

Dedication

To my mother, the word thank you is not enough, after completing a trilogy of her own, my two brothers and I, She helped me through the dark years, so it is to her, and to her unstinting loyalty that I dedicate this book.

Eskhatos

Contents

Chapter	Page
1 Scavengers	4
2 Torture in Time	16
3 Happy Birthday Cita	26
4 A Close Call	35
5 Another Piss Up	40

6	The Decision	44
7	The Final Journey	52
8	In Remission	58
9	Screaming Reality	68
10	Cold Reality	77
11	Intergalax - The Scare	83
12	Rescued Rescuer	92
13	A Lesson Finally Learned	113
14	Laxxus	124

FOREWORD

Being the final book in the JET! Trilogy I will to dedicate to children worldwide. It has been a bone of contention for me over a long period of time that children have become more of a commodity rather than the precious human beings that they are. I have seen over many years the care given to children being gradually eroded, and it has saddened me to see this happen. I do not want to use this as a soapbox to preach from, rather more, a platform from which I can launch my dream.

ESKAHATOS

SCAVENGERS

Monday bloody morning again! Weekend? What weekend? Blink and you'd have missed it! Walking into the briefing room as he had a thousand times before, the smell of hot and cold coffee was, as usual, the first thing to hit Smiffi's nostrils, the smell of cold coffee coming from the many spillages on those useless rickety tables. Seeing him arrive, Donut, who it appeared was now his permanent mate made a beeline for him. Cursing his luck Smiffi wondered why he always had to rush over so enthusiastically? The other Scavengers always got a good laugh out of the situation - at him! Although Donut acted a bit like a misguided missile Smiffi didn't dislike him, or minded having him as an oppo, but he did hate the others taking the piss every day! Musing the problem Smiffi remembered he'd never given a damn what other people thought, and as far as he was concerned they could take him as they found him - or do the other thing! In his own way he felt sorry for Donut, after all, he got it ten times worse than Smiffi from their so-called workmates. Getting a coffee from the robot he pretended he hadn't seen Donut and walked to the opposite corner, but knew he would follow him there.

'Mornin' Vadronel,' said Smiffi trying to strike up an "avoid the subject" conversation, 'do anything on the weekend?'

'Never mind that,' replied Vadronel loudly, 'here comes your little pet!' Standing close by and overhearing as they

were meant to, Chassa and Haak laughed as Donut walked over grinning widely at him.

'Alright Smiffi?' came the predictable greeting from Donut, but as his peers echoed his greeting around the hall he dejectedly cast his eyes down, after which Smiffi gave Vadronel a very dirty look.

'What are you lookin' at Smiffi?' asked Vadronel returning his look.

'Is it a bird, is it a fish, is it an animal, is it human? No! Is it a steaming little turd on two legs? I don't know... you tell me!' retaliated Smiffi coldly; Looking at the others for support from his piers Vadronel walked purposefully over.

'What did you say?' he asked menacingly.

'Don't pretend you didn't hear,' countered Smiffi, 'either put up - or shut up!' Taking a swing at Smiffi was Vadronel's one big mistake, and being quicker he ducked and landed one of his own. Catching Vadronel on the chin Smiffi sent him reeling into a nearby table, but that gave him enough impetus to project himself back at Smiffi, his blow was lucky and caught Smiffi on the side of the head.

'That's your last Vadronel!' said Smiffi bringing up his right fist to Vadronel's solar plexus. Completely winded he curled up in a ball, and without uttering a sound sank unconscious to the floor. With everyone's interest having turned to blood the hall went quiet for a few moments, as his oppo Willban helped Vadronel to his feet and sat him on the nearest chair. Taking control of the situation Haak

then decided he'd announce their sector allocations a few minutes early, and regain the equilibrium.

'Very brave Vadronel,' said Haak, 'also very f---n' stupid, if you had a brain you'd be dangerous - you know what Higher Echelon's are capable of! Ok, let's have some quiet now can we?' Then waited while the hubbub died away. 'Right, as it seems some of us are clever with our fists we'll leave them 'til last! Oh uh, everyone hang on when I've called your names, please don't leave the room.' Infectious laughter erupted, and at that moment Smiffi felt he could easily murder Haak, who'd been breathing down his neck since he'd started work for Intergalax Scavenging Universal, simply because Smiffi had a grade one Assessors Certificate, and Haak's no better than a grade two! Spending the next fifteen minutes reading out the team's names, Haak looked up to check the appropriate hands had been raised in acknowledgement. Knowing that when Haak had finished the roll call, like Donut he would be ridiculed; Smiffi waited.

'Finally, Willban and Vadronel... you alright yet Vadronel?'

'No, I think he should go home Haak.' answered his teammate Willban.

'*Greeaat!*' shouted Haak, and purposefully emphasized the word while looking disdainfully at Smiffi.

'Ok Willban, I'll come out with you today, off you go Vadronel - see you tomorrow.' Stooping forward Vadronel

nodded his head in pain, and then staggered off still reeling from the blow.

'Now the moment we've all been waiting for,' announced Haak, 'Smiffi and.... Donut! And... *and...* guess where they're going today? Sector *s-e-v-e-n-t-e-e-n!* Finding Haak's cynical attitude highly amusing everyone laughed and jeered, and pointed at Smiffi and Donut in the safe knowledge they couldn't take on and beat the whole team.

'Right! You can go now boys... and uh, pick your own time zones - eh?' As the hall cleared Smiffi almost went for Haak, and knowing what a sarcastic bastard he was his final jibe was almost too much. The other teams were happy going to their sectors, but then thought Smiffi, why shouldn't they be, they always got the plumb jobs!

'Come on Donut, let's get the f--k outta here!' Grinning again Donut was glad he was with Smiffi, at least he treated him more humanely than the others, and remembered on two previous occasions Vadronel had beaten him badly, so he felt a sense of justice now that Smiffi had given him a good hiding, and felt great loyalty toward Smiffi.

'See ya later Smiffi!' said one of pilots as they left for their Discs, and still laughing inanely at the morning's entertainment, then, pointing at Donut, 'perhaps you can dump that little piece of cretinous shit on a lonely planet somewhere before you come back!'

'Perhaps I could dump you before I leave!' replied Smiffi

staring him straight in the eye. Now it was someone else's turn to be ridiculed, as the other crews laughed at Smiffi's verbal counter Smiffi grinned maliciously, now at least one of the bastards knew what it was like to be laughed at by everyone!

'Hey, there's no need for that, I was only joking ya bastard!' 'Ask Donut if he thinks it's a joke, and uh... call me a bastard again, and you'll get the same treatment as Vadronel - ok?' Our hero pilot decided he'd rather be a coward, so quickly shutting his mouth he left for his allotted destination. It wasn't that Smiffi enjoyed throwing his weight around, in fact the opposite would be more truthful, it was just that a direct threat to Donut happened to be that morning's final straw. There weren't many who'd take on Smiffi, and it was a well known fact that he'd been a "Higher Echelon" in the A Block Force just before the end of the million years war, so if you want to stay alive and healthy - you don't f--k with those guys!

Standing on the bridge Smiffi and Donut went through the commensurate pre-flight checks, then walking to the computer he selected space sector seventeen, then looking at the time sectors he paused for a moment, Haak had said they could pick their own time sector, although hadn't exactly included Smiffi and Donut, he hadn't precluded them either! Knowing he meant it as a malicious joke he decided he would take him at his word, and selecting time sector 998 entered it in the log.

'Won't you get a bollockin' for doin' that when we get back?' said a worried Donut.

'So what, he knows he sent us there because there's nothing on Earth... or in the rest of sector seventeen for that matter,' replied Smiffi matter-of-factly, 'I'm beginning to get pissed off with it lately, the money isn't as good as I expected either!'

'Yeah but you don't wanna lose your job do you?' said Donut, who'd always been in awe of those who jumped from job to job.

'Leave!' commanded Smiffi. The Disc moved off slowly as per program, then satisfied everything was in order answered Donut's question. 'There's always something else.' Walking to the wall he watched the stars striate as the Disc undertook its space-time command, walking on 'round he followed the curvature of the craft but kept his eyes fixed on what was happening outside as he continued his conversation with Donut.

'Yeah - like what?' asked Donut completely baffled, 'I can't do anything else, I'm just a skivvy - and always will be!'

'I know that, but I can!' said Smiffi profoundly, 'having fighting skills if a war crops up I can go anywhere!'

'Yeah but, supposin' you got killed!'

'That's a risk anyone in my position is prepared to accept - and take!' Looking ever more baffled Donut couldn't understand how anyone could risk their life without even batting an eyelid.

'Here we are,' announced Smiffi as they entered time sector 998, 'that didn't take long, now we can have a good skive at the firms expense, sod the lot o' them!'

'Supposin' they're tracking us,' suggested Donut.

'Haak's out with Willban today, and guess what the boys in Trakstat will be doing?'

'I dunno Smiffi - what will they be doin'?' Smiffi laughed.

'F--k all!'

'Oh yeah, of course, when the cats away...'

'Now you're catching on!' said Smiffi, very aware his teammate could still get under his skin he realised it wasn't his fault, then thought what the f—k does it matter, but he couldn't help feeling that sometimes he just wanted to shut him up; the little guy was harmless enough, and he would never hurt him.

'What shall we do then,' asked Smiffi in mock smugness, 'shall we just stay here and drink Dregs all day - I've got some in my locker - or, shall we visit this planet here?'

'I thought we weren't supposed to bring Dregs onboard?' asked Donut.

'No - we're not!' said Smiffi, 'in case it's escaped your notice - everyone else does - including Haak!' A brief silence ensued as Donut stared into space, and Smiffi waited for his answer.

'So?' said Smiffi holding up his arms in despair.

'So what?' asked Donut naively.

'What - is - it - to - be, Dregs? Or uh... what's it called?'

Earth!

'Both!' replied Donut grinning.

'You're not as green as you're cabbage looking are you Donut?' replied Smiffi laughing. Breaking out two cans of Dregs he tossed one to Donut, then pressed the disinticap on his own.

'Seat!' the floor metamorphosised and within seconds a chaise longue appeared, and sitting on it he observed Donut's expression, and wondered how long the poor sod would stand there and hesitate, in case Smiffi gave him a bollocking for not asking first.

'Go on,' said Smiffi waving his arm in Donut's direction, 'I don't want you standing all the time... people might think it's a cattle market!' With that Donut laughed for the first time that day, which Smiffi considered that to be a major break-through!

'Seat!' ordered Donut, and up came a duplicate of Smiffi's recliner. Taking his seat Donut emulated Smiffi by putting his feet up. Popping the disinticap from his can he poured the contents down his throat.

'Well this is the life!' said Smiffi, settling himself further into the chaise longue.

'Yeah, good innit!' replied Donut, never having been treated with civility before he grinned like a Cheshire cat. Remembering what it was like before Smiffi started work at Intergalax his eyes clouded, and he recalled the times he'd worked with the likes of Vadronel and Willban,

Batter and Stelf, and they had all given him more than a hard time! Smiffi was alright, and Gelf liked him, although he still harboured feelings of unease Donut thought he was ok compared with the others.

'I wonder what this Earth's like? I mean... I know it's dead, but I wonder if it's worth taking a look at?'

'No I don't think so,' replied Donut trying to sound authoritative, 'it's better here drinking Dregs!'

'Yeah.... maybe you're right.' replied Smiffi settling himself again, he didn't really want to move from that spot anyhow! It was then that something hit him like a rock on the side of his head! Remembering his training days it suddenly occurred to him this could be his "Big bonanza!"

'Donut! Drink up!' he barked suddenly, 'we're gonna take a look at this here Earth!'

Whaaat?' screamed Donut nearly choking on his drink, then without question he downed it in one, and instantly felt its effects, then remembered the last time he'd done that, after Vadronel had forced it down his throat in the briefing room for a joke! With his head now spinning he tried to concentrate on what Smiffi was telling him.

'Scanners on!' ordered Smiffi, but Donut was at a loss, and was unable to remember where the panel was containing the scanner pads, for a second or two he panicked as the effects of the Dregs took total control of his mind, and ended up staggering 'round the bridge like a drunken headless chicken! Watching Donut stagger around was

something to behold, and Smiffi laughed fit to bust!

'Sit down, I'll do it!' Still laughing loudly Smiffi walked to the panel and hit the multiscanner pads. Watching the scannerline traverse the screen for a few minutes he switched on the deepsearch, but as nothing immediately presented itself he returned to his chaise longue. Half an hour later a single long tone sounded.

'Shhhhhhit! Hey! Donut, come on, I think we've hit something big!' Receiving no answer he glanced over his shoulder to see Donut out cold on his chaise longue, then grinning again he took the craft inside the Earth's rarefied atmosphere.

'Antiglare!' Darkening quickly the transparents cut the red glare from his vision. Walking over he shook Donut several times, but could only get him to attain a semi-conscious state; if you could call it that! Giving it up as bad job he returned to the deepsearch, which was still giving its verification alert, studying it again he knew he'd have to investigate this - like right now! The gigantic Disc settled over a strange looking settlement with buildings that resembled huge blisters erupting from the ground, but finding nothing of merchantable quality he left. Following the verified alert along its spaceline source another dwelling came into view, but this one was positively archaic. Having known for some time this planet was in its advanced death-throes, as indeed was the whole solar system, its Sun now a red giant sprawled across space, and

had already swallowed up two of the planets it had served for an untold millennia! Everyone at Intergalax knew Sector seventeen was finished, and that was the only reason Haak had sent him and Donut here, but his thoughts for this planet had changed from bad to good. The third of its kind from this ember of a Sun still had a million or so years of life left, if you could call it life. However, he'd been given Sector seventeen again purely because Haak didn't like him, and his assistant had been nick-named Donut because he was a bit slow on the uptake, and remembered how they'd left to the sound of their fellow workers derisory laughter, but now with the advent of the verified alarm Smiffi had the distinct feeling he would have the last laugh, and wore a wide grin to celebrate. Anyhow, one day when he was Controller he would change things, everyone would have a fair crack of the whip!

'We're in sector seventeen aren't we?' asked Donut looking bleary eyed at the screen.

'Yes.' replied Smiffi testily.

'Well why it is that according to Infostar there are supposed to be two other planets closer to this Sun than... what's it called again?'

'*EARTH!*' yelled Smiffi impatiently.

'Alright, alright, I was only asking.' replied Donut feeling hurt.

'This Sun is a red giant ok!' said Smiffi curtly, relenting

suddenly he remembered Donut wasn't exactly compos mentis. 'Sorry mate, the other two have been swallowed up by this Sun already, so they don't exist anymore, I guess you can see the other two because some lazy bastard hasn't updated Infostar yet.' Plummeting toward the surface the atmosphere was thin and the hull temperature increase was only 16 percent, but their scanners showed an air temperature of minus one hundred and eighteen degrees. Spending the best part of an hour flying around, they searched for anything that might bring a good price at auction, and as he hadn't had a decent commission for some months he was short of readies to his bank balance. Maybe today was the day, he'd heard of it happening in other companies, where employees had literally retired on the commission earned from one big scoop.

Ever conscious of the time he looked at his watch, seemingly he'd drawn another blank, his stomach knotted as he thought of two weeks hence when undoubtedly his bank manager would summon him to the default office. Having completely "resurfaced" Donut offered to take an active role in the proceedings, so Smiffi put him in charge of the helm. It was then Smiffi realized it was he who'd have to follow up the verified alarm.

'Come about! Come about!'

'What?' replied Donut staring straight ahead, grabbing the control Smiffi shoved Donut from the helm, then banking sharply to port he brought the Disc through one hundred

and eighty degrees. Slowing considerably he cruised over the spot to search for what he'd seen on the verified scanner, but having brought the ship around, for some reason he was unable to find it, and was almost ready to give up when suddenly it came into view. It was weird old house, no, ancient would be more accurate, and in an advanced stage of decay it stood on a promontory, its garden at one time must have been very beautiful, and sloped downward through a valley between two wooded areas, not that there was much left of either now, as the trees were blackened with the decay of death! Suddenly Smiffi's heart almost stopped, in a large conservatory at the rear of the house sat an old man in a wicker chair, with a blanket over his legs to shield him from the cold, and what appeared to be a piece of paper on his lap.

'Hey - come on Donut, I think we've hit the Big City!'

'Are we going in then?' asked Donut innocently.

'What d'you think, d'you wanna spend the rest of your life doing this?' replied Smiffi. Grinning widely Donut realised Smiffi wasn't like the others, and was the only one he knew who wouldn't do him out of his share of the commission, and momentarily recalled how Vadronel had snatched it from his very hand, then having thanked Donut for his generosity had walked off laughing.

'Thin atmosphere, we'll need suits.' said Smiffi walking to the equipment closet with Donut in tow. Closing the inner doors, they checked their air supply, then having checked

for leakage depressurized the airlock. The hiss was violent, then, floating gently to the surface Smiffi and Donut went to investigate their intriguing enigma.

Walking up the driveway of what was once an elegant front garden, it, and the house were in a far worse state of dilapidation than it had appeared from the air.

'What sort of a dwelling is this then Smiffi?' asked Donut, never having seen a Tudor house before.

'It's category "C" by design, but.... this one was built with materials from a much later date, so... I would guess it was a copy of an earlier design.' Merely touching the front door caused it to fall inwards, they listened as the noise echoed briefly around the house, whoever lived here had indeed been very wealthy! It was a large house, most of its rooms were spacious and well furnished, so walking slowly through they eventually reached the kitchen where Smiffi and Donut turned right, and found what they assumed to be a family or morning room on to which was built a conservatory. It was then Smiffi's memory clicked in; the old man! Increasing his pace he made a beeline for it. Its doors having long since fallen from their hinges he walked straight in, and unsure of what he would find for moment he paused briefly, then walked forward again. As he walked around the wicker chair the old man came into view, and as he'd seen earlier from the Disc there was indeed a piece of paper lying on his lap! Picking it up he looked briefly at the old man, who was, very old. Big-

boned, Smiffi could see that he'd obviously had an athletic build in his youth, but looking old and frail in death his body had been almost perfectly preserved by the intense cold; Smiffi then transferred his gaze to the note.

TORTURE IN TIME

Being engrossed in the man's story Smiffi hadn't noticed Donut come in, his sudden presence startled him for a second, then looking 'round he waved the note at Donut to indicate he was reading. Sitting mute in death and staring out at that once lovely garden, the old man was totally oblivious to Smiffi and Donut reading his last testament.

'So what does it say then - I knew I shouldn't have sat in the fridge that long!'

'Shut the f--k up!' shouted Smiffi scathingly. Obeying immediately Donut noticed Smiffi was near to tears. He'd never seen him like this before, and not wanting to lose the only friend he had he kept stum! Smiffi continued, but for Donut's benefit this time he read aloud.

'My name is Sirk Notaani, and this is my story. If anyone should ever find me, read this and heed it well, for my story is one of woe; although it wasn't always that way. When I was young I was a captain in the UWF and had trained to be a Hyperspace pilot, I was sent on a mission to a planet across the universe, and left my beautiful wife Cita behind for a fourteen-month expedition for the sake of science. I was duped! Having reached the planet I was caught in a gravitational vortex that caused me to crash-land, at one point during my descent I faced death, as my ship The Diamond Dart careered up a scree at over sixty thousand miles an hour. Managing to glide the ship for

thirty miles or so, she eventually made contact with the planets surface before coming to a halt, but had ploughed a twenty-five mile furrow in the ground before doing so. with the ships drive dead I thought I was doomed, but knew I had to find a technology to effect a repair in order to return home. Having been told by the scientific faction of the UWF that life existed on this planet it wasn't long before I found it, one of those Kerosene burning jets from ancient history suddenly screamed overhead, frightening the shit out of me! Setting out to find it I took all necessary items for my journey, including weapons; a decision for which I was soon thankful, and that you will realize as you read on. During my journey I came across many weird, and some very frightening creatures. My first encounter being with giant beetles that came damned close to killing me! It was only my partially charged Ionjet that got me out of trouble, but having luckily reached a higher plateau they pursued me relentlessly to the foot of a cliff, which I knew they were incapable of climbing, but how they tried! My journey continued laboriously, but mostly it was deathly quiet. One enduring memory I recall was the view from a mountain (as it turned out to be) I was climbing, rather than my earlier assumption that it was a mere cliff. I'd seen nothing like it back on Earth, and the mountain was, not to put too fine a point on it (although far more columnal) half as high again as our highest mountain, Everest! However, my journey for some time to come was uneventful until I

reached a cave, or maybe it was a tunnel. Attacked by an Anaconda this beast was truly a monster, and fully extended its jaws were more than six feet! Slamming a pulsar bolt into it I had survived again, but my next surprise was to be water, boy, did I need it! The noise was awesome; but I was in for a bigger shock when eventually it came into view, my assumption had been right, it was a waterfall that I estimated to be at least two miles high! Bearing in mind I was only a third of the way up the mountain, it took me days to descend the other side as I mostly slid on shale all the way, but also battled against an intense mist from the waterfall that considerably impaired my vision. On reaching the valley floor I was confronted by verdant greenery so lush it reminded me of home, and I remember sitting against an Oak tree thinking of what I'd left behind; and cried openly and bitterly for over ten minutes; wouldn't any man in that situation? It was then that my training thankfully took over, as I had to go on. I walked relentlessly until I found a cave of sorts in which to shelter for the night, not what I wanted but it was better than nothing, and I needed to have my back against something, as only God knew what other beasts existed here! It was that same night I saw something so weird I was unable to fathom it out, although I was to learn what it was in the not too distant future. If you've ever seen six glowing red eyes stare at you hour after hour without movement you'll know what I mean! It's very unnerving

when exhaustion takes over and you're fighting to stay awake. Having traveled for days through this beautiful valley I was always conscious of my lack of food, the supplies I'd brought with me had tumbled down the shale some days earlier, and I was now very concerned - and hungry! Then came my next altercation, although it turned out this one was to the mutual benefit of myself and a pride of Tortoiseshell cats - but these particular cats were the size of tigers! Having rescued their cubs (except for one, regrettably) from certain death at the tusks of a ferocious hog, the parents thanked me with a show of affection the like of which greatly surprised me; their memory has stayed with me all my life. Three days more and I'd arrived at a breach in the cliffs I so desperately needed to reach, like a giant gateway it stood at least a thousand feet high, and by now I was considerably weakened by hunger, although having plenty of water from the river I'd been following, it was tepid, and had a strangely brackish taste. Once through the breach I was in the second of the two craters, the first (and most northerly) being where my ship had come down. There was something about these craters that rang an alarm bell in my mind, but being weak from hunger I was unable to fathom it out, and having had to leave the river I now suffered from a ravenous thirst. My mind began to ramble, and I was unable to even consider the fact that I'd been made a scapegoat. It was then I noticed something that excited me more than anything else

since landing on this weird planet - food! Yes, there it was, and it was cultivated! Too weak to do anything about it at that moment I fell asleep under an Oak tree, and with the days heat being severe I kept my suits aircon switched on while I slept. I don't remember how long I slept, but, when I was still half conscious I felt something touch my wrists. By the time I realized something was wrong it was too late, and I was yanked mercilessly into the tree against which I'd rested so peacefully. Having been captured by the Men, their leader Mak was a vicious little git and showed no mercy whatsoever, although I found out later he was not their leader, but merely a pretender trying to snatch power while their true leader was away from their village. I was given a beating so severe I seriously thought I would not survive, however, upon the return of Raff, the true leader of the Men I was released, given medication, food, and even one of their little huts to live in! I say little huts as they (the Men) were on average only three feet six inches tall, a legacy from man's "weapon-happy" and foolhardy past! I learned of their plight regarding an enemy they called the Powerful One, whom I later destroyed using the Dart's weaponry, which being far superior to his eventually forced his capitulation. During this conflict I was shown the most amazing catacomb of caves, and I defy any normal person to find their way out, the Men however navigated them without giving it a second thought, as one would walk down a sidewalk! They also showed me the

most amazing sight I've ever seen in my whole life, a museum so vast I can't begin to describe its sheer size. While in there one day, having long since recovered from the ordeal meted out by Mak, (and for which Raff had beaten him to death with a pole in front of my very eyes) that alarm bells in my mind rang again, and looking around the museum I stumbled upon various artifacts from my own planet! A picture began to form in my mind, and what I saw I didn't like. Why would I find items from my own planet when I was literally across the other side of the universe? Further research proved me right, and suddenly I became aware - that I was on my own planet!

