute?' said John quietly, not wanting to disturb Sirk and Cita, 'I think you ought to take a look at this!' Having learned the skill of body language many years ago Professor Patenil didn't like what he saw on John's face. Leaving quietly they walked to the edge of the village where John indicated to him the curious horizon, that had seemingly sprung out of nowhere!

'Alright, don't tell anyone, let's take the Dart and have a look at it.' said the professor calmly. A few minutes later John put the ship on levit, then switching on the external cameras the horror that confronted them was beyond belief! For a few seconds they stared at each other in horror, and turning their attention to the screen again John pulled himself together, then flying the Dart to one thousand feet put it back on levit.

'*What the fuckin' Hell is that?*' he asked the prof, completely dumb-founded.

'I don't know John,' came his cautious reply, 'the first thing we're gonna do is put out a probe, but, I think this is the evil that Hamys was so afraid of!'

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Probe the land mass below, analyse its composition, and report.' A few seconds passed while the ships computer

investigated the composition of the ground below, then having sifted the evidence subsequently presented it to the inquirers.

'Land mass static - eight percent of terra firma has minimal movement, expansion constant and progressive. The land mass has a live and life-threatening form that is growing at a rate of twelve percent every twenty four hours!' By "life-threatening" the professor and John knew the computer was talking about - human life!

'Let's get out of here!' said John, urgently.

'Let's get out of this land!' replied the professor, 'staying around here isn't exactly healthy for us now!' Touching down in their cursed village John and the professor ran straight for Sirk's dome, and doing so bumped into Arin who was just about to leave.

'What's the hurry lads?' he enquired, and not only curious at their obvious pace, but their expression of extreme worry.

'You'd better come back in with us,' said John, his face drawn and tight. Knowing John well enough not to contest his assessment, Arin knew instinctively the situation was grave. The professor had gathered the others to inform them of what they'd found, and finalised on what would befall them should they decide to stay.

PARTING IS SUCH SWEET SORROW

Having hastily packed a few personal effects everyone boarded the Dart, and insisting he was ok to fly as soon as the last person was through the hatch Sirk took her out. Once his mind was made up they knew better than to argue the toss.

'Besides - I wanna have a look at this black morass for myself!' he said bravely, but the sadness in his voice vied for supremacy with the bravado he'd injected into it. One look at that black mass below convinced him, he knew instantly that the professor and John were spot on with their assessment, this entity was indeed very dangerous. 'Let's get the fuck out o' here!' he snarled, and turning the Dart tightly to port he blasted her into high orbit. Having given Cita an injection of sleep before take off, Taniche was looking after her in the sleeping quarters until they arrived back in the Men's village.

One look at their faces told Raff something awful had happened, so a warm welcome with help and diplomacy would be his watchword and actions until further notice.

'Welcome Sirk.' said Raff extending his hand.

'Thank you Raff,' said Sirk gravely, 'I'll tell you straight away so there's no confusion,' wavering for a while Sirk found it hard to find the words, 'baby Sheel... she's uh... she's...' unable to continue Arin stepped in to rescue Sirk from further torture.

'Raff,' he said leading him aside, 'Baby sheel... she's, dead!' No one had seen tears from Raff before, but they now ran freely down his face as Arin related the story to him.

'I am so sorry,' he said when Arin had finished, 'please tell Sirk - this goes for all of you, of course - if there's anything you need, or want, anything we can do... you only have to let us know.'

'Thank you Raff,' replied Arin gratefully, 'you don't know

what that means to us right now.'

'The important thing is you recover without problems, we will smooth a passage for you!' Smiling his thanks Arin felt warm inside, and he realised then that there is nothing, nothing in the world that can compare with good solid friendship.

The dawn of another day. One small step on the road to recovery. Not that Sirk or Cita would notice the difference, their hearts still ached abominably from the loss of their newborn! No one bothered them, and the whole village allowed them the time they would need to come to terms with their grief, and let them decide when they were ready to approach the village again. It was almost a week before Raff heard Sirk call from the door of his hut, and turning he walked back to greet his "long time" friend.

'How are you and Cita feeling Sirk, I hope your burden will ease soon.'

'Thanks Raff, we're coping I suppose, I wanted to say thanks for all that you - and the rest of the village have done... and... to apologise, if you see Hamys, please tell him I would like to talk to him.

'I will,' promised Raff, 'I'll tell him now.' Watching Raff walk away Sirk took in the morning, and couldn't help thinking this is a morning baby Sheel should have seen, a fine clear and crisp morning. That thought sent him straight back into the hut, and like a rock the whole harrowing episode hit him again. Putting her arms around him Cita held him as tight as she possibly could, her love for him still undiminished, he was, and always would be her man, nothing he could do would ever make her leave him, he was her world!

'I'm sorry,' said Sirk finally drying his eyes, 'I'm supposed to be strong for you, and here I am gett-'

'It doesn't matter!' said Cita passionately, 'It's only right you should shed your grief as well, I don't expect you to be a pillar of strength all the time!' Holding her tight he gave her

an extra squeeze as bereaved people do for reassurance. At that moment Raff's wife Sheel walked over, after who Sirk and Cita had named their baby.

'I have made this for you and Cita,' she told Sirk gently, 'tell Cita I will be pleased to see her when she feels up to it.'

Thank you Sheel, I will tell her... I'm sure she will appreciate the gift - thank you!' Pleased she had made a gift for her good friend Cita, Sirk got the impression that Sheel was missing Cita more than she was letting on. Opening it Sirk pulled out a beautiful cream linen cloth, approximately eighteen inches long, by ten wide, and on it were embroidered the words "Parting is such sweet sorrow" in deep gold thread, the upper right edge of each word had been high-lighted in pale gold thread. A lump suddenly tightened Sirk's throat, and where he and Cita were concerned the milk of human kindness wasn't short in measure! Leaving the comfort of the fire and good coffee Sirk took the present to Cita, and kissing her tenderly told her of Sheet's visit.

'I will go and see her this afternoon,' she said tearfully, 'everyone's been so kind... I sometimes find it hard to take - but I wouldn't have it any other way.' Feeling slightly better he suddenly remembered that black morass they'd seen before leaving the previous day, he had to see the professor and the others immediately, to see what plan of attack they could formulate against - whatever this "thing" was, and would be carried out immediately after the funeral.

A SMALL BABIES FUNERAL

Finished in white paint Kiska and Hepra had made a small coffin, and had even gone to the trouble of fitting two brass handles at either side. Taken aback when they first laid eyes on it Sirk and Cita were at a loss to know how they'd acquired the skills, especially considering how little time they'd had to make it! Having tactfully shown Sirk and Cita where the "passovers" were traditionally buried, and to minimise their trauma, the only thing left for them to do was make their way to the place of rest. The entourage moved slowly off, but the disparity in their gait didn't pose a problem on this occasion, as no one walked fast on this day, and Raff had respectfully requested that he, Hamys, Kiska, and Hepra be their pall bearers. Touched by their gesture Sirk and Cita were thankful to have their friends standing by on a day such as this. Lifting it aloft the little coffin teetered slightly as Sheel placed a wreath of white lilies on top of the coffin, as Raff had shown her how to use the Replicator she explained later she'd got them from the museum, but had made fresh ones for the funeral. Breaking down Poor Cita could stand it no longer, and as her legs gave way under her terrible trauma Sirk held onto her. Managing to regain her balance they walked a few more yards, but as her legs gave way again this time she stayed on her knees for some minutes, and her tear-drenched eyes stared straight ahead as if she'd simply given up; having no will left to carry on. After walking a few more feet she stopped again, and still staring ahead she stood motionless and appeared to have switched off. Her knuckles white from gripping the tiny shawl that once held her baby Sheel, and her vision blurred with tears of sorrow, they were accompanied by the constant yearning for her lost infant. Unable to comprehend the disaster that had overtaken her, saying goodbye to the one she'd given birth to such a short time ago was to her, almost impossible. What had she done that was so devastatingly

wrong, that her baby should be taken from her? Nobody could feel what she was feeling at that moment, Cita, alone, hoped and prayed for a thread, something, anything, that would enable her to hold on to her baby Sheel just once more. Then, that heart-wrenching torment that tore at her very soul told her that what she wanted was not possible. 'Where's my baby?' she cried inconsolably, and stumbled once more. Holding her steady Sirk let her have as much time as she needed, then five minutes later they continued their slow walk, the little column of mourners would pay their last respects to one whose life had been cut so tragically short and seemed so meaningless. Having come down the previous night to dig the little grave Arin and John now had the most unpleasant task of all, that of lowering the little coffin into the ground.

Professor Patenil quoted from an ancient bible; Revelations, chapter 2, verse 10.

'Fear none of those things which thou shalt suffer: behold, the devil shall cast some of you into prison, that ye may be tried; and ye shall have tribulation ten days: be thou faithful unto death, and I will give thee a crown of life' Although his voice had faltered several times, the professor managed to finish his oration without a pause, and apart from the others it was something he expected of himself.

'And I will give thee a crown of life,' repeated the professor from the reading, then stopping for a moment he pulled himself together, 'I have no... doubt, that God... will give little Sheel a crown of life, for she was innocent and pure of heart, having none of the vices of adulthood she is now protected by God, and sits at his right hand.' Unable to stop Cita's fall this time again Sirk gently lifted her from the ground, and there was silence for a moment or two, then putting his hand on his brothers shoulder, Arin said - amen.

Without warning, Taniche, in a beautiful soprano voice sang The Lord's Prayer. Another silence, but this time in remembrance of one so young, who would never grow to see

the wonders of this new world. Having volunteered as a burial party some of the Men signalled silently to each other that they would stay and backfill the earth with Arin and John, and insert the headstone; for which John and Arin were very grateful. A cross made by Hepra simply said: Baby Sheel, Born, June 30th 100,073, three weeks old. Safely in Eden. Her little body now lay next to the old and wise remains of Tim.

THE NEW WORLD

Sitting on the dirt next to Hepra Sirk poured himself a cup of tea, then taking a sip he listened to the others. The professor was trying to convince Hamys and Kiska that living in a dome, would be infinitely better protection against the elements than the huts they currently occupied. However they were sticklers for tradition!

'What do you think Sirk?' asked Kiska. 'Well... I can see the professor's point, on the other hand if you feel that strongly about your huts - and you're happy in them... at the end of the day, it's *what you're* really happy with that counts.'

'Thank you Sirk,' replied Kiska, 'words of wisdom, no less than we'd expect from you Sirk, however, the professor's arguments are very persuasive, so I will put it to Raff at the next meeting of Elders, that we should consider these domes very carefully!'

'I think that makes a lot of horse-sense!' said Sirk sincerely.

'What is horse-sense?' asked Kiska., and Sirk knew straight away he'd have to go through the rigmarole of explaining his colloquialism.

'What is horse?' asked Hepra innocently, and knowing he should have seen this one coming Sirk tried explaining as best he could the appearance of the animal, but both had difficulty in comprehending Sirk's description, and to visualise the huge numbers that once roamed the Earth. Next time we're in the museum, I'll show you, there has to be a reference to horses in there somewhere.

'I hate to change the subject,' said Sirk, suddenly seizing his chance, 'but - the small matter of that black morass on the island - we have to do something about it!'

'Yeah, I know what you mean..' said Arin looking worried. 'We gotta do something about this moving morass,' Sirk told Cita, 'the professor, John and Arin are coming with me, ok Angel? You take care, and if you need anything Sheel will be here for you, and if you need me you've got

the radio.' Kissing her again he walked out to find John and Arin waiting for him with Raff, Hepra, and Kiska.

No one spoke as they walked to the ship, and with her hull barely twelve inches off the ground where Sirk had left her the previous day the Dart waited on levit, but would now she would go into full battle condition for the first time since defeating the Powerful One.

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Relog your last command, reverse the course and return to your last known destination.'

'Compliant!' Came the response Sirk had grown so used to. Seconds later they soared above eagles, and headed for the land that held so many bad memories for Sirk's little army. Reaching their destination the Dart's computer automatically invoked default and put her on levit at one thousand feet.

Destination!' the computer informed them. Switching on the exterior cameras, Sirk trained them on the black morass below, and knowing it was uncharacteristic for Sirk not to give instruction the others looked at him with concern.

'Ships computer!' ordered Sirk, apparently unaware of their concern.

'Your request?'

'Switch on probes, scan for life forms, and material composition of the black matter below.'

'Compliant!' They'd have to wait now, and let the computer accurately analyse the composition of the black, heaving lava-like material.

WARNING! WARNING! WARNING! The computer suddenly sounded off, and Sirk's alarm at the severity of the emergency issued by the computer was echoed by the others.

'Status?' shouted Sirk, with concern now furrowing his brow. The composition is of a dangerous viral form - capable of wiping out humanoid life - suggest - leave the area

immediately - or destroy virus - most immediate!

'Ok, take us out of here!' ordered Sirk immediately. Heading back to the village and safety the Dart disappeared from view.

The Men alighted with John and Arin, but staying behind with the professor Sirk. went over the data gathered by the Dart's instruments.

This is very serious Sirk,,' said the professor as his face darkened with foreboding, 'this is one massive virus - capable of wiping us all out!'

