

1. The Beginning

Leaning back in his chair, David grasped the back of his neck. He could almost feel the tension. He gave a sigh of relief, leaned forward and switched off his computer. He spun round in his chair, rose to his feet and walked into the dining room where his wife Mary, and their two friends were already beginning the meal. Tonight was a very special occasion for David and Mary, it was their first wedding anniversary and they had asked Alan and Amanda over to celebrate the occasion with them.” I’m sorry that the baby sitter has let us down” said Amanda. Mary politely emptied her mouth and waved dismissively “don’t be silly, we have plenty of room and besides, we love to have them here”. Lucy and Gary were ten year old twins who had been constant visitors to David and Mary’s since their birth. The frequent break from the children had been good for Alan and Amanda’s relationship, and the twins had no qualms about being here. It was like their second home, they even had their own rooms. Mary got up from the table and proceeded to clear away the plates that had just been used for the starter,

“Hey you guys haven’t finished”

The twins looked down into their laps dejectedly “It doesn’t matter” said David and then whispered to the twins “I never used to like melon either”

At this they perked up, shuffled in their seats and readied themselves for the main course. David smiled at them, and Alan shook his head, knowing that any further words on the matter would be lost, so he resigned himself to a submissive, good natured giggle. Mary reappeared at the doorway pushing a hostess trolley. She positioned it at the head of the table and proceeded to place several bowls of food onto the table. When she had retaken her seat she humorously announced “dinner is served”. At this point everyone began to help themselves. As Mary was just about to take her first bite of dinner, the phone rang. “Isn’t it typical, it always rings when you don’t want it to”? She got up and placing her napkin neatly next to her plate, she went into the living room.

David was sitting with his back to the living room door, and although he, Alan, Amanda and the twins were engaged in general conversation, he was more intent on eavesdropping into the one sided conversation that was now taking place in the other room. Although he could not quite make out what was being said, he had worked out the gist of things.

It was about fifteen minutes later before Mary could return to the dining area, by which time the meal was almost over, and everyone was ready for coffee. Mary decided she would warm her dinner later in the microwave, and that now she would join the others in the living room.

As the party walked into the comfortable, spacious living room, Mary turned to the twins and suggested that they went into the outer living room to watch television. The children were pleased, as they were becoming increasingly bored with the adult company. Mary was also pleased as this would give her the opportunity to explain the phone call she had just taken. She sat in the large easy chair next to the fireplace and taking a sip of her coffee she turned to Amanda. “I’m so sorry Amanda, we can’t take the kids to the mountains next week. They are going to be so disappointed”.

At this David stood up from the stereo, looked towards his wife and said “that was the commander on the phone wasn’t it” Mary nodded. Everyone knew what this meant. Mary had been selected, once again, to be the navigator for the next shuttle flight.

David and Mary had met when David’s company had won the contract to build the new reception area at the base where Mary was completing her shuttle training. He had always thought that one day she would give up space flight and concentrate on becoming a mother and wife of an architect. After all, they were comfortably off, and it would be no hardship for them to live on the substantial income that David enjoyed.

Mary confirmed that it was indeed the commander she had spoken to “they have found another planet and it will soon be in range. The exciting part about this one is that they think it may be able to support life. I have to leave tomorrow”.

David crossed the room and sat on the arm of his wife’s chair. He put his arm around her shoulder and sat silent for a moment. He hated it when she had to go way, not least for the fact that he held an intense dislike for her job. He did not trust space. He considered that orbiting the planet was one thing, but for his wife to travel to different planets was definitely another. He had always dreaded the thought of losing her, although he had never said so.

There was an awkward silence. Alan and Amanda were aware of David’s feelings and could see from the look on his face that this was not the time to voice an opinion. Everyone looked at Mary, each with a different, yet similar look of puzzlement.

“I have handed in my notice” explained Mary “It becomes effective immediately after this mission”.