By now my plight was desperate, and worried greatly about how was I to get home? With only one answer staring me in the face, that of being stranded on my own planet and living in the far distant future! Then I had a stroke of luck, as my little friends showed me another part of the museum where I found a recon unit from my own time! This one piece of equipment would get me home - and to my own time! Having repaired the Dart I said fond farewells to my little friends and left. Knowing they would perish through non-existence if I succeeded in persuading my peers not use the Depol, the most insidious of ultimate weapons, it hadn't occurred to me at that time that I would never succeed; as the fact that for months I'd lived on the results of the Depol had escaped me for some time. Back in my own time I set about bringing those that had sent me

on this "death" mission to justice, but it wasn't to be. Being a largely covert system I was unable to reason with most, they listened with cloth ears, and at the UWO council meeting I quickly realized I had no chance of persuading them to talk once more with the Cathans. Suddenly something horrifying dawned on me, if I stayed in this time I would perish along with everyone else! Thinking quickly I grabbed my wife, Professor Patenil, my good brother Arin, and along with my life-long friend John Mycker I made my getaway. Picking up the professor's granddaughter from England, who, as I remember came reluctantly, we flew back across the Atlantic Ocean to pick up John's wife and his two boys from Louisiana. Having been chased around the globe for hours by Terrafighters, our ship eventually took a couple of Laserlok hits, but I finally managed to outwit my pursuers by giving out a standard distress call. Thinking I was done for their pride led them in to my trap. Having dispatched the last of them we made our way to Hydrus, where, weeping openly we watched as our precious planet went under the hammer of destruction. Our seven-month journey now began in earnest to return to Urf as the Men called it, although the others complained we had nowhere to go; few of them knew what I knew.

Back on Urf we settled down to domesticity, and slowly rebuilt the planets infrastructure, then spreading our wings, we eventually traded amongst ourselves to create wealth

and prosperity for all. In joint charge of operations with my good friend Raff, who, I was glad to see was still chief of the Men on my return we set about business. As the years passed my one regret was never having taken my good friend Ali Boran, who used to run my favorite club The Ill Eagle. By now I was fifty-four years of age, and never having diminished, my one regret was to take hold of me in a manner I had never experienced before. I knew I had to go back once more to pick up Ali! Both John Mycker, my good friend and mission controller on my original mission, and the professor, tried talking me out of it, and the professor's reasons I knew at the time were realistic in their entirety, with John supporting him all the way. At one point I almost gave in, but I was a determined man; some said I was cavalier in my approach to life. Being trapped here I now have to admit they were right. I made that journey, and that is why you see me sitting here now. Knowing that I would die a lonely old man, and apart from all my friends I have spent the last forty-eight years of my life wondering what had become of my lovely wife Cita, (for she was such a beauty) and my two precious children Arin Raff and Sheel Taniche. Since arriving here I found this strange old house to live in, but it's in a different time zone from Cita, and this planet Earth that I call home, like me is now dying. Our Sun is now a red giant, but has stood the test of time, and for all mankind's arrogance it has outlived even him! Scientists in my time

popularly agreed that when our Sun became a red giant, the Earth, as with the whole solar system would be swallowed up and fried like an egg, I'm not saying they were wrong, as Mercury and Venus, the two inner planets of our solar system have already disappeared, and I have no doubt Earth will follow suit, but I won't be alive to see that! However, no heat manifests itself from the solar Disc, and I have to admit that right now all I can feel is this intense, infernal cold. Hypothermia is setting in, and very soon I will no longer be able to write, so here I will end my story. Finally, my ship The Diamond Dart is a few miles west of here, where you will find it programmed and fully operational. I would ask one favor of whoever finds me, which is this, please make the journey to Urf and let Cita know what happened to me.

'Poor bastard,' said Smiffi quietly, 'he must have really loved her. The bullying he'd put up with over the years had made him very emotional, and as a consequence Donut burst into tears.

'So... he never found his old friend either... what did you say his name was?'

'Uh... Ali Boran,' replied Smiffi, 'no I guess he never did, and lost a lot more besides.' Standing in silence for a few minutes they said a prayer for Sirk, then taking his body into the garden they laid him on the ground.

'Come on, let's find this Diamond Dart, maybe it's worth something.'

'But we don't know what it looks like.' said Donut innocently, then walking back through the conservatory he noticed another piece of paper on the floor, picking it up he eagerly turned it over, and to his eternal surprise it was a picture of the Diamond Dart!

'As there's only one I don't suppose we'll have much trouble identifying her.' commented Smiffi dryly.

'Well, come and look at this then!' said Donut proudly showing Smiffi his find, 'as it's called the Diamond Dart maybe we'll find some diamonds on board, then we can retire like you said!' Laughing loudly Smiffi couldn't help thinking this little guy was really something.

'You're looking at the diamond that's going to make us rich.' he told Donut pointing at the picture.

'Well, it now seems we know exactly what we're looking for.' said Smiffi studying it carefully. 'As it's situated a few miles away we'll take the Disc.' A few minutes later having located the Dart he put the Disc on levit.

The liquid walkway poured down from the Dart to greet them, and having boarded her they marveled at her technology.

'Shit, if what he says is true about him being from the thirty fourth century on this planet, this thing was way ahead of its time!'

'How much commission d'you think we'll get Smiffi?'

'I'm not sure at the moment,' replied Smiffi thoughtfully, 'but I know one thing, we're gonna pay a visit to a friend of

mine before we declare it, I don't want anyone snatching it away from us, you know how devious Haak and the rest of those bastards can be!

'Don't you think we ought to go to Urf first and tell his wife what happened to him?' said Donut, catching Smiffi off-guard.

'No.... she'll be long dead by now!' he replied derisively, then with regret realized he'd acted just like the others.

'But what about his children, they'll still be alive, and surely they'd want to know what happened to their father?' Standing mute for a few minutes Smiffi mulled over Donut's comment.

'You're right Donut,' he said eventually, 'yeah, we should go... oh, wait a minute, we can't! The wormhole, Sirk said in his note that it had distorted - and extruded.'

'Yeah, but that was then, it's still constant today... so, surely it won't present us with a problem!' countered Donut, and Smiffi had to admit he was right, there was no reason why they shouldn't, or couldn't make the journey!

'Can you get a Bodibag,' asked Smiffi, 'we'll take him with us, they'll want to give him a proper burial.' To preserve his body Donut and Smiffi put Sirk's body in one of the cots for the journey, so at least Cita would have a decent memory of him, and just as important, be able to recognize him. Taking a tour of the ship they went aft to inspect the galley, sleeping quarters, then the pharmacy and arsenal.

'Shit! Come and see this Smiffi!' shouted Donut from the

sleeping quarters.

'F--k me!' said Smiffi witnessing Donut's find, Ali's remains were still in the cot where Sirk had put them forty eight years previously.

'Well I'm bugged,' said Smiffi looking at the decayed remains, 'I guess he did find him after all, not that he did his friend any favors, either he was totally unaware of time-space distortion, or - he took one huge gamble, maybe the seal on this cot had deteriorated, look at his body.'

'My guess is,' said Donut reflectively, 'that he took a huge gamble - that didn't pay off!'

HAPPY BIRTHDAY CITA

Having mastered the controls of the Dart they powered down the Disc and took the Dart for a test spin, and finding no criteria amiss they were impressed by the power of such an ancient craft, so logging into the onboard computer they checked out the flight path they'd take to reach this planet "Urf", albeit in it's own past!

'Look!' said Donut suddenly, 'the wormhole hasn't changed for the last sixteen years!'

'Shit, you're right, if that's the case we should be ok, although it's a pity we can't use the Disc, we could cut right through this crap and go there in a matter of hours.' Still compliant to instruction, the Dart lifted off for the first time since Sirk had accidentally arrived there forty-eight years earlier.

'This thing's incredibly easy to fly, very maneuverable,' commented Smiffi flying her manually, 'pity it's so damned slow!'

'How fast will it go then Smiffi?' asked Donut, having always been interested in old craft.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'What is maximum warp capability of this ship?' asked Smiffi.

'Its maximum speed is above warp, and if required can travel to convolut thirty-five.' answered the computer.

'Shit, it's a damn sight faster than I imagined Donut,' said Smiffi grinning, 'let's give it a try - ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Convolut thirty five now!' Like a droplet wiped from a condensating window the Dart disappeared from view, and checking the holomap for trajectory, Smiffi saw they were on course for Earth via the (in)famous wormhole. Although used to doing any distance in a matter of days, Smiffi and Donut were both experienced and knowledgeable enough to use sleep, and made use of sleep and the cots during the journey. After six periods of sleep they approached the wormhole, it was time to take her down to convolut twenty four, with entry at the correct speed being paramount, as not to do so would throw them anywhere in the universe, and could even put them right back on Earth with Sirk!

Coming out the other end Smiffi let out a sigh of relief, and blew slowly through his lips as Donut watched as the stars stop striating; Smiffi immediately put her back to convolut thirty-five.

'It's been a while since I went through a wormhole that way,' he told Donut, and grinned at the experience like someone who'd just got off the carousel at a fairground!

'Yeah,' replied Donut, 'good fun eh?'

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Locate and fly us to Earth!'

'Compliant!'

'How in f--k's name did that Sirk guy ever put up with this computer's voice, they should have given him a medal for that alone!' said Smiffi laughing. Although he didn't really understand the joke, not wanting to offend Smiffi Donut laughed anyway.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Destination Earth - auto!'

'Compliant!' answered old Tinny, then making a slight adjustment to its trajectory the Dart headed for its home planet.

As days went it was a happy one, but Cita had never really come to terms with losing Sirk, as he was all she'd ever wanted, all she'd ever needed in a man. Most days were spent going through life automatically, and her conscious time was taken up with her memories of their young years when they were still wild and free. Then followed the dark years when he'd gone on that perilous mission; and all that followed, but the best years ever she knew unerringly were the ones they'd spent together on Urf.

For his kind deed Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche thanked Raff Junior, who as a master chef had baked a cake especially for their mother. Written in royal icing on the cake were the words "Happy one hundred and fourth dear Cita". Cards from all over the world arrived by post, TT,

email, and of course personal visits by the thousand! At one stage they worried in case Cita might tire, and almost called a halt to the singing of happy birthday! It was after saying a prayer for their long deceased friends Raff, Sheel, Tim, Professor Patenil, Hepra, Kiska and Gorn; and a special one for Sirk, when someone screamed outside.

'Oh my God, oh my God! It's Sirk - Sirk's back.... he's back - it's the Dart!' Everyone ran out, and Cita moving as fast as her frail legs would allow her, joined them. The Dart settled just outside Vantown City just two hundred yards from Cita's home, and watching it settle on levit a tear ran down her cheek, could it be, after all this time? Trying to remember how long he'd been missing, in her excitement her mind couldn't cope with the mathematics of it. The hatch floated silently open as usual, but when a different figure appeared at the top of the walkway Cita's heart plummeted, it wasn't to be, and this man wasn't Sirk. As Donut made his appearance behind Smiffi she wondered why these two were flying the Dart.

'Hello, my name is Smiffi,' he said extending his right arm, 'I'm looking for two people, Arin-Raff Notaani and Sheel-Taniche Notaani, are they here?'

'I'm Arin-Raff,' he told them and stepping forward shook Smiffi's hand, 'what are you doing with my father's ship?'

'I'm sorry Arin-Raff,' said Smiffi pausing briefly, 'I don't bare glad tidings... your father is on board, but....' Cita broke down, then running as fast as her legs would carry

her she ascended the walkway, and running after her Arin-Raff was stopped by his uncle Arin's gentle arm.

'She'll want to be by herself for a while.' he said softly, then suddenly aware of his mother's need to grieve in private Arin-Raff relented. Finding it somewhat difficult Cita's frail hands pulled at the heavy Palicene zipper to open the Bodibag, then casting her eyes down she saw the strong and unmistakable features of Sirk's face, gaunt and pale in death, there was no shadow of doubt it was her beloved. Weeping heavily she put her arms lovingly around his head, as if to shelter him from some unknown evil. Her long silver hair cascaded across his face.

'What happened to you my love?' she whispered softly, whilst making a futile attempt to hold back her tears, 'I've missed you so very much.' Standing erect she wiped her hand over her face, and left the Dart to return to the others.

'You can pay your respects to your father now,' she told Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche, 'you also Arin, you'll want to see your brother.' Putting his arm around her shoulder Arin comforted her.

'I'll go when they get back.' he told her gently.

'I'm sorry if we've spoiled your birthday Cita,' said Smiffi, 'we had no way of knowing....'

'Believe me Smiffi, you haven't spoiled it,' replied Cita tearfully, 'you've made it a happy one, you see... now I know what's happened to him I can put my mind at rest, especially now I've got him back.'

'Well that makes me very happy indeed.' said Smiffi earnestly, and handed her Sirk's last testament, 'I can see now why Sirk wrote so glowingly about you!'

'We owe you a debt of gratitude,' said Arin gratefully, 'Sirk was my brother.' Inhaling deeply Smiffi nodded, and fought back tears of regret, and realized for the first time in ages he'd done something to please someone else. He hadn't felt emotion like this since the cessation of the million years war four years previously, when a renegade band of the Form had slaughtered his wife and five children. Having exacted a cold revenge on the perpetrators, an attempt was made by his superiors to demote him in the ranks, but having attained Higher Echelon his council informed the court his status could never be legally removed, and was something he would have until his dying day.

'This is a nice place you've got here.' said Smiffi changing the subject to ward off his emotion, 'how do you live, by trade or subjugation?'

'Trade,' replied Arin openly, 'it was Sirk who brought us here after the Holocaust, he introduced the system we've lived by ever since.'

'So conciliation actually works?' asked Smiffi incredulously.

'We've never had any complaints - well, not many!'

'Shit! On my planet we were always taught subjugation is the only way to survive and prosper, I'm beginning to like

this planet... so, you don't have wars or conflicts of any nature then?'

'I wouldn't say that exactly,' said Arin honestly, 'but we have an arbitrary system that takes care of disputes, and our children are taught that the word of the Arbiters is final, so....' Smiffi grinned, a grin that unnerved Arin for a moment, he'd seen that grin on Sirk's face, wide, showing his teeth, and his eyes being slightly vacant reminded him strongly of his late brother.

'Uh, would you have any objections to us staying here.... uh, I mean living here with you on this planet?' blurted out Smiffi suddenly. His request took Arin by surprise, and for a moment or two wasn't sure what to tell him.

'I uh.... guess it would be ok,' replied Arin hesitantly, 'I'll have to talk with the City Council but I don't see any objections being raised, after all you've done us a huge service by returning Sirk, so...'

'It's just that we have a craft that is far superior to the Dart, no offence to that ship, but ours has a technology very advanced by comparison... it could be of good use to you!'

'No offence taken,' replied Arin laughing, 'Sirk would be the first to recognize something new and good, believe me he would have embraced it with open arms!'

'We can't live here,' said Donut suddenly, 'Intergalax will track us before you can say-'

'Hot shit?' interjected Raff junior at the thought of having that interstellar giant as their own, and made everyone

laugh.

'And they'd find us in about the same time it takes to have one!' said Donut causing more hilarity.

'Sorry Donut, I hadn't thought of that,' replied Smiffi, and was surprised at Donut's astuteness.

'How in Hell's name could they trace you here?' asked Arin, seeing no reason why anyone could know where they were.

'Our Disc, is fitted with a Hypertrak, as they all are, which can track the ship though time and space, and if we were to bring it here you would regret it for the rest of your natural - of that I can assure you!' said Smiffi his face set like iron, exactly like Sirk's! Beginning to like this guy Arin was also aware it was because of the similarity to his brother.

'Why would it be that bad? Surely they'll listen to reason.' said Arin, innocent of the war-like whiles of Haak and his cronies. Laughing loudly Smiffi then apologized, then explaining assured Arin he hadn't laughed at him.

'On my planet we have what are called Scavengers, Donut and I are Scavengers!' he told Arin, 'our job is to go around the universe - space and time - and pick up anything we think is of value to take to auction, sometimes, if you get lucky you find something - like the Dart for instance - that will fetch such a high price at auction you can literally retire on your commission! Such is the competition that people have been known to disappear, and Donut here will testify to that, he's had commissions snatched right out of

his hand before now! As far as they are concerned this planet and the solar system is dead, and if they ever got wind of this planet's time sector they would come time and again, until they'd plundered every last item of value and left it barren! We were about to take the Dart for a secret valuation, then, having a twinge of conscience we decided to bring her back here to you.'

'Well I'm sure glad you did Smiffi,' said Arin smiling, 'as far as I'm concerned you've made friends for life here - all of us!' Echoing their approval the villagers gave them a loud cheer.

'I'm touched,' said Smiffi genuinely, 'but it seems we cannot stay, as Donut pointed out we can't take a chance on them tracking us here, they would rake over this planet until they'd looted everything!'

'They don't frighten us,' said Arin bravely, 'after the Powerful One nothing scares us!'

'Well, I don't know who this Powerful One is, but let me tell you this, as a Higher Echelon fighter in the million year war I fought with A block, you don't get any higher than that! However, having said that - Intergalax frightens the shit out of me!'

'As far as the Powerful One's concerned it's a case of was, not is, and although I respect your greater knowledge of Intergalax, I don't know about Higher Echelon fighters - what exactly are you capable of?' Unsure if he should demonstrate his awesome powers Smiffi thought for a

moment, then spotting a bubble he locked his mind to it and melted it in front of their very eyes! Within thirty seconds it was a pile of smoldering ashes on the ground.

'Holy shit!' said Arin, clearly shaken by this guy, 'I've never seen anything like that in my whole life!'

'Here's the crunch... that was nothing! The Disc is fitted with light guns, a light so white it can blind you in less than a second... oh uh, it also penetrates solid matter!'

'F--k!' said Arin-Raff wondering what his dad would have made of that!

'Well,' said Smiffi starting again, 'now you know why we could never risk it - not with people as good as you!'

'Smiffi,' said Donut with a tone of inquiry, 'supposing we were to go back to the Disc, set it on a course for oblivion, then return here in the Dart?'

'You're no Donut,' said Smiffi picking him up with one arm, 'you're a genius! What is your real name anyway?'

'Gelf,' said Donut, and wondered if this would be the last time he would be known as Donut!

'Gelf it is from now on!' declared Smiffi, 'what we're gonna do is take the Dart back to the Disc, set the Disc on a bogus journey through time and space, we'll then re-board the Dart and bring her back here, and Intergalax will be none the wiser, especially as they'll be spending years chasing the Disc through time and space! The one thing they can't do is connect the disappearance of the Disc to the Dart!' After Smiffi had finished explaining his complex

plan Arin pointed out that the journey would take them fourteen months.

'No,' said Smiffi, 'it'll take us seven months, as once we've verified the Disc in its last known position we can bring the Dart back in the Disc, then, let the Disc.... go!' declared Smiffi waving his arm skyward to demonstrate its finality.

'I see no reason for you not to stay then.' said Arin grinning.

'No point in further delay,' said Smiffi, 'come on Donu - uh Gelf!' Everyone, including Gelf laughed at Smiffi's goof.

'Will you stay for Sirk's funeral?' asked Arin politely, 'we'd feel honored if you would.'

'With all respect I think it's best we go now... the sooner we dispose of the Disc the better, sorry, please don't take offence.'

'None taken,' said Cita, then, playing on words, 'we'll take a gate instead! If something had to be done it had to be done, Sirk would have understood that.' Boarding the Dart Smiffi and Gelf left to annihilate their past, and hopefully return intact with the Dart.

A CLOSE CALL

It seemed the whole world had arrived in Vantown City for Sirk's funeral, and *all* hotels were literally bursting at the seams in an attempt to accommodate the sudden influx from home and abroad, but those unable to find a room slept rough just to be at the great man's last bash! The sky was overcast; the weather it seemed had adopted an attitude commensurate with the occasion. The procession started slowly that morning from Sirk's home, but after ten minutes the cortege had grown in length to six miles, everyone who'd made the journey for Sirk's funeral had tagged on behind, it was *the* testimony to his popularity and legend. Garlands, bouquets, wreaths, you name it, were given in thanks to the man who'd made all things possible through his heroic tenacity, vision and bravery. As requested, various favorites from his cache of music were

played as they marched slowly to the Meadow of the Passovers, at Cita's request the last song to be aired was one that she and Sirk had made their "own", Mary Black's On Golden Mile. The procession came to a halt at the freshly dug grave, and as the bearers carefully laid the coffin over the grave the procession fanned out around it, while those at the back hoped to get even the slightest peek of the ceremony. A light breeze lifted the flag of Urf draped across his coffin, as Kinshasa started reading from the same bible Professor Patenil had used at baby Sheel's funeral all those years ago, which had also been used at the funerals of the professor, Kiska, Raff, Raff's wife Sheel and many other townspeople. Standing stock-still Cita was afraid to move, in case the slightest movement might trigger a memory that would steal her dignity, and above all else she felt she had to maintain that, but memories can play the cruelest tricks at the moment you least expect them.

Her memory was triggered by Arin walking 'round to stand beside her in her hour of need, and suddenly she recalled the last time she'd nearly lost her beloved man; this time it was for real! Through her tears she saw Sirk lying in that hospital bed, and remembered the first time he'd regained consciousness after his ordeal in defeating the Powerful One. Anyone having suffered severe pain and injury will know what it's like regaining consciousness, the sudden awareness of pain hits you like a sledgehammer,

although some stay conscious others return to oblivion. Aware of his pain Sirk felt his whole midriff had been ripped apart! In reality that is more or less what had happened, but someone was standing close by, and another he knew instinctively was sitting close by, although he wasn't able to make out their faces, he could however see they were smiling.

'That was a close call mate,' said Arin, 'I think you're getting too f---n' old for this game!'

'Bullshit!' came his reply in a somewhat weakened voice, then the black pit beckoned him once again.