'How did it get there, and how the f--k are we gonna wipe it out?'

I haven't any answers yet Sirk, so I must think very carefully, if we don't get this right... I dread to think of the consequences!' Closing all functions on the bridge they left for the village, and looking forward to seeing Cita again Sirk relished the thought of a good meal around the camp fire. His first task however was to ask Raff if he could get everyone to a meeting 'round the camp fire that evening. Seven o'clock prompt, and not one soul was missing from the assembly, and attempting to cheer him up Arin remarked that Sirk appeared to have lost none of his magnetism, and still able to draw a capacity crowd!

'As you know,' he started shakily, still distracted by their recent trauma, 'we... uh, have just returned from a land that has something I can only describe as evil... had we listened to Hamys we would probably still have baby Sheel - I shall never doubt your word again Hamys! However this morass, which is the only way I can describe it, is coming this way! It can only be described as one gigantic virus, I know it sounds strange, maybe even funny, but I can assure you... it is *very* lethal... and is more than capable of wiping us out!' A stony silence followed the end of Sirk's speech; Hamys was first to break the silence.

'Sirk,' he said sadly, his head bowed with remorse, 'I am truly sorry about your loss, what I would like to know is

what can we do to stop this "morass" from reaching us... I mean, it seems to me there's nothing we can do about it!

'At the moment Hamys that appears to be the case,' replied Sirk gaining confidence, 'but we have the ultimate weapon on our side - Professor Patenil!' Then indicating the professor with his left hand as the laughter died he continued, 'he and I are going to the museum first thing in the morning, and you can bet on one thing - if there is a way of defeating this virus - the professor will find it!'

'The first thing we must do is to find out where it came from,' interjected the professor suddenly, 'once we've identified its origin, then, we'll know how to deal with it! From what I can see, which is not much, this virus has been amassing for many centuries, even a millennia, indeed, the holocaust may have had a profound effect on it and caused it to grow exponentially. You know, you're very lucky, had you dug the footings by hand instead of that machine you would have all been dead by now!'

'We'd better get straight on it then!' added Sirk emphatically.

'It won't be easy,' the professor reminded Sirk, 'remember, none of us have any knowledge of virii whatsoever!'

'The sooner we go the better then!' replied Sirk. On board the Dart the next morning Sirk went through the motions of take off, and within a few minutes was walking into the museum's medical exhibition hall in search of something, anything, that would hopefully stamp out the hideous viral monstrosity that was about to engulf them. First to get started was the professor, who picked up files, manuals, and any journals he could lay his hands on.

'What exactly are we looking for?' asked Sirk, unable to understand the terminology.

'Anything that contains the word virus - pounce on it!' replied the professor without looking up. Spotting something on a shelf near the ceiling Raff asked Hepra and Kiska to do their famous climbing act. Ten minutes later they had

completely cleared the shelf, but being ancient a lot of the files were too fragile to survive handling and disintegrated under their touch. Handling the remainder with due care Sirk and Arin poured over them.

'Penicillin any good Prof.?' shouted Arin, who was halfway down the hall. Nodding a negative reply the professor carried on his search through some manuals he'd found lying on a bench, next to a host of medical exhibits from God knows when! After an hour most of them thought their search would be fruitless as Sirk and Arin leaned against a table looking dejected, but Hepra and Kiska were studying one exhibit with great curiosity. The other two left working were John and the professor.

'I think I may have something here.' said the professor without looking up, 'it's worth considering... I think.' Hope sprang eternal as they rushed over, and prayed that that would remain with them as long as this menace threatened. Having found a journal from the twentieth century the professor scrutinised it carefully.

'It appears we have a choice of mutation... or, super infection. I think... we're dealing with something called Staph. aureus. No, I don't have enough medical knowledge to understand this,' said the professor pre-empting their unspoken question, 'well... not in time to eradicate it anyway. We are going to have to think of something else.'

'Doesn't the manual give any idea of what we'll need to destroy it?' asked Sirk, now more than scared at the possibility of being wiped out.

'Ah... I see, oh, no... maybe not. No, this'll take far too long!' Getting impatient at the professor's ramblings the others hassled him to let them in on his findings, but all was to no avail as the professor explained his hopes had been dashed by the need to manufacture their antidote. 'We would have to manufacture, Streptomycin, and, or, Isoniazid. No chance!' Looks of dejection pervaded their faces, it appeared they were doomed!

'Sterilisation!' declared Arin suddenly.

'With what?' asked Sirk, impatiently.

'No wait! said the professor, 'are you saying - use the pulsars?'

'Exactly!' replied Arin triumphantly.

'Of course,' added the professor, 'it's so obvious, come on, we're wasting time here!' With that they hurried back to the Dart. It was time to punch a hole in the black morass that meant certain death for them all! In the air once again Sirk made a bee line for it, and if this worked he would wipe it out in one single blow!

'So you think the heat from the pulsars will literally sterilise it?'

'That is my theory.' replied the professor, 'well, Arin's I should say, after all, it was he who thought of it.'

'We'll soon find out,' declared Arin looking through the supercool, 'there it is!'

'Look at the f---n' size of it!' said Sirk totally aghast, 'this has got to work, we can't let that reach the village!' Flying overhead at mach six Sirk put the probes to work, and waited for the computer to give him the necessary information. A few seconds later, the computer spilled out the chilling news.

'Mass, one hundred and thirty thousand square meters, volume, seven hundred and seventy six thousand, four hundred and eighty five cubic meters, direction - due south, rate - two miles per hour. Multiplication factor - nine - in twenty four hours!'

'Shiiiiiiiit!' whistled Sirk through his teeth, and without further ado swung the Dart around and headed north again, then diving at thirty degrees he went in for the kill!

'Shields up!'

'Compliant!'

'What d'you need them for?' asked John, 'it won't be firing back!'

'No, but we don't know how invasive that thing is, after all,

it is a virus, and the computer doesn't like it!

At a thousand meters he reduced the ships speed to mach one, and with his thumb on the button he selected continuous fire, then pressing the firing button six familiar blue lines left the Dart and connected it to the black morass, and to their utter amazement the bolts punched a massive hole right through it! Peeling off he brought the ship quickly around, and surveying his handiwork the seething mass had receded from the blow, but the ground was badly scorched where the bolts had made contact.

'Well, that's better than I expected,' he said calmly, 'let's finish it off.' Going in faster on the second dive he put the Dart in a tail-up attitude, and held the button down as he flew over the insidious germ that had taken his newborn away. His eyes fixed, his teeth set, it was total Annihilation, or nothing! Now receding fast it seemed the more he fired at the mass the faster it disappeared, and after an hour and ten minutes Sirk flew a reconnaissance to make sure there was no chance of it regenerating. Another fifteen minutes and the computer an all clear, and satisfied he'd completed the task successfully told them it was time to go home.

Waiting with Raff to hear their news, the whole village turned out to greet them on their return, hoping and praying it would be good news. Walking from the ship Sirk waved as Cita and Taniche ran to meet them along with Mayan a few feet behind. A smile was all that was needed to start them cheering, and they were glad to welcome home their hero.

'Was it a bad job?' asked Raff, walking over with Sheel.

'At the end of the day, no, it was surprisingly easy,' replied Sirk, 'but I hope you were cheering the right person, this wasn't down to me... we have Arin to thank for this one.'

'No I don't think so,' replied Arin self consciously, 'it was you that destroyed the bastard!'

'Will you listen to him!' retaliated Sirk, 'look, if you hadn't suggested sterilisation we'd be staring death in the f---n'

face in the not too distant future!

'Yeah, I'll second that!' declared John, 'take centre stage Arin, you deserve it!'

'Hear hear!' shouted the professor, 'Sirk and John are right, we were all stumped in the museum, even I, with my knowledge was completely lost!' Sirk grinned his grin, the one that told Arin to give up, he was going to be a hero, whether he liked it or not!

The party had gone well, and everyone had enjoyed themselves. Although the next morning there were a few sore heads, namely Arin, Kiska, and Hepra, but life got off to an early start, and taking Cita to the river for a swim Sirk thought it therapeutically necessary after their tragic experience; the warm waters would relax and calm their minds. Exactly like his brother Arin wasn't used to being hailed a hero, and played down his role in saving them from certain death. The others however were *not* going to let him forget it! Lunch was a merry affair with jokes and stories bandied back and forth, then at two o'clock Sirk approached Raff to suggest they put the original committee back in force as soon as possible. Readily agreeing Raff further suggested they take the rest of the day off, to give those who'd over-imbibed the previous night a chance to recover. Also agreeing Sirk shook Raff's hand and informed the others of their decision, then grabbing Cita's hand told her they were going on a picnic!

Telling the others they were off for a jaunt he and Cita boarded the Dart for destinations unknown. High in the thin upper atmosphere Sirk swooped to one thousand feet over the remains of New York again, then putting her on Levit he took Cita's hand and led her to the supercool.

'I thought it might be wise to give ourselves a reminder,' he said quietly, 'can you imagine any of us surviving that?'

'I still can't believe it,' said Cita staring at the devastation below, 'I never thought it would be that bad!'

'You probably won't believe this but the rest of the world is

exactly the same, Sydney, Rome, Paris, London, Hong Kong, you name it, they destroyed it!' Staring without blinking for a few minutes Cita stood transfixed as she took in the total devastation of their planet for the very first time.

'All because of two hyper-nuclear weapons, and one Depol! We must make sure this never happens in our world!'

'Not really, my angel,' said Sirk correcting her, 'it was man that did that! The weapons were merely the instruments they devised to carry it out.'

'F---n' bastards!' she shouted, 'how could they do something like that!' Putting his arm around her he pulled her close, and comforted her until she'd pulled herself together. Back in their seats Sirk took the ship off levit, then flying to the Canadian border headed west for some time at mach one, and to his amazement the land looked quite lush. Spotting a large clearing he took the Dart down for a closer look.

'This'll do nicely for our picnic!' said Sirk breathing in the keen mountain air. 'This country seems to have fared better than the others, although, having said that there doesn't appear to be any life here!' Producing a wicker hamper from one of the crews lockers made Cita smile, and she thought what a lovely man her husband was, grass, trees, and air like wine, that was something they hadn't tasted for a very long time! Opening the hamper Sirk produced a variety of goodies - all filched from the museum - and John!

'You really thought about this didn't you?' asked Cita, as Sirk poured two flutes of champagne.

'I don't want you talking about me behind my back!' he replied grinning, 'besides, I've got a reputation to keep up!'

'Silly sod!' she said, and laughed at his mock suaveness. As hurrying wasn't on the menu they ate their lunch at a leisurely pace, and the longer it took the better. Being alone for what seemed an eternity was something they

wanted to savour 'til the very last moment. Putting his flute in the hamper Sirk lay back on his elbow and studied the beautiful woman beside him.

'What are you looking at?' asked Cita glancing at him sideways, 'you'll go mad looking at me for too long, you should have married someone good looking!'

'Yeah, I know that.' replied Sirk, teasing her, 'how are you feeling now, do you think you've come to terms with it yet. Tipping the last of the champagne down her slender throat she put the glass on the rug, although she didn't answer for a while, but knew she would answer in her own time Sirk didn't press her. When it finally came her answer wasn't verbal. Slowly undoing the buttons down the front of her blouse Sirk realised what she was doing, and reaching out he put his hand on her arm.

'You don't have to do this you know.' he told her gently. Sliding her blouse from her shoulders she leaned over and kissed him passionately, and feeling her tongue plunge into his mouth Sirk knew she was now over the worst, then putting his arm around her waist he pulled her to him. As his hand slid between her breasts he noticed they had lost their firmness, but having carried milk for their firstborn it was hardly surprising. To Sirk however that didn't matter, in fact he thought it gave her a more radiant beauty, the stresses of motherhood had leant her a "ripeness" that made her somehow more appealing. He'd never understood other men, who, having become fathers, had left their wives for other women just because their bodies had changed. In the mood for another baby Cita's long hair almost smothered him, and feeling her breasts press against his chest he knew there wasn't a chance in Hell of saying no! Sitting on top of him she undid his belt, so sliding his hands up inside her full skirt he felt again the beautiful roundness of her thighs. Tucking his fingers inside her panty band he peeled them gently down, then as her breathing became more rapid and staccato he knew she

was ready. He was! Then, reaching down with her left hand, she manoeuvred him between her legs, then slowly, inch by inch, she mounted him. Suddenly Sirk was inside her; for six months he'd waited patiently, and now at last he would taste the beauty of her body again. Their lovemaking was urgent and born of frustration, then a few minutes later Cita's mouth opened as she issued a cry of relief from her full red lips. A few seconds later he felt Cita tighten on him, then coming like he'd never come before he felt that wonderful downward cascade into the exquisite pit of ecstasy! Eventually parting, they lay in the hot afternoon sun, totally naked, and totally unashamed.

'You ok?' asked Sirk stroking her hair. Now relaxed she rested her head on his chest, and gave him a squeeze. Feeling a thousand feet tall again he would do anything for Cita, even die! They both knew and remembered from the time they'd first met that they would be together forever. At four o'clock Sirk declared it was time to return home, so packing away the remains of their picnic she turned and kissed him passionately.

'What was that for?' asked Sirk, playing it down.