To himself David was pleased, and at the same time relieved. He knew how much Mary’s job meant to her, and so, not to give anything away he put on his concerned look, turned to face Mary and began to argue against the decision. “Sweetheart. Why? You love that job and you’re damn good at it. You haven’t been fired have you?” Mary let him continue until a smile broke over her face. She could contain herself no longer. David was confused. “I’ve thought long and hard about this, and I am sure that I am doing the right thing” she paused for a while so that she could achieve maximum effect from what she was about to tell everyone. “After all I don’t think that it would be fair of me to be hopping from planet to planet and try to be...the mother of our child.”

The awkward atmosphere that had filled the room minutes earlier was instantly replaced by a stunned, shocked silence. David leaped to his feet and somehow seemed to take Mary with him. Dancing in circles he was half crying half laughing, trying desperately to speak. “How? When?!” “Calm down, calm down” said Mary. After a few more minutes of jubilation they both sat down in their original places. This time David was closer to his wife and squeezing her shoulder much more tightly. “I’ve been for all of the tests, they were positive and you are going to be a father.

“Well” said David proudly, “I think that this is the time to open that special bottle of champagne that we have been saving for just such an occasion”. By the time David had crossed to the drinks cabinet the children had entered the room to see what all of the commotion was about. Amanda proceeded to tell the youngsters the good news,

which sparked another wave of excited dancing and cheering. David had poured drinks for everyone and was attempting to weave his way through dancing children to deliver one glass to each of his friends, and to his wife. "I think that on this occasion even you two can have a drop" He gave a small glass to each of the children and they all raised their glasses. David stood in the middle of the room facing everyone. He composed himself, and quietly said, "To life, to the future, to good friends and to my darling wife...Thank you". "Here here" said everyone in unison and began to drink. Lucy didn't like the champagne as was evident from the grimace that spread across her face. Gary however gulped down his drink and asked Lucy whether she was going to drink hers. When she said that she wasn't, he proceeded to dispatch her glass in much the same manner. Everyone laughed then the children returned to watch the rest of their program.

The rest of the evening was taken up with initial planning for the forthcoming event and with the drinking of more celebratory champagne.

Many names for the new baby were discussed, and finally it was sort of agreed that if it were to be a girl it would be named Susan and if it was a boy, Jeremy. David secretly hoped it would be a Jeremy.

Before anyone had noticed the time, a second bottle of champagne had been consumed, and the children had all but been forgotten. "Oh well" Alan sighed, "we have an early start and a long journey tomorrow so I think, that it must be bedtime for us". Everyone agreed, and the usual all hands to the deck ensued to make tidy the living room. Turning out the lights they moved into the outer living room where the children had fallen asleep in front of the television. The video was still playing a program called 'The Art Of Magic' that the children had been watching earlier. David quipped to Alan that he was rapidly tiring of this particular tape as it was all that was played when Lucy and Gary were visiting. The two men then picked up a child each and put them to bed. As they quietly closed the door to the children's rooms Alan looked at David and said "your turn soon old man", David smiled, bade Alan good night and disappeared into his own room.

By the time that Alan, Amanda and the twins had come downstairs the next morning, Mary and David had finished their breakfast and had prepared the same meal for the others. They all sat and chatted until it was time for the Andersons to depart.

The party of friends slowly walked to the cruiser. As they walked, they made plans to spend time on the coast with Alan and Amanda as soon as Mary's mission was over.

At the cruiser handshakes, kisses and hugs were exchanged. Tears were wiped away as the Andersons got into their car and pulled silently out of the drive. As they drove away Amanda pressed herself against the window to wave a last farewell to David and Mary, an uneasy feeling came over her. Somehow, this time things felt different. For some reason she felt that this would be the last time that she would be saying goodbye to her friends. To her it almost felt like it was the end. She shrugged away a cold shiver, dismissed her thoughts and settled down to the journey.