'It's ok, there's nothing to worry about,' the doctor informed them, 'he'll be like this for a few days, his trauma was particularly severe!' As Arin and Cita Looked pensively on, they waited patiently until he surfaced again as their stomachs knotted with tension. There was only one figure by him when he came 'round this time, it was that of Cita, and her smile welcomed him before he succumbed to the black void yet again. An hour later and consciousness returned once more, but this time more alert, he felt almost compos mentis!

'Hello,' said Sirk, his voice had taken Cita unaware, and she spun around to face him, 'how long have I been in here?'

'Oh my love,' she said, as tears blurred her vision, 'thank God - I thought we'd lost you. Four days ago I thought I was gonna be a widow!' Seeing Sirk smile Cita knew

instinctively he was going to say something witty.

'You think I'd let you spend all that insurance money without me? Not f---n' likely!' A short silence ensued before either spoke again.

'What happened... where are the others?' asked Sirk as concern clouded his face.

'It's ok,' Cita reassured him, 'PO is definitely dead! The others are fine, including Kinshasa, although he picked up an injury rescuing you.'

'What?' asked Sirk concernedly hoping he hadn't been badly injured.

'When PO's bullets ripped through your chest he ran out to pull you to safety, but PO used that pink veil on him, and was about to turn his machine guns on both of you when Kiska grabbed your pulsar and gave him a blasting, that put him off his stroke long enough for Arin to get the Dart in close enough to fry him on the spot!'

'Apart from that everyone's alright, yeah?' asked Sirk concernedly, 'did they smash the computer and the replicator?'

'Yeah Hun, they are, and they did, you rest now,' said Cita, 'I've gotta get something to eat, but I'll be back soon,' then looking at her watch, 'about half an hour?' Having tired quickly Sirk smiled wanly, and within a few seconds of Cita's departure he was non-compos mentis once more. While he was out cold he was vaguely aware of movement and pain, which had been brought about by a nurse

changing his dressing, and from then on he drifted sporadically in and out of consciousness.

The morning was bright and sunny, and unaware he'd slept all night Sirk had been disoriented by prolonged periods of unconsciousness, so thinking it was still the previous evening the ward sister eventually gave the game away by telling him his wife had been in for more than two hours while he was out cold, but had left again at ten o'clock.

'When's she coming in again?' he asked her, thinking he wouldn't see her again that day.

'It's twenty to twelve now, so she should be here in about twenty minutes.' said the sister kindly, then seeing he was still prone to bouts of unconsciousness left the ward for other duties.

'I thought it was women who were supposed to keep men waiting?' asked Cita smiling at him from the bedside, 'I've brought someone to see you.' Straining his neck in the direction of Cita's gaze he attempted to see who was there to see him.

'How're you doin' ol' buddy?' said Kinshasa grinning widely; Sirk smiled back.

'Hey... I hear I owe you my life,' said Sirk flatly, 'I hope you haven't come to collect, I haven't finished with it yet!' Kinshasa burst out laughing.

'Hey man, I'm happy with the one I've got thanks.' he replied, then shaking Sirk's hand stood aside as Arin

walked in.

'So you did it then!' he said, smiling thinly.

'Yep! I blew the old bastard in to the middle of next Wednesday!' said Arin with a great deal of satisfaction.

'The way you laid into him with the Pulsar I think it was Thursday!' said Kinshasa.

'You bastard!' hissed Sirk, 'that was my job!' For a moment Arin thought he was genuinely upset, but the tell-tail twitch at the corner of his mouth gave the game away. They all laughed, then laughed louder as Sirk's exertions had caused him a great deal of pain, and spent the next few minutes regretting it.

'When do I get out of here?' Well it had to come, they all knew it wouldn't be long before the inevitable question was asked.

ANOTHER PISS UP?

For the first time in ten weeks Sirk took his first steps into the big wide world, being weakened through inactivity his legs wobbled as he descended the hospital steps. He was however glad to be going home, although hospitals are great for recovery, now he was back in good shape home was where it was at, and he wanted to be with his friends!

Raff, Kiska, Hepra, Hamys, and the professor cheered and clapped, and everyone was there to greet him as he arrived home, but again, as he stepped from the bubble Sirk felt that twinge of self-conscious. The Count San Germaine arrived two minutes later with his hand extended at arms length.

'It was truly a courageous thing you did,' said the count genuinely, 'I'm just glad Kinshasa was able to get you out, we all owe him a debt of gratitude!'

'Here here!' shouted John, 'what would we have done for corny jokes if he hadn't!' Happy knowing he was with real people again Sirk bust a gut laughing, people who cared, people who would give of themselves without question, without counting the cost or expecting anything in return, Sirk considered them all to be the salt of the Earth.

'There's a party tonight in the recreation area,' said Raff, 'everyone's invited - obviously - and Sirk!'

'Here we go again!' said Arin, smirking at the thought of the Men getting up to their usual antics. Well, it was a party to end all parties, and emulating the Powerful One the Men as usual had everyone in stitches. Once again Kiska had found something he could turn into a costume, and everyone finished up on the floor in convulsive laughter; the museum had coughed up an old balloon that he'd somehow managed to tailor around himself and had inflated it to such a degree that he literally rolled around on the ground 'til he'd almost lost control!

'Shit! I'm so heavy I think I'm gonna fall through the Urf!' he shouted much to everyone's delight.

'Unless a pulsar gets you first!' offered Kinshasa with tears rolling down his cheeks.

'Hot shit! They're going to cook me as well!' declared Kiska rolling his eyes skyward.

Yet another collection of music had been gleaned from the museum, but this time they'd found such gems as The Mavericks, The Corrs, Westlife and many others, including an old album by T-Rex, which had them all dancing to I Love to Boogie. The party ended with Arin playing Sirk and Cita's adopted song, Mary Black's On Golden Mile. The following morning most revelers emerged from their respective domes looking at each other in puzzlement; and were clearly questioning the wisdom of the previous nights revelry! However, life must go on, and things very slowly returned to normal, after talking at length with Kinshasa Sirk agreed that he and his people were more than welcome to live in Vantown City; and Sirk would ship them over in the Magnetran after building domes for them to live in, and reminded Kinshasa of an age-old saying, "Strength in numbers!"

In to his autumn years the professor had been pouring over everything scientific in the museum. He'd also been busy educating anyone who would listen on any subject they wanted to learn, particularly if they showed a flair for it. Knowing that education was the key to their future he

felt it his duty to impart as much of his knowledge to as many as possible before his demise. The professor felt he owed it to Sirk, after all it was he who'd had the vision to foresee what would happen to Earth, and get them safely out before that terminal day, a fact he mulled over as he walked to the Vantown City Council meeting.

'Fairly soon I will be able to re-introduce many species of animal and plant life to boost the planet's infrastructure, and we will in effect be better off than our forefathers,' he told the council, 'as we have decided to make ourselves aware of how pollution could affect our new - old - home, we also have a much better chance of securing a better future for generations to come, and we must all face the fact that this must be of paramount importance!' The applause was deafening, his sincerity had captured their imagination as well as their hearts. The planet Earth for the very first time since man had first become civilized was in capable hands, and had a future it seemed that was almost guaranteed, to all intent and purpose man had realized and learned from the folly of the earlier years on his "jewel"; and he was now willing to look after what appeared to be a rarity in a vast universe. It could be said that after what they'd been through they weren't looking to the heavens for any answers, not at that moment in time anyhow. Having dealt successfully with a dispute between one of the Men and one of Kinshasa's people, Sirk returned home tired that night, Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche having gone out for the

evening had left him alone with Cita for the first time in over a month! It wasn't that they minded, they loved having their children around, but Sirk always reminded himself of something Cita told him years earlier, something he knew came from the death of their firstborn, baby Sheel.

'We never know what tomorrow will bring, they may not always be with us, and so we must make the most of them for as long as they are around.' However, it was still nice when having two or three hours to themselves, they were able to chill out and do their own thing. Pouring a drink Sirk asked Cita if she would join him.

'Tell me where the glue is and I'll be glad to!' she told him smirking.

'Alright nurse, I guess I asked for that one.' he replied laughing, but his face clouded, 'I was thinking about Ali again earlier, I wonder if it's possible to go back again, I don't see why not!'

'The only person who can answer that is the professor,' said Cita candidly, and dreading the thought he might say it would be alright she added, 'why don't you ask him?'

'I will... but it can wait 'til tomorrow, tonight is just for us.' he told her definitively. Behind her smile she feared the very thought he might actually go, and as the specter of Ali Boran had surfaced several times now she had worried for a considerable length of time.

Sirk's birthday bash was again another epic piss-up, and everyone got out of their heads, still, they couldn't

complain, as shares in the local brewery did very well from the proceeds! Again the Disco worked overtime, music played practically non-stop all night, Chuck Berry followed the Rolling Stones, after that came Larry Williams Bony Maronie, after which came a firm favorite of Sirk's, Esquerita's Rockin' the Joint. It was after two am before the first rockers showed signs of tiring, and began drifting away in ones and twos.

THE DECISION

As Cita had suggested Sirk talked with professor Patenil about the likely success of one more mission, although he'd advised Sirk emphatically not to make another journey back to Earth, Sirk had argued with the professor for some time. At one stage it had almost become

heated, then, finally tiring of the argument the professor walked away. The following morning Sirk paid him another visit to apologize for his outburst, as it appeared Sirk had become obsessed with rescuing Ali.

'Sorry Prof.,' said Sirk sheepishly, 'I was off the mark last night, I didn't mean to have a go.'

'It's alright Sirk, what's done is done and can't be undone, let's forget it, bury it in the past where it belongs.'

'Thanks prof.,' replied Sirk gratefully, 'it's just that I can't forget about Ali, I would really like to go back for him.'

'I know Sirk, things like that always lie heavy on your conscience, but we've been here over twenty years now, and that wormhole we came through will have either extruded or distorted, to go through now would be suicide... God knows where you'd end up!'

'But isn't there the slightest chance it might not have distorted, it might still be the same... isn't that also possible?'

'Yes!' replied the professor testily.

'That's all I wanted to know,' said Sirk, then getting up from the professor's armchair bade him farewell.

'One piece of advice, as it seems you've made your mind up,' stopping in the doorway Sirk turned to face the professor, 'go through the wormhole at the same speed we came through originally, and log it with the computer, that way at least you'll be able to backtrack!' Nodding his thanks to the professor he left.

'Just one more thing,' shouted the professor, Sirk turned again, 'what about Cita?' Nodding again Sirk's eyes this time were downcast, and he was unable to return the professor's gaze.

The following morning working on supplies for the trip, his first item was of course the all-important replicator, and stocked up with anything and everything, especially coffee! Recon and Regen being next on his list he remembered how important they'd been to him in the past, although not saying anything to Sirk, Cita worried constantly, but resisted the temptation to beg him not to go. Talking secretly with Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche, they told her she must stop him at all costs.

'Mum, if Professor Patenil says it's too dangerous then he can't go! For Christ's sake we'll lose him forever I know it!'

'You won't stop him, I know your father better than anyone, and once he's made his mind up that's it!'

'Well I'll stop him then!' shouted Sheel-Taniche breaking down in tears.

'No, both of you - you say nothing! If you do it'll only serve to strengthen his resolve, we only have one option, keep our mouths shut and hope he comes to his f---n' senses!' With that they left Cita in the kitchen with her head in her hands, scared to even think about what would happen to Sirk once he'd left. While Sirk went about his inventory Professor Patenil ran his expert eye over the drives mathematics; the Tachypas hadn't been powered up for

years and was sorely in need of mathematical repair. Having finished he laid his instruments on the trolley, and turned as Sirk walked on to the bridge.

'Ah Sirk,' said the professor weakly, 'it's all done, there are no discrepancies to report, so as long as she cuts ok in I don't think you'll have any problems.'

'Thanks prof.,' said Sirk earnestly, 'I do appreciate this, I know how taxing it must be for you.'

'Not half as taxing as it is for Cita!' replied the professor looking Sirk straight in the eye, then as he left Sirk greeted John as he walked onto the bridge; Sirk looked away.

'Morning Sirk,' said John brightly, 'I'm glad I've caught you... have you got time for quick chat?'

'Not really,' replied Sirk, sensing another lecture, 'but if you don't mind following me around - go ahead!'

'Sure, I understand,' said John agreeably, 'Sirk, you know how long we've known each other... and you know I've never interfered with anything you've done before, but-'

'Cut the crap John, what you want to say is - don't go on this mission, you know what the professor thinks, so give it a miss for once and toe the line!'

'Ok, if you put it like that,' replied John, 'yes, but it's not what the professor thinks, or says, it's what Cita thinks!'

'Cita's fine about it.' said Sirk emphatically.

'You sure about that Sirk,' said John, leveling his gaze to let him know he was serious, 'if I was you I'd go home and have a real heart to heart with her before you leave!' Again

Sirk's gaze hit the ground, and knowing they were right he was unable face them, but the truth burnt his insides and etched itself on his mind; still his stubborn streak willed him to go back for Ali.

'Well everything's ready,' said Sirk arriving home, 'I think I'll start out tomorrow.'

'Ok baby,' replied Cita smiling, 'it'll be lonely without you, I'll have to find something to occupy my mind while you're away.'

'Yeah, you'll find something,' said Sirk, keeping it short, 'just think, in fourteen months from now I'll be back with an old friend!'

'Yes,' replied Cita quietly, 'that'll be nice.'

'What the f--k's eatin' you,' asked Sirk acidly, 'I thought you'd be glad to see Ali again?'

'That's just it though, we won't be - will we?' said Cita challengingly.

'Oh I see, so it's been a conspiracy between you, John, and the professor from the beginning has it?'

'Nothing of the sort!' hissed Cita angrily, 'nobody thinks you should go... but you... you don't listen to anyone do you, you always think you know best! The professor knows what he's talking about - listen to him Sirk - please!'

'The professor told me today there is a possibility I can get through, so I am going! I don't know what you're all worried about, haven't I always come through for you in the past?'

'This is different,' pleaded Cita as a last ditch effort, 'if something happened to you, don't you know what it would do to me... or don't you even care?' Walking over Sirk put his arm around her shoulder and pulled her to him.

'Nothing is going to happen - that I promise you!' he said reassuringly.

'So there's nothing I can do or say to make you change your mind?' asked Cita, hoping he might just admit to one weakness, but in the back of her mind she knew it was hopeless.

'Cita, really there is nothing to worry about!' he told her emphatically, then breaking down she ran from the room leaving Sirk with a large lump of guilt in his throat.

Monday morning saw the start of a new week, and the start of another epic journey for Sirk. Everyone came to see him off, and inevitably there were a few last minute pleas from Cita and the professor, John, Raff and many of the Men, but Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche stood in mute silence a few yards away. It was to no avail, no one would convince him not to take this trip. The tall gaunt figure of the Count Saint Germaine walked through the crowd.

'Can I say something,' he asked with authority in his voice.

'Of course you can Count,' replied Sirk amiably, 'but I think I know what's coming.'

'I'm sure you do,' said the count steadily, 'but the professor is right! I have seen many things in many times, and, I've seen people disappear many times - doing just what you

are about to do now!'

'Sirk! Let me come with you!' shouted Kinshasa from the edge of the crowd, 'two heads are better than one.... what d'you say?'

'No mate,' replied Sirk emphatically, 'if something does go wrong there's no point in two of us getting stranded, not that it will you understand!' As the hatch shut they stood staring, and listened as the Tachypas cut in. The external PA cut in, and Sirk gave them his last farewell.

'See you in fourteen months everyone - and that's a promise!' Lifting slowly to a thousand feet the Dart suddenly disappeared from the sky. Everyone listened as the familiar staccato crackle followed the wake of the now unseen Dart from the atmosphere, then, as the last echo died away they walked silently back to their homes.

Reaching the wormhole a month later Sirk instructed the computer to track the wormhole, which it did in its own impeccable style. What Sirk wasn't aware of was the fact that Professor Patenil due to advanced years had accidentally overlooked a Discrepancy in the mathematics between warp and convolut, although being only 0.000027 tricoseconds Sirk was totally oblivious to the fact that it had thrown the Dart forward a massive four hundred million years as he went through the wormhole, but what was worse was the fact that the discrepancy wouldn't manifest itself until he was on his home run. The remainder of his journey was almost a non-event.

Realizing it would make an admirable landing port he brought the Dart down slowly in the magneparc, and the exterior cameras showed the club was still in business, as people came and went in varying states of inebriation; he'd hit it right! In the knowledge that he'd not only made it, he felt a great deal of pride that he'd take Ali back with him to prove them all wrong! However, the exterior cameras also showed him he was attracting quite a lot of attention, and Sirk reminded himself he would have to make this - one very quick mission! As the walkway solidified Sirk walked once more on Terra Firma, and it felt strange being back here after so long on Urf, but putting his feelings aside he made his way quickly to the club entrance. Sliding his card over the eye it recognized him immediately, then descending the stairs the familiar strain of rock music came from below, and Sirk recognized it immediately as Hank Ballard, doing his version of The Twist.

'Sirk!' shouted the familiar voice of Ali Boran over the bar, 'Sirk, my good friend - what are you doing here now, I thought you were supposed to be on some other planet? And here it is five months later, and you're back!'

'Ali,' started Sirk quickly, 'I haven't got much time, so I want you to listen carefully to what I have to say, ok? Now, I know this may sound odd, no, crackpot, but I've traveled back through time to be here, I can't explain how it happened right now, but Cita, Arin, John Mycker and the Professor are living in the future on this planet! What I'm

about to tell you now you will find unbelievable... but, what I want from you is your firm assurance that you will do everything I say, can you give me that assurance now? Your life depends on it!' Looking at Sirk as if he'd lost his marbles, there was something in Sirk's tone however that told Ali that he was perfectly serious.

'Ok Sirk, I've never had any reason to doubt your word in the past, so...'

'Good man,' said Sirk hurriedly, 'I want you to come with me right now - on the Dart, if you don't you will perish with the rest of humanity, the UWF did use the Depol, but when we left Earth originally Terrafighters chased us around the globe and stopped us from coming for you; we had to make good our escape before they finished us off!'

'So I leave right now, and.... walk away from the club and everything!'

'Yes!'

'Shit! Well, if you say that's the way it's got to be - let's get the f--k outta here!'

'Let's go!' said Sirk quickly, 'I've probably attracted a large crowd by now, all wondering like you why I'm here instead of up there!' The crowd outside the Ill Eagle had grown considerably, and Sirk was not wrong! Unfortunately Pat Tanna, chief tech on the Dart project was among them, and had radioed HQ to the effect that The Diamond Dart was back on Earth already!

'What's goin' on Cap'n Sirk!' he shouted watching as they

made their way back to the ship. Hurrying across the magneparc, and urging Ali along with him Sirk just waved. They were only thirty feet from the walkway when they heard the familiar wail of the security vehicles screaming across the airfield, and Pat Tanna must have had his line open to HQ while they were still in the club. Suddenly two open magnecars raced across the apron ahead of the security vehicles, and Sirk had already picked out the unmistakable silhouette of Tranter! A squadron of Terrafighters flew low overhead, and knowing already he'd bitten off more than he'd could chew Sirk ran up the walkway, as he and Ali ran through the hatch Sirk pulled the remote from his belt clip, and closing the hatch ran to the bridge. Sitting quickly at the helm Sirk switched on the scanners, and saw another squadron of Terrafighters already approaching from the southeast. Following a figure of eight pattern at ninety degrees to the first squadron their tactics were immediately apparent to Sirk; to make sure they could track the Dart visually as well as on radar! Sitting at the helm for a moment Sirk thought about it carefully.

'I think we should get the f--k away from here now, don't you Sirk?' asked Ali nervously.

'We will my friend,' replied Sirk coolly, 'I've gotta do some thinking, we're gonna have to outwit these bastards if we're gonna get clean away!' Pressing a pad Sirk materialized another seat, and sitting down quickly Ali felt the gravity

belt tighten around his ample belly.

'Hold on,' said Sirk suddenly, 'we're going straight up!'

Before Ali could reply Sirk put the Dart in vertical mode.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Convolut one - auto - go!'

'Compliant!' The Dart disappeared, and Sirk had now contravened low-flight regulations, and their take-off speed meant the vacuum behind the ship could have sucked up the entire crowd, but having considered the distance between the ship and the spectators he knew it would only have had a superficial effect on them.

'Laser lock-on!' screamed the computer, but they needn't have worried, by the time the terrafighter pilots were ready to fire, the Dart had already left the Earth's atmosphere and was well out of range.

THE FINAL JOURNEY

Holding station at Hydrus Sirk had no idea Ali would be scared of sleep, and it took him over half an hour to convince Ali it was vital he take the measured one hundred

milleparts of sleep, but it was more than that, he was petrified!

'Supposin' I don't wake up again?' he asked nervously as Sirk held the powersyringe above his arm.

'I'm taking it as well,' said Sirk earnestly, 'so, if I you don't wake up... neither do I!' That seemed to do the trick; and Ali reluctantly held his arm aloft for Sirk to administer his dose. Lying in the cot Ali watched as Sirk connected the nutrient feed, then, as the cot lid slid slowly down his eyes had already closed. On the bridge he instructed the computer to take the route it had mapped on the way out at convolut thirty-five. Shooting a dose into his own arm he climbed gratefully into his cot, then connecting his own nutrient line he waited for the black veil to descend over his eyes. Once more the Dart hurtled through the black void, and oblivious to anything around it the onboard computer went efficiently about its business, detecting meteors, meteorites, comets, cosmic storms, and took evasive action as and when necessary.

After six long months Sirk woke Ali for the penultimate time, as only the wormhole stood between them and home! 'Here!' said Sirk holding a glass of whisky aloft, 'I brought this along... well it's a special occasion!'

'Cheers!' said Ali cheerfully, 'I'll enjoy this very much indeed.' Downing it in one, he placed the tumbler on the helm.

'I'm glad you decided to come back with me Ali,' said Sirk

suddenly, 'you won't have any worries over money, we'll sport you a stake in your new club - why do you think I came all this back way for you - eh?' They laughed so loud Sirk nearly choked on his whisky!

'Only one more month of sleep my friend, then it's all over, you can settle down to a life of peace and luxury! There's no Tone music down there – or police raids'

'I'm intrigued,' replied Ali smiling, 'I had no complaints with the old one, but as you say, had I stayed there I would have be blown to bits anyway, plus, I won't have to keep a wary eye out for the law any longer when the music is on, so I don't see a problem!'

'Don't you just love it when a plan comes together?' asked Sirk grinning widely, 'ok, here we go, this you will find very unpleasant, we're about to enter the wormhole, so if you want to go aft at any time - do so, I will understand.'

'No, it's ok Sirk, I'll stay here on the bridge with you, if you don't mind.'

'It's your decision mate!' Taking the Dart down to convolut twenty-four they entered the wormhole bang on time, and the stars striated as they had so many times before. On the right side of the console a gauge started reading off from zero to plus, but they whirring so fast it was impossible to read them; Sirk poured them both another whisky.