'That, was for a very, lovely, afternoon,' said Cita sincerely, 'thank you darling!'

'I enjoyed it too!' he told her with a smirk.

'Trust you,' she said laughing, then poked him in the ribs, 'that's all you ever think about!'

'Well, I need to think about it now, and, so do you.. after all, we have to rebuild the human race!' he added grinning. Flying back slowly neither wanted the day to end too soon, and Sirk played some love songs from his cache of music, and the first track was John Lennon's Imagine, and Sirk listened to the words - very carefully.

'You know, it's a pity this guy wasn't alive in our time.' he said reflectively.

'How do you mean?' asked Cita, puzzled by his statement.

'If that music had been listened to by the fools who ran our

world, and had comprehended the words... maybe, just maybe, the holocaust would never have happened.' Looking through the supercool Cita stood beside him and thought about that, and realised for the first time the finality of what had happened. Tears welled in her eyes, and sensing her silence Sirk turned to see her sorrow, then, putting his arm around her he told her everything would be alright. The future was the only place for them, the past was buried and no longer relevant. The next morning Raff was up early as usual, and tapping on the wall of Sirk's he waited a few minutes, but getting no answer he was about to leave when suddenly the door opened, and Sirk's head popped out.

'Whadyouwant?'

'Sorry, I didn't realise you were still asleep.' said Raff apologising for his oversight.

'No, it's ok mate,' said Sirk, suddenly realising they had a lot to do that day, 'give me ten minutes can you?' Happy with that Raff went to the communal fire where Sheel was organising breakfast. Some twenty five minutes later Sirk emerged grinning like a Cheshire cat - again. Everyone knew what he'd had for breakfast!

'Oats?' asked John seeing Sirk arrive.

'Double helpings! I must have been a good boy!' replied Sirk, still grinning. Taking a plate he thanked Sheel for a great brekkie, then in between mouthfuls he and Raff discussed the agenda for their next meeting.

BOTTOM LINE

At eleven o'clock precisely Sirk declared the meeting open, and making a small speech to guide the committee on the items of the agenda he then recognised Raff, who wanted to discuss better housing for the Men and their families.

'I don't wish this to sound like sour grapes,' said Raff, starting his oration, 'but, when you left for the other land you erected homes that are considerably advanced from the ones we dwell in. I would respectfully ask the committee to consider erecting such homes for us as well, as you are now back with us - and believe me, you are very welcome, but then, I hope you already know that, and as you will no doubt be erecting domes for yourselves I am wondering if it is possible for us to have the same.' Having finished Raff took his seat, although feeling and looking ill at ease hoped he hadn't offended his friends. There followed a short silence that was eventually broken by Professor Patenil.

'First, on behalf of us all, I would like to say a heartfelt thank you to Raff and his people, for welcoming us back after our traumatic time, and of course it goes without saying Raff that if we build these homes for ourselves by "ourselves" that means you as well, *all of you*. Not to include all of you never entered our heads!'

'Hear, hear!' shouted Sirk, as Arin, and John echoed his sentiment. The first meeting had gone well, and knowing how first meetings could go Sirk found it somewhat surprising. Having reached "Members Apologies for Absence", and "Items missing from the agenda" etc. etc., they had covered and settled every item without abstention.

'In closing this meeting I would like to say that all of us will have a dome to live in, "a dome home, with a free garden gnome".' Laughter erupted, but intrigued by the word gnome the Men asked Sirk to explain. Again Sirk had mentioned something he wished he hadn't, then spent twenty minutes explaining the origins of gnomery, which wasn't

something that really interested Sirk, but, when the Men wanted to know something they didn't rest until they'd got an answer! A week later a site was cleared west of the village, for the erection of seven hundred and fifteen new homes, to house seven thousand one hundred and forty individuals. Being solar powered they would be fitted out with all the latest mod-cons. Two hours later Sirk and Arin had finally replicated the excavator they'd snatched back from "germ" island as Hamys had dubbed it. With the aid of the Replicator they were building on average more than twenty domes a day. A week later and one hundred and two homes had been completed, that went to the neediest of the Men's families, or according to the degree of dilapidation of their hut. Three months on from the start of the project John arrived at Raff's hut and knocked urgently on his door. Opening it a few seconds later Raff stood looking quite perturbed.

'Raff, I've just thought of something, I think.. It's quite important.' he said, earnestly.

'Well, you'd better come in and talk,' said Raff, slightly puzzled, 'what seems to be worrying you?'

'Well, before we build anymore domes, I think we should think about where we're gonna build them!'

'I think we've already done that John!' replied Raff totally baffled, 'that is why we are building them over there!'

'Sorry Raff, I explained that badly,' said John laughing, 'let me explain again, the fire is the focal point in the centre of this - the old village, for people to meet at meal times, that sort of thing. We haven't got that on the new site, so before we go any further I think we should talk about a focal point for the new village!'

'I see what you mean,' said Raff, thoughtfully, 'this is important, yes, you're right John, we must do something about that now.'

'Well we don't want you ending up like people back in our time,' replied John, 'living monastic lives and never really knowing their neighbours, or communicating with them.'

Looking at John quizzically, his last statement had puzzled Raff, who noting his expression explained further.

'I suppose it started centuries ago... according to our history a certain political party had at that time a certain leader who made a conscious decision, and made money available to anyone who was willing to get on their bike, and ride as they put it at the time! They were known as "Yuppies". They started the trend of moving around the country taking different and better paying jobs as they went. After that... well, history proved the rest. That is why when we came here we were pleasantly surprised to see you gathered 'round the fire eating your meals as one big family.'

Having put their theory to Sirk and the others, John and Raff were congratulated for their foresight, and Arin further suggested they build a barbeque area similar to those in their time.

'A great idea mate.' said Sirk visualising the complex. 'Why don't we have several, looking at the numbers involved we're gonna need them!'

'Could I do it?' asked Taniche suddenly. A short silence was quickly followed by looks of sudden shock.

'Well, I am quite good at it!' she protested noting their expressions.

'Oh, no,' explained Arm, 'it's not that we don't think you can do it, it's just that we didn't know you could, but uh... by all means, if you've got the skills, go ahead. Would you like to oversee the whole project?'

'Yes please,' she replied enthusiastically, 'I'd love to!'

'The job's yours!' replied Sirk, then looking at Raff, 'you ok with that?'

'No problem as far as I can see,' said Raff happy to agree, 'I'm sure whatever Taniche comes up with, will look very attractive.'

Having only built a hundred or so domes they were able to modify their existing layout, so producing a design for a large radial area Taniche based it very much on the old

village. A circular layout at the centre was paved with brick on which were built ten barbeques, and were planted up with shrubbery, bedding plants, herbs and flowers. Having seen Sheel's wreath at the funeral gave her the idea of using the Replicator to produce other species to make the area more attractive. Finished with subtle and objective lighting Raff was the first to voice his approval, and was quickly followed by Sirk, John, Arin, and the professor, and ultimately accolades rushed in from the whole village.

'I can see why she's your granddaughter,' said Sirk to the professor, "brains must run in the family!"

'I may have had something to do with it!' replied the prof with a glint in his eye.

'I'm glad I've been able to contribute something at last.' said Taniche, and was pleased they approved of her design. Another visit to the museum paid handsome dividends, when from the Building hall they were able to equip themselves with all but one item, that being mortar. However, only having found one bag of it the Replicator once again came into its own. Once initiated the garden plan became the centre point for all domes, and being built radially around it wide avenues separated each group of twenty eight domes. Needing seven hundred and fifteen dwellings meant fifteen groups would have an extra dome tagged on, but as Arin succinctly pointed out as time passed, and presumably families grew in number and volume, they'd need to build more anyhow, so symmetry he didn't really see as a problem.

The next committee meeting saw them take leaps and bounds into their future, such was the strength of their conviction and endeavour all motions put forward by any councillor was endorsed by the others. A motion to name their dwelling place was put forward, and the popular suggestion of Hometown was happily accepted by all and swept in unanimously.

'Any other business of a non-contentious nature?' asked Sirk

before he closed the meeting.

'No,' replied Raff, hesitantly, "but, I do have one item of contentious business!"

'Tell us what it is mate?' asked Sirk detecting Raff's reticence.

'Well, I uh... I was wondering if, as you're the head of the committee, perhaps you should take over as head of the village, that is if you feel you want to.' Taken aback by this Sirk wondered if there was a certain amount of jealousy attached to his statement, but knowing Raff as he did that wouldn't be the case, as a people weren't given to such pettiness.

'But you're the head of the village Raff, nothing could ever change that.'

'Yes I know, but as I see it, you, being the one that defeated the Powerful one for us, it seems more fitting that you should be the overall chief!'

'I don't agree,' replied Sirk thoughtfully, 'I thank you for considering me for such a high office, but your people must be led by you, I could never do that as well as you... and besides, it wasn't me that defeated the Powerful One - it was us!'

'Perhaps as a democracy we should put it to the vote?' said Raff finally.

'If it's all the same to you Raff I wouldn't feel right taking your office. Apart from that, supposing I woke up one morning to find I was getting the same treatment as Mak! That had them all in stitches, and for almost five minutes laughter reigned, however Raff eventually managed to bring the house to order with a request for Sirk to at least think about his proposal; the meeting was closed. They had taken another step to becoming a true democracy. Getting used to being woken up in the early hours it was now Arin's turn to disturb Sirk's Sunday morning lie-in.

'I've just had an idea, there's another thing we haven't thought of,' said Arin, grinning widely, 'fountains!'

'What?' said Sirk incredulously, and yawning, 'how in f---'s

name are we gonna power them?'

Easy!' replied Arin airing his knowledge, 'we've got everlasting power! Tapping into that would be a doddle!'

'Yeah, I see what you're saying... engineering-wise all we'd need to do is take a feed from the main laser!'

'I can do it! I'll take it on single-handed, it would be my pet project, the Prof. can help me connect up the power.'

'Ok, we'll put it to the committee at the next meeting, and take it from there.' Happy with that Arin went to spend some time with Taniche, and get her expertise on layout and style!

'Well, now I'm up, I might as well get some breakfast,' said Sirk, 'any requests Cita?'

'Onion and chocolate pie?' For a second he thought he'd heard wrong, then stopped dead in his tracks, then walking slowly backwards to the bedroom he looked at Cita to await her confirmation. She smiled, he smiled, then, with a rebel yell ran to the kitchen to make an onion and chocolate pie! Having eaten showered and dressed an hour later they went for their Sunday constitutional, and said hello to their neighbours as they went.

'You know it's funny,' said Cita, engrossed in philosophical thought, 'on our way here I was filled with dread as to what it would be like, but now I don't ever want to go back, even if we could. It's like a different life here, ok, I miss the Ill Eagle, but apart from that...'

'Yeah, I know what you mean,' agreed Sirk, thinking of their long-lost friends. 'I was thinking of Ali yesterday, I feel guilty in a way, I should've brought him as well, he was a good friend.'

'Yes he was,' said Cita, reflectively, 'but, one thing I know for sure, he wouldn't have blamed you, he would've said - 'Go for it Sirk, *take your chance, make the most of it!*'

The next meeting was a boring affair, there was only one new item on the agenda that mostly comprised of going over existing business, and the last item headed "Referendum" was the one Sirk wasn't looking forward to.

'Item eleven,' said the professor looking at Sirk, 'Raff's proposal to step down and hand his leadership to Sirk Notaani, a referendum was suggested at the last meeting, and all agreed it should take place. Any dissension?' Not wanting to offend Raff, he simultaneously wanted to raise his hand in opposition, but knowing he couldn't decided he'd wait and hope he'd be voted out! A date was set for the referendum one week from the date of the meeting, so having no other business the meeting was closed. Gathering their various files and folders the committee members were suddenly interrupted by Sirk.

'I just want to say... I'm gonna be a dad again!' announced Sirk, and everyone cheered; many slaps on the back left him feeling distinctly sore! That evening answering a knock at his door, Sirk found Raff, Arin, and John asking if he and Cita would accompany them to the fire in the old village, and on arrival they found the whole village had turned out to celebrate their good news!

'Whisky for everyone!' declared Raff, pouring (as usual) large measures. It was going to be another one of those nights! Well over half a bottle, and much Bagg music later Sirk noticed Cita was looking decidedly weary, so making their excuses they left for home and an early night.

Looted from the museum an old ballot box would be ideal for the referendum, so with the committee meeting over, they opened the doors of the council rooms for the waiting electorate. By midday the booths had closed and the count had begun, and by one thirty a result was declared; Sirk held his breath! It was a landslide, Raff had beaten him resoundingly, and obviously happy with their leader the Men had given him their vote of confidence.

'I still feel Sirk would have made an excellent leader.' said Raff, as humble in victory as in defeat!

'Well, that's democracy for you,' said Sirk, smiling, 'looks like the best man won!'

'How can that be?' asked Raff of his hero.

'That's the beauty of having a free vote,' replied Sirk, 'the people decide, not the individual, your people obviously prefer you to stay as their leader, and so do we, that's the bottom line!' Bemused and wearing a face of resigned acceptance Raff left thinking he could never fully accept it.