Back in the house, the atmosphere was one of peace and quiet. David and Mary stood for a while and hugged each other. After a short time, their eyes met, they nodded and together they said "it's that time". They burst into giggles, kissed briefly, and began to busy themselves preparing for their respective day ahead. They had

done everything possible to delay the inevitable. But now the time had come. Locking the front door, David followed Mary to the two cruisers that were parked at the top of the driveway. They stood between the two cars and embraced passionately. After a few minutes they leant back in each others arms "See you in three weeks" said David. "I'll be back before you know it". Mary replied. There was an obvious tear just about to run down her face. David raised a hand and caught the tear on his index finger, and then he drank the tear from his finger and placed his hand over Mary's mouth.

"You had better hurry home, and bring little Jeremy...", "Susan" interrupted Mary, "whoever, home with you". They kissed some more and then they finally agreed to part.

"I love you" said Mary. "I love you too" David swallowed hard as they each got into their own vehicles. After a final wave, and a blown kiss they left for work.

For David the journey to work on this particular morning had been a tedious one. It did however afford him time to reflect on the fact that once again he was losing his wife for three whole weeks. After seven missions, he thought to himself, this one was going to be the last. A horn sounded behind him. He had been daydreaming and for an instant he had forgotten that he was in the car. He shook himself back to reality and caught up with the car in front. He leaned across to switch on the radio, and as he did so he noticed a small note stuck to the dashboard above which simply read 'I LOVE YOU'. He smiled, settled back in his seat and listened to the radio. As he pulled into his parking space he spied his friend, Bob Majors. It was hard to miss Bob's car, even in the dark, as it was painted in a strange luminous green. Bob had always joked that when he had been out for the night, he was nearly always the worse for wear and that it was useful to be able to find the car. This was not the case; Bob was one of the most grounded people that David knew.

David waited for Bob and they walked into the building together. "Morning David, how's Mary?" "Pregnant" Bob was just about to say "oh, good", until he had realised what David had just said. "Well I'll be... that's brilliant news. This calls for a celebration, how about tonight at the 1066?" David sighed "I'm afraid that isn't possible. Mary has had to go to work". As he spoke he gestured with his hand in the fashion of a craft taking off.

"Oh well definitely when she gets back then". The two friends agreed as they walked across the foyer.

Everything that day had started slowly for David and the journey to the fifteenth floor was no different. During the lift ride he never spoke. Bob turned to him and enquired if everything was OK?. David assured him that it was. He shrugged off the question as the lift reached his floor. He said goodbye to his friend and promised to meet him in the bar during their lunch break. David had not wanted to burden anyone with his thoughts but he was obviously preoccupied with his wife. He had always felt these emotions every time that she had taken on another mission. He knew that his fears were irrational, as there had not been a space accident for countless generations. This fact, however, did little to calm his worries. He knew that the next three weeks would be an eternity.

As Mary approached the base, she could already see the nose cone of the shuttle rising from its underground hangar. She could imagine all of the ground crews feverishly working to ready everything for the take off later that day. The radio had been on during her journey, but she had not paid much attention to it until she heard a song which had stirred something inside of her. She turned up the volume as the song was ending “That was for a special lady, Mary. David loves you very much and can’t wait to be together with you again, and he wishes you a safe journey. Stay tuned because next we have the news, and indeed the news that you have all been waiting for”.

Mary already knew what the great important news was, however, hearing it on the radio made it somewhat official. “Today, the government announced that there will indeed be a three hundred and sixty hour public holiday as sunlight returns to our planet. The holiday will officially commence in twenty hours time from. . . Now! Volunteers are now being accepted at your local town hall and the rate of pay this time is a staggering four hundred credits per hour. So, if you are not going to be one of our volunteers, I suggest that you dig out your sunglasses. More news on the hour, now back to the studio”.

Even as she listened, Mary could feel an intense rush of adrenaline surge through her body. She mused over the fact that she would be one of only a handful of people in her lifetime, which would have the opportunity to stand on an alien planet and maybe breathe without the aid of cumbersome apparatus.