'Avert your gaze Ali,' said Sirk quickly, 'it'll lessen the effect,' noticing his friend was in considerable discomfort. Six minutes later, their ordeal over, Sirk shot another dose

of sleep into Ali's shaking arm, and having checked him into the cot he repeated the act for his own benefit. Another four weeks saw them come 'round again, and walking into the galley Sirk made a pot of coffee while Ali showered. Walking onto the bridge Sirk checked the scanners; the screen should be showing the solar system now. Sirk's heart missed a beat; it wasn't there! Feeling suddenly weak, he realized his subconscious fears that the professor had been right all along, and found himself wondering why he always thought he knew best! Why hadn't he listened to them? Then something else hit him, what would he tell Ali, but remembering his training he calmed down, and realised that to panic at this stage would do him no good whatsoever. Like everything else, there had to be an answer to this problem, it was just a matter of sorting it out!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Why aren't Earth and the solar system on the scanner?'

'We are not in range yet, we still have four months to travel!' Sirk knew instinctively he'd dropped a monumental clanger.

'The stats have changed, why is that?'

'There is no change in my information banks.' came the chilling reply from the computer.

'But there must be!' hissed Sirk vehemently.

'No change!' As Sirk sat heavily at the helm Ali walked

onto the bridge and thanked Sirk for his coffee, but seeing the look on Sirk's face, and having known Sirk as long as he had, he knew Sirk was troubled. Explaining his dilemma in great detail, Sirk assured him they would get to Urf soon. Another four months of sleep was something neither he nor Ali was looking forward to, but it had to be done if they were going to get back at all!

Three wake periods later Sirk put the coffee on for what felt like the millionth time! He and Ali sat at the helm drinking while they waited patiently for the computer to announce the solar system was in range, then talked for hours of the old days in Ali's club, and laughed at the many funny moments they'd witnessed over the years.

'Remember Captain Clapp?' said Ali grinning at Sirk.

'Do I?' replied Sirk laughing, 'are you talking about the night he thought he had you for illegal entertainment?'

'That's the one,' said Ali reflectively, 'God did we f---n' laugh that night!'

'Yeah,' replied Sirk, as his eyes glazed over, 'I didn't know what you were gonna do that night I must admit; I thought you were sunk, but you had the bastard! It was that first drink that turned the tide, there's no doubt about that.'

'Yeah yer right,' interjected Ali, 'I figured that if I could somehow get him to relax just a fraction I could win him over.'

'You did that alright,' cut in Sirk, as eager as Ali to relate the story, 'instead he went out pissed to the gills... then, the

Global Holovis guys tripped over him by accident, recognized him, and it was all over Internews with GH and every tabloid in the world! Then he got the sack for dereliction of duty!' By this time they were near to hysteria, and Ali almost gagged in his moment of mirth!

'Still I must admit,' said Sirk regaining his breath, 'he was an evil bastard, if ever anyone deserved it - he did!'

'You're not wrong Sirk!' agreed Ali finally composing himself.

'Earth's solar system imminent - onscreen in two minutes!' Suddenly Sirk was fully alert, and with anticipation spun around to face the console.

'Flaw detection!' announced the computer suddenly, 'the solar systems energy source is corrupt - core temperature denigration 38%!'

Saying nothing Sirk's mind was now frozen, and he was unable to comprehend this latest outburst from the computer. What had happened to Earth, was it still there? Staring blankly at the screen his mind raced at the possibilities and the impossibilities, the probable's and improbable's, then, taking her off auto he considered going back through the wormhole; but remembering what Professor Patenil had told him about compounding the problem he admitted to Ali they were in very deep pooh, and without a bog roll! Passing Pluto Sirk put her back on auto for the remainder of their journey; and left the supercool open to watch the Sun in its red giant state he, then made his way to the galley to join Ali

for a cup of coffee. Walking through the companionway Sirk's heart exploded like a bomb! Lying on the floor was a body in an advanced stage of decay, its skeleton showing prominently through dry and fragmented flesh, and its eyes resting on the edge of their sockets! Its face wore a macabre grin as if it was trying to tell him something, and frozen to the pot Sirk stared in stark horror at the remains of his good friend Ali! What had he done? Here he was, stuck in a time zone with little or no chance of escape, and on top of that, through his own vanity and stupidity he'd killed his good friend Ali! Now, he knew the wisdom of listening to others. No, he would still get back! He'd been in scrapes before and got out of them, so he would get out of this one as well! Standing distraught for a while he considered what he'd do with Ali's body, or what was left of it, when he suddenly heard the computer chime in again. 'Information -Earth - imminent - sixty minutes - solar time!' Reaching the bridge he made straight for the console, noting as he went that the Sun now filled the supercool, and cast a red glow over the whole bridge.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Reduce ships speed to convolut one, continue on course.'

'Compliant!' Sirk wasn't sure how the Sun would affect the ship, if the solar temperature increased significantly it would undoubtedly cause serious damage to the Dart, and there was no way he could risk landing if that was the case.

It concerned him greatly as to what he'd do if a landing wasn't possible, but decided he'd face that one if and when the problem arose. As they got ever deeper into the solar system his biggest worry was monitoring the hull temperature, so programming his chrono he checked his body rates, his temperature thankfully remained at ninety-eight point four, his metabolic rate however was down slightly, but his blood pressure and pulse were both up. Electrical brain energy had also increased, by forty two percent! Still, that didn't surprise him in this situation and dismissed it out of hand. Hull temperature had also increased, by a vast margin, his concern turned to worry, and knew he'd have nowhere to go if a landing on Earth wasn't possible; he was in very deep hot shit!

IN REMISSION

His first check on the hull temperature showed it was already up by eighteen percent, but had since risen by another twenty-nine! His thoughts turned to finding somewhere else to live, but where, another planet? Other solar systems containing habitable planets must exist, but having taking the Darts capabilities in to consideration, it would be like the proverbial needle-in-a-haystack! Deciding he'd leave things as they were for now he let the ship travel on, voice-activating the computer to keep him in touch verbally, and let him know how far he could allow his situation to deteriorate.

'Information - Earth - imminent - two hours, sixteen minutes, forty one seconds - ships speed - convolut one - hull temperature down - six point two percent.' Hearing

this Sirk spun like a top, and his eyes fixed quickly on the console, but, sure enough it had gone down!

'Why?'

'Information not available!' Was the computer's indifferent reply. Not knowing what was going on Sirk kept his eyes fixed firmly on the instruments, and watched for the slightest deviation in the hull temperature, but prayed it would continue on a downward slide, that way he would at least be able to land safely on his home planet. He was clearly in remission at this juncture; providing the hull temperature didn't increase again he was home and dry!

'Information - Earth - one hour, ten minutes, twelve seconds - ships speed - convolut one - hull temperature down - four point eight percent.' At a loss to know why the hull was cooling Sirk knew only one thing; it flew in the face of known science!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Go to convolut ten, then reduce ships speed to convolut one within ten minutes of ETA, inform me if hull temperature increases!'

'Compliant!' Deciding to risk a higher velocity, he was curious as to what he'd find on landing, but could it be he would find everything as he left it? It was possible, then, realizing his imagination was running away with him he dismissed the thought.

'Information - Earth - imminent - thirty minutes - ships

speed - convolut ten - hull temperature - down two point two percent.' Knowing it wouldn't be long now before his questions would be answered, he kept his eyes firmly set on the hull temperature. Time for a quick coffee before re-entry, which tasted good, and having to pass poor Ali's corpse still lying in the galley, he returned to the bridge to drink it. Finishing his coffee he put his cup in the sink and left the galley, he had to do something about Ali's body before re-entry, but what? Brainwave! The cot lid hissed upwards, and as it did so he ran to the litepole, then descending to the cargo bay he reached for a bodibag. Grabbing the litepole again he returned to the crew's quarters. It was a gruesome task trying to get Ali's body in the bag, but having reached such an advanced state of decay it fell to pieces as he lifted it from the deck, and had to stuff the various limbs in as best he could, eventually giving up he knew there was precious little time left before re-entry, so placing it in the cot he sealed the lid. Running back to bridge he heard the computer chime again.

'Earth - destination achieved - reducing ships speed to convolut one - hull temperature down - 0.989 percent.'

'Shit! Sirk expelled the expletive like a missile, then realized he'd made it unnecessarily. The hull temperature was way below the critical point!

'Ships computer!'

'Your request?'

'Reduce ships speed to warp one, and check for

gravitational vortices then- the ship bucked violently to port, and threw him against the bridge rear bulkhead. The Dart leveled out; so he quickly took his seat before it had a chance to throw him around the bridge again!

'Gravity belt!' Sirk felt the comforting pressure of the belt pull him firmly into the seat.

'Auto!' screamed Sirk as the ship whipped to starboard, then without warning the Dart suddenly veered to port again, as the onboard computer tried desperately to bring the Dart under control, but it had its hands full as the vortices refused to let her go in peace! Hanging on for dear life, and his mind racing through a thousand possibilities he had a feeling of De Javou, and remembered he'd been down this route before! Recalling what had happened last time he realized if he didn't act quickly, his life would end - very quickly!

'Manual!' The helm went light in his hand, but as the Dart pitched from port to starboard, without warning the nose lifted then went into a dive again as he fought to control the bucking bronco!

'Cut Tachypas!' he screamed at the computer, 'auto - correct flight path!' The computer went through its calculations again; and in the blink of an eye the Dart mercifully attained level flight again. Looking through the supercool Sirk suddenly faced another nightmare, the Dart was heading straight for the side of a mountain!

'Tachypas in!' For some reason the drive failed to fire up,

so snatching the helm Sirk pulled back on the stick as hard as he could, with his air speed still over sixty thousand miles an hour he winced as the hull slammed into the side of the mountain! Screaming like Banshee as it careered up a scree, but the ships nose now pointed skyward again as she leap-frogged from the mountain, and over the edge of a sheer cliff that fell away thousands of feet below. Now in free flight the Dart pitched and rolled, with Sirk's hands reacting to every twitch he was barely able to control it, then, as the ships speed decreased she became easier to handle, and settling out she glided smoothly down onto a scrub desert. The next thing Sirk had to wait for was the impact as she made contact with terra firma, and watching through the supercool he knew by the fact he could see the ground a hundred yards ahead it would be within a few seconds. Suddenly the noise hit his ears like a giant kettledrum, then as it made contact with the desert floor its hull ploughed a furrow along the bed, although it bounced several times it lost considerably more speed.

Finally coming to rest the Dart tilted to port as she did so. Still sitting behind the helm Sirk knew this was more than just De Javou; he *had* been down this route before! Rubbing his hands over his face he looked gaunt, as the worry, pressure and stress of the last few minutes had taken its toll, and now came the added stress of finding his way back to Vantown City! Suddenly a cold fear crept into his psyche, it wasn't just the knowledge that he'd traveled

this path before, but also the fact that he'd have to run the gauntlet of the beetles again, and the other frightening monsters he'd faced last time! Then something dawned on him, his Jetpak was fully charged! He could fly direct to Vantown without putting one foot on terra-firma, so making for the armory he selected a pulsar rifle and one pistol, then checking the charge rate on his Jetpak he pulled some food supplies from the store, and made his plan to reach Vantown at his earliest opportunity. With everything in place he attached the Jetpak and opened the hatch, but the first thing he noticed was the weird red glow the Sun cast over everything. The familiar stunted Lebanon Cedars however no longer existed, the desert had been completely denuded of all plant life! If that was the case maybe the beetles didn't exist either! Deciding not to chance it, and save valuable time Sirk stuck the remote in his tunic pocket, then, pressing launch on his chrono he lifted off, saying a silent goodbye to the Dart as he left.

With a knotted stomach he flew southeast on the familiar route that would take him to Vantown City, and home! Over the scree, across the valley, but his alarm bells rang when he noticed that the valley, instead of being its familiar verdant green was now a sandy barren waste! A few minutes later he entered the gap in the cliff to the second of the two craters, and Sirk knew it wouldn't be long before he saw his home! His euphoria however was short-lived, within seconds he could see there were no

signs of life in the city whatsoever! Losing altitude his feet touched ground outside his dome, but the building was derelict, and it was obvious to him it had been like this for some considerable time! Sirk's heart raced, and knowing now that he was stranded for all time he panicked for the first time since he was a kid, looking left, looking right, the whole town was deserted, and remnants from his past life were strewn across the ground, plates, cutlery, and clothing, all manner of things. The caves! Yes, of course, they'd returned to the safety of the caves! Powering up the Jetpak he flew across the crater at maximum speed, and was desperate for any sign that he'd got it wrong, but his heart sank again as he saw the myriad caves now exposed to the elements. Eroded by time they now resembled some gigantic honeycomb, but still thinking he would find them he flew over the caves and into the museum, and found it was in a worse state than the caves. The roof had completely collapsed, and most of the floors with it, and Sirk's heart sank to an all time low! Back to Vantown City, perhaps he'd missed something, anything; there must be a clue as to where they were, but his search was fruitless.

'Cita!' his cry went unheard, and unheeded as he sat on the floor inside his dome. His tears fell unhindered as he realized for the first time the full magnitude of what he'd done! Half an hour had passed before he'd vented his sorrow sufficiently to try and rationalize his situation, standing again he wiped his hands over his eyes and started

looking around, and it was then for the first time he noticed the intense cold, but why was it so cold when the planet should be frying in super-hot temperatures! Hitting a light pad he was amazed to see the light glow, then it hit him, of course, he and the professor had rigged up the nuclear fusion plant to supply their power ad infinitum, so, at least that was still working. What of his future now? Sitting down Sirk thought on the subject for some time, but came to one conclusion, his memories of this place would haunt him for the rest of his days, and as much as he disliked it he would have to move somewhere else; if there was somewhere else! A search was necessary; he would have to find another place to live 'til he could find a way back to his own time. His only avenue was to return to the Dart and use it to find somewhere as quickly as possible, as the Jetpak would not serve him for more than a few hours, and he might need a lot longer than that before finding something suitable. Taking a last rueful look around he lifted off, and steering the Jetpak through one hundred and eighty degrees he headed back to the ship. Opening the hatch Sirk was aware that the Sun's red glare was affecting his vision, and decided he'd make full use of the solar visor to counteract its effects.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Tachypas drive in!'

'Non-compliant!'

'Shit!' Suddenly Sirk remembered the last time he'd been here, the nerve had been damaged on impact; and thanking God he'd brought the replicator along he dived for the storage locker in the cargo hold. Leaving the replicator in the control systems center he made quickly for the bridge.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Do a search on nerve EN1296, let me know if it's damaged.'

'Search complete - affirmative - damage 100%!' Knowing what to do next he ran back to the control systems center, and connecting the replicator he made the repair - he wasn't finished yet! After half an hour the nerve was functioning again, now he could get the ball rolling! Having carried out his checks he returned to the bridge and sat at the helm.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Tachypas drive in!'

'Affirmative!' Sirk heard the familiar feint whirr as it powered up.

'Aircon?'

'Functional!'

'Shields?'

'Functional!'

'Weapons?'

'Functional!'

'Power?'

'Functional - 100%.' Having one last thing to check before leaving he flew to the Vantown All Peoples Bar, the very bar he wanted Ali Boran to run as a latter-day Ill Eagle Club, as the door missing he ran in and made straight for the stockroom. It was still there, whisky by the gallon, carton upon carton was stacked ceiling high! Tearing the lid off the nearest carton he opened a bottle and took a large swig.

'Too damn f---n' good to leave here!' Loading as many as would fit in the hold, and seeing no point in hanging around soak up his regrets he lifted off, taking the Dart high above Vantown City he put her on levit and sat at the helm to consider his next move. East! In all the time he'd spent on Urf he'd never traveled east, so it was time to take a look. A few seconds later he found himself scanning a city with the ships exterior cameras, although it was derelict like all towns and cities, there were also no signs of life. The Dart cruised slowly, and after fifteen minutes he spotted a house on the outskirts of the city, no more than half a mile from the boundary. A fairly large house, at one time it must have been owned and lived in by someone with a huge wad of cash, so taking the Dart down he put her on what was once a large expanse of open lawn. A "U" shaped driveway accessed by two very rusty wrought iron gates was flanked on both sides by ornate cast iron lampposts, which had also suffered from advanced

corrosion. Taking the pulsar pistol he attached its holster to his tunic, then slinging a rifle over his shoulder he walked down the elevator. The front door gave easily under the weight of his shoulder, and hitting the floor with a resounding bang the noise of its demise echoed briefly around the house, but apart from a surfeit of dust the house was well furnished. Hitting a light switch - bingo, they worked! Already things were looking up, and walking through what was obviously the lounge, the next door presented a dining room, and an old hand-made Jacobean dining suite with two dressers, were obviously made for someone who lived a very opulent lifestyle. The next door found him in the main domestic center of the dwelling, the kitchen had also been sympathetically decked in the Tudor style, and the fridge was still humming! Yanking the door open to his eternal surprise it was stuffed with all manner of vegetables, cheese, eggs, ham, yogurt, butter and milk, all of it - unusable! His curiosity then drove him to investigate the rest of the house, then, noting a conservatory leading from the utility room he went through to what appeared to be a family room, every room in this house was large, this guy must have been filthy rich. From the family room he found himself in the hall again, and seeing a door almost opposite he walked over to investigate, it was a study, expensively furnished. A large red leather-bound desk stood in the middle of the room, with its matching captains chair. Upstairs he counted six

bedrooms, and the master bedroom contained an en suite shower bathroom, with a further two bathrooms at opposite ends of the landing. Choosing the master bedroom for himself before someone else got in first, he set about making it habitable, and one find he thought would be invaluable was a vacuum cleaner in the utility room, so plugging it in, to his amazement even that still worked! Three hours later a domesticated Sirk sat in a large high-backed button-down leather armchair, and remembered when he'd done the cleaning for Cita. Unable to stop himself he fell headlong into a pit of remorse, and tears fell freely as the reality of his situation hit him again. Would he ever see his beloved Cita again? His son and daughter? Arin? Would he see any of his friends again? The sleeve of his tunic providing a temporary tissue, as he realized he would still have to carry on, and normality would be the only way to retain his sanity; to rationalize his thoughts he set about making himself an evening meal. His first task was to bring all the food from the Dart and store it in the kitchen, it was then he remembered the whisky he'd appropriated from Vantown City; his grin broadened, it was the first since his arrival.

SCREAMING REALITY

A Recon would provide a quick meal for his first night in this new and unwelcoming home. The whisky coursed down his throat, and its effect Sirk found warming. However he tried the microwave's power in this kitchen was insufficient to take on the Recon, so cursing loudly Sirk ran to the Dart to use the onboard apparatus, and within a few seconds he'd removed his comestibles (for want of a better description) piping hot.

'F----n' shit!' he said scathingly and looked at it in disgust. Returning to the house he tripped over the doorstep and nearly had the lot sliding across the floor!

'F----n' whisky!' It suited him to blame something other than himself, and knew full well he'd only had three, well, they were very large! Sitting at the kitchen table his eye caught something next to the sink; behind a lead-glazed door lay the most beautiful vision outside of the whisky - wine! Running over he pulled open the door, and grabbing a bottle he opened all the drawers to find a bottle opener, then without looking at the label he pulled the cork and sniffed at the bottleneck; it was good! A glass from another cupboard and he was feeling almost festive, the Recon he already knew would be, and was disgusting! Four glasses of wine made it palatable - almost. However, Sirk decided he'd finish the bottle to guarantee ridding his mouth of the

taste. Setting about washing the dishes it suddenly occurred to him he could leave them for now, they could wait 'til the morning! Feeling reasonably inebriated and knowing he had sufficient entertainment on the Dart he switched on the TV, no amazement this time, he wasn't expecting to see anything, as all transmissions would have ceased many years ago!

'Nice snow!' said Sirk sarcastically looking at the screen, then making for the Dart he collected some holoplays. Retrieving his cache of music and a few films he settled in the chair to watch an old gangster movie from the twenty first century, and two hours and forty minutes later he watched the credits roll up, but having taken on board another six whiskies he had difficulty finding his next program. Pushing the holoplay impatiently into the player without having read the title, by the time he'd sat down again it had already started, and wanting his feelings to remain firmly in his subconscious quickly realized his mistake as Ali's large frame appeared on the platform.

'Hello again Sirk,' said Ali with his big grin. Bleary-eyed Sirk knew he'd put himself in a precarious situation, 'I hope you enjoyed the Kate Bush album...was it ok? I had a few probl-' Switching it off in a flash, there in front of him was what he wanted to forget, and needed to forget he'd been directly responsible for Ali's death, plus the fact that he was stuck here until he could find a way of getting back! Despite the whisky Sirk felt cold, a quick visit to the

kitchen and he found the control box for the heating, switching it on a red neon told him it was operational, and twenty minutes later he began to feel its benefit. Another holoplay, another whisky, another holoplay...another whisky! Sirk was back in control, refusing to give in to his subconscious, and knowing he had to stay in control... it was, he knew, the only way he would get home! With his chrono now reading ten twenty and feeling the worse for drink, he decided it was time for bed. The bed he thought was something of a work of art, it was a four-poster, and having drapes at all four posts Sirk thought he would sleep like a king, the only difference being, his queen wouldn't be sleeping beside him that night! Cursing himself for having had that thought, he fought off another wave of melancholy, but having washed, he brushed his teeth, combed his hair, and then, satisfied he'd retained his sanity reasonably well, jumped into the huge bed and hit the light switch. Sleep didn't come easily, as the amount of alcohol he'd consumed now kept him from the slumber he so badly needed!

Opening his eyes he was immediately aware of something playing heavily on his nerves, sounds, no, it was the lack of them! No birds singing, no cattle noise, no traffic or the usual hubbub made by humanity during the course of their days business, but most of all, no human voices! The heavy silence he found very disturbing, and having got used to children's laughter screams and giggles,

the towns-people, Cita, Arin, Raff and everyone else, the silence bored into his skull like a jackhammer! After a quick shower the next morning, he dressed and went down for breakfast, a search in one of the cupboards proved fruitful, a bag of oats, still sealed made a very good and staple start to the day. Replicate it! His next issue was what he would do on this, the first day in his new home. He would find a way out of his situation - no matter what! Reluctantly he washed the dishes, including the ones left from the previous night, but unable to find a towel to dry them let them drain, as to him, finding a way out of this place as far as he was concerned was of paramount importance, and way above that of drying dishes!

'Yep! I'll do it,' he said confidently walking to the Dart, 'today I'll find out where I went wrong, tomorrow I'll put it right, the day after that... I'll be on my way home! Yahooooooooooo!' It was too quiet, searching the data banks he came up with some music, Sir Cliff Richard, and as he listened to Living Doll he thought about that, a knight of the realm, his queen had made him a "Sir"! God that must have been something! His mind mercifully drifted for a while to his school days, and remembered well the lessons about England in the twelfth century, and how their king or queen, for gallantry and valor on the battlefield, knighted men and as it had lasted for centuries it was obviously very popular! As he sat wondering why it had died out he remembered he should to be on the computer to find the

error he'd made, and his way home! His search proved totally fruitless, and Sirk feeling frustrated beyond endurance decided he'd take a break! Going back to the house he went straight to the kitchen and made himself a good strong coffee! Sitting at the large kitchen table he saw the whisky bottle he'd emptied the night before, and as soon as the thought had entered his head he went straight to the utility room and pulled another bottle from the carton. Unscrewing the cap he poured a large quaff down his throat; it felt good! Then, remembering his coffee, he poured another measure in that! Feeling a good deal better he returned to the Dart, now he was certain he would find what had gone wrong, it wouldn't be long now before he was on his way home to his beloved Cita!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Holoscan!'