THE ARCHIVIST

The following day Sirk found the time to do something he'd wanted to do for a long time, and that was to explore the many facets of the museum, and was convinced it still had some surprises in store for them! Telling the others he'd be back late he and Raff boarded the Dart.

'If you need me in a hurry, use that!' he told Cita pointing to the handset. Closing the hatch he and Raff made for the bridge, then taking the ship to the take-off port he set her down.

'I want to go back to the Medical hall Raff, I think there might be another floor below that again!'

'Hot shit!' said Raff, 'eyes agog, 'how can that be?'

'Something occurred to me some time ago Raff,' said Sirk, with his eyes glazing, 'given what we already know about the museum, and given the number of exhibits already on display, plus, the amount of subject matter in this world - or was in this world - you've got to say to yourself, there must be more!'

'I don't understand¹' said Raff frowning, 'surely it would be too far underground to survive?'

'I don't think so,' continued Sirk, 'I think there's another complete floor below this one!'

'Three storeys!' said Raff incredulously.

'Could be there's four!' added Sirk, matter-of-factly. On reaching the medical hall, Sirk suddenly recalled the day they'd searched in vain for an antidote for the virus that killed little Sheel. Looking down the hall there were two doors at the far end, and having reached them after ten minutes, he would use these as the starting point of his expedition.

'Heads we take the left, tails the right!' said Sirk, flipping a coin.

'It's the left!' announced Sirk, then spent the next five minutes explaining to Raff the chance of two sides of a coin

in order that two people could make one decision. Pushing it open centuries of grit dragged under the door and echoed ominously down the hall, but curiously (or not) the lights were working, as in most of the halls they'd found. It was plain to see from the onset that this hall was devoted to public entertainment, and contained cinema projectors from a bygone age, with theatre and ten pin bowling. There were artefacts from club entertainment, including "dens of iniquity" as some of them were known, but it was then that something *very* familiar caught Sirk's eye. A neon sign in red white and blue portraying a sick looking eagle, and standing transfixed he stared in disbelief at this sentinel from yesteryear. Right in front of him was the sign Ali Boran had proudly displayed outside his club since first opening its doors "The Ill Eagle"! Other artefacts included Ali's early warning system, which was used by most club owners to forewarn them of police raids. Closer inspection uncovered a cache of holoplays, all of them from Ali's club! It was then he saw something he found too much to bear, a holoplay with his name on it, and in an instant it suddenly dawned on him, this was the holoplay he'd asked Ali to make of Kate Bush's Red Shoes album. For a moment his eyes clouded, and his mind wandered back to that fateful day when Ali had stopped the music to announce the onset of war! After leaving the club he'd not seen Ali again, but he had kept his promise, and made him a copy of his favourite album before he died! Of all the people he wished he'd brought with him Ali was undoubtedly top of the list. Now feeling very low Sirk was at the point of returning to Hometown, and with his head in his hands Raff tried to console him, but knowing Sirk he also knew also he would bounce back.

'Come on!' said Sirk, standing suddenly, 'no good moping like a f---n' kid!' His eyes latched on to the many piles of holoplays, the next one also had his name on it! Picking it up he studied it for a few moments.

'We'll give this a spin when we get back.' said Sirk

ponderously, studying the holoplay with curiosity.

'Something I don't understand Sirk,' said Raff looking perplexed, 'If your world ended at this point, how come there are things in here that really should have been destroyed!' Stopping dead in his tracks he stood stock-still for a few moments, and stared straight ahead as if paralysed.

'F---n' hot shit! You're right Raff, that is something I hadn't thought of, yeah, if our world was destroyed at that moment, these things shouldn't even be here! Something odd going on here,' he said pensively, 'I think we'll have to look into this, soon! But for now, we must get on with the task in hand my friend.' Looking briefly through the second door Sirk swore blind he saw it move!

'Did you see that?' shouted Sirk.

'What?' asked Raff, puzzled by his sudden outburst.

'Oh, you obviously didn't,' said Sirk, 'I could've sworn that door moved just then, come on!' With that, Sirk went Hell-for-leather down the hall, although doing his best to keep up Raff was left in his wake. Reaching the other end he yanked the door open and ran through, but was confronted by a staircase leading down and to the right. Taking the stairs two at a time he reached the bottom and found his "other" hall! Amazingly this one was twice the height of the one they'd just left, and was filled to the brim with exhibits relating to sailing and the sea, and contained vessels of all sizes, types, and age, and some had Sirk wondering how the archivist managed to get them in there!

'I thought so,' said Sirk grinning, 'look, this hall is twice the height of the one we've just left!'

'Which means there must be another one underneath again!' said Raff suddenly.

'You're not wrong!' replied Sirk, his mind raced at the possibilities, until he remembered that mysterious movement he'd seen. 'Shit, there's no one here.'

Opposite the bottom of the stairs he and Raff noticed a door to the left in the top corner of the hall, opening it cautiously they walked through, and again the lights were on, but this hall was as Sirk suspected, it was exactly the same size as the one immediately above it. Containing exhibits from the world of camping, it included a two storey tent from his own time! A movement at the other end of the hall had Sirk chasing shadows again, and on reaching it he dashed through the door so fast he nearly lost his balance! There were no lights on in this hall! His curiosity aroused he used the illumin's powerful beam to slice through the dark blanket in the unlit hall. What met Sirk's eyes was a hall he was pleased to log in his mind, as a certain odour had already given the game away, his nose told him it was devoted to alcoholic beverage! Back to reality, although he could hear no sound, nor see any movement, he was certain someone was here. Shining the illumin around the hall he pulled the pulsar from its clip, just in case, but nothing! 'Raff!' he whispered loudly. 'I'm going in to see what I can find!'

'Ok,' replied Raff, 'be careful.... do you want me to come in as back up?'

'No, take this,' he said handing Raff the illumin, 'shine the beam ahead of me as best you can, if anything attacks, let loose with your pulsar!'

'Hot shit!' announced Raff with glee, 'it's just like the old days!' then grinned at his declaration as Sirk slid into the dark threatening velvet. Walking slowly Sirk watched for any movement that might constitute danger, but after a five minutes and still barely halfway up the hall he'd only made mental notes of a few brand names that had caught his eye. Then an almost imperceptible noise caught his ear.

'Raff, shine it to my right - quick!' Doing as he was bade the illumin picked up a waxen figure dressed in clothes from the early nineteenth century, and for a second he was almost fooled into thinking it was a tailor's dummy, but

whoever he was had made the slight but fatal mistake of moving. Walking towards him Sirk noted the man hadn't moved since he'd been spotted, but getting within a few yards, as if afraid for his safety the man suddenly cowered behind a pile of kegs.

'You have nothing to fear.' said Sirk softly, 'I'm not gonna hurt you... what are you doing down here?'

'What's your name? Mine's Sirk.... Sirk Notaani.' Smiling he held his hand out, and beckoned to the man to shake it, but he appeared more afraid than ever. Not wanting to appear threatening he temporarily withdrew his hand, it was then Sirk noticed the man was incredibly tall, and estimated him to be almost seven feet, as to why was he was so fearful he was unable fathom out.

'It's alright, there's nothing to be frightened of,' repeated Sirk, 'we only want to be your friend.' By this time Raff had reached them, and curiously the man appeared to recognised him.

'Do you know Raff?' queried Sirk.

'I have seen him before.' said the man finally in a gentle voice.

'Where have you seen him?' asked Sirk quietly, not wanting to startle him.

'In here.' replied the man.

'Why have you not spoken to us?' asked Raff.

'I was afraid of the nasty person in the bubble, the one who killed all your friends.'

'But that shouldn't have stopped you talking to us!' said Raff, and clearly puzzled by the man's irrationality.

'I thought if I made myself known to you, the other person might learn of my whereabouts,' said the man fearfully, 'then he might come and kill me!'

'Not now he won't!' said Sirk reassuringly.

'H-how do you know?' asked the man hesitantly.

'It's quite simple - he's dead!' After hearing that the man appeared to relax a little, however, he still kept a safe

distance from Sirk and Raff.

'Why don't we go up into the other hall, the light is better there, we'll be able see each other properly.'

Hesitating momentarily the man seemed uncertain, but Sirk assured him there was nothing to fear. Then, shuffling slowly from the dark corner he walked with them toward the stairs, and in better light Sirk and Raff could see his skin was very pale, waxy and almost luminous in appearance. He was indeed very tall, and Sirk reckoned that at one time he'd had quite an athletic build, but for some reason had allowed himself to become almost emaciated. Sitting at one of the complementary tables Sirk waited for the man to sit first, and that gesture seemed to please him, as well as put him further at ease.

'What is your name?' asked Sirk, now intrigued by this odd man from God knows where!

'I am the Count Saint Germaine!' he announced proudly.

'Well count, I'm very pleased to meet you.' said Sirk, thrusting his hand forward again, and this time the Count shook it, although cool and clammy his handshake was none-the-less firm.

'How long have you been here?' asked Sirk, who'd been burning to ask that question since they'd first encountered him. 'We had no idea you were here.'

'Long before the Holocaust!' answered the count, and not being given to effusive conversation Sirk realised quickly he would have to take things slowly.

'But that's impossible!' cut in Raff, his eyes agog, the mere thought of what he'd said hit him square between the eyes.

'I agree!' colluded Sirk immediately, that would make you over one hundred thousand years old!

'Yes, I suppose it does.' answered the Count calmly.

'But no one can live that long!' announced Sirk incredulously.

'Oh, why not?' he replied, but the count's question was genuine rather than challenging, being completely gob-

smacked Sirk and Raff remained silent for a couple of minutes.

'The average life-span for the human race is at best ninety years!' stated Sirk.

'Alright for some!' said Raff knowing his lifespan was much shorter. Putting a comforting hand on his shoulder Sirk couldn't help but grin at Raff's dry sense of humour.

'Look uh, what do you eat, how do you survive down here,' asked Sirk suddenly, 'where do you get your food from?'

'You have something called a Replicator I believe?' he replied. That made Sirk smile, and knew now this man was no idiot, and had intelligently found a way of becoming self-sufficient.

'I would very much like it if you would be guest of honour at our dinner tonight..' announced Sirk suddenly.

'Well, thank you very much, that is a kind invitation I must say... I accept!' said the Count agreeably.

'Good - this way,' said Sirk, and gestured with his hand at the open doorway, which was a good five minutes walk away. Reaching the Dart the Count seemed unperturbed by the ship, or its interior.

'Don't worry about what happens aboard this ship, you're perfectly safe.' said Sirk to put his mind at rest.

'Yes, it's alright, I've seen it flying about on quite a few occasions.' declared the Count.

'Yes... of course you have!' said Sirk, and it occurred to him that if what this man said was true about his age, he'd obviously seen much more than they could ever hope to.

Returning to Hometown Sirk announced they would banquet in the big hall that night, in honour of their new-found friend. The Count thought it very pleasant that no one stared at him, or asked him about his height, after having related to Sirk his experiences in times past where people would stand and gawk, just because was a little different!

'Listen everyone!' announced Sirk over the mike, 'I would like to introduce a new friend of ours - the Count Saint

Germaine!

The Count Sain-' said the Professor nearly choking on his wine, 'I thought he was a myth!'

'I'm afraid I'm very real, and very much alive!' replied the Count, and smiled in amusement at the professor's surprise.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to be rude,' said the professor hastily, 'it's just that I remember reading about you... I can't remember which book, but roughly the story goes that you'd been accurately described by different people at different times over several centuries, and amazingly, witnesses descriptions of you invariably tallied, describing you as being about thirty five, seven feet tall, and with blond hair! What so amazed people was that when they had checked out the facts, you appeared not to have aged over that same period! According to the article I read, the last time you were seen was at a royal event in Europe just after the turn of the twentieth century.'

'Yes, I remember that wedding, you're remarkably well informed Professor.' said the Count observedly.

'So it's true then?' asked Raff.

'So it would appear.' said the Count cryptically. 'Although I must confess, I feel a lot older than thirty five now!' His dry sense of humour had them laughing near to hysteria.

'What is it that you do,' asked the Professor composing himself, 'I mean, how do you occupy your time?'

The museum,' answered the Count readily, 'I spend my time archiving anything I possibly can, mainly so that people of the future can observe their history.'

'So it's you that has archived the whole museum?' asked the professor incredulously.

'Yes,' said the Count, 'for my sins, I had the place built after the holocaust, then spent my time trawling the world for artefacts to exhibit. It's amazing how much there was to salvage and restore, although... I have to say a few of my exhibits have suffered recently!'

'Sorry about that,' said Sirk, 'you probably know already we had need of those guns recently.'

'Oh please - don't apologise Sirk,' replied the Count, 'I'm glad they were put to good cause!' That had them all in hysterics, but then, getting rid of PO was a good cause!

'But surely after the holocaust there wasn't much left.' added Arin, who'd said very little until this point.

Turning to face him the count informed Arin of his plight to find anything in good condition.

'You see Arin,' he concluded, 'eventually I realised that if I looked hard enough there was an abundance of material to work with. I admit, a lot of it had to be renovated, but it was all worthwhile, and very fulfilling, except when the Powerful One got out of hand on one or two occasions.'

'Well, I can tell you Count,' interjected Sirk, 'that will definitely not happen again, he is very, very, dead! Getting together late that evening Sirk, Raff and the professor talked quickly and quietly amongst themselves. A decision was made.