She swiped her card through the reader and she could see through the glass doors all of the frenzied activity within. As she entered, she could hear snippets of various conversations that were being held. They were a mixture of excitement for the public holiday, excitement by a few people over the extra credits that their families would earn by becoming power volunteers, and not least, that the orbit of their planet would once again take them within reach of a planet, not visited for over twenty generations.

When she walked across the lobby she was greeted by a pleasant receptionist, “Good morning Mary, everyone else is already in the briefing room. Good luck, I wish I was coming with you”.

Mary smiled and passed through a door marked B1. Immediately upon entry she was confronted by two security officers who demanded her handbag, her security pass, and all items of metal that she had about her person. She was only too happy to comply with their wishes but she did however feel reluctant to remove her wedding band. Having completed this first stage of entry she was directed towards a scanner beam, which not only checked for anything missed by the security guards, but also was designed to give her a preliminary medical check. She always passed through this machine with a little trepidation; a red light at this stage would almost certainly preclude her from the mission. As she passed through an almost inaudible beep was heard and a green light was displayed on the end column. Mary breathed a small sigh of relief and continued through the next door at the end of the corridor. As the door closed behind her she was met by two people dressed all in white. “Morning Mary, big day today” said a man’s voice. She hated this room “I’m sorry Mary but you know the drill” he said. Mary then, somewhat embarrassingly began to take off her clothes. As she stood on the travelator she could not help but think to herself how

totally degrading this part of the security procedure was. The way in which she coped with the embarrassment was to sing the song that had been playing on the radio earlier to herself. After passing through another doorway, she had reached the final room, she was pleased to leave the embarrassment zone as she called it, and passed into the final stage. There was no one in this last room. It was, except for a small pile of clothing, completely empty. She immediately recognised the clothing as being part of her uniform. While she was dressing she could feel the warmth of the uniform, it felt comfortable against her skin. Impatiently, she sat on the small white seat that was protruding from the wall. It would be approximately five minutes now, and there would be no further contact with the outside world, except for verbal communication, until the mission was over. She thought to herself as the room went into its final cycle. No sooner had she made this thought when a hum was heard, the lights dimmed to an iridescent purple. The lighting and the humming seemed to pulse in unison as the room sterilised every part of her body. It had a soothing effect on her, almost hypnotic. She gave no thought to the fact that she was pregnant, or for the safety of her embryonic baby growing inside of her. The medical department had already assured her that this process held no danger for her, or her baby.

Suddenly the room reverted to its former state, everything changed with such urgency that it made Mary flinch as she came back to reality. There was a series of clicks, and the door automatically opened to reveal the briefing room. As she entered, six faces turned to greet her, she returned their greeting and sat down at the one remaining desk. All the people assembled here were to be the crew of Mission 1472 Alpha.

The seven colleagues sat in silence as they each filled out documents which sworn them to secrecy about their mission, a secrecy which by law would last two years after the conclusion of the mission. This was a standard document signed by all participants. When they had all finished they were collected together and placed in the hyperbaric chamber which was located in the glass wall in front of them. Mary sat quietly studying the others, in an attempt to get a feel for the people who she would be spending the next three weeks of her life with. At the front of the room, with his back towards her, was the captain of the mission, Jason Daniels. She had worked alongside him twice before. He was a hard task master but at the same time fair, always open to new suggestions and willing to spend time to sort out any problems that the crew may have. She had, in the past, had time to converse with the captain on a semi social level and had discovered a little of his history. He had twice received the medal of honour for bravery; in fact he was one of the most highly decorated private contract pilots in the service. He was also quite unique amongst this crew in so much as he had managed to combine his military life with a highly successful sports career. Being one of the worlds leading practitioners of 'Hung Quan' he enjoyed the status of superstar. Hung Quan was one of the most popularly watched sports on the television networks. It involves a mixture of ancient martial arts combined with modern day hand held weaponry. Unfortunately Daniels status in this field did not preclude him from his military commitments. The law was very specific about their ongoing conscription policies and it had never seemed to bother him. Mary quite suspected that this part of his life bought some modicum of relief from his

other roll totally within the public eye.