'Compliant!' The sphere appeared on the platform, and staring pensively at it Sirk thought about his next move.

'Display my last journey from Earth.' A few seconds passed by, then the gray trace appeared denoting the path of the Dart from Urf to Earth.

'Insert the wormhole at the precise point of travel on the outward journey.' Again the trace appeared, and studying it carefully Sirk stared at it for more than five minutes.

'Now super-impose the return journey over the top of outward journey... now insert the wormhole of the last

journey over that.' Another few seconds saw the gray trace lose a little of its transparency. At this point Sirk lost his temper, so leaving the console he walked to the nose of the Dart, then looking out from the supercool he counted to ten, then returned to start another scan.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Scan all three traces, and display the difference between them!'

'All traces identical!'

'F--k it, they cannot be identical!'

'Close scanner!' The holoscan disappeared, but remaining seated Sirk contemplated his approach to the problem, and was unable to fathom out why all three scans showed the traces to be identical, but there had to be a difference - somewhere!

'I need a drink!' Leaving the Dart in disgust he headed purposefully to the house, at least he could rely on the whisky! Another shot, large! He was ready to tackle the problem again. He was about to return the bottle to the cupboard when, having a change of mind he took it with him, just in case!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Replace the holoscan as before!'

'Compliant!' The holograph re-appeared, and sitting at the helm again Sirk studied it closely.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Give me the date of the first mission to Urf.'

'April 4th 3387.'

'Using wormhole data from that journey calculate a new journey to counteract the effects of the present wormhole.'

'Do you require the calculus on a time or distance basis?'

'Time of course you f---n' stupid bastard!' His rationale was disintegrating, and Sirk suddenly realized he was losing it - in a big way!

'Forget it,' he said finally, 'I'll do it in the morning.' Standing up he stretched, and left the bridge thinking he'd be better off with a fresh mind, and a fresh start. As per the previous evening sleep didn't come easily, and most of the night was spent fighting phantoms from his subconscious. Thoughts and half-thoughts about Cita and his two lovely children, and daydreams from his half conscious mind repeatedly etched away at him as he drifted in and out of consciousness.

Feeling decidedly rough as he got out bed Sirk took his commensurate shower on the Dart; and breakfast was a mundane affair consisting of two rounds of toast and coffee, but as he walked automatically to the Dart his mind was doing re-runs of the previous nights specters .

'Lights up.'

'Compliant!' Sitting at the console he rubbed his hands over his face, and as they cleared his eyes he saw again that

hideous red light from the Sun.

'Align supercool!'

'Compliant!' At least he could now work without that red swathe forever in his face!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Resume lasts nights program.'

'Compliant!' The holoscan immediately displayed the tracking of the previous two, and the original journey of the Dart, studying them again he still couldn't see the difference between them, plus, and to make matters worse the computer had verified it!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Have you got the data I asked for last night on wormhole time differential.'

To counteract the degradation of the current wormhole, a journey of fifty three light years at warp one would be necessary!' said the computer.

'In both directions?'

'In one direction only!' That was something Sirk didn't want to hear, with his head bowed he realized his situation was beyond redemption; a journey through the wormhole of that magnitude was outside of his life span!

'How come I wasn't warned of the difference when we went through?'

'I was not programmed with any data for that eventuality.'

'Fat lot o' f---n' good that does me!' Getting nowhere fast he knew he would have to go down a different route! Leaving the Dart he returned to the house for a coffee and a re-think. Although feeling down he still refused to be beaten by this wormhole bogey, and had to find a way of shortcutting that fifty-three year journey. Whisky! Yes, of course, knowing the amber nectar always made him feel good, he poured a large quaff into a glass and downed it in one! The spirit coursed through him, and feeling vibrant again he returned to the Dart.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'What would be the outcome of going through the wormhole at convolut thirty five, convolut one, or... can you calculate a speed and course directly to the wormhole to return to Urf in the time zone we last left?'

'Negative - approximation - convolut thirty five would put you in a time zone deep in earth's prehistory, convolut one would take you to the Pleistocene era. Any course and speed variation aimed directly at the current wormhole would put you in Earth's future at differing stages - all more than six millennia ahead of the time zone you left!' Sirk broke down, he'd tried everything, he was sure of it, and was now trapped here for the rest of his natural life! Never again would he see Cita's warm loving smile, or hear the laughter of Arin-Raff and Sheel-Taniche! It was gone - forever! Crying bitterly, he now deeply regretted not

having listened to the professor and John, they'd been right all along, but Sirk knew best, he wouldn't get caught out! Always the chancer, always taking risks, it's what made him what he is, but now he'd paid the ultimate price for his cavalier approach, not only had he let down Cita and his children, but he'd also let down everyone else, even the newcomers like Kinshasa and The Count Saint Germaine. On top of that he'd killed his old friend Ali! Bereft with the torture and sorrow of his entrapment he walked slowly from the bridge, down the walkway and wandered aimlessly back to the house.

'Welcome home Sirk!' he said loudly, and spat the words with as much venom as possible, and pouring another whisky he raised the glass to toast himself and repeated the ritual several times.

'Wellllllllll, thish ish a fine kettle off fishhhh, no bashtard wansh-a-know me now, I guesshhh I'll have a party by myshelfff!' Having opened it an hour earlier all that remained of the bottle were two measures, and a further five minutes saw it rendered barren! Staggering slightly he noticed it was devoid of content, and threw the bottle violently across the room! Producing a replacement Sirk happily resumed his intake of oblivion, as he played Fleetwood Mac, Elvis, Gene Vincent, The Beach Boys, and anything he could find from Robbie Williams to Westlife, but it was when Kate Bush started playing that he fell to Earth; Eat the Music, the vision of Cita dancing in

front of him made the party swing, and as he danced around the sofa he tripped and fell drunkenly to the floor. His fall brought him temporarily back to partial reality; and it also brought home the reality of exactly where he was. Dragging himself onto the sofa he broke down again, and cried bitterly at his stupidity, how could it have come to this when he had so much to live for? Another bottle and he was unconscious, and lying on the floor in a drunken stupor he remained there 'til the early hours.

COLD REALITY

Shivering from the intense cold Sirk woke suddenly, and looking at his chrono it was four thirty am; time to get to bed? As his teeth chattered uncontrollably he climbed the stairs, and was barely aware the whole house was cold, and climbed fully dressed under the duvet to sleep off the effects of the previous nights excess. By seven o'clock he was awake again, his head thumping from an overdose of two bottles of whisky. Feeling positively evil and unable to raise his head from the pillow, he remained there for another three and a half hours. Sitting slowly up in that regal bed he vaguely recalled walking from the utility room with his second bottle, after that it was mostly a blur, then suddenly realized he should be on the Dart trying to find his way home. Moving suddenly after that much drink always catches out the unwary, and being no exception he cursed volubly as his feet hit the floor, then cursed again,

silently, having forgetting he'd been drinking!

Although he didn't feel ready for anything after a meager breakfast he took a very slow walk to the ship, but at least the bridge was warmer than the house.

'Computer!'

'Your request?' Still partially inebriated Sirk was incapable of going any further, so putting his head on his arms he closed his eyes in sheer exhaustion, and receiving no further commands the computer went back to sleep. Twenty to one and Sirk panicked, although his head was still sore, he was sober enough at that stage to realize he'd wasted half a day!

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Is there any way of returning to Urf in our time sector?'

'Insufficient data!'

'F--k you!' He shouted hoarsely, 'you're about as useful as an empty ass on a crapper!'

'Compliant!' Wandering back to the house he sat in the conservatory and stared into space. His mind now frozen he was unable to come up with any fresh ideas, and two hours had passed before he was aware of the cold, so getting slowly to his feet he walked into the kitchen to look at the programmer. Finding nothing wrong he turned up the temperature to compensate and within ten minutes was feeling more comfortable. Lunch was not something he relished on this particular day, but, eat he must, and

proceeded to masticate his way through a disgusting cheese sandwich! Three o'clock and he was back on the bridge again, so sitting heavily in his seat he spun it around to face the console.

'Computer!'

'Your request?'

'Look, you've gotta help me out here,' he said quietly, 'I'm sorry for what I said earlier, but you gotta understand that I must get back to Urf - in my own time zone?'

'Insufficient data!' Walking from the bridge Sirk returned to the house, and once back in the conservatory he sat heavily in the wicker chair facing out over that once beautiful garden. In its giant state the Sun now cast short multi-penumbral shadows, and its sheer size rendered them unfocused, even the night sky was a reddish-indigo blanket that Sirk found equally disturbing. In a rare moment of lucidity he considered again the problem of the growing intense cold, and it suddenly occurred to him the Sun's rays were emitting no heat whatsoever! Having been preoccupied since his arrival he hadn't noticed it 'til now, and looming large in the night sky even the moon under the Sun's influence, and on a reduced orbit, was tinged a dirty yellowish pink. Its effect on tidal waters was no longer an issue, and was minimal now that the Earth's oceans were drying up. Any remaining water Sirk realized would be deadly poisonous, and far from safe to drink! However, as long as he had the Dart he'd have Regen to keep him

supplied with that precious life giving liquid. Unaware of the atmosphere being highly contaminated, Sirk hadn't realized he was also ageing much faster than was normal for the human race!

Six months had passed since his forced internment in this archaic building, and his trips to the Dart were getting rarer, then one day while sat at the helm with a bottle of whisky he noticed the calendar readout on the console, it was the third of September, what is special about this date he thought; it's my birthday! Spending the best part of three hours trying to persuade the computer to wish him a happy birthday he failed miserably, then taking his pulsar from its holster, he threw it at the computer and walked from the bridge in disgust. Back in the house he opened another bottle of whisky, and poured it straight down his throat.

'That's a f---n' improvement!' It was then, luckily, he noticed the house was cold again, but on checking the control unit he noticed the neon wasn't glowing.

'F---n' power failure now I s'pose!' he muttered drunkenly. Going to the fuse box under the stairs he reset the trip; nothing happened!

'Bollocks!' he said as his speech progressively slurred. Realizing the power had failed totally it dawned on him he'd have no light or heat! Another swig from the bottle and he felt better, although his spirit had lifted, as he walked around the house he questioned everything as to

why he was being persecuted this way. His tour over he returned to the lounge and looked at the inglenook fireplace, thinking initially it would be no good without gas to fire it he dismissed it out of hand. Then a spark kindled his mind, as there were copious amounts of dead timber outside, if he were to rip out the grate he could light a fire in the hearth! Working feverishly he set about gathering all the driftwood he could before dark and piled it outside the front door. With the grate removed he set a fire, reaching for his pistol he remembered throwing it at the computer, then noticing his rifle leaning against the wall he snatched it up. Firing a round into the kindling he watched it burst into life, but it was then he realized he had another problem, being ultra-dry the timber burnt rapidly, and was consuming it almost as fast as he could put it on! Dragging in pile after pile of kindling he stacked it high in a corner of the lounge, and fed the fire whenever necessary, but as the pile in the lounge diminished he found himself retrieving firewood more frequently from the pile outside, and as time passed his journeys to gather the precious firewood became evermore protracted .

Unaware that time was not on his side, Sirk hadn't noticed the days slip by with increasing rapidity; and he now concentrated on one thing only - survival! Even when shaving he failed to notice the rapidly increasing lines on his face, and was totally unaware that time was accelerating faster as each day passed. This phenomenon

was a direct result of his existence in this solar system at the end of its natural life span, and, assuming the Sun's eventual collapse meant it would eventually become a black hole, and time itself would inevitably accelerate even faster; that would be long after his life had ended. Most days he spent roaming the house mumbling about things he had to do for Cita, or urgent matters arising at the council meeting, then going to see Arin, John and the professor, then Kinshasa and Raff. He hadn't been this busy in a long time! The Sun's red glare, loneliness, and his rapidly advancing years were gradually eroding his mental stability.

'What have I got to do today?' he asked himself as usual, 'so much to do, so little time to do it!' Fumbling around in the study he picked up a wad of papers, and shuffling through them he placed them back on the desk, then walking aimlessly out he found himself in the kitchen wondering why he was there. From there it was a trip to the conservatory, and hopefully he would find the fictitious paperwork he'd misplaced. Moments of sanity returned rarely and sporadically, when he'd run to the Dart to plot a course for home, only to leave him seconds later, after which he'd wander back to the house in a daze. One particular day while on the Dart, he did an inventory, and seeing the Airhat in the equipment locker took it out and returned to the house, where he sat in the conservatory to watch solar flares through the visor. Then tearing it from

his head in disgust he wondered what on Earth had prompted him to wear it in the first place! Too frail to gather supplies of firewood, and with the cold intensifying, he was unaware of the mortal danger he was now in. A blanket from an upstairs cupboard served as extra insulation as he busied himself with his ever-increasing workload, so wrapping it around himself, and with the aid of his liquid fuel he felt a good deal better. Days came and went, and time no longer mattered to Sirk, now that his mind was all but gone he spent his days sitting in the conservatory staring at the dead and blackened bracken in that ghostly garden. Another red Sunrise, and another day fighting the cold, but having no hot water he'd long-since given up showering, or even washing, so wrapping himself in his blanket he sat in the conservatory as usual, where he was smitten with infrequent moments of lucidity, then shivering violently he shuffled into the study.

'Paper...paper, I must have some paper... paper, paper, paper,' he muttered incessantly as he searched the leather-bound desk, then found a crumpled but usable sheet of A4 . 'Pen, pen... pen, pen, pen pen pen... why isn't there a f---n' pen.' Like his voice, his strength had also weakened, and with considerable difficulty managed to open the top drawer of the desk, then finding the implement he required so desperately he shuffled slowly back to the conservatory. Sitting carefully in the wicker chair he shivered involuntarily, so pulling the blanket around his shoulders

his hand shaking from the cold he began to write. Two hours later, his labor done he dropped the pen to the floor, and as his head fell back a tear ran down his cheek.
'Cita!'

INTERGALAX - THE SCARE

Starting with a gray sky and drizzle Saturday was a

clammy day without even a breeze, and because of the weather Vantown City was quiet compared with most weekends. Arriving at Cita's house that afternoon Arin came for his usual visit, and took his seat opposite as she poured their coffee.

'You ought to let me make that,' he said chiding her gently, 'somehow you always seem to beat me to it... I think you watch me arrive, and dive into the kitchen before I get to the bell!'

'I may be getting on but I'm not dead yet! When the day comes I can't make a friend some coffee - then - I will be dead!' said Cita laughing; Arin knew she meant every word!

'It's been over six months since Smiffi and Gelf left,' said Arin changing the subject, 'I suppose they'll be back soon.'

'You can bet on it,' said Cita knowingly, 'he won't let us down, he's not the type!'

'Yeah... you know, he reminds me a lot of Sirk, I almost -'

'You think I didn't notice it,' cut in Cita laughing, 'you think I missed that don't you?'

'Not at all,' countered Arin, 'I know you too well to think that!' They both laughed, and it was good to laugh again, as since Sirk's death they hadn't laughed that often. Two hours later Taniche arrived, still beautiful in her advanced years, and with her was their only son Sanjit, named after the professor he was now thirty-one, and very much his father's son.

Another hour had passed before Taniche decided they'd better get home for dinner but Arin complained that it was too soon to go home, especially as things had just started to get interesting. Taniche however insisted, and reasoned that as it was she who'd be to preparing and cooking, she had to allow time! Apologizing to Cita for dragging him away she got her coat and made her way to the hall.

'Hey... why don't you dine with us tonight Cita?' said Arin out of the blue.

'Ah, you go on,' replied Cita laughing again, 'you don't want me getting in the way!'

'No, I think it's a great idea,' said Taniche suddenly, 'I'm sorry I didn't think of it, I was so wrapped up in thinking about what to cook I-'

'That's it then,' said Arin finally, 'get your coat, we're gonna dine in style!' said Arin decisively, and there was no protest from Cita. Not having been out in over six weeks she was glad of the break, so leaving the house she listened for the sonic lock to chime, then turning she got into Arin's magnecar for her Saturday night out.

Coming so suddenly, it was so intense that the light temporarily blinded him, and Arin had to swerve to avoid a pedestrian crossing the road. Unsure of what to do next the situation was taken out of his hands, as a voice boomed over Vantown City reminiscent of the Powerful One, except this one was louder!

'All residents will assemble in the communal area now!' He

considered making a run for it, but then something told him that would be a foolhardy move. Suddenly recalling Smiffi and Gelf's visit almost seven month before, he remembered Smiffi's description of the race from Intergalax. Slowly everyone assembled as instructed, so getting out of the car he told the others to stay put while he went to see what it was all about. The light had diminished considerably since he'd walked to the recreation area, although still having to shield his eyes he could make out the massive shape of the Disc above them. Massive it was, in the darkening sky he could clearly make out the shape of the hull that stretched from horizon to horizon. Black as space itself a beam of light projected from the center of the hull right into the recreation area. As it hit the ground a greenish yellowish light emanated from it, then pulsating for a few seconds it took on a humanoid form, which appeared to walk from the light, and the form then looked around before making what appeared to be its first decision.

'I am looking for two people,' he told them scowling, 'Smiffi and Donut... if you've seen them you'd better tell me now, as not to do so could mean death, so if I find out you've been lying...' said the vision. A deadly silence followed, although death was something nobody wished for, their dilemma now was to avoid betraying a friend, and that was something no one did on Urf!

'I'm growing tired of this,' said the vision, 'I can see I'll

have to make an example of someone!' It waited another minute, then still getting no response the ghost-like form solidified as it walked from the light. Then suddenly he grabbed Hamys and Annyl's youngest daughter Rasih from the crowd, and dragged her bodily toward the beam of light.

'Do you want to see her die?'

'No... please don't kill my baby,' came Annyl's anguished cry, 'don't kill her, please don't kill her!'

'Then... tell me what I want to know,' said Haak menacingly, 'and you can have her back, and that's a promise.'

'I wouldn't trust a word he says!' came a voice from the darkness behind, and spinning suddenly Haak grinned at seeing Smiffi walk from the shadows.

'Well... what a nice surprise, our missing hero returns!'

'You harm one hair on her head and you know what I'll do to you!' said Smiffi; his eyes cold with hate.

'Smiffi, my old friend, you appear to have forgotten who has the gun.' said Haak confidently.

'No, not at all Haak,' replied Smiffi, also confident, 'but what happens when you've killed her, you know you'll be next, do you really want to die that much?' Unnerved at hearing that, Haak looked around to see where his back up was.

'I know what you're thinking Haak, if there were a thousand of them up there, it wouldn't stop me from getting

you, oh I know I'll die too - but I'm prepared for it!' Appearing somewhat agitated for a second or two Haak then released Rasih from his grip, and turning to Smiffi gave him a solemn warning.

'Ok "A" block, you win this time,' said Haak venomously, 'but... there will be other times when you won't have the advantage! I'll be back for you and that little runt Donut - now we know where you are, and don't think you'll ever come back to Intergalax!'

'Oh I won't be staying here,' said Smiffi coolly, 'we're moving on, tripping around the universe, there's far better places than this for the likes of me!'

'Wherever you go Smiffi I'll get you,' said Haak walking back into the light beam, 'one day you'll look 'round and you'll see my face grinning at you - just before I kill you!'

'I'll be waiting!' replied Smiffi grinning menacingly, 'don't keep me waiting too long.... people who don't keep their promises bore me!' scowled his farewell. The people of Vantown City watched nervously as Haak dissolved into the beam, and as the light retracted into the hull of the megalithic Disc it 'rose slowly to rejoin its accompanying squadron, then lifting from Urf's atmosphere it left them in peace once more.

'Shit...that was close!' said Arin blowing through his teeth, 'when did you get back Smiffi?'

'Two minutes after they landed!'

'Why didn't you do something sooner?' said Arin-Raff, 'he

could've killed Rasih!

'No my friend,' said Smiffi kindly, 'we were watching him all the time, and besides, I know how he operates, fear is his biggest tool!'

'Anyhow I'm ok - hot shit!' said Rasih smiling.

'He wouldn't have killed anyone for some considerable time,' said Smiffi, 'he's clever enough to realize he could have killed the very person holding the information he needed, which, gave me more than enough time to get in undetected and deal with the situation.'

'Well it certainly sounds like you know what you're talking about,' added Arin, 'and personally I'm more than glad you came when you did! By the way, how did you get in undetected?'

'That's one of the advantages of being a Higher Echelon,' said Smiffi grinning, 'I'm able to cloak myself if the need arises, although they saw the Dart arrive on their scanners they were arrogant enough to think it didn't pose a threat, but what they didn't know was - I was flying it!'

'Hot shit!' said Arin, bemused by this amazing addition to their clan.

'That's the second time I've heard that expression,' said Smiffi laughing, 'is it some kinda private joke?' Listening intently as Arin explained the origins of "hot shit" Smiffi was highly amused

'I wished I'd been around when Sirk was here, he sounds like the sort of man I could have had a few laughs with!'

said Smiffi finally, and ruminated briefly over what might have been.

'Yes I think you would, he rebuilt this world almost single-handed,' Arin told him proudly, 'the Men themselves will vouch for that!'

Given the professor's old dome to live in, Smiffi and Gelf were surprised to find out who their new dwelling once belonged to, and continued their walk through the house in awe and reverence. Seeing their expressions Arin inquired as to how they had heard of the professor, and why they held him in such high esteem.

'Arin my friend,' he started, 'you will never know what this means to Gelf and me, or anyone from my planet, saying the name Professor Patenil is almost the same as saying God, you see he was instrumental in discovering how to traverse wormholes... if it hadn't been for him - none of us would be able to do what we do today, or go where we go!' 'I never realized his name was held in such high esteem,' said Arin finally, 'I'm totally gobsmacked!'

'Oh we've paid more than one visit to Earth throughout its history,' said Smiffi proudly, 'um, would you mind if we paid a visit to his grave?' asked Smiffi reverently.

'Smiffi! I'd be proud to show you, come on, I'll take you there.' With that Arin took them to the Passover meadow, where they spent a few minutes gazing in awe and reverence at Professor Patenil's resting place, then moved on to pay homage at Sirk's, as it was they who had returned

him to his rightful place in the universe, and time!

'Come on,' said Arin hastily, still smarting at the loss of his only brother, 'I'll take you on a tour of the whole place, the museum is a place that will blow your minds - I'm certain of that!' Making themselves very popular with the locals in The All Peoples Bar, Smiffi and Gelf soon settled into Vantown City life, and, with stories of their escapades at Intergalax, most said, to miss a night in there was to miss the best entertainment there ever was! It was a Friday evening while talking to Kinshasa something dropped into his mind like a bomb.

'You know, I wish you two could have met Sirk,' said Kinshasa earnestly, 'you two would have got on like a house on fire!'

'Yeah, I got that impression from Arin,' replied Smiffi, 'it's a pity we couldn't -' Stopping dead in mid-sentence, Smiffi stared into space as if he'd just been struck by his own Disc.