'Count,' said Sirk suddenly, 'we have agreed, and we would like it very much if you would live with us here... in the village, would that be agreeable to you?'

'I'm flattered,' answered the Count hesitantly, 'but what of my work in the museum? I need my bubble to travel.'

'Ah! So it was you I saw some months ago, I wasn't sure at first, I caught a glimpse of a bubble disappearing over the rim of the crater, you nearly gave me a heart attack, I thought it was PO, but don't worry about your bubble, we'll bring it here for you.'

'Thank you Sirk,' answered the Count with a smile, 'then... I accept, I'll be pleased to spend my time with such humble, yet interesting people.'

The evening went well, and the Count was affable without being overbearing, and being organizationally like-minded he and the professor got on especially well, and spent most of the evening trading information. With their

meal over most got inebriated to varying degrees, more so now they were guaranteed a lifetime supply of wine, beer, lager, spirits, and cider, through the whiles of the Count and his painstaking efforts in the museum. Six months later, although living in the village the Count was seldom seen by anyone. It appeared he preferred to spend his time in the museum furthering his life's quest. The mystery of how he'd managed to live so long it seemed would never be solved, and made it quite clear that he would not discuss the matter, and being too well mannered the others didn't pursue it.

The new village was now complete with its barbeques, fountains and lighting installed, so a farewell party was held for the old village. Yes, it was another of those nights! After two sessions of Bagg music, and apart from whisky, a large variety beverages were now available, and getting unsteadily to his feet Raff prepared to make a speech.

'Thish ish a rather shad ocasshion for all of ush... although, in shome waysh, it alsho hash many bad memoriesh! Sho, raish your glasshesh, and shay... fffarewell to our old homesshhthead... and, hello to ttthe new!' Having procured a twentieth century DJ rig from the museum Sirk had installed his cache of music from the Dart, and now had them dancing the night away. Quickly developing a taste for Rock 'n' Roll the Men particularly had caught the bug worse than Sirk! Having gone from early days of Joe Turner, Larry Williams and Bill Haley, then came the Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Hendrix, and Tom Jones, after that there were liberal helpings of Gilbert O'Sullivan, Abba, and countless others, ending the evening with Robbie Williams and the Corr's, the finale of course could be none other than the king - Elvis! By two thirty, and very near her time Cita and her lump had tired somewhat, and looking distinctly uncomfortable Sirk took her home Sirk and lay her weary head on the pillow, she was asleep before he'd even said goodnight! The night was

hot and sticky, so turning the aircon up a notch by the time he'd showered and jumped into bed Cita looked considerably more comfortable, and as he lay there looking at her he thought how lucky he was to have such good friends to share their new life with. Life's tariff had now taken a marked upward turn compared with when they'd arrived.

all Sirk and the professor had to do now was make final adjustments to the satellite and maximise its efficiency, after that they'd have all the mod-cons of the previous world, but without the bigotry, the cynicism or pollution, and Sirk couldn't remember being this happy in a long time. Every member of the village had home entertainment of one sort or another, thanks to Sirk's insistence, and if it wasn't Holovid, it was music from Sirk's collection, plus, whenever he got to the museum he still made time to hunt out new additions! Arriving that evening for dinner Arin and Taniche made a foursome with Sirk and Cita, it was something Cita had been planning for some time - with an ulterior motive! Partaking of several glasses of whisky, by courtesy of Raff, talk became much easier, and within twenty minutes their tongues were wagging freely, and Cita being clever didn't even mention a pending engagement. No indeed, she talked on many subjects from food to the pending winter and its accompanying floods. Who wants to talk about engagements anyway? It appeared Arin and Taniche did - desperately! Having listened to Cita rant for three quarters of an hour about her different recipes Arin was almost at bursting point, and had to interrupt Cita in full flow! Accepting his apology Cita in turn apologised (clever eh?) for talking too long, then asking Arin to continue it was as good as guaranteed, now she would hear *all* the news she'd been waiting for all evening!

'No!' squealed Cita with delight, pretending she'd had no idea, 'so have you set a date for the happy occasion?' 'We don't really know yet.' replied Taniche looking at Arin,

'we aren't exactly sure how to go about it, I mean, we haven't got a vicar!'

'Well, this calls for a celebration!' said Sirk, and was happy his brother had found someone he could spend the rest of his life with. After their first impression they weren't sure of Taniche, and had certainly never given a single thought to her and Arin becoming an item.

'Come on! I've got this champagne John gave me a while back, let's crack it!' Having already gone through the best part of a bottle of whisky and two bottles of red wine, topping up with bubbly would have a profound effect on them - the following morning! Did they care? No... not really. Who could blame them, anyone else would do the same - wouldn't they?

Yes, it did! Have a profound effect on them. I mean sore heads were becoming commonplace since Sirk had arrived, and having obliterated PO the celebrations had grown in frequency and length. Still, they would recover, that much was known, all except Cita who'd had very little to drink, although Arin, Taniche, and Sirk, all wished they had recovered now, instead of X hours in the future!

'A hair of the dog?' said Arin straight faced.

'Why didn't you think of that?' queried Sirk, then feeling his head thump from the exertion instantly regretted it.

'Because you're a hyperspace pilot, and I'm a seasoned Journalist!' replied Arin succinctly, and laughed at Sirk's hangover.

'I guess I can't argue with that.' said Sirk grinning, then half joking, 'we should visit the seaside soon.'

'Why, is it close by?' asked Arin, his eyes agog at the possibility of a swim in the sea!

'I was only joking, but, now you come to mention it, I suppose it's not more than... maybe, ten hours walk?'

'We can't walk for that length of time, why don't we fly there in the Dart!' said Taniche overhearing their conversation. Hearing them laugh Taniche suddenly realised

what she'd said, and now the butt of their jokes she felt slightly offended.

'Can you imagine cramming the best part of a thousand people on the flight deck of the Dart?' asked Arin laughing loudly.

'They won't all want to go at the same time, surely?' asked Taniche, still feeling hurt at being ragged.

'You wanna put money on that?' asked Arin irreverently.

'Seriously,' said Sirk, waiting 'til he had their attention, 'I'll tell you what would take us all to the beach, in one go!' Then waited for someone to prompt him, but only Cita prompted him, in the ribs!

'No, listen up, that Public Service Gravitron we got from the museum, if we could get it running it would take us all there! And don't forget that they were designed to carry four thousand passengers!'

'How long would it take to get there in something like that?' asked Taniche, now in favour of the project.

'I'd say about seven or eight minutes, something like that.'

'That fast eh?' asked Arin, 'not bad for an old un!'

'Yeah, they were capable of two ton up, even in those days!' added Sirk just for interest.

THE FUTURE BECKONS

The following morning Sirk pulled out the two holoplays he'd found in the museum, and was keen to see Kate Bush do the Red Shoes again, it had been he and Cita's dancing "swan song", but he was also curious about the second holoplay, with his name on it in Ali's handwriting.

'I've got a surprise for you!' he announced as Cita walked into the lounge.

'Oh not again! Do we have to do it every half hour?' Laughing loudly Sirk sensed her humour was as sharp as ever, then slotting the holoplay into the player he pressed play and sat heavily on the sofa and waited for it to start. Finishing a bit of tidying away Cita sat beside him as the vertical green pencil thin line expanded to a full picture of Ali standing in front of the mike as he always had.

'Sirk my good friend,' he began, 'as you'd hoped with everything that is going on, you will probably never see this play, indeed, as I'd also hoped, anyhow, here it is... for your entertainment, Kate Bush!' With that Ali's image faded and was replaced by Kate Bush who went through each number on the album just as Sirk remembered. Almost an hour later, and one replay of their favourite track Sirk switched it off. His attention then turned to the second holoplay, his curiosity needing satisfaction. Stretching out on the sofa again he picked up the remote, and pointing it at the player waited again for it to start.

'Hello again Sirk,' said Ali gripping the mike tightly with his big right fist, 'I hope you enjoyed the Kate Bush album... was it ok? I had a few problems getting it to take 3D! Anyhow, if you are still alive I hope you will see this as well as Kate Bush. I've been following your progress on Global Holovis Sirk? I really hope you make it mate. Go for it buddy! I know justice is on your side, even if Tranter doesn't... I don't think it'll be long now before... you know what.' Realising Ali was referring to the pending launch of

the Cathan missiles he listened intently. 'Anyhow, my old friend, wherever you are, if and when you see this I hope you and Cita are happy... and you've got plenty of bambinos! Adios, and good luck my friend-.' The holoplay suddenly disappeared, and being left with nothing but white noise Sirk cried bitterly in the knowledge that the white noise they now watched meant his demise was a certainty. Comforting him Cita cried her own tears, Ali had been a good friend to them both, indeed, it was true to say that had it not been for Ali, Sirk would never have had the courage to ask Cita for a dance. In those days being a raw recruit, Sirk hadn't considered himself good enough for Cita, but playing cupid Ali as usual had had a quiet word with Cita, and had told her that the nice looking young man across the room was very interested. After their first meeting at the tonal concert he'd lost his nerve, and it was some weeks before he saw her again, and Ali wasn't going to allow Sirk to let this chance slip away!

Feeling low for the rest of the day he went to the kitchen for something to nibble as he did before dinner, and putting his arm around Cita's shoulder gave her a very large squeeze.

'You know, I was lucky to have had a mate like Ali, God I wish now I'd picked him up, why didn't I, would another ten minutes have made that much difference?'

'I know how you feel love,' replied Cita tenderly, 'but sadly we can't change the course of history.' Holding on tight to the man she loved so dearly she knew he regretted bitterly not having brought Ali with him, and would do so for the rest of his life!

Extricating the Gravitron from the museum had caused them considerable trouble, and had consulted the professor on powering it up, but with his usual ingenuity it was running! Chasing around the crater in it like a couple of kids Sirk and Arin had great fun, and stopped frequently to take anyone for a ride who was willing to risk their necks!

Having proved its safety, or more to the point, having tired of their new toy they parked it outside the town, then informed everyone of the first excursion to be run by ARINSIRK Tours. Having had a first-hand brief from Sirk, and never having seen the sea before the Men were over-awed at the thought of seeing an expanse of water that large. Setting off at nine o'clock they'd decided to make a day of it, and as usual Sirk had found the public address system!

'And playing now, the perfect number for our little jaunt, Frankie Ford with... Sea Cruise!'

Having studied much Holofilm Sirk was now rapidly becoming quite the accomplished DJ, and the Men loved every minute of it, but everyone was intent on seeing what this large expanse of water and left the village looking like a ghost town. Putting the Gravitron on levit Sirk released the gravity belts, and without hesitation everyone made immediately for the portholes - to see the sea! First off was Arin who was also first in the sea, and mouths agape the Men watched him run into the sea, but quickly followed suit! Thankfully the beach was flat and perfect for the kids, and being very near to her time Cita was happy to sit on the beach and watch the others have fun. Spending half an hour in the water Sirk remembered Cita would be by herself, and so she didn't feel neglected he spent the rest of their time with her. By one o'clock everyone was ready for lunch, and with close on a thousand people lunching on a beach isn't something you would think out of the ordinary, but given they were the only thousand people in the world seemed rather weird thought Sirk.

'Memories?' said Arin, observing the expression on Sirk's face.

'Yeah, I was thinking about that weekend we went to Southend, just before Dad decided we were moving to America, I was eight, I think, you must have been a fraction over six.'

'Yeah,' replied Arin suddenly with a grin, 'remember that big bastard who took a chunk out of your ice cream with his big horse teeth, and you rammed the rest of it down his throat 'til he choked!' They laughed 'til they cried at their halcyon memories. Their day by the sea was a total success, and everyone had enjoyed themselves, but like all days it eventually came to an end; it was time to return home. A clear blue sky had persisted throughout the day, and only now was the sky marred by high Cirrus clouds in the west. A sign that the wet season would soon be with them! Only Cita was going home without a tan, but given her skin tone it would hardly notice anyhow, and most of the others it has to be said, were lobster red rather than tanned!

Little or no business was conducted during the wet season, purely for the reason that there was no hurry, and no one needed to get wet... Manana. Mostly the whole village waited and watched for the wet season to blow over, while staying warm and dry indoors they waved to one another from their domes. The annual wet season had finished early, and in less than two the sun had put his hat on again! The crater floor soon became dry and parched again, and within three hours there was hardly a sign that one single drop had fallen! Action was swift now, and Sirk was anxious to get a town council elected, so having modified two originals he had overseen the construction of a "long" dome, this they would use as their town hall. On a visit to the museum Sirk and Arin had discovered a chain of office for Raff, which after a few modifications stated his name, the date he was elected, and was ready for presentation. Being the first official chief, and now the newly elected mayor of Hometown, he'd need something befitting his status. Overwhelmed by his gift Raff was close to tears as Arin draped it around his neck, but not wishing his followers to think he was going soft he recovered in time to make a short speech, and thanked Sirk and Arin not only for their incredible gift, but for their support

ongoing since their return. The processes of democracy had been installed, and were duly followed by electing the town council. Having incorporated as many of the Men's ideologies into the new "Senate" style council as was possible, a working model was found upon which to build their future. A national holiday once a year for a two month duration at a pre-determined time would be spent at the seaside, and the old Gravitron would be utilised for that very purpose. The remaining ten months would be spent building their future, to expand their numbers with the sole purpose of producing errant members into their society, who, at maturity would go out and regenerate other parts of the planet and repopulate mother Earth. From then on they planned, and hoped, that as mutual trading nations it would build them global wealth, and culminate in prosperity for the world as a whole. This time however, committees would be set up to monitor every single new idea, invention, so a process was set in place to ensure there was no repeat of historical errors. Having been given a golden opportunity to make sure that this time it worked, there could be no room for mistakes. Laws, stringent laws would be set in place to protect people from any would-be unscrupulous usurpers, who, thinking they'd found a way to make themselves rich at the expense of others, would be dealt with severely! Having beaten off the Powerful One, and destroyed the virus spreading from their one time home, they not only had to be seen to be "doing it right", but would have to do it right! To do otherwise in their opinion would be like throwing it all away. All agreed to put into use any working equipment that could be gleaned from the museum provided it wasn't detrimental to their new doctrines.