If Jason Daniels had worked his way through the ranks to his present position, the man sitting next to him was quite the opposite. Marius hatch was a small squat man who carried a little too much weight, his hair was beginning to thin about his crown and his complexion bore the tell tale scars of a juvenile skin complaint. This however did not distract from his brilliance within his field. He was a well studied man, a man who had attained every possible academic award in the fields of quantum mechanics and quantum physics. He was also very learned in all of the fields that would be necessary on this mission. He had passed through the academy in half the time it took for any normal cadet to do so. Subsequently he had entered service at a highly elevated position, and at twenty seven years of age he was already the youngest commander in the service. Even though he was obviously the right man for the job, Mary had always found difficulty getting along with this man. She reasoned that it was because he was on a higher intellectual level than the rest. He himself found it difficult finding common ground with other people on which to converse. In a certain sort of way she felt sorry for Marius, she considered that his intellect had made him a lonely man.

She found herself musing over the other three men in the team. She had neither worked with, nor even met any of them before now. Firstly she considered Matthew Watkins. By his appearance, she judged him to be about her own age. His physique, nor his features gave anything away about him. He seemed pretty average in appearance, however she did know one thing about him, about all of her colleagues, that was the fact that if any of them were not expert in their field or totally dependable they would not be here now. Each of them held impeccable credentials, and all were veterans of at least five previous flights. John De Vie cleared his throat. This diverted Mary's attention away from the meteorologist to the geologist. John De Vie, or as his name tag implied J.D., was in her estimation, the odd one of the bunch. He had almost casually draped himself over the chair, one leg was completely obscuring one of the arms of the chair, and his arm was rested on the back supporting his upper body. His deep golden hair was neatly tied back into a pony tail and his face had not been shaved. This gave him, she thought, an interesting air. He would probably be the most fascinating member of the crew she would get to know. She hoped that he would be a refreshing change from the average type of astronaut she was used to working with.

Sometimes the mere sight of a person, or the way in which they present themselves, their looks, or even just their general demeanour, causes some people to take an instant dislike to others. Travis Wheatley was one of these people. Since Mary had first entered the room she had been evaluating the others, generally she could find no reason to dislike any of them, but, there was something about Travis that she had taken an instant dislike to. He was probably a very nice person. Maybe he was a little misunderstood but somehow Mary didn't think so. He had, what she considered to be, a shift face. He had very thin lips and piercing brown eyes which picked up every reflection of every light in the room. His eyebrows were pencil thin, almost plucked and shaped. His hair was short well groomed and of a colour that she had never seen before, it was the richest, brightest shade of red she had ever seen.

This would be the first mission she had been on where there had been another woman in the crew. About this, she had mixed feelings. Normally she had been used to being the one whom the male members of the crew would pussy foot around, she was not sure how she would react to the fact that she now had to share her spotlight. On the other hand however, it may be that she could use her as a confidant, someone who would at least understand that sometimes it is comforting talk to another woman. Anne Homer was the medic, she was single and possessed the looks of a model, the type you see in every glamour magazine. This in itself did not make Mary feel threatened in any way, Mary was a happily married, pregnant woman who was not unattractive in her own right. Anne rose to her feet and asked Mary if she would like a refill for her now empty glass. Mary said she would, and watched as Anne walked across the room to the water dispenser. When she returned Mary commented on the elegance of Anne's wardrobe. They laughed, and a friendly conversation was struck up. The room was filled with the sound of quiet conversation as the crew chatted amongst themselves.