'What is it Smiffi?' asked Gelf looking suddenly concerned. 'Hot shit!' said Smiffi using the local expletive, 'I think we could do it!'

'Do what my friend?' asked Kinshasa.

'Gelf, we've got to get back to the Disc... don't you see, we can bring Sirk back here - alive!'

'Surely that's not possible!' asked Kinshasa, 'that time has gone!'

'No my friend, that time has not gone! With our ship we

can cut across the time/space barrier!'

'I'm afraid I don't understand,' admitted Kinshasa, 'but if it's true, we must keep it from Cita until we get him back here, if she got her hopes up thinking he was coming home, and something went wrong, it would devastate her!'

'Yeah - you're right Kinshasa,' replied Smiffi thoughtfully, 'we'll keep it to ourselves... there is a bonus to this as well, what we can also do is bring back Ali Boran with us... but, we would have to hide in the past. That way Haak would never find us once we've done away with the Disc.'

'Is the Disc still on Earth Smiffi?' asked Gelf with a furrowed brow. 'I mean, supposing Haak's traced it and taken it back to Intergalax?'

'I don't think he'll have thought of that yet Gelf,' said Smiffi dismissing it, 'I think we'll go home now, sleep on it, then tomorrow we'll meet here at eleven o'clock and make our plans - ok?' Agreeing, they arose from the table, said their goodbyes, and left.

The wet season was due in less than a week, and high nimbus cloud curling in from the west acted as the vanguard to what was to come. While walking to The All Peoples Bar, Smiffi, Gelf and Kinshasa talked about the onset of the wet season when a cold wind blew up from nowhere, and they were glad to be inside. Getting a round in Smiffi took the drinks to their table, and setting them down he remarked to Kinshasa how much they enjoyed living in Vantown City; which was a far cry from the

cynical cut and thrust of Intergalax.

'Look,' began Smiffi, taking a slug from his whiskey, 'I think I know how we can do this, but we'll have to do it in one go, if we take two or three bites at this we might have a disaster on our hands! So, what would you say was the most enjoyable time for everyone in Vantown city Kinshasa?'

'At a guess... I think it's safe to say... just after we finally defeated the Powerful One, life then was idyllic.... yes, I think we were all happy then.'

'Ok,' said Smiffi, 'keep that in mind for now, and listen very carefully to what I'm going to tell you... how I'm going to achieve this by using the Disc is, as I said yesterday, by cross-referencing time/space and short cut ageing totally. First, we have to get Sirk back from time-frame we found him in, to about a year before, then w-'

'Hang on Smiffi,' interjected Kinshasa, pointing out the window and totally confused, 'Sirk is lying dead in the Passover meadow, there's no way you can get him back from there!'

'Patience my friend,' replied Smiffi holding his hand up, 'the fact that we can cut across time/space barriers says we can, anyhow, to continue, once we've done that we must then go to the time co-ordinates where he picked up Ali Boran, then we come to the tricky bit. Can you give me now an exact date and time we can safely return to Urf?'

'I think,' replied Kinshasa carefully, 'if you brought him

back to May 1st 100,075, that was when Vantown started growing in prosperity and everyone was happy.'

'Thanks Kinshasa,' said Smiffi gratefully, 'leave the rest to us.'

'What shall I tell Cita, and the others! They'll all want to know where you've gone.'

'Tell them... we've gone to settle our score with Haak, and that we'll be back soon.'

RESCUED RESCUER

Just after midnight Kinshasa met Smiffi and Gelf at the Dart, and having chosen to leave at that time they were less likely to be seen, or have to face a barrage of awkward questions. Shaking hands Kinshasa still found it hard to accept that they could actually do this thing.

'Good luck,' he told them warmly, 'I guess I'll see you in...'

'Ten months from now!' said Smiffi finishing his sentence for him. Boarding the Dart Smiffi closed the hatch, and faithfully following Sirk's procedures lifted silently off as the townspeople slept. Space as usual was silent, nothing to do but sleep, then as the pulsing tone woke Smiffi and Gelf from their comatose state, the lids hissed their way up, and Gelf set his feet firmly on the deck.

'F---n' Hell,' said Smiffi, seeing Gelf already up, 'you shit the bed or something?' Laughing loudly Gelf headed for the galley to prepare them a breakfast, then called Smiffi to come and help himself to plate of shit!

'Thanks!' said Smiffi washing it down with Sirk's coffee.

'Well I did say it was shit.' retorted Gelf defensively.

'You could have warned me first!' replied Smiffi looking distinctively sick.

'Sorry.' replied Gelf testily.

Nine months had finally passed, and they were both glad to be at the end of their journey. The Sun, boiling red in the afternoon sky still cast its evil glow over the landscape, so taking the remote from his pocket he retracted the Disc from its hiding place somewhere deep in space.

'It'll be with us in about half an hour,' said Smiffi, 'we might as well take it easy while we wait.'

'What's this?' asked Gelf looking at the readout on the console, 'what does "Rolling Stones" mean?'

'How the f--k should I know?' replied Smiffi with his feet on the console, 'press a few pads and see what happens.' Going about it systematically Gelf went from row to row, then purely by chance hit the play button and set off "Let's spend the night together", suddenly they were on their feet, what was this noise? Was it a secret weapon the Dart had concealed from them? Grinning his wide grin Smiffi hit the stop button and turned to Gelf.

'I remember this, I heard it a few years ago on Glassil one, they had a cache of music they'd pinched from Earth a few weeks before I got there... they were dancing around like lunatics, this is more of the same - I must admit I'm getting quite a liking for it myself - it has got a very good beat

really!

'Yeah,' replied Gelf smiling widely, 'I reckon I'm getting a liking for it too!' Suddenly the Disc appeared dramatically in front of them, and looking through the Dart's supercool Gelf saw a figure suddenly disappear from the bridge of the Disc.

'Let's get outta here - f---n' quick!' said Smiffi suddenly. Running for the hatch they snatched a suit each, and donning them as fast as they could opened the hatch, then used the Jetpaks to propel themselves away from the Dart. Seconds later a white light drowned the Dart as Smiffi and Gelf made their way to the Disc in a semi-circular route, and narrowly avoided the light that would have meant their sudden and premature demise! On board the Disc Smiffi signaled to Gelf to go to the weapons deck and load up a sound gun, then, moving slowly forward he kept a close vigil on the gangway ahead; looking for any sign of Haak! Having reached the third interior, and still having seen no sign of him Smiffi realized Haak was playing his usual waiting game. Ok, thought Smiffi, I'll just go in and get him! Remembering there were five openings to the bridge, Smiffi decided he'd play cat and mouse, and fortunately the first opening was offset from the gangway, and remembering there was a sub arsenal he quickly pulled out a gas grenade. Suddenly Gelf was standing at his side with the sound gun in his hand, so passing it quickly to Smiffi he fell in behind.

'Well Smiffi... here I am, I knew you'd be back for the Disc, you couldn't resist it could you? That was your downfall you idiot, the biggest f--k up you ever made. I suggest you come off that heap of ancient shit and show yourself... yes – and you Donut! I couldn't leave him out now could I? Of course, you'll be given a fair trial, that goes without saying... well, you would have - but as you resisted arrest I had to kill you!' Haak was enjoying himself, and laughed loudly as he waited for Smiffi and Gelf to give themselves up, then, after waiting a full minute he repeated his message.

'Come on Smiffi, you can't win... I've got the light gun set up, one move from you and it's all over, just give yourselves up!' Again Haak waited, his eyes searching every part of the Dart's bridge for signs of life. Hearing the security doors slide home he thought was a little strange, especially as there was no one else on board! His eyes fixed he slid rapidly to the deck, the gas grenade had done its work, and once the openings had been sealed the oxygen-consuming gas had formed a neat little vacuum on the bridge rendering Haak - dead!

'I don't think we'll have any more trouble from him!'

'No - but you will have more trouble from me!' Before he'd even spun around Smiffi knew he'd recognize the face behind the voice - Vadronel!

'Well well well, what a nice surprise,' said Smiffi grinning, 'I though there was an unpleasant odor, I should have

recognized it immediately!

'Very funny Smiffi,' replied Vadronel with his usual sneer, 'did you think Haak would come on his own? No... he had to have a witness to your's and Donut's death, but alas, I'll have to take you back alive now to face a murder charge!' Looking at Vadronel's gun Smiffi could see it was a sound gun like Gelf's, and as he didn't fancy having his innards melted at that precise moment he knew he daren't make a play for him with that in his hand!

'Let's all go to the bridge shall we?' said Vadronel pointing the snout of the ugly Lofreq at him, 'then you can fly us all home!'

'If you insist,' replied Smiffi, getting his brain into gear. The very first time Vadronel dropped his guard he would pounce, but he knew it would have to be soon, the farther they traveled from Earth the longer the trip would take to return to Urf to rescue Sirk and Ali! As soon as they were on the bridge he sealed the openings, so Vadronel wasn't stupid!

'Need to keep you where I can see you,' he told them smiling maliciously, 'I know what you're thinking Smiffi, I also know what you're capable of... so don't give me the opportunity to kill you, although I would relish the task!'

'I wouldn't dream of it Vadronel.' said Smiffi returning his grin.

'What d'you mean,' asked Vadronel suddenly alert, 'you wouldn't dream of giving me the opportunity, or you

wouldn't allow me to relish the thought of killing you?'

'I wouldn't allow you to relish the thought of killing me,' said Smiffi still grinning, and realised he was a f---n' a psycho, but watching Vadronel twitch and fidget, Smiffi knew it wouldn't be long before he made a mistake.

'You know this Disc is low on dark energy?' Hearing that Vadronel backed up to the readout, but not once did he take eyes his off Smiffi, ah well thought Smiffi, not this time! It was then, while looking through the supercool Gelf started shouting, and pointed at something outside. Alarmed at Gelf's sudden outburst Vadronel ran to look; he made his mistake. Looking to see what Gelf had spotted he very briefly took his eyes off Smiffi. His screams echoed across the bridge as his body slowly melted, and Vadronel dripped to the deck like so much blancmange.

'Well, after that little episode I suppose we'd better get a move on!' said Smiffi smiling at Gelf. 'By the way, what the f—k were you were screaming at just now?'

'F—k all!' replied Donut grinning.

'Yeah... hot shit!'

'Time space co-ordinates sector seventeen and 997 please!' The Disc moved imperceptively.

'Arrival!'

'What kept you!' said Smiffi addressing the computer, and walked to the supercool. Looking down, there sure enough was Sirk looking up at this strange and vast Disc that had suddenly appeared from nowhere. Seeing Smiffi at the

supercool he waved his arms frantically, and already saw rescue as a distinct possibility. Riding the light beam they set foot on the only planet in that solar system ever to have supported human life, then walking out Smiffi held his hand out in a gesture of friendship.

'F---n' hell - am I glad to see you guys!' said Sirk grinning.

'Sirk Notaani I presume?' said Smiffi also grinning.

'I'm certainly not Stanley!' replied Sirk, and was surprised this stranger knew about his planets history, 'anyhow, you're not wrong - however, where did you learn about Stanley?'

'How long have you been here?' asked Smiffi, and knew Sirk's answer would be important inasmuch as Smiffi would have to set his co-ordinates according to the accuracy of his answer.

'About forty eight year I guess,' said Sirk, looking distinctly gaunt.

'Yeah I thought so by the ageing on your face!'

'What?' screamed Sirk, unaware of his very apparent malady.

'By my calculation you must be what... a hundred and two years old! Anyhow, I digress... my partner Gelf and I have been living on Urf for a while now, but I'll explain further as we make our journey, we learned of your plight some time in the future, you see we found you dead in the conservatory of that dwelling over there. Sirk's blood ran cold, and realized he must have perished with the planet

without ever getting back to Cita, or rescuing Ali Boran!

'Come on,' said Smiffi urging him on, 'we'll load the Dart into the bay of the Disc, then, we'll go find your friend Ali!'

'Can you do that?' asked Sirk incredulously. 'He died on the Dart before I got here!'

'Don't worry,' Smiffi re-assured him, 'our ship can cross-reference time and space, what we're about to do is take you back to Urf in an earlier timeframe to rejoin your Cita, your family and friends, and, you'll have your old friend Ali there as well!'

'What timeframe do we need to pick up your friend Ali? Think carefully, pick a time when you're certain there was no strife.'

'Right,' said Sirk, searching his mind, 'I think we should go back to 3387, the third of July I think - No! Cancel that... uh, make it the twenty third of March 3387, yes that's it, I know for a fact that Ali was holding a birthday bash for one of the UWF top brass that night, so we'll be bang on!'

'Ok,' said Smiffi coolly, 'take a seat Sirk, we're goin' for a ride around the big clock!'

'Time space co-ordinates sector seventeen and 587!' Like a kid in a toy store Sirk's eyes flashed around the bridge, this ship was infinitely superior to the Dart, and he could see that without even having had a tour of the ship. Two days later they arrived at 587 on Earth, standing agog on the bridge, he compared it with the Dart, and was unable to

take in how little time it had taken them to arrive!

'Smiffi... uh, will they know we're here?' asked Sirk, concerned by the size of the Disc.

'No, there's no way they'll detect our presence,' answered Smiffi confidently, 'the hull of this ship is a cloaking device that "eats" radar, microwave, red or blue shift, which it then converts it in to energy to power the ship.'

'Ingenious,' replied Sirk, he liked this guy, he knew his stuff and was confident, 'so we'll have to use the Dart to go down then?'

'No,' replied Gelf, 'the light beam will be a lot quicker, hot shit!

'We've hit a time displacement, looks like we're gonna have a couple of hours on our hands... here!' said Smiffi and tossed a can of Dregs at Sirk, who, catching it gratefully pressed the disintcap and poured it down his throat.

'Well I can tell you've spent time on Urf,' declared Sirk with grinning and had heard Smiffi use his expression, "hot shit", this is good, what is it?'

'Dregs,' said Smiffi pointing at the side of the can, 'it's a brew from Intergalax, although we won't have it much longer.' Referring to the fact that they could never go back to Intergalax, Sirk studied the logo on the can that Smiffi had pointed out to him, and then it hit him!

'Hot shit!' said Sirk, his eyebrows six feet above his head, 'that is what I call instant!'

'Thought you'd like it,' said Smiffi grinning, 'to undo the results just press both temples with the pads of your thumbs - and - you won't get hung over!' An alcoholic drink you automatically switch off whenever you feel like it; Sirk was agog at this!

'Before you go trying it now, remember there isn't much left.' said Smiffi grinning. Returning his grin Sirk nodded, and didn't see any point in spoiling a good thing. He, Smiffi, and Gelf spent the next two hours chatting about life on Urf, and their lives on Intergalax, but had taken onboard another three Dregs each, despite it being in short supply! An electronic gong sounded the ten-minute signal, which had Smiffi out of his seat, and placing a thumb on each temple he held them there for one minute, then walked to the console as straight as a die. Watching Gelf do likewise Sirk copied them, and to his amazement found himself sobering up very quickly indeed, and one minute later felt as if he'd had nothing to drink! As Smiffi and Gelf stood on an orange circle behind the console he wondered what it was for, then as Smiffi beckoned him over he had his answer.

'This takes us to the Terraport,' he explained as Sirk stood in the circle, 'we'll go down in the same beam of light you saw us arrive in.'

'A new experience for Sirk Notaani,' said Sirk joking, 'I didn't thank you for rescuing me, I apologize for that - and thanks!'

'Hey, no worries,' said Smiffi, 'besides, I wanted to meet the guy who pulled off the impossible!'

'The impossible?' asked Sirk; curious as to the impossible task he was supposed to have pulled off!

'Vantown City!' said Smiffi, 'we - that is people on my planet were raised to believe that subjugation was the only way to run any planet, and your personal affairs. Of course we'd heard rumors that conciliation existed, but I'd never experienced it until we came to Urf, and saw it actually work first hand for ourselves!'

'I see,' replied Sirk, slightly bemused, 'it's funny how cultures can be so different, although having said that, having come from Intergalax where subjugation reigns supreme, here you are praising our system, but... it's not all down to me, the people wanted peace just as much as I, and having gone through what they had they were ready for it.'

'I won't lie to you Sirk,' said Smiffi frankly, 'when we first found you sittin' dead in that chair my first reaction was to take the Dart to auction and retire from the proceeds, but... Gelf reminded me of my primary duty, and after reading your note I couldn't do it, I knew where my next port of call was... '

'Well I for one am very grateful to you Smiffi,' said Sirk earnestly, 'and as for the Dart at auction - we all get tempted now and again!' Initially Smiffi didn't know quite what Sirk meant by that, then, but as the penny dropped he

burst out laughing, and Gelf almost did an impression of a dying fly! The orange pad disappeared slowly through the floor taking them with it, but as it gained momentum Sirk counted at least fifteen floors before its sheer speed caused him to lose count. Suddenly stopping, the platform sank three feet below floor level before it finally stopped, then, slowly regaining floor level it allowed them to alight.

'Ok this is where we have to watch things carefully,' said Smiffi with emphasis, 'we'll be guided by you Sirk, as you know the lie of the land.'

'No problem,' replied Sirk, thankful he'd play a part in the proceedings, 'where will we actually hit Terra Firma?'

'Slap bang outside the Ill Eagle club!' said Smiffi emphatically. That pleased Sirk, as he wanted to go in fast and get out fast, he was about to say, "Let's go!" when something jogged his memory.

'Weapons!'

'We won't need any,' said Smiffi calmly, 'I'll give them a demonstration if things get rough, that usually does the trick!' Sirk grinned his grin, and Smiffi grinned his grin, and Gelf grinned because they were grinning! Before he knew it Sirk was standing on that familiar apron outside Ali's famous club, then looking quickly in each direction he bade them follow him, but this time he didn't bother swiping his card; well... it was a surprise visit! Rounding the corner at the bottom of the stairs Sirk could hear the familiar strains of Rock 'n' Roll music, then suddenly there

stood Ali, in his usual place at the end of the bar.

To say he was gobsmacked would be an understatement; his jaw dropped the best part of a mile without even slowing on the way down! Holding his finger to his lips Sirk beckoned Ali to join him. So looking quickly around he could see his clientele were mostly entertaining themselves, walking slowly out so as not to attract attention he joined Sirk at the bottom of the stairs.

'Sirk, I don't understand,' he said in total bewilderment, 'what are you doing here?'

'I can't say too much now,' said Sirk urgently, 'but I need to tell you something, then, I need you to make a decision.' Sirk related his need and his problem to Ali as quickly as he could; and listening intently Ali took in every word. Finishing his narration Sirk introduced Smiffi and Gelf; and nodding briefly in their direction, he asked why it was necessary to leave right at that moment.

'It's a matter of life and death Ali, literally - your life!' For a few seconds Ali stood looking gravely around, then making his mind up he turned to Sirk and looked him square in the eye.

'I've never doubted your word in the past Sirk, ever! But this... it seems somewhat familiar to me, I must say I'm a bit confused!'

'I know,' replied Sirk hurriedly, 'I can explain that on the ship, but we must leave now!' Right on the dot the wrong person walked out - Tranter! With his eyebrows six feet

above his head he fixed Sirk with a look of disdain.

'Captain Notaani,' he asked acidly, 'just what exactly are you doing in here?'

'I might ask you the same question?' replied Sirk, mimicking Tranter's voice. That made Smiffi and Gelf laugh fit to burst.

'You appear to have forgotten I am the senior officer here.' countered Tranter curtly.

'Well, as such I'll allow you to leave first,' said Sirk smiling, 'age before beauty! Or should I say... dirt before the broom!' Staring coldly at Sirk he walked passed and climbed the stairs. Having seen the whole episode every single merry-maker in the bar went silent, and the only person still going was Gene Pitney singing "I wanna love my life away", however, being a hologram he was totally unaware of the proceedings. Rising from his table a senior UWF officer started toward them, then pulling his gun he leveled it at Sirk, and was in no doubt about putting Sirk under close arrest.

'Are you going to accompany me to HQ, or are you going to make a fuss... remember Captain Notaani - I have the gun!' One look at him and Smiffi took no chances, glowing slightly for a second his eyes made contact with the officer in question, who felt his body temperature rise rapidly from his stomach, then in a matter of seconds the heat spread to the rest of his body. Crumpling to the ground he disintegrated before their very eyes!

'F--k! I'm ready to go!' said Ali suddenly, 'I've never seen anything like that before!' Before Smiffi and Sirk realized he was leaving Ali was halfway up the stairs, and chasing after him they only caught him at the entrance, puffing and panting from his sudden exertion.

'This way,' said Sirk quietly, 'we must hurry.' Still puffing Ali ran like the wind trying to keep pace with Sirk, Smiffi, and Gelf.

Once in the light beam they were quickly transported to the main lower deck, where the lift then took them to the flight deck and safety. With his usual efficiency Tranter had mustered UWF security to arrest Sirk for frequenting a nightclub of known infamy! As usual... he was too late! The few laser bolts that had hit the Disc were ineffectual and deflected by the cloak, and then Smiffi grinned, knowing he was going to have some fun.

'Gelf,' he said suddenly, 'would you do the honors - about 25%?'

'My pleasure Smiffi!' replied Gelf, and without any hesitation Gelf turned on the White light just to see them squirm. Followed closely followed by Tranter Security vehicles scattered in all directions, and their red laser emergency lights coupled with the white light from the Disc, made the airfield appear like a fairground for a few seconds before the giant disc lifted off.

'Ok,' said Smiffi grinning impishly, 'I think it's safe to leave now!' Sirk laughed at this bit of dry wit, and he was getting

to like this guy more and more. Lifting off the Disc cast a spectral shadow over the whole five thousand acres of airfield, and scared the wits of those in the near vicinity, and were frightened to death they were about to be taken by an alien force!

'What time frame do we need to return to Urf Sirk?'

'Shit...uh, well as far as I know we need to return to... May 1st, 100,075, yes, that was a good time!'

'Well I'll be f--ked by Nicaraguan f--kpig!' shouted Smiffi.

'What?' asked Sirk looking totally bemused.

'That's the exact date Kinshasa said you'd prefer!'

'No joke,' replied Sirk now totally bewildered, 'that is totally unreal!'

'You heard it here first folks,' said Smiffi to the computer, 'so don't hang about - sector seventeen - 591! Now get the f--k outta here!' The Sun shone on the horizon as the Disc disappeared from the late evening sky, and within a second, she was more light years away from the third rock than any inhabitant of that planet could ever have imagined!

'Will this journey be as short as the first?' asked Sirk, hoping Smiffi would answer in the affirmative.

'Yep! That's about the size of it, don't worry - you won't need "sleep"!'

'It's a pity I haven't got my music here,' said Sirk laughing at Smiffi's wisecrack, 'I could do with a bit of rock right now.'

'No worries,' said Gelf smiling broadly, 'we'll download it from the Dart!'

'If you can do that - great!' said Sirk, looking distinctly relieved, 'it's just that I get the shakes if I don't get a regular fix!'