TANICHE AND ARIN GET MARRIED

The dispute over who would perform the ceremony was eventually settled by consensus, which resulted in the professor being elected as their first religious leader. Having read about God from old bibles in the museum from time immemorial the Men were no strangers to religion. Although intrigued by the bible stories they confessed that some of it they didn't understand. At first reluctant Professor Patenil eventually undertook the duties bestowed upon him, and accepting his new post gracefully he realised would please everyone, plus, it was Taniche, his own granddaughter for whom he would be performing the marriage. That incredible museum had come up trumps again, and provided Taniche with the perfect wedding dress, but due to a distinct lack of dress-makers Mayan adequately carried out the few necessary alterations. It also produced top hats and tails for the groom, best man, and, grandfather of the bride! Taking place in the town hall the ceremony should have started at eleven o'clock, March 18th 100,075, but, had to be delayed when Prof. Patenil, because of a technical hitch, was unable to proceed as the minister. Her father not being present meant it was down to him as the nearest living relative to do the honours and give her away! A hurried vote had been cast, and Raff was drafted in as the *new* priest to see the ceremony through to its conclusion, and considering his lack of training he carried out the task with surprising acumen. Reaching that part of the ceremony where Raff had to ask "if anyone knows of any reason or impediment why these two people should not be joined in holy matrimony," a sudden cry of yes from Cita brought proceedings to a grinding halt, and wondering what had gone wrong the congregation turned to look in her direction! Through her pain Cita grinned, Sirk grinned, then everyone grinned! It was her time.

'Hey! You trying to spoil my wedding?' said Arin making everyone laugh at what was supposed to be, and were given to believe a solemn occasion, but it appeared that that is not how it would be in this case as Cita had put her seal on the proceedings!

'Raff, you'd better read faster, I don't think we've got long!' said Sirk looking at Cita. With furrowed brow he continued, and occasionally glanced with concern in Cita's direction. Including his wife Sheel a few of the women suddenly took Cita from the hall; he closed the book.

'Who's got the ring?' asked Raff suddenly.

'I have,' said Sirk, looking worried, 'why?'

'Give it to me!' he said abruptly, although looking very puzzled Sirk complied. Having given the ring to Raff he then looked at the congregation, whose gaze was fixed firmly on the door and Cita's progress.

'I now pronounce you man and wife!' said Raff hastily. 'You may kiss the bride... and so will I! The whole place erupted with laughter, and at this point Taniche was so overcome with mirth she only managed to stay on her feet with help from her husband of one minute, while poor Cita laughed fit to bust through her obvious pain!

'Photographs!' shouted John, but two snaps was all he got! One showed Taniche and Arin running from the hall to catch with Cita, and the other of Raff hanging on to Taniche' wedding dress as he tried to keep up! Hoping there was some they could help by the time they'd arrived Sheel had already taken delivery of a baby boy!

'Brilliant!' shouted Arin, pleased for his brother, who now had a son and heir.

'She hasn't finished yet!' said Sheel, pushing a much worried Raff out of the way.

'What!' said Arin, as his eyebrows hit the top of the dome!

'Yes, it's twins, you'll have your work cut out now!' said Sheel smiling broadly at Cita, who was still puffing and panting in the labour of birth pain, but seven minutes later

a baby daughter was born to Sirk and Cita, a twin sister for their baby boy.

This will be a triple celebration!' shouted Hepra from outside.

'How in Hell's name did you figure that out?' asked Arin, looking bemused.

'One wedding, two births, one and two make three... am I right?'

'There's nothing wrong with your maths, you're excused from school tomorrow!' said Sirk beaming like a man with no face.

No prizes for guessing! Yes you're right, it was another one of those nights! Putting drink aside for one moment, no one knew if Taniche and Arin enjoyed their wedding night, including Taniche and Arin! Morning, well it was almost midday actually before anyone surfaced! With faltering steps Raff re-entered the world from his house at eleven thirty two, and even with his cast iron stomach he didn't have much to say, and looking around he expected to see others going about their business, but became dejected on seeing an empty village, as it appeared he was *still* the one who always got up first! Poor Cita was that tired after giving birth she couldn't see anyone 'til late afternoon, but as it turned out no one was capable of seeing her 'til late afternoon!

'Have you named them yet?' asked Raff, when he and Sheel eventually turned up at five o'clock.

'Yes,' replied Sirk, 'we have, but I'll let Cita have the honour of telling you, after all, she put in all the hard work!'

'Our boy we have named, Arin Raff,' announced Cita proudly, 'and our daughter is called Sheel Taniche!'

'We are honoured that you have named them after us,' said Raff with Sheel echoing her approval.

'Likewise,' said Arin who'd just arrived with Taniche smiling amiably beside him.

'Well, what's it like being an old married man?' said Sirk teasing his brother.

'Hey, less of the old!' retorted Arin laughing, 'anyhow, what's it like being an old married father? No seriously, it's great, I wouldn't have it any other way.'

'No, neither would I!' said Sirk wearing a permanent grin, then rolled his eyes skyward.

'Trust you to bring the tone of the conversation down!' said Arin laughing at Sirk's joke.

'Well... I know it's a thankless task, but someone's gotta do it!' said Sirk seriously.

'Well... they sure picked a good un' in you!' said Arin ironically, and on a rare occasion caught his brother out.

Five years later the village had grown to more than double its original size, and on John's advice had been given town status. It was a day of celebration, so with the opening of their new school everyone was given the day off. Having been made headmistress Sheel appointed Cita and Taniche to the first teaching posts. Their situation had never been better, so another picnic by the sea was readily agreed by the committee, and the Gravitron was once again pressed into public service, but this time it was almost half full! With hampers packed and everyone on board John piloted the great machine from the town. Now teenagers John Junior and Odin were suitably impressed by their fathers ability to pilot this great monstrosity from a bygone age. Apart from that it gave Sirk a break from ferrying everyone around, who was more than grateful at being able to spend more time with Cita. Similar to their last day by the sea this one also enjoyed an azure blue sky, hot sun and pleasantly warm water. Everyone had the time of their lives, swimming, splashing, and generally larking around like tomorrow didn't matter. As days went it was seemingly endless, and time being on their side there were no deadlines to meet, no bosses to harass them demanding more work for less money! Surely this idyll would last

forever! If Sirk and the others had anything to do with it - it would! One thing Sirk knew for certain, he had good and loyal friends, who, like him worked assiduously to maintain their equilibrium.

Complete with bawling kids not wanting to return home again - ever, John flew the Gravitron back slowly.

'What's taking you so long?' asked Sirk, wondering why John was flying close to stall speed. 'If you go much slower the Gravitron will lose it's field!

'Do you wanna go home?' asked John with a smirk, then thinking for a second or two he eventually answered in the negative.

'I thought not.' said John leaving his answer to hang in the air.

'Ok,' said Sirk, responding to John's reluctance, 'what's on your mind?'

'Well... I've been thinking, it would be nice if we built some domes down here, so whenever we come down... a sort of holiday home if you like.'

'I like!' replied Sirk enthusiastically, 'have you been taking brain pills lately?'

'Very funny!' said John laughing. 'So as an idea, you think it might be worth putting forward at the next committee meeting?'

'I'll put it on the agenda.' said Sirk excitedly, and was keen to get things moving in that direction. Back in town nearly two thousand people said their goodbyes, and looking forward to the next outing all agreed it had been a wonderful day.

The following day, Raff, Sirk, and the professor, paid another visit to the museum in search of equipment and supplies for the next village. It was only a matter of weeks now before they would elect the members of the expeditionary team, the time was rapidly approaching to start the first phase in their rebuild programme for old mother Earth. No one could have foreseen what was to

take place that day, except of course, Hamys. Since waking that morning he was full of foreboding, and remembering how prophetic he'd been about Germ island the whole town was wary! As lunchtime approached nothing had happened, but still feeling wary furtive glances were cast to all points of the compass, but by mid-afternoon they had relaxed a little, and considered that maybe Hamys had got it wrong! Most of the Men had been in the field tending the crops, but Hamys was the only one unable to settle into a rhythm. Then, at ten past three he shot up upright, with his eyes darting in all directions and his senses suddenly razor sharp, he stopped work completely.

'Everyone! Get the f--k out of here!' he shouted, and was clearly alarmed at something that as yet remained intangible and unseen, 'everyone, get into your homes!' No one needed telling twice, as tools were quickly dropped to the ground the Men ran into the town shouting warnings as they went. The urgency of the situation alerted Taniche and Cita, who frantically called the children into the school. Making them nervous the town was now deathly quiet, and not knowing what was coming made it nerve-racking. Suddenly out of the crop field came the most awesome sight they'd seen for a very long time, as a giant Anaconda slithered rapidly toward the town!

'Where's Arin Raff?' asked Taniche suddenly, concerned at his absence from the assembly.

'Oh God,' said Cita seeing him two domes away, 'he's still outside!'

'Oh my god,' said a terrified Taniche, 'we must get to get him before that thing!'

'I'll go!' said Cita, 'if I go around the blind side of the school, I should be able to reach him before that thing gets here!' Before Taniche could protest she was through the door and running as fast as she could.

As far as it went it had been a very productive day, as Sirk, Raff, and the professor had sorted most things they'd

need for the expeditionary force. In one year from this day there would be another town in existence, a separate entity in its own right. Apart from trading with Hometown, the new occupants would build and expand for their own sake until they became self sufficient. After that would follow other new towns, and so on until well after their lifetimes, and they and the Men would be remembered as the ones who started it all. As a council, being were responsible for the future of mankind they would have to make edicts, that everyone would have to follow, no matter what! Boarding the Dart Sirk instructed the computer to take them home on auto. There was no reason to hurry, and it would give him the opportunity to talk to the others during the flight home. Having told the others that to a large degree Canada had also survived the holocaust, Sirk suggested it would make an excellent venue for a future phase in the development plan, and John said they would look forward to checking out the country as a viable proposition. Looking through the supercool Sirk's heart sank as he watched Cita run after Arin Raff, then seeing the Anaconda twenty feet behind and closing fast his mind raced! By using the pulsar he could eliminate it in a split second, but by the time he'd aimed and fired it would be too close, and apart from the snake the bolt would also kill Cita! Then suddenly his peripheral vision saw something else, and looking down to his relief he saw the cats, seven of them! Having forgotten how long they'd been here, as well as there own it dawned on him that the cat population had also grown! Seeing the cats approach from its left the snake turned quickly, and as Cita and Arin Raff became history the snake turned its attention to its adversary. Pre-empting the snakes intention the cats swerved to its right narrowly avoiding its bone-crunching jaws. Others from the pride attacked from the rear distracting it further, turning like lightning it struck back at its two assailants, but thankfully its jaws missed both. By now the cats had allowed Cita and Arin Raff to

put some distance between them and beast, and after their narrow escape the cats were busy regrouping for another attack. Thinking quickly Sirk took the Dart to ground level, and opening the hatch he lowered the walkway, and running the gauntlet Cita made for the hatch with Arin Raff. Without warning the beast rekindled its interest in its former prey, but waiting at the top of the walkway with a pulsar rifle Sirk allowed Cita and his son through the hatch to safety, and barely having time to aim he brought up the pulsar, now only a few feet away he was staring at those gaping jaws again, but with a burst of high voltage pulses the beast died instantly. With a resounding thud its massive bulk slammed into the hull of the Dart and hit the ground with a smack. Before Sirk's had fired his life-saving bolt the cats hadn't had a chance to close their attack, so thankfully this time there were no casualties!

'You saved my wife this time,' said Sirk as the cat brushed affectionately against him, that action, and the weight of its body brought back memories of long ago, although curiously thought Sirk, it wasn't that long ago!