The far wall of the room, located directly in front of the crew, was made entirely out of glass. It created a corridor with the extreme back wall. In this corridor were placed three desks and three chairs. On the desks were note pads, pencils, and glasses of water. Set into each desk there was a computer terminal and a screen which was linked directly to screens that were placed in front of each crew member, and to two screens that were suspended behind the glass wall, facing out into the room. All of these screens were accessed by the control corridor.

The light in the corridor flickered to life and the door to the left opened. In through the door walked three men, who proceeded to take their places behind the desk. Each of them placed a folder onto the desks and began to log on to the computer system. Whilst this was happening all of the crew, including the laid back J.D. sat upright in their seats and prepared themselves for the mission briefing.

The person who was to conduct this meeting was Over Commander Lyle Harrison. He had been in overall command of the Alpha section for many years and was used to briefing crews on mission objectives. This one was different for him, for the crew, for everyone.

Alpha division was set to specifically deal with first contact situations, which to date had never occurred, and for the exploration of new found planets and asteroids, which from time to time came into the range of their planet. Lyle Harrison was the consummate leader. He took an obsessive interest in any, and all of the missions findings and discoveries. This time he was more excited than he had ever been, he was about to give the briefing of a lifetime. Outwardly he remained calm, relaxed and authoritative. He wanted desperately to be part of the crew but his age had prevented him from being included. This did not however dull his commitment to the project. He sipped his water, looked at the assembled crew, put on his glasses and began to address the awaiting astronauts.

"Good morning everyone, as you already know I am over Commander Lyle Harrison. To my left is Major Peter Hooton, and to my right is major general Tom Stewart. These two officers will, during this mission, be your first point contact. All

matters regarding anything will first be discussed with your captain, and he in turn will relay any findings, problems, or requirements to mission control via these two men. “Now let’s get down to business. You have probably heard the rumours which have been circulating that you are about to visit a planet which has never been visited before. Well I can now confirm that these rumours are in fact not true. Interstellar cartography has confirmed that the planet that is now in range of our own, is one that was visited during the infancy of our space programme. It was the first time that we had ever lost anyone during an interplanetary mission. The three man crew of 106 Alpha did not return however the records show that they did manage to relay vital information about the planet. We believe, from their findings that the surface of the planet is able to sustain life as we know it. Long range sensors show that it supports an atmosphere and there are signs of extensive vegetation and desert regions. As yet we have picked up no radio transmissions, nor do we expect to, so we must assume that either there is no life as we would recognise it, or that if there is life, it is only at a stage of early development. Until you discover more about what you are up against, you will have to be on your guard. The planet is approaching us from the gamma quadrant and will only be in range for three hundred and sixty hours, so we must assimilate as much information as we can in as shorter space of time as is possible. This is a once in a lifetime opportunity that we must make the most of, we will only have one shot at this”. He turned his attention to the computer terminal and began to extract the information he now needed. “I would now like you to turn your attention to your monitors. As you can see from the simulation, this is the trajectory of the planet. Alpha 1472 will launch 96 hours before it is in actual range and will rendezvous at this point... This is the first point at which we will be in optimum range for a landing attempt. As our orbit passes through this system, provided that you manage to locate a suitable landing site for your first orbit, you will have precisely three hundred and ten hours to assimilate and collate as much information as possible. This will leave only two hours for you to affect a successful take off from the planet, and as you are all aware break free from its gravitational pull”.

With a click of his mouse he halted the computer simulation that was in progress on the screens “At this point we will once again be out of range. I have no need to tell you just how important this mission is. This will be the one that will have the most far reaching implications for the future of every single person on this planet. The information that you bring back with you could be the building block of technological, medical, meteorological, and geological advancements that will see us through into the next millennium and beyond.”