'Shit! You mean that stuff -'

'No, just takin' the piss,' said Sirk grinning. Smiffi laughed, and found he was taking liking Sirk more as time went by, but having a similar sense of humor had put them firmly on the same wavelength. Within a few minutes Gelf announced Sirk's music was ready to play, so showing him how to operate the in-flight hi-fi Smiffi left him to arrange the entertainment. Leaving the bridge briefly Smiffi returned a few minutes later with twelve cans of Dregs.

'This is all we've got left lads so make the most of it!' he announced sullenly.

'Oh no it isn't!' said Sirk suddenly.

'Yes I'm afraid it is Sirk,' replied Smiffi adamantly.

'No... you're wrong,' countered Sirk grinning, 'there's a piece of equipment on the Dart that can make as much of this as we want!'

'Don't pull my pisser,' said Smiffi seriously, 'I don't joke about things alcoholic!'

'Neither do I!' countered Sirk also serious.

'Show me!' With that Sirk left the bridge, and returned with a grin on his face, and a small square box in his hand.

'Here you are,' he said happily, 'now we can drink as much

as we want!" Laying the replicator on the deck he slid out the replication plates and placed a can of Dregs on it, then placing the laser connector at the power point switched it on.

'How many do you want - no! Let's go for twenty cans!' said Sirk thinking ahead. The green LED's alternated as usual, and the unit issued its familiar whisper as it went through its replication process.

'Are you seriously telling me that thing will make more Dregs?'

'You catch on quick Smiffi... I like that.' replied Sirk grinning again. Smiffi, laughing again knew right then this trip was going to be fun! After five minutes Smiffi watched as a faint apparition of twenty cans appeared on the opposite plate, which caused his eyebrows to climb further up his forehead, another ten minutes the LED's had synchronized; the unit switched off.

'Try that for size!' said Sirk confidently handing Smiffi and Gelf a can each, but eyeing them suspiciously they both wondered if they were safe.

'No... they won't poison you!' said Sirk laughing, then, to allay their fears he opened his can and drank. Seeing Sirk still in the perpendicular, they opened cans and took a tentative taste.

'Hey... shit! It's just as good as the real thing!' said Smiffi incredulously. 'If we took that to Intergalax we could make a fortune!'

'You mean "hot shit!" said Gelf correcting him.

'Can that thing do anything else?' asked Smiffi, his eyebrows still near his hairline.

'Most things yes,' replied Sirk, 'except human, or any other form of life... it will replicate plants however!'

'I wonder - was I just a little bit hasty in leaving Intergalax?' replied Smiffi, but as the corner of his mouth turned wryly down Sirk laughed again.

'I'll accept a good offer!' announced Sirk dryly. They all laughed enough to put their pants in jeopardy!

'Excuse me interrupting,' said the onboard computer, 'but I think you ought to take a look at the readout flashing on the console!' Walking over to take a look Smiffi's face went pale, and without having to ask both Sirk and Gelf knew by his face something was seriously wrong.

'We've got big shit coming our way!' said Smiffi without taking his eyes from the console. 'The sensors have picked Haak's ship, it's tracking us.'

'Can't we out-run them?' asked Sirk, thinking they could give them the slip by out-maneuvering them.

'No... it doesn't work like that,' said Smiffi gravely, setting the ships scanners he counted no less than eighteen Discs following at a distance of two light years, 'we could fly this thing all over this galaxy, the universe and time - and they would still find us!'

'No shit?'

'No shit!' replied Smiffi vehemently.

'So we have to stand and fight, or, let them come aboard and give ourselves up.' reasoned Sirk.

'One thing I'm not gonna do is f---n' give up!'

'That's what I thought!' replied Sirk grinning, 'I always enjoy a good fight. So how do we put shit on their face?'

'I don't know right now... but I'm working on it!' His face set like granite Smiffi watched the console carefully, and looking over his shoulder Sirk studied the Discs and their formation.

'How resistant to high voltage are these things?' asked Sirk suddenly.

'They aren't, they've never had to be,' replied Smiffi matter-of-factly, 'we haven't had high voltage on Intergalax for centuries... it was banned after many people were killed by it.'

'Christ! How many were there?'

'I'm not sure, as I remember from history lessons it was about sixty or so.'

'No shit!' replied Sirk, as his eyebrows traveled rapidly upward, 'on Earth there must have been countless thousands killed by high voltage!' Looking at Sirk as if he was mad, it was obvious to Smiffi that Earth dwellers must have been completely mad to keep using something that had caused so many deaths!

'What's your angle Sirk?' asked Smiffi, curious as to why he'd asked such an obscure question.

'Can you drop the Disc straight down from a static

position?'

'Yes, that's not a problem,' answered Smiffi, but still looked baffled.

'Ok, here's what we do,' explained Sirk quickly, 'get onto Haak's ship, and tell them you're prepared to shoot it out, this strategy will rely on spit-second timing, so when he replies he's gonna tell you that we'll all die... you tell them you don't care, that you're prepared to die, this will be the point where your knowledge of Haak will come into its own, when they open up on full light you'll already be dropping out of range, and hopefully they will end up blasting each other out of the universe, meanwhile I'll be on the Dart, so open the bay doors and allow me enough time to get the Dart into flight, and I'll clean up the leftovers with the ships pulsars.'

'F---n' shit! I'm glad you're on my side,' replied Smiffi, admiring Sirk's tactical skills, 'as you say it's gonna be split-second timing... but it's just crazy enough to work! Ok, let's do it!' Slowing the Disc considerably Smiffi watched as Sirk made for the hold, then waiting on the bridge he watched Haak's ship, and prayed he wouldn't be impatient for an answer, but knowing Haak like he did he was certain he'd wait it out. His tactics would be to pile on the pressure, as was his want, he enjoyed the psychology of out-waiting the opposition, then as they crumbled he knew for certain he would get a result; either a fight, or capitulation. Wondering why Sirk was taking so long he

told Gelf to get on the light guns, and load them all in a complete three sixty arc. Then Sirk came over the intercom.

'Ok Smiffi, open the bay doors, I'm ready!' Hovering menacingly inside with the Dart on levit; Sirk waited for Smiffi to give him the word, and tensed himself ready for action; timing would be tight.

'Is that really you Haak?' asked Smiffi opening the mike.

'Yeah Smiffi,' replied Haak, 'it's really me!'

'I'll have to be more thorough in future then won't I?' said Smiffi feigning extreme fright.

'What's it to be Smiffi,' boomed Haak in reply, 'I can't wait long... as you know I'm a busy man!'

'You'll have to take out Haak,' Smiffi told Sirk, then switching his intership frequency to Haak's, his voice firm, 'I haven't got time for the likes of a shit like you!'

'You're f---n' mad Smiffi... you don't stand a chance, you must have noticed you're surrounded!'

'So don't talk about it, f---n' do it!' Waiting three seconds Smiffi suddenly sent his Disc plummeting down. Eighteen discs opened fire, but as light met Disc they exploded simultaneously, and the carnage was incredible, fortunately for Smiffi most had fired seconds apart then, so taking the Dart off levit Sirk dropped her from the hold of the Disc, and swooping down he brought her swiftly to port, but watching the scanner he noticed that as they opened fire Haak had been clever enough to take his Disc up!

Realizing suddenly these craft were significantly faster than his, he put the Dart straight to convolut thirty-five, and at that point he noticed two Discs had escaped the initial onslaught, and were coming straight at him. Veering quickly to starboard he brought her about, then leveling his flight path one of his assailants came into range.

'Lock on target!' Watching the green grid synchronize with the red Sirk pressed the pad, the Disc exploded into a million fragments, meanwhile the other Disc had come in behind Sirk and was closing in, but letting loose with a barrage of full intensity light Smiffi vaporized it without thought. Suddenly Haak had closed on Smiffi, and realizing that he was too close to for comfort, Sirk knew he had to do something - quick! He was in range!

'Lock on target!' Again the green and red grids synchronized, pressing the pad six traces briefly connected the Dart to Haak's Disc, but Haak in the same instant fired at Smiffi. Deciding he had an urgent appointment with someone on high, Haak and his Disc disappeared rapidly, but the light emitted by Haak's disc had thankfully caused only superficial damage to Smiffi's Disc, having fired at the critical point Sirk had taken the sting out of the light emission. Flying a circle of victory around the Disc Sirk peeled off and headed for the bay doors, and once in the hold he put her back on levit and returned to the bridge.

'Hot shit Sirk - that was some flying display,' said Smiffi in disbelief, 'I've never seen such precision, that was

definitely shit hot!

'You were no slouch either the way you dropped the Disc out of range when Haak opened up,' said Sirk returning the compliment, 'how did you know when to move?'

'I didn't!' replied Smiffi with a poker face. Dumbfounded by Smiffi's last statement Sirk was unable to answer

'He's being modest,' said Gelf suddenly, 'it's not just that Smiffi's better qualified than him, he's been able to read Haak's mind for years... that's why Haak didn't like him!'

'How's the damage?' asked Sirk concernedly.

'It's mostly skin stuff,' said Smiffi dismissively, 'but it won't worry us on the home run!'

'Everyone ok?' asked Smiffi, Sirk and Gelf gave their affirmation, 'then, let's go home!'

'Hey! Where's Ali?' asked Sirk looking very worried.

'Oh shit,' replied Smiffi totally baffled, 'I haven't even seen him lately!'

'Is it safe to come out now?' said a voice quietly from the front side of the console. They all laughed as Ali crawled out from the aperture of an inspection hatch.

'I'll break out the Dregs then.' said Sirk matter-of-factly,

'A man after my own heart.' said Smiffi then followed it with his command, 'leave!' The Disc disappeared on its two-day journey to Urf. Disintcaps popped everywhere, although there were only four of them it sounded like party time! Ernie K Doe's Mother-In-Law played loudly on the sound system, but it wasn't until Sirk had to visit the bog

he realized that it was being piped around the whole ship, even in the companionways! This was good, as it meant he wouldn't miss a single beat whenever he had to take a leak, or fire a brown torpedo! After hearing Eugene Church's In Miami, and many other songs from the fifties and sixties, they went to the twenty fourth century to hear some music from a time just before rock was officially banned. A firm favorite had been found with a band called Scavenge, and Smiffi listened to their whole album "Hoovers First", three times over! Sirk and Gelf were relieved when he finally asked to hear something else! No one bothered pressing their temples that night, all four agreed it seemed a shame to spoil the effects of the Dregs when there really was no need! Retiring almost gracefully, they slept soundly 'til their sleep period was over. However, being the first to attain a vertical stance Sirk was on the bridge in a flash. Switching on the sound system he selected Johnny and the Hurricanes Reveille Rock, and soon had Smiffi and Gelf staggering onto the bridge, who complained bitterly about their slumber being rudely interrupted. Grinning widely Sirk turned it down to hear their "genuine" complaints.

'Today we will reach home, don't you guys wanna celebrate?'

'The only thing I wanna celebrate is going' back to f---n' sleep!' said Smiffi looking like he'd just had sex with a grizzly bear! Standing alone Gelf was a different matter, who staring silently through the supercool.

'You with us Gelf,' asked Sirk grinning, 'or are you pining for Intergalax?'

'Pining for Intergalax?' asked Gelf slowly, 'no... I am f---n' not!' That made Sirk laugh, Gelf's sense of humor was similar to Smiffi's, but knowing they'd worked together for some time that didn't surprise him. Suddenly the long low frequency alarm sounded, Smiffi ran to the console and stared intently at the screen.

'Yes... we'll be back on Urf in just over four hours lads!'

'Well, as we've got time in hand,' said Sirk, 'perhaps you'll tell me how you use your eyes as a weapon?'

'Yeah,' replied Smiffi indulgently, 'I suppose we've progressed as a race to the point where you see us as we are now; it started more than a million years ago, before the million years war. Intergalax had been uneasy with the Form for many years, and there had been several skirmishes with them for more than ten thousand years... they were in fact at one stage a part of our race, but they became war-like, and were banished by our governing body for attempting a coup, eventually they found another planet to live on while they planned a campaign to re-take Intergalax for themselves. It was then one of our scientists discovered the human brain was capable of producing serious amounts of energy, and emitting it as a powerful high voltage weapon, the brains electrical power could apparently be concentrated, and emitted through the eyes. Having discovered they were capable of emitting light, as

well as their normal function of receiving it, extensive training was necessary to attain this status, which you now know as "Higher Echelon".

'So it wasn't really evolution then?' asked Sirk, fascinated by the subject.

'No... it was more adaptation, than evolution.' replied Smiffi factually.

'Well it sure frightened the shit out of me!' declared Ali remembering the UWF officer he'd "melted" back on Earth.

A LESSON FINALLY LEARNED

Moving the air over Vantown City the Disc's giant shadow darkened the sky as it came to on levit, as the massive bay doors opened the Diamond Dart took its place of honor alongside the Disc. Seeing them arrive, Cita, the

prof., Raff, with Arin, and Taniche, had raised the alarm; they were finally home!

'What the f--k's all the noise about?' asked Hamys, who'd obviously had a heavy night, then saw the Disc. 'Hot shit - they're back!' Having put the Dart on levit Sirk lowered the walkway as Arin tried unraveling his puzzle; if Smiffi's flying the Disc, who is flying the Dart? The Terraport had already beamed down Smiffi and Gelf; and by the time Sirk had opened the hatch and lowered the walkway, they were there to greet him.

'Come on you slow bastard - what kept you!' said Smiffi grinning as Sirk walked down the walkway.

'F--k off,' replied Sirk laughing, 'this a real ship, not an overgrown dinner plate like that f--kin' thing!' Before he knew it Cita had thrown her arms around his neck and burst into tears, and suddenly Sirk was drawn into a passionate clinch he thought he'd never escape from!

'Prof.,' said Sirk lowering his voice, 'in fact everyone here... I owe you all an apology, you were right... and I was wrong - that is the long and short of it, and I am very, very, sorry! I have learned my lesson well... tonight I will tell you what happened to me after I foolishly left you all behind. What I would like to add is this... my thanks, to these two guys - Smiffi and Gelf, if it hadn't been for them and their ingenuity, I would have remained dead on Earth, in its own death throes - forever! They and their ship are a revelation, and I'm sure Professor, you'll waste no time in going

aboard to snoop at a technology far in advance of our own! Oh, and uh... will you please welcome an old friend - Ali Boran!' With that Ali stepped through the hatch of the Dart, his wide grin as usual exposing his ultra-white set of railings! Cita ran over and threw her arms around his big bulky neck; Arin and John shook his big fist as a tear ran down his big ugly face!

'I'm confused to put it mildly,' said the professor slightly perplexed, 'how did you get here with Ali from where you were, and meet up with Smiffi and Gelf?'

'Smiffi can explain it better than I can,' said Sirk, then lead Ali to his new club, 'oh uh, your living quarters are at the rear of the property, and I think you'll find them very comfortable!'

'Proper little estate agent isn't he?' said Ali laughing at Sirk's attempt to please him.

'I just want to make sure you're happy with it.' replied Sirk, knowing Ali wasn't aware he'd be living on the premises.

'My friend, if you'd said I was going to live in a tent I'd have been more than happy,' said Ali still grinning, 'as long as I'm with my friends... that's all that matters!'

'Something is puzzling me,' said the professor suddenly turning to Smiffi, 'as you appear to travel around the universe at considerable length - and speed, can you tell me what creatures look like on other planets?'

'I'm not sure exactly what you mean professor,' said Smiffi looking baffled.

'Well... on Earth - that is the Earth of yesteryear - we had what was called a film industry...they made moving pictures as entertainment for the masses-'

'Yeah I know,' cut in Smiffi getting his own back on the professor for his testy attitude.

'Oh... right... well, what I'm trying to say is, we have many films that portray large and very weird monsters, some of them bizarre to the extreme, but what I want to know is, do creatures like that exist anywhere in the universe?' Smiffi grinned in amusement.

'The answer prof. is no,' said Smiffi candidly, 'if you look at it logically the scenario you put to me could never exist, the reason for that is basically this, we all started from a common source in the big bang, so all people I've seen are of a humanoid form. Planets that support life anywhere in the universe all have the same basic criteria, all come from the same basic material source, sure some may have a larger mass than others, but in support of life on that planet, they were commensurately farther away from their solar support, obviously, but the films, they were good entertainment... yeah?'

'Yes, I guess so, what you've told me is largely what I'd thought,' replied the professor thoughtfully, 'I was considering this theory back on Earth, but as usual more pressing matters got in the way, and I've only just got around to working on it again... you don't mind me picking your brains do you Smiffi, it's just that being well traveled

you are a valuable source of information.'

'Not at all professor,' replied Smiffi amiably, 'if you need to know anything feel free to ask.'

'Thank you,' said the professor, taking Smiffi by the arm, 'now perhaps you can tell me about this ship of yours, and how you managed to get Sirk and Ali back to this time - I just don't see how that is possible!'

'Well professor,' started Smiffi, and uncertain of how much the professor knew, and he was gagging for a Dregs, 'obviously you know the universe is flat - like a Disc... take our Disc as an example - in your mind turn it into a doughnut ring yeah? Now take a reference point anywhere.... then describe a line around the doughnut 'til you get back to your original reference point, you've just traveled around the whole universe in time! You see... everything that happens in your life, and everyone else's, in fact any event that happens in anyone's life in the whole universe has already happened, and is just waiting for them to catch up to it. The day you were born your whole life was mapped out in front of you, let's say you had a fall from a ladder on your sixteenth birthday, that fall happened the day you were born, as you progressed through your life you merely caught up with it sixteen years later, after it had happened it was still there, but now it was in the past, in stead of the future! So, everywhere we go, we can catch up with, or go back to events different by crossing time-space barriers. There are universes

everywhere, thousands of them... all dying and being reborn at different times, our universe for instance has been through the big bang eleven times now... have you ever had a feeling of déjà vu, you must have been somewhere and had a strong feeling you've been there before? Well, that is in fact a memory throwback from an earlier life!

'Yes - I understand that,' answered the professor testily, 'but how do you get around so fast having to contend with wormholes, it's not physically possible - is it?'

'That's what I was coming to,' Smiffi told him patiently, 'our ships are too fast for wormholes, we can cross-reference time and space... travel wherever we like - whenever we like - literally! By using the Tachyon in both space and time we can select which time and space sectors we want at random through using string. So you see, all I had to do was cross-reference each individual time and space sector to leave Urf on Cita's one hundred and fourth birthday, retrieve both Sirk and Ali, then, do the same again to get back to this time, it has, I'm pleased to say, afforded all of us time to enjoy our lives, hopefully, in peace and prosperity... the only thing I fear now is Intergalax, although we finished off Haak and his cronies, they will still send out search and retrieve parties for us, it's only a matter of time before they find us with that f--- n' Hypertrak onboard.'

'Why don't you destroy it?' asked the professor directly,

'once you've destroyed it surely there's have no way they will find you!'

'If only it were that easy!' replied Smiffi looking up to the heavens, 'no one knows where they're fitted!'

'That's no problem,' replied the professor confidently, 'I'll build a detector - that'll take care of it!'

'If you can do that, I for one would be very grateful!' said Smiffi genuinely. Questioning Smiffi extensively on what frequency the Hypertrak operated he left to design and build the promised instrument.

'I don't somehow think he'll do it,' said Smiffi turning to Sirk, 'but I appreciate his attempt.'

'You don't know the prof,' replied Sirk grinning, 'he won't give up 'til he succeeds!'

'My hopes have just gone up by 100%,' replied Smiffi returning his grin, 'perhaps you're right, he does seem to have a sort of dogged attitude about him.'

'A word of advice,' added Sirk, 'don't what ever you do go into his workshop while he's working!'

'I get the message.' said Smiffi, 'come on, let's see how Ali's getting on in his new domain.' With that Sirk and Smiffi joined Cita and Arin in The Vantown City All Peoples Bar, and Ali was in his element entertaining them as usual with his range of stories and dirty jokes. A few minutes later Raff, John, Kinshasa, followed by Hamys, Kiska, and Taniche, walked through the door and made for the bar.

'Hello then,' said Arin joking, 'it appears my wife is becoming an alcoholic!'

'Piss off Arin!' said Taniche chiding him playfully.

'Oh... in that case I'll have a pint of bitter!' replied Arin straight-faced. Everyone laughed at Arin's quip, but Taniche laughed as if she'd had a few already!

'Would anyone object to me re-naming this place The Ill Eagle Club?' asked Ali walking over, 'I would love to have my old name again.'

'That was the general idea Ali,' said Sirk laughing, 'it's a criminal offence if you don't!' Again they laughed, and as there were no licensing hours in their new world, Sirk suggested they have a drink or two to welcome Ali to his new club. It was a good idea and everyone it appeared was in favor, so duly installing himself behind the bar Ali dispensed drinks with his usual flair.

'Oh uh... just one thing Ali,' said Sirk suddenly remembering their new addition, 'thanks to Smiffi here, we have a new drink to add to the bar tariff - Dregs!' Ali's eyes went wide! Anything new he wanted to know about immediately, and was naturally curious about anything that would increase his profit margin, which in turn was always appreciated by his clientele, and that was because back on Earth he always out-ran any opposition, for one simple reason, he gave them what they wanted!

'I like it here,' said Gelf with a grin wider than a crocodiles ass, 'I'm never going back to Intergalax.'

'If you want to stay here - you stay here as long as you want!' said Sirk earnestly, 'No one's gonna question your being here.' For the first time in his life Gelf felt that he was worth something, that he had a value, and by the same token he also felt he wanted to contribute something, to give back what they'd given him. Unlike those on Intergalax, these people didn't take the piss out of him every time he showed his face, so giving Ali a can of Dregs Gelf waited to see his reaction.

'F----n' hell!' declared Ali, his eyes on stalks, 'this is shit hot!'

'Hot shit!' said Hamys, 'I'll have one of those!' Pouring one into a glass Ali asked what quantity they'd brought with them, Smiffi declared the three cans on the bar was it, lock, stock and barrel, then excused himself, to brew some more on the replicator; no one dissented!

A week later Ali's new sign was ready, and supervised its installation. Walking by with Kinshasa and Smiffi, Sirk commented on it being just as good as the original. Although only having seen it briefly Smiffi agreed, and remembered the impact it had had on him. Suddenly the professor ran into the bar looking very excited, then spotting Smiffi made straight for him waving a little black oblong box.

'I've done it!' he declared proudly, 'this is what will detect the Hypertrak on your Disc Smiffi!' Taking the unit from the professor he looked at it for a few seconds and handed

it back.

'If you say so professor,' he said sincerely, 'it appears then... all our fears are over.' The professor beamed, he liked Smiffi, he always appreciative of what others did for him. Leaving the Ill Eagle he and the professor made for the Disc, and leaving a few minutes later Sirk joined them on the bridge, but seeing their looks of dejection he asked what had pissed them off.

'The whole ships a f---n' Hypertrak!' said Smiffi dejectedly.

'Bollocks!' answered Sirk vehemently, 'how do we get over this one?'

'I'll work on it,' said the professor, 'there's always an answer somewhere.'

'Having built that detector professor,' said Smiffi sincerely, 'I know you'll come up with the goods.'

'You can bet on it!' added Sirk. Beginning to worry at the possibility of a return visit by Intergalax before the professor had found a solution, Smiffi's concern showed on his face.