'I owe you big time, you have my undying friendship and loyalty.' Having recovered from her fright Cita left the safety of the Dart to see the big cats again, and bending on one knee she stroked one of the females, but as it affectionately licked her face, it smoothed against her and knocked her clean over in the process! Nudging her playfully it was telling her to get up, and to Sirk's great amusement, being very much in a playful mood every time she did so the cat proceeded to knock her over again. Now it was safe without warning sixteen cubs ran out, also wanting to join in the fun! Everyone laughed as time and again Cita was bowled over by the beast, and her every attempt to stay vertical was instantly thwarted by the mother cat. Then as if tiring of her newfound amusement she suddenly stopped. A quick call to the infants and they were off, their duty done, another life saved, albeit not one

of their own, but a species they and their kind had respected since time immemorial. The Anaconda having been fried wasn't exactly user friendly as far as the cats pallets were concerned, and Sirk realised suddenly he'd have to get rid of the body, and quickly! To let it putrefy in the village was unthinkable, and a visit to the museum produced a rope and tackle, then hoisting its carcass aloft he used the Dart to dump it in the north crater far from Hometown. However, his action produced one spectacle they hadn't counted on, Honey Buzzards! At least twenty of them circled that afternoon to feed on the carcass, and not being as fussy as the cats they gorged themselves on a free meal supplied by courtesy of Sirk catering! As with the cats, Sirk was pleased to see their number had also grown, and all existing life here was now on the increase. It was a good sign for the future, even if they had only had a small percentage of Earth's original animal stock!

Back in the village Raff joined the professor and talked about the pending expedition to find a new settlement.

'You know,' said Raff pensively, after finishing his discussion with the professor. 'I did wonder if we could have used the Replicator to save baby Sheel, surely that would have worked.'

'No... I'm afraid not,' replied Professor Patenil kindly, 'you see, the Replicator is fine for duplicating inanimate objects, but when it comes to things like soul, personality, consciousness, etc., it can't replicate them as they have no molecular structure the unit can recognise. So you would only produce a living body with no learning ability that would recognise no one, and would be totally useless to itself and others, apart from that, had you successfully replicated poor little Sheel, the disease having already infiltrated her body would have been replicated with her, so... you would only have succeeded in delaying her death by a second or two.'

'What was this virus that killed little Sheel?' asked Raff

looking disconsolate and feeling he'd been of no use to his friends.

'It's called Staph. aureus.,' the professor told him, 'I did a bit of research on it in the museum... it appears that back in the twentieth century they had quite a problem with it, as every time they increased the strength of antibiotics so the virus grew in strength, but thinking they'd wiped it out in the mid-twenty first century, it re-appeared in twenty one eleven and wiped out millions, after which they concocted another antidote, which seemingly *wiped it out again*. However, we now know different... I think even now we'll have to be vigilant, I'm not too sure we've wiped it out completely, even with the pulsars!'

'But surely if we've sterilised the earth,' continued Raff, 'it must be dead by now!'

'Not necessarily,' replied Professor Patenil patiently, 'they are known as Saprophytes, they obtain their nourishment from soil and water and don't need a living host, and if not recognised in time... when they invade the human body the effects can be fatal, and *that* is where we failed little Sheel!'

VANTOWN

Overnight Raff had gave much thought to what he'd learnt from the professor, and with a new morning was feeling more his old self, and as a council meeting had been convened for ten o'clock he needed to be at his best, and with only two items on the agenda, one of them was the pending expedition to found a new town, that he and Sheel secretly hoped to be considered as "possibles" to lead and organise the new settlement. At ten o'clock precisely the meeting was declared open, and everyone was there to hear what John had to say regarding logistics for the expeditionary force. Giving them a half-hour run-down on what he proposed to do regarding the settlement, food, equipment and back-up for those involved, John then invited questions from the members, that culminated in Raff asking if he and Sheel were among those chosen to form the team.

'Yes,' replied John smiling, 'I can assure you, that you will both be going with Arin and Tanihe, Professor Patenil, Hamys and Annyl, and last but not least, Kiska and Vala.

'Assuming no one has any more questions on this matter, I move to the next item. A name for the new town... Any ideas?'

'Newtown?' said Sirk sardonically.

'Oh, very original!' added Arin laughing.

'Oi! I don't hear you come up with anything?' replied Sirk, grinning.

'How about Vantown?' suggested the professor suddenly.

'How did you arrive at that?' asked Sirk, wondering how the professor was able to throw in something totally confusing.

'Well...' started the professor slowly, as was the norm, 'as I see it, the party going out to initiate the satellite town, are in the vanguard of a new era, and a town, so if we take the Van from Vanguard and add it to town we have - Vantown!' It was unanimous, and a show of hands

clinched it. At eleven o'clock John was relieved to see not one hand raised when he asked for "Matters of a non-contentious nature", and swiftly closed the meeting.

Walking from the town hall Kiska ran toward them, sweating and considerably out of breath, and as he'd come from a southerly direction they were somewhat confused as to where he'd been, there was nothing but crater in that direction. Stopping in front of them he paused for a few moments to regain his composure.

'I've found a bubble,' he declared excitedly, 'it's in the control room where PO launched the missiles at us!' 'Are you sure?' asked Sirk, convinced all but one had been destroyed.

'Yes,' replied Kiska, having recovered a little, 'and - it works!'

'You mean you've flown it?' asked Sirk incredulously.

'Yes, it was difficult... as it was made for that big fat shit, but I did it!'

'Well f--k everything!' said Sirk, and smirked at the pluck of this little guy.

'Well, it's a bit late now, but... you know that was a dangerous thing you did?' said Arin seriously

'Yes I know, I got board so I decided to take a walk.' Staggered by the little man's tenacity Sirk was also concerned that no one had noticed him missing! They would have to be more vigilant in future, otherwise another tragedy might well overtake them. Three days later John had gleaned and gathered all they would need for the expedition, and had assisted Sirk in loading everything onboard the Dart. The whole morning had been spent checking and re-checking the inventory to ensure nothing foreseeable could go awry. At midday they stopped for lunch with the villagers in the recreation area, and it seemed most were there for the send-off, and this would be the last day they would eat together as a community. At two thirty Sirk suggested they make a move, it would take them an

hour to find a suitable site for Vantown, and another two to unload their cargo, even using the Replicator it would take them a further two hours to erect three domes before leaving the inhabitants of Vantown to fend for themselves! As it was they'd found a suitable site on the Welsh coast, a spot west of Goodwick, which according to maps in the museum was known as Trefasser, and thankfully it was surrounded by a reasonably good tract of fertile land. By the time they'd erected the solar panels and aligned them with the satellite it was already after seven thirty. So without further ado Sirk said farewell to his brother and Taniche, then saying goodbye to the others he and John boarded the Dart and headed back for Hometown.

'D'you think they'll be alright.' asked John apprehensively. 'Sure they will,' replied Sirk reassuring him, 'they'll be in constant radio contact, so if there's anything they need all they have to do is call, and I can be there in minutes!'

As time went by Vantown's development proved encouraging, and being largely self-sufficient it stood in its own right, and as luck would have it, walking the cliffs with Taniche one day Arin spotted large quantities of Kelp near the shoreline, and knowing it to be a good source of protein he had the idea farming it for Vantown's economy. Trading the Kelp against goods needed from Hometown considerably helped their prosperity, and by now Sirk and Cita's kids were almost ten years old, and were learning fast about the welfare of the Hometown and their part in supporting it, and were also taught by their parents as to how and why they were there, and, that nothing like the holocaust must *ever* happen again.

Two years after Cita's twins Taniche had given birth to a boy, and now eight years old was a cousin to the twins. Ranging in age from two to seven years, Raff and Sheel had had four kids, Hamys and Annyl, three, two girls and a boy, and with his rabbit-like bedroom activities Kiska had beaten them all, as Vala had given birth to no less than six!

By this time another six settlements had been established, and were trading amongst each other with humour and good will! Having grown to such proportions a member of each town's council was duly elected to sit on a brand new senate-styled Grand Council in Hometown, and sitting every three months they discussed any and all matters important to the overall well-being of the communities. Life had never been better, and minus credit facilities a monetary system had also been implemented, indeed Hometown had benefited because of it, and now that every person had everything they wanted, money, entertainment, transport, holidays, and other niceties that people need on a day to day basis life was more comfortable. A total lack of crime meant policing wasn't necessary, as all parents raised their children on the premise that if it wasn't yours you do not take it, the need to steal had been removed by careful fulfilment, so theft no longer had any relevance. At the most recent council meeting item one on the agenda was to give Hometown city status, and because history had shown crime had been prevalent it had the effect of raising concerns, but the dissenters fears were quelled by councillor's reference to their crime record so far, and there were no further objections. After many arguments over dropping any part of its original name, it was finally agreed by all to name it Hometown City, and with a population of over three hundred thousand it now prospered exponentially, but by the narrowest margin Vantown had surprisingly come a close second, and with competition being fierce other settlements came in very close succession.

A DARK STRANGER

Now considerably inebriated they had been in the museum for over two hours, and had been reminiscing over old times with a bottle of whisky they'd procured from the new distillery before leaving. However, it was time to return home, and after their usual short flight Sirk brought the Dart down on auto, but doing so he noticed a large crowd in the recreation area. Thinking the worst Sirk and Raff ran down the walkway, and pushing their way through the throng wondered what had attracted them. Reaching the inner circle they saw a man, but he was no ordinary man, he had a black skin! Having been staked out over one of the barbecues the poor guy was obviously in severe pain, but to Sirk and Raff's dismay Sirk's son Arin, and Kiska's eldest son Bartak had taken him prisoner for apparently stealing food from the crop fields! To Sirk and Raff it was a case of *deja vous*, as Sirk remembered graphically the Hell and torment he'd suffered at Mak's hands, and seeing another man in the same predicament had Sirk's memory was working overtime! Accompanied by a swollen eye and lacerations to his chin, a gash on his scalp bled profusely.

'Untie him ! ' barked Sirk.

'Wait a minute Dad, we found hi-'

'I said - untie him - *now!*' he repeated, when his dad said do it now Arin Raff knew better than to argue! Seeing Arin Raff back down Bartak then threatened Sirk with a pole, the same weapon that had obviously done the damage to the stranger.

'We caught him stealing our food! We have been teaching him a lesson!' shouted Barkat in no uncertain terms. 'Put the stick down!' said Raff quietly. Turning quickly he then lunged at Raff, but stepping deftly aside he avoided what would have been a nasty blow. Grabbing Bartak around the neck Raff threw him heavily to the ground, then kicking the stick out of reach he walked over and picked it

up. Raising it above his head Raff had every intention of bringing it down on Bartak's cranium

'Wait!' shouted Sirk, 'there's no point in hitting him Raff, leave him there for now.' Realising what he was about to do he thought the better of it and threw the stick to the ground.

'I don't understand Dad,' said Arin Raff, 'I thought you said we should never let anyone take anything from us?'

'I did!' barked Sirk again, 'but I also said don't pre-judge anyone, this guy was eating our food for a reason, did you stop to consider that?' Looking dejected Arin Raff realised he'd done wrong, and as the crowd began to disperse Sirk quickly realised the threat had passed.

'What's your name?' he asked the black man.

'Kinshasa,' he replied guardedly, 'you speak English?'

'Yeah,' said Sirk laughing, 'sorry, I'm not laughing at you, this situation is similar to one I found myself in some time back.... but I'll tell you about that later. In the meantime we'd better get those wounds of yours seen to, *and* get you some something to eat!' Smiling for the first time Kinshasa realised he was among friends.

'I am sorry for the way you've been treated,' said Raff suddenly, 'if there is anything I can do to make amends, just ask.'

'I admit, I was a trifle worried about my health 'til you showed up.' he said humorously. Their laughter released the tension, and it appeared Kinshasa's sense of humour was very much like their own, and Sirk insisted he stay with them until he'd made a full recovery. Although having many questions Sirk purposefully held back until Kinshasa was well enough talk comfortably, and was glad he'd got there in time to save him from the same agonies he'd been through. Three days later seeing Kinshasa sat alone in the recreation area Sirk watched him for a moment, and realised his face was very troubled.

'There's something bothering you,' said Sirk softly, 'if you

want to talk... I mean would I be prying if I asked what?' Not having heard him arrive Kinshasa spun around.

'Sorry, I didn't hear you... no, it wouldn't be prying, I uh, I was just thinking about, how far I've come.'

'How far is that?' asked Sirk, interested in his new-found friend.

'I couldn't put it in terms of mileage, but I've been travelling for more than four years!'

'What's the name of your country?'

'Candia, it's a long way from here, I managed to cross a frozen sea, then I trudged across a continent to get here.'

'Were you travelling, east?' asked Sirk, trying to determine which part of the globe he'd come from, but by the name he'd given Sirk had an inkling that Canada was the country to which he referred. Although Kinshasa had no idea which point of the compass he'd travelled from, he thought he'd headed west, having mostly followed the sun.

'Are there others of your race?'

'Yes, although, by now there may not be.' he replied looking downcast.

'How do you mean exactly.' asked Sirk, attempting to find out as much as possible. Thinking for a few moments he turned to Sirk and looked him straight in the eye.