“If you look in the envelope on your desks you will find a ROM disk. On each of these disks are the parameters of your individual missions. I know that there is, within reach of you all, the ability for cooperation, and we are relying on that to maximise the information yield from this mission. I have personally hand picked each of you for this mission. I selected you because I believe that you are the best people for the job. It will be the adventure of a lifetime, and I have no doubt that you will all go down in the annals of history, and be spoken about long after this mission is over. This is precisely why failure is not an option”.

“If you have any questions, and I would be disappointed if there were not, all of

them should now be addressed through major Hooton and major general Stewart. All that remains for me to do is wish you good luck and a safe return". With these words he stood to attention, saluted the crew and left the room. Major general Stewart rose to his feet and began to address them. "Good morning" he began "All the listening stations around the world have been concentrating maximum efforts on this project since telemetry alerted us to the approach of the planet we have labelled Epsilon Omega, and to date there has been no confirmation of any type of manufactured radio waves. Further to this, observation has not been able to detect any unnatural satellites orbiting the planet. From these two facts, we have to assume that Epsilon Omega has no form of defence, we further have to assume that if there is any type of civilisation present on the planet, it is either at one end of the evolutionary scale or the other, that is to say, they are beyond the need for defence or communication, and it is also likely that they are probably also beyond the need for space travel. However we tend to dismiss this as being the case. We are more in favour of the other end of the scale, a pre industrial society. This being the case, I must stress the importance of non involvement. Under no circumstances will there be any contact of any kind with any intelligent life form that may be present.

Unfortunately mission Alpha 106 made no transmissions back to this planet after entering the atmosphere of Epsilon Omega so, we can have no knowledge of any life form that may exist there. We do know however that the atmosphere has a high probability of being able to support our biological needs. There is no way to even speculate as to the fate of Alpha 106, but we are confident that any problems encountered by them were not a direct consequence of the planet itself.

If you would all like to go through to the relax room we have provided relaxation terminals for each of you. There is also sustenance and refreshments available... Take care to review your mission thoroughly. Report back here at precisely 1300 hours. For now ladies and gentlemen, that will be all". The two officers collected their paperwork and left the room. The crew did likewise and retired to the relax room.

The table at the far end of the relax room was laid with a complete meal. The crew all took their places on the stools that surrounded the table. As they were about to start their meal captain Daniels called for their attention. "Listen everyone, this will be the last proper meal we will be having, and I for one would like to enjoy it in peace. So, I don't want to hear anything about the mission. Now let's eat." His words put everyone at ease, and the next half hour was a welcome break in the already intense time that lay ahead of them. They sat, and for the duration of the meal they engaged in polite, but friendly conversations. The captain had realised that they needed this time to get to know each other, after all they were going to be confined together in a relatively small environment for a long time.

Upon completing their meal the crew moved over to the comfort of the easy chairs that were arranged in a circle, alongside each chair was situated a computer screen and a terminal. In silence each of the crew sat studying and absorbing the information provided for them on their ROM discs. Most of the material held on the discs was of a standard nature but because of the importance of this mission, there was certain information specific to each of them that differed from any other orders they had received before. They sat and worked on their mission briefs for hours, until one by

one, they reclined in their seats, each displaying an air of accomplishment. At 1250 hours captain Daniels, having waited until everyone had completed their own evaluation of the tasks ahead, cleared his throat and said to everyone,

“Right, now we all know what is expected of us, I now have to ask you. You have all read the last paragraph held within the file marked **Vital, Read Last!**, and this is the absolute last chance you will have to withdraw from the mission, I am obliged to point out certain facts to you. If you decide to withdraw there will be no adverse remarks placed on your records, nor will it affect any future missions that you may be considered for. Since Alpha 106, there have been no significant problems in space, so all of the departments within the programme assure us that there will be no unforeseen problems with this mission. Bearing in mind these facts I must now ask you to make a decision, do any of you wish to withdraw from this mission?” he paused and waited for an answer. Each of the crew sat and reflected upon the final paragraph which read... *Finally and most importantly, the mission upon which you are about to embark, is one, of the nature, which our world has never known before. It is a mission in which there may be a possibility of first contact with an alien civilisation. If this should be the case then certain parameters must be adhered to. We will assume that there is life on Epsilon Omega. Should this life form be at an evolutionary stage that has not yet reached the advancement of our own, we must be aware of its future advancement. To these ends it is imperative that there be absolutely no contact of any kind with any intelligent being encountered. It would be unfair of us as a civilisation to influence the natural evolution, and learning process of another world. If, in the unlikely event that beings encountered should display the same physiological attributes to our own there are provisions within your orders to allow you to interact with them in an effort to establish their level of advancement. In the event of craft malfunction, resulting in the termination of the mission on Epsilon Omega the aforementioned parameters will remain in force. To achieve this we have, for the first time, on any craft installed a self destruction device. This device can only be activated by the input of three of the secret pin numbers given to each of the crew. One of these numbers must be that of the captain, or of the second in command. This drastic measure is important to preserve the integrity of whatever we may find. It is imperative that you understand the implications of this device. Once activated, the self destruct mechanism cannot be aborted. In the event of the need to implement this device, your final orders from control are to prevent the contamination of the planet and its inhabitants, the self destruct device will not be activated until all seven of the crew are secured within the vehicle. There must be no evidence left on the planet to suggest that it has been visited by anyone or anything that is not endemic to that environment.*

Each of the crew sat and considered this paragraph, silently anticipating the others, each expecting one or more of their number to decline the mission. After a few moments it was clear that there were to be no objections to being included in the mission. The captain looked at each of them in turn.

“I will take that as being a resounding acceptance of all of the conditions laid out in your orders, and invite all of you back into the briefing room.” When they had all re-taken their seats, the door was automatically closed, and they could hear a

pronounced hiss as the room was hermetically sealed. The room then went through the same process as the final entry room. The lights dimmed to the familiar purple glow and began to hum. This process was the final procedure in the sterilisation programme. From this point onwards they would have no direct contact with the outside world. For this mission it had been decided that it would be prudent to minimise any risk of cross contamination between worlds.

After a short wait the two officers who had been there earlier, returned to the corridor and took their seats. All of the crew were now irrevocably committed to the mission, and this was to be the final time they would see anyone before their return.

The clock on the wall was reading 1300 hours as Major General Stewart, and Major Hooton rose to their feet. They stood to attention and saluted the crew, Major Hooton spoke, "On behalf of the entire staff of this facility we wish you a safe journey and a speedy return" The crew stood to attention and returned the salute. The officers and the crew sat down. Major General Stewart reached over to his terminal and pressed the key marked activate.

The entire corridor containing the two officers slid silently to the left, as it did it revealed the panoramic view of the launch pad. By this time the shuttle that was to take them out of the confines of their planet was standing proud on its supports. All around the area the hustle and bustle of support vehicles could be seen. As the room travelled slowly towards the shuttle, Mary thought that this was like watching a huge television screen. To her, it felt like she was watching a film. It had a strange fictional quality to it, a quality that suggested that this was not really happening, that somehow it was all a dream. In the night sky she could see a myriad of stars, as she scanned the skies she gave a heavy sigh. Soon she would be a very small part of that theatre. Her attention was drawn to the carnival that was now being played out in front of her. The speakers inside of their room had now been patched through to mission control, as they came on line the first words that the crew heard were those of the countdown operator.

"T minus one hour, four minutes and twenty seven seconds"

With these words the clocks in front of them changed from reading present time, to give a countdown time displayed in hours, minutes and seconds.

As the room approached the shuttle, activity in the area intensified. They could see final fuelling of the craft taking place, and an army of ground staff making last minute checks that were a familiar sight to anyone who had made this short trip before. The nearer they came to the shuttle, the more they could make out the finer details on the craft. The lighting that was illuminating the area was not as intense as the lights that were picking out the shuttle; they gave a magical, almost surreal air to the craft. Upon