'The professor will see you through.' said Sirk reassuringly. 'Yeah... I know he will,' replied Smiffi quietly, 'it's not that that worries me, it's whether he'll do it in time!' Realizing Smiffi's concern, Sirk also knew the awesome power of the light guns that were the Discs arsenal.

'Smiffi,' asked the professor suddenly, 'is your craft powered by a Tachyon drive?' Affirming the fact Smiffi

watched the professor disappear from the bridge.

'He's on to something,' declared Sirk grinning, 'I know that look, if I had a dollar for every time I'd seen it I could have retired years ago!' Laughing at Sirk's analogy, and feeling somewhat relieved Smiffi's face lifted. At Sirk's suggestion they returned to the Ill Eagle Club for "another" pre-lunch Dregs! Seeing that as a good idea Smiffi left with him, and hoped the prof. would come up with an answer.

'I'm buying!' said Sirk generously, 'Gelf, Raff - what's yours?'

'I'll have the same again,' said Gelf appreciatively.

'What the Hell is it?' asked Sirk staring at the muddy looking contents of his glass.

'Whisky and Dregs - Raff just put me onto it!'

'It looks like shit!' declared Smiffi.

'What d'you call it?' asked Smiffi curiously.

'Urf?' suggested Ali from behind the bar.

'No... Hot shit!' said Raff and Gelf seriously - and in unison, and to put it mildly both were more than well inebriated, however, seeing they were obviously enjoying it, Sirk asked Smiffi if he'd join him in trying it for size.

'I can only die once!' replied Smiffi, hoping he hadn't sounded prophetic, but having tasted the brew that Ali had mixed for them to his own precise measurements; they agreed it was indeed a "find".

'Two Hot Shit's it is then Ali mate?'

'My round this time!' declared Smiffi as he collected their glasses, 'come on Gelf get it down your neck mate - Ali, five glasses of Hot Shit please!' Status Quo were the latest on hologram to play in the bar of the Ill Eagle, and were pumping out Marguerita Time with their usual eloquence, as Arin and Taniche rejoined them Arin lit up one of his famous cigars.

'Strewth! I sometimes wonder if I should have left that replicator behind!' said Sirk ribbing his brother.

'No taste... some people!' retorted Arin without looking round. Well it was true to say the Ill Eagle was back in full swing, and Sirk couldn't help thinking it was even better than the last one, this time they didn't have the worry of police raids or UWF snoops informing on them. Making everyone look around the professor rammed his way into the bar so fast, the door hit the wall with a resounding thud.

'Smiffi!' he said excitedly, 'is your Disc powered by anti-matter as well as Tachyon?'

'F--k me! You've asked me something now prof. sorry, I only fly the damn thing,' said Smiffi in complete surprise, 'I really don't know.'

'I'm gonna take a gamble I'm right!' replied the professor completely in character.

'Why - does it matter?' asked Smiffi suddenly concerned.

'It might matter,' said Gelf rambling in a drunken stupor, 'there again it might not matter... there again it might anti-

matter, on the other hand - it might not anti-matter!"

'I'll be back soon!' said the professor, then giving Gelf a scornful look he left. Spending many hours going over a ship he was unfamiliar with, its technology stretched even his brilliant mind to its limits. Having verified his sonic screwdriver was useless, he'd spent more than two hours trying to remove the protective cowl from the engine bay, only to realize it was an old fashioned bayonet fitting that had been engineered with such precision, all he had to do was unlock it! Grinning broadly the old adage, "Nothing's new!" sprang into the professor's mind. He had now reached the point where he started to relish his work, the finer points of technology, and something that was beyond the realms of his understanding he only saw as his new challenge. Suddenly his heart raced with excitement as he discovered the Tachyon accelerators, and behind it were two sausage shaped cylinders, they had to be the matter/anti-matter boosters! In a rare moment of levity he considered they'd be a couple of real bangers at the wrong barbeque! Taking the omnimeter from his pocket he ran it over both cylinders, and seeing the left cylinder give a negative reading, he knew instinctively the right would give a positive, the LED changed from blue to brown. 'Bingo!' The prof. then noticed a cablerun from the right cylinder, but it disappeared behind a bulkhead at the front of the engine room, so checking the left cylinder he noticed that that one had no cablerun! Now very suspicious he

traced the cable to somewhere near the deck, then, noting its coding he swept the whole bridge looking for the same cable code. It took some doing, but the professor being a dogged man wasn't one to give in easily, especially when he knew he was right. Having swept the banks across the front of the bridge he turned his attention to the console, within a minute the reading came up as bold as brass, the professor allowed himself a shallow smile. Having removed the rear panel from the console his next job was to locate and dismantle the frequency distributor, so running the omnimeter around inside he quickly picked it up, then followed the reading along the cable; it ended in a small multi-lensed oculomotor.

'So! They have been clever little boys!' he said cynically.

'How clever of you to Discover our little secret!' said a sinister voice from behind. Stopping work, the professor considered the voice for a few seconds, then backing out from the inner sanctum of the console he turned to see who was paying him a visit.

'I don't think we've met,' said the professor amiably, 'Patenil, professor of hyper-technology from... well, here - actually!'

'I am Laxxus,' replied the stranger flatly, 'I am from Intergalax, it appears you have one of our Discs here!'

'Oh whoops!' said the professor unapologetically.

'Oh whoops indeed,' said Laxxus, 'I have a message for your friend Smiffi... he and Donut are to surrender

themselves to me in one hour, or I will burn this planet to a crisp! Can you convey that message to the necessary people?'

'I think I'm capable of an elementary task such as that - yes!' retorted the professor angrily. 'Who's Donut by the way?'

'His name is Gelf if you must know, and please remind Smiffi that I am also Higher Echelon.' added Laxxus with calm assurance as the professor hurriedly left the bridge.

LAXXUS

Having told Sirk of their unwelcome guest the professor wanted to blow up the Disc with Laxxus onboard, but Sirk insisted on telling Smiffi before taking any action himself. Just being a witness to Smiffi's powers was enough to last a lifetime, and Sirk reasoned that this guy might be just as

awesome.

'I'm glad you told me first Sirk,' said Smiffi, and for the first time Sirk saw something other than confidence in his eyes, 'Laxxus! Christ, they must want me real bad to send him.'

'You know him?' asked Sirk, trying to figure out if there was anything he could do.'

'Yeah... he fought on B Block in the million years war, I vaguely remember him being decorated for some brave deed or other. I've also heard he's very good.' Looking at Gelf he cocked his head to one side to signal they were leaving.

'Professor,' asked Smiffi suddenly, 'did Laxxus walk onto the bridge or'-

'I don't know,' replied the professor hurriedly, 'I was only aware of him suddenly being there.'

'Ah, so he did use the Terraport!'

'What are you gonna do?' asked Sirk, concerned for his new friend, 'can I help in any way?'

'At the moment Sirk, nothing,' replied Smiffi, but was grateful for his offer, 'I'll have to see if he's prepared to bargain first.' Taking the Magnetran Smiffi left for the Disc, it seemed now his worst fears were realized, it was too little - too late! He wasn't blaming the professor, or anyone else for that matter; it was pure fate and nothing else. He couldn't blame them for the fact that their technology was ancient, their willingness to help more

than made up for that! Now he had to face one of his own kind, a killer, but there was one other important thing he had to consider, was Laxxus better than him? Wondering if he'd gone soft since arriving on Urf, Smiffi knew his answer would come soon. Stopping the Magnetran he left through the side portal in case Laxxus decided he'd take him by surprise. However, having walked around the front of the vehicle there was no sign of him. He knew at once Laxxus was playing for time - and playing with him, he wasn't sure if Laxxus had gone soft since the end of the war, but Smiffi knew he couldn't afford such casual luxuries, to do that could very well render him dead! No, Smiffi's only course of action was to believe in himself and play it by the book, and of course use a little flair, then suddenly something occurred to him he'd almost forgotten, and running back to the Magnetran he opened a frequency to the Dart.

'Sirk,' said Smiffi quickly, 'I guessed you'd be on the Dart, is the professor with you mate?'

'No,' replied Sirk, 'hang on, I'll get him!' Waiting the few minutes for Sirk to return he tapped his fingers on the console, then, suddenly his frequency went live again.

'Did you get him?' asked Smiffi, and hearing Smiffi's voice the professor sensed the tension in it.

'It's me,' answered the professor, 'what can I do?'

'Professor,' began Smiffi, 'can you remember exactly what he said to you when you were on the bridge?'

'More or less,' replied Professor Patenil, 'one thing comes to mind, he said to tell you that you and Gelf were under arrest.' Smiffi grinned, that was what he'd hoped to hear, it was plain to Smiffi that Laxxus had also heard of him, but Laxxus was obviously hoping to take them back with him, that meant he wouldn't be going all out for the kill! Glancing up his eyes caught sight of a tall dark figure standing in front of, and dwarfed by the mighty Disc - it was Laxxus!

'I think it's time to go,' said Smiffi suddenly, 'I can see him now, he's waiting for me.'

'Go get the bastard Smiffi,' said Sirk, wishing he could do something to help his friend. Switching off the frequency Smiffi straightened, and walked out the hatch on Laxxus' blind side - just in case!

'Oh well done Smiffi,' taunted Laxxus, 'you remembered how to maintain maximum cover!'

'No more than I'd expect from you Laxxus!' replied Smiffi, purposefully keeping matters in a non-aggressive state, and knew that as long as he was able to bargain with Laxxus, the longer he'd have to outwit him.

'So, what can I do for you Laxxus, I don't suppose you've come all this way to trade banter with me?'

'You know what I want,' replied Laxxus, 'don't make me spell it out!' Consideration was given playing it dumb, but Smiffi knew Laxxus was too smart to fall for that.

'Ok, so I stuffed Haak,' admitted Smiffi light-heartedly, 'is

that so bad, you know what he was like... I had no choice in the matter, it was me or him!

'F--k Haak,' replied Laxxus dismissively, 'I'm not interested in him... he was a waster, no what I'm really interested in is that old ship you salvaged... The Diamond Dart!' Hearing that Smiffi nearly fell off the planet, what was he to do now; he couldn't just hand it over, it wasn't his to give!

'You want the Diamond Dart?' said Smiffi laughing, 'what in f--k's name are you gonna do with that old tub?'

'Don't pretend you don't know Smiffi,' replied Laxxus goading him, 'I wouldn't mind betting you were thinking of taking it for yourself.'

'Well, there's only one way you could know that Laxxus,' countered Smiffi, 'that was only discussed between me and my oppo, Gelf, so you must have placed a bug on my Disc, and that's a crime in itself Laxxus!'

'Oh dear, I have been a naughty boy,' said Laxxus menacingly, and was clearly attempting to goad him again, 'I must slap my wrist when I get back!'

'Very f---n' funny Laxxus,' replied Smiffi, but knew now he'd have to employ further delaying tactics, 'the Diamond Dart is a worthless pile of junk, and I can't see what you want that for.'

'Quit stalling Smiffi,' said Laxxus in retaliation, 'I'm getting pissed off with f---n' about like this!'

'Oh dear,' replied Smiffi, his power already engaged, 'well - I'll tell you what Laxxus - if you want the Diamond Dart,

why don't you go and get her... if you can find her.' That was the last straw for Laxxus, his eyes lit up like a pair of searchlights, but pre-empting the situation Smiffi let loose with his own. The power was phenomenal, being slightly better than Smiffi's Laxxus' hit the hull of the Magnetran with a resounding bang, which left smoke drifting from a gaping hole in its side. Leaving him in considerable pain a second volley caught Smiffi on his ankle.

'Did that hurt Smiffi?' asked Laxxus sarcastically.

'What d'you think Laxxus,' replied Smiffi gritting his teeth, 'anyhow that was your last hit on me!'

Smiffi's shot hit the ground in front of Laxxus vitrifying the sand at his feet, then as Laxxus dived to the ground Smiffi did likewise, and realised it was going to be a tough one. Studying the area around him Smiffi realized Laxxus had chosen his ground well, and seeing no trees to fell on his enemy Smiffi realized it would be difficult to bring about a change in his fortune. The only thing he could do was a general scorch and hope he'd catch Laxxus out, Smiffi's eyes glowed, then sweeping left to right he vitrified everything in sight, silence followed for a short while, then, a minute later Laxxus laughed loudly.

'Smiffi... Smiffi,' said Laxxus laughing derisively, 'is that the best you can come up with... a bit "basic training" isn't it?'

'Well I don't know how retarded you are, so I thought I'd best start with the simple stuff!'

'You're so f---n' clever Smiffi,' shouted Laxxus, then suddenly calming down, 'look, can we talk... this, this... fighting isn't gonna get us anywhere.' It was then that Smiffi had to ascertain if Laxxus was losing his nerve, or was he playing Haak's game?

'I'm willing if you are,' said Smiffi calmly, and realized this was also his chance to take him out for good, 'we kill our eyes, then, we walk and meet halfway!'

'Sounds ok to me,' said Laxxus agreeably, too agreeable for Smiffi's liking, 'let's walk!' Keeping his eyes on Laxxus every second Smiffi walked with an easy purpose, and Smiffi knew by his walk Laxxus' thinking was identical.

From a standing position Laxxus suddenly let loose, and within a millisecond Smiffi had done likewise. Their combined power met halfway, and it was now a head to head stand-off, but Smiffi had had a better start, and his power was greater than Laxxus', but Smiffi's earlier injury was causing him concern, and he worried its effect would diminish his power of concentration. Both Laxxus and Smiffi knew this was their last fight, once locked in a head to head there was no going back! Needing all his power to repel Laxxus, his injury was gradually draining his stamina, although Laxxus' power hadn't grown he was at least able to maintain his power, and that was what Smiffi knew would be his downfall. He'd realised some time ago that this would happen one day, although didn't think it would be this soon, and had considered it more likely to

happen when he was older. Now his penumbra was overpowering Smiffi's, Laxxus' grew in confidence, and Smiffi knew he had only thirty seconds left at best, and could already feel its heat. It was time to start his death chant, his power was draining rapidly, and through the power of his own penumbra his voice carried on the wind, and all within a hundred-mile radius heard it. Without warning Laxxus disappeared from the face of the Urf, all that remained was blackened, smoldering vitrified ground, and Smiffi, who'd been resisting Laxxus with every fiber of his being fell face forward with the sudden lack of force. In the split second he fell Smiffi remembered seeing five or six blue traces, and Laxxus' body turn into a bright blue vapor before he hit the ground. Stopping his chant he regained a vertical stance, and watched as Sirk did a victory roll overhead. Banking to starboard Sirk brought the Dart down right in front of Smiffi.

'Smiffi! You ok?' shouted Sirk running down the walkway.

'I thought you were a f---n' goner for a minute!'

'I should have been,' replied Smiffi seriously, 'oh uh by the way... you know you've broken the Higher Echelon Code of death!'

'Sorry mate,' replied Sirk woefully, 'I didn't realize there was one!'

'Just a piss take!' replied Smiffi smirking. Being beside himself with fear, and thinking he'd lost his true friend forever Gelf burst out laughing, then realizing he'd been

had, Sirk laughed with him.

Vantown City had organized a celebration the like of which wouldn't be seen in a long time, not only were they officially welcoming Ali and his "new" Ill Eagle Club, but also Smiffi and Gelf, the newest members of their township. Put up by Ali a sign outside the club advertised free drinks all day at the grand opening, but to start the ball rolling, at one pm there would also be a barbeque in the communal area preceding it! In the bar that night the topic of conversation was, well, there was only one! Smiffi, Gelf, Sirk and Cita, Arin and Taniche, Professor Patenil, Raff and Sheel, and host of others had commandeered three tables enabling them to sit together.

'What's the state of play with the Disc?' asked Smiffi having taken a seat next to the professor.

'Oh, it's all been taken care of!' he replied with calm assurance.

'You mean you've actually removed the Hypertrak?'

'Yes, it was no big deal,' the professor told him with an air of superiority, 'once I'd realized the ship was matter/anti-matter driving a Tachyon based powerhouse, I simply traced the Trak from its source in the engine room to the bridge where it was obvious to anyone they'd installed it in a clever little oculomotor-like device, which sent it's signal to whoever requested it using the correct code! After that it was just a matter of disconnecting and removing it.'

'Or you would have done, except for the interruption by

Laxxus!' cut in Sirk, causing laughter all 'round.

'Yes, well... I could have done without that, his timing wasn't perfect.' replied the professor reflectively.

'Well, I for one am very grateful professor,' said Smiffi.

'Smiffi, what exactly is "A" block... I mean in regards to fighting.' asked Sirk, curious to understand something totally alien to his understanding of the term.

'It was something Intergalax developed during the million years war,' said Smiffi retrospectively, 'the formation is of troops - like myself - in a block or square, facing out to the enemy, they developed what was known as the "Death Stage", it was a square platform with several raised Diaz, and every level back was higher than the one in front, we allowed our eyes to fend off most attacks, but as Gelf will testify... things didn't always go our way. The Form, that was our enemy by the way, had something they called The Gas. They killed thousands of our troops before the Akademikos - that's our version of the professor here - came up with a mask that was smart enough to identify and repel any new gas they were likely to develop! Anyway, I digress, the block itself was fed from the Disc via the Terraport from above, and the troops were beamed down to the center of the block, so if any of our troops fell wounded or dead at the front, they were automatically replaced from the Disc to the inside of the block, so if a trooper was killed or wounded the one behind moved out. That way there was a constant supply of troops -

ingenious!

'So what was the strategy of your enemy... this Form, or what ever they were called?' asked Sirk, fascinated by Smiffi's narrative.

'Well, they wouldn't fight after dark which was to our advantage,' continued Smiffi, 'they were afraid of gassing their own troops, so our blocks simply moved forward during the night and burnt out as many of them as we could at daybreak!'

'It sounds gruesome to me!' cut in Tanihe, her face contorted with shock.

'Yes, that I can't deny,' replied Smiffi apologetically, 'but you must realize one thing... whenever our troops were captured by The Form they were horribly tortured, then, when they'd extracted any or all information from them they were put to death by dissection.'

'Does that mean what I think it means?' asked Arin, now wearing the same expression as his wife.

'Yes,' replied Smiffi candidly, 'I won't give you the graphic details... unless of course you really want them!'

'I think we can work that out for ourselves!' said the professor, holding his glass up as a subtle hint.

'And now!' announced Ali switching on the mike. 'Thanks to the diligence and perseverance of one Captain Sirk Notaani we can proudly announce the first holoconcert of Danny and the Juniors, starting with Rock 'n' Roll is Here to Stay!'

Needless to say Sirk and Cita were first on the floor, and having found ancient footage of Rock 'n' Roll dancing from the nineteen fifties they were keen to put it into practice, then, hearing the pulsating beat from the music of yesteryear others followed their lead. Smiffi and Gelf sat and watched as they gyrated around the dance floor, both thinking they would have to get themselves a woman - but where! Their answer walked through the door in the form of four lovelies who were obviously out to enjoy themselves, and find a man who was able to look after them! Another of Sirk's recent finds, Babybird's You're Gorgeous followed Danny and the Juniors, and as Ali was producing new Holostars by the dozen, there was now a plethora of entertainment for all who loved dancing, and feared he'd have to stay open twenty four hours!

'Would you like to join us?' asked Smiffi of the tall blonde in the party, 'I'm Smiffi, and this is Gelf my oppo!'

'Well... I don't mind if I do,' she replied smiling broadly, 'I'm Petanna, this is Judica, Sorcere and Romantia.' With a great deal of suaveness Smiffi escorted the ladies to their table, but as the music finished everyone returned to their tables with an urgent need to quench their thirsts. Making the introductions Smiffi sat between his new lady and Sirk, and there was no doubt that this was the place he wanted to stay for the rest of his life. This was a place of peace, and having already identified with these people and their welcoming ways Urf was all that mattered to him now,

although inside he still harboured the feelings of a Higher Echelon, still "alert" for some unsuspecting event, little by little he was learning to relax. Like Sirk he would protect these people with his very life if necessary. With Sirk, Smiffi and Kinshasa at the helm, Arin and John with their business acumen, Ali with his flair for entertainment, the professor with his infinite thirst for knowledge, plus his willingness to impart it to anyone who'd listen, here was the nacelle for a new world - one of peace. A convergence of ideas, and a commonality that would bring them to one single goal - peaceful co-existence, and of course, they had the most important ingredient of all, to ensure their success - womanhood - thankfully!

'I've only got one thing to say to people who say stories can't have a happy ending.' announced Sirk.

'What's that?' asked Smiffi raising his eyebrows.

'Bullshit!'

'Eskhatos!' said the professor suddenly.

'Esk what?' queried the others.

'It's an ancient word, Greek I believe... used by ancient theologians, it pertains to all things terminal, the end, Armageddon, the Apocalypse... that sort of thing.'

'I hope to f--k it doesn't apply here!' said Sirk in mock alarm.

'Yes it does,' added the professor, giving them further cause for concern, 'but only in the context that we've all ended up here, and here is where it all ends - happily I

hope!" Throwing a beer mat at him, Sirk realized that even after all this time the professor's sense of humor could still catch him out!

'Happily!' said Tranter appearing from nowhere, 'yes, it's nice when things end happily. Which reminds me, I must thank you Notaani, you did a sterling job dispatching the Powerful One for me!

'Where the f--- did you come from,' asked Sirk, stunned by this enigma, 'you're dead!'

'I beg to differ!' replied Tranter grinning maliciously, 'I'm very much alive, and... I've come to collect!'

'Collect what exactly?' asked Smiffi, taking an instant dislike to him.

'The Powerful One's gold,' replied Tranter looking smug, 'or should I say *my* gold!

'How in f---'s name did you get here?' asked Sirk, 'I thought you'd perished back on Earth!'

'Captain Notaani,' replied Tranter condescendingly, 'didn't it ever occur to you how the modifications to the Dart were carried out so quickly?' Hearing that Sirk realised he'd been duped again! 'You see Notaani, there were in fact two Dart's, the one you came here in, and the one you took on your first mission, and that is the one I used to get here, your "shitty" maroon friend. Oh yes, I know that's what you called it. So... I think now, I will put my plan into practice and take up where the Powerful One left off, uh, thanks again to you Notaani, so if you and the

Men will kindly make your way to the smelting plant, we can make a start.'

'Fat f---n' chance!' replied Sirk angrily.

'Uh, you seem to forget,' said Tranter coldly, 'I have the gun!' As if he'd been drinking Tranter staggered three steps sideways, then holding onto a table to check his fall he paled significantly, looking as if he'd come down with a very nasty disease. Dropping the Pulsar he fell to the floor writhing in agony, then as his life ebbed away his body relaxed - his pain had gone! Everyone's eyes turned to Smiffi; his eyes were on fire!

'Well... I didn't like him,' he said defensively, 'did you really want him hanging around?'

'Uh... no!' replied Sirk, having thought about it for all of two seconds!

'*Eskhatos!*' said the professor again with emphasis.

'Where Tranter's concerned I think you could be right this time,' replied Sirk grinning, 'anyway, I hope no one else is gonna to pop out of the wood work, can anyone see a Powerful One hanging around!'

THE END

(Yes really!)