There are - were - about eight thousand of us, until ten years ago...then this monstrosity arrived and enslaved my people, and forcing them to pan for gold... at first many defied him, including me, but having all the weapons I realised it was futile trying to get the better of him as we had none! I fought and argued with my own kind in an attempt to make them see that if we let him get the better of us we were finished as a race, our pride, our dignity, and our freedom would be gone forever.' Without interruption Sirk listened to his tale of woe, and couldn't deny it sent a chill down his spine. Could it be that PO was still alive, and suddenly remembered the moment he'd found that piece of PO's finger lying on the ground in the take-off port, and

remembered also having fried him a second time after freeing the Men from the smelter. After that Raff had blasted him in the smelter with a pulsar and had taken everyone by surprise! Having used a super computer to store his genetic information, memory, psyche, and consciousness, Sirk knew suddenly it was a distinct possibility that it was PO! Had the bastard replicated the super computer? The very thought scared him stiff!

'What do you call this person who's enslaved you?'

'He calls himself the... Powerful One!'

'F—n' Hell!' said Sirk vehemently.

'You know him?' asked Kinshasa.

'Do I know him, that my friend is an understatement... I've killed him twice, or at least I thought I had, and Raff has killed him once!'

'That's impossible!' said Kinshasa, 'if someone's dead, they're dead!'

'Not this bastard!' replied Sirk adamantly.

'Anyhow, it doesn't really matter, he's probably killed them all by now.' added Kinshasa dejectedly.

'I doubt that very much.' replied Sirk, and once again realised he was up against his arch enemy. 'Come on, the less time we waste the better, we'll make a plan of attack, but this time I'll have to make sure he is dead, once and for all!'

'How can you do anything, it's at least a four year march don't forget!' said Kinshasa, who as yet hadn't heard of the Dart, let alone seen it!

'Don't worry, it'll take us a few minutes to get there, you'll soon see why.' In the meantime I need as much detail as you can give me, where he operates, how often he checks on you, anything you can tell me that might give us an element of surprise.' Including the lie of the land Kinshasa gave Sirk all the information he had.

Calling an emergency meeting of the Supreme Council Sirk explained to Raff and the others what had transpired,

who in turn begged to be included in the battle against PO. Then consulting with the professor, asked him if it was possible that PO could have replicated himself again.

I think... it's safe to say he's stored his image in another computer, wherever that is! He may have his image stored on several computers - think about it! We must find and destroy them, I think our friends problems, and ours should be finished for good, we can't afford PO, he is a liability'

'Ok prof, thanks, if it's still in the smelter, I think we should go there first and destroy it, at least that'll stop him from replicating himself again, then we'll destroy PO for good!' The smelter met them with its dark oppressive silence, and knowing PO was still alive Sirk was more than aware he could appear at any time, but they had to destroy his super computer before destroying him. Reaching the control room he peered tentatively around the door, but seeing and hearing nothing their only company was the hum from the computer.

The professor was right,' he said emphatically, 'why would it be running if it wasn't in use, this must be how he's kept himself alive.' After switching off the power supply Sirk systematically lanced it with a series of short bursts from the pulsar. A few minutes later the dust had settled around a shower of sparks and small wisps of flame, and Kinshasa declared he'd never seen anything like that in his life before. From the corner of his eye Sirk noticed a familiar box shaped piece of equipment to the right of the computer's burnt remains, and firing another volley he destroyed the Replicator PO had used to regenerate himself.

'That should take care of him, *don't* rest in peace you f---n' piece of shit!' As the noise died away he listened for a moment or two, but there was no sign of PO whatsoever, so all being well they left for the Military exhibition hall. Procuring the Kalashnikov's they'd used in the previous skirmish with PO, that moment was now steeped in their history and was legend among the Men! On board the Dart

Kinshasa's eyes were agog at the complexity of the craft, and very quickly realised this was a weapon that would give them more than a fighting chance. Back in Hometown Sirk informed Professor Patenil that their mission had been successful, but facing the Men of Hometown, although a lot of them too were young to remember PO it appeared they would not be going alone, as apart from the elders there were others who needed to settle an old score!

'Ok,' said Sirk finally capitulating, 'here's your weapons, get on board!' Among the first up the walkway were Raff, Kiska, Hamys, and Hepra, followed keenly by as many who could squeeze onto the flight deck, but Sirk suddenly realised they were still coming up the walkway, and had to put the overspill in the hold! They didn't mind, down they went, with even more pouring up the walkway behind them! 'I don't understand,' said Kinshasa looking decidedly puzzled, 'why are they willing to risk their lives for my people?'

'It's a long story Kinshasa,' said Sirk, 'I'll tell you about it when we've destroyed PO!' Returning Kinshasa's grin Sirk knew they were going to have some fun with this fat, slug-like bastard... before he died!

Travelling east Sirk followed Kinshasa's directions, and sure enough, he'd crossed the Russian continent from Siberia! Before that he had crossed the Bering Straight from Alaska, and had trekked across Russia in sub-zero temperatures to in the hope he'd find help. Admiring his tenacity and courage Sirk couldn't comprehend how he'd survived the journey, yet somehow he had, and was standing in front of him as large as life! As far as Kinshasa was concerned their journey was something out of science fiction, and the craft that was transporting him home was to say the least *incredible!*

'I seem to remember my ancestors mentioning something about ships that travelled at fantastic speeds, I take it this is this one of them.'

'It certainly is!' replied Sirk, but as he entered the airspace of Kinshasa's country of origin, he flew deliberately low, to avoid being seen by PO. On Kinshasa's instructions he put the Dart on levit inside a convenient tree line, then studying the holographic layout from Kinshasa's drawing decided their best plan would be to attack from the southern side, This would undoubtedly give them the best angle, and would ensure them the element of surprise. With their Kalashnikov's at the ready The Men waited patiently, but would they now finally lay their ghost to rest? Inching the Dart slowly forward Sirk asked Kinshasa how close they could get without being seen.

'See that higher tree line above the next ridge,' asked Kinshasa pointing north, his knowledge of the terrain Sirk now considered to be invaluable, which he imparted meticulously, 'over the top of that tree line, you'll be slap bang inside the panning area, to the left is the smelter, above that is the office where he counts and weighs his precious gold bars.'

'Ok, but I think we'll have to go in on foot,' said Sirk thoughtfully, 'if we go in all guns blazing we're sure to hit some innocents, but apart from that I don't wanna take any chances on that f---r getting away again! Are we all agreed?' Trusting Sirk's judgement implicitly no one argued. 'Here, you'll need this,' said Sirk handing Kinshasa a pulsar rifle, even though time was of the essence he showed Kinshasa how to operate it, who, to his relief showed an extraordinary aptitude!

'Hey, I've just remembered there's a deep gulley south-west of here, you can put the ship down there without it being seen, *and* we can follow the gulley right into the panning area.'

'Nice thinking,' said Sirk gratefully, he liked a man who could think well under pressure, especially anything that gave them a better edge, and in his book this would be a distinct advantage!

Almost as if it were tailor-made the Dart nestled neatly into the gully. Opening the hatch they filed quietly from the ship and walked single-file to the higher ridge that Kinshasa had pointed out. It was good cover, the long ridge of rocks protruding from the ground gave them ample concealment while Sirk reconnoitred the area, Kinshasa had done them proud. As there was no sign of PO Sirk lay against a rock to think for a while, then as usual when a plan entered his head he sat bolt upright.

'You got something?' asked Arin.

'Yeah... I think we'll go in after dark, then we can at least find out where he is without revealing our position.' The scene below them was all too familiar, and watched Kinshasa's people slave in their back-breaking work, and apparently without supervision. Knowing too well PO wouldn't trust them to work unattended for long, Sirk realised it would only be a matter of time before he put in a personal appearance. Checking his chrono it was only 2:45pm and would have along wait 'til dark!

'It's a wonder I didn't find you last time I was here,' said Sirk ruefully, 'although, having said that I was a long way east of here.' To while away the hours Kinshasa told him a little of their history, apparently at the time of the holocaust his people had been living far to the south, it was then that Sirk realised they must have migrated from the southern states of North America.

'Yeah, like everyone else they found themselves facing a wall of water, but by the weirdest of flukes, my people lived high on the steep side of mountain, it was that mountain that split the waters in two and diminished the strength of the wave, and by a sheer miracle my forebears thankfully escaped drowning. After that they spent months trekking north and eventually ended up here.'

'What do you live on, food I mean ?' asked Sirk, who'd seen nothing in the immediate vicinity.

'We have vegetable patches, we grow our own mostly,

sometimes we're lucky enough to catch animals, then we have a feast! But they are few and far between.' Amazed to hear they ate meat Sirk remembered well his own experience with that hog on his first trip, but looking at it philosophically he realised beggars can't be choosers!

'What animals are you able to catch?' asked Sirk, interested in what forms of animal life existed here.

'Mostly rabbit,' replied Kinshasa readily, 'occasionally we catch moose, but they're usually far to the north from here.'

'I've had an idea for some time now,' said Sirk, looking at Kinshasa, and realising Kinshasa was keen to listen he continued, 'from where I came, deep in Earth's history there were divisions between nations... borders where people were required to produce passports in order to gain access to another country. In this world I see us as one global nation, regardless of race, creed, colour or religion... we live in peace and harmony, to trade freely, each major city having a senate that is answerable only to the Grand Senate, that would sit say... four times a year, so you see-' stopping suddenly he studied Kinshasa's face, and thought he'd lost interest, 'sorry Kinny mate, there I go again, spouting off... I didn't mean to bore you to death, I'd be guiltier than PO then wouldn't I?'

'No, no,' replied Kinshasa hastily, 'it's me who should apologise, as you were talking I was imagining what that would be like, I guess my eyes glazed over... yeah?'

'Something like that,' replied Sirk smiling.

'Seriously Sirk,' continued Kinshasa, 'I would like to be a part of that, I think it would benefit us greatly, and I would like to congratulate you on your foresight.'

'Thanks,' replied Sirk, flattered by his new friend's compliment, 'I will officially welcome you to Hometown City's Trading Council... but we'll do the official bits when we get back. They shook hands firmly.

'You can go now!' barked a voice from over the ridge, but Sirk didn't need to ask who's voice it was. 'Be ready to start

at 6 o'clock tomorrow morning! Failure to do so will mean immediate death!' Well that was it as far as Sirk was concerned, the alarm clock had chimed! It was time to act.

'As soon as your people are away from the panning area,' whispered Sirk, 'we'll have a golden opportunity to attack him while he's on his own!'

'I'm with you man,' answered Kinshasa, 'let's fry the bastard!' As he and Kinshasa took aim the Men grew impatient waiting for Sirk's signal, which as far as they were concerned was taking far too long, and were ready and veritably champing at the bit!

'Let rip!' said Sirk as PO's bubble came into view. Two blue traces hit the bubble smack in the middle, which to their dismay were deflected harmlessly away, and caused no apparent damage to the bubble, or its occupant!

'Hello my friend,' boomed PO recognising the Pulsar traces immediately, 'well, I must say I'm surprised to see you again! However, I do bear a grudge, so, I will take the greatest of pleasure in finishing you off this time!'

'We'll f—n' see about that!' barked Sirk. 'I've got a bigger surprise for you this time!' As PO opened fire a few rounds ricocheted off the rocks they sheltered behind, then a fusillade suddenly strafed the ground in front them, and it appeared he wasn't concerned about wasting ammunition! Or on the other hand was he trying to bluff them into thinking he had plenty? Again he remembered that PO had a Replicator, and Sirk realised he was smart enough to know it would duplicate ammunition as well as most other inanimate objects, and would also know it would duplicate as much ammunition as he put on the platter! Stopping for a moment Sirk considered his position, and realising that the pulsar was no longer capable of draining power from PO's bubble, they hadn't got the advantage he'd thought they'd have. They would have to strike by other means, but what? At that moment he hadn't a clue, it was time to think - rapidly! Lying low, they listened as PO occasionally strafed

their cover in the hope he might catch one or two of them, and at the same time hoped they would capitulate to his superior capability.

I'm going back to the ship,' he told Arin and Kinshasa, 'I think what we need is the combined power of all our pulsars, that way I think we can effect a drain on his bubble. One thing before I go, beware of his nerve gas, I haven't seen any evidence of it yet, but knowing that fat shit if he's got it, and we get in range, he'll use it, and... it's excruciatingly painful.'

'Yeah I remember!' added John laconically.

With that he left, and twenty minutes had passed before they saw the Dart float silently into view behind the tree line, using the walkway Sirk ran down to let them know what he wanted of them. Without question, led by Raff the Men spread out behind the tree line, alongside Arin, John, and Kinshasa. Then taking the Dart rapidly over the treetops he switched on the external hailing frequency

'Ok.' he shouted, 'let the bastard have it!' Firing all six onboard pulsars, Sirk's Own Pulsar Fusiliers let rip simultaneously, and to his relief just as before PO's bubble tilted backwards, with his power source drained it then allowed Sirk and the others to render him harmless. Instructing the others to wait 'til he got back on the ground he put the Dart on levit in the panning area. With a pulsar rifle in his hand he left the bridge, and descending the walkway he ran back under the cover of the trees to rejoin the others. It was time for the final assault.

'You ready?' asked Sirk looking up and down his line of troops, 'ok... let's get the evil shit!' Running from the cover of the trees the Men showed no fear as their Kalashnikov's spewed salvo after salvo into the bubble, and running slightly ahead Sirk raised his gun to waist level ready for anything, and knew that this time he was close to ending PO's reign of terror for good! Turning to his left he aimed the pulsar directly at PO's head, then suddenly, everything

went black...

The end

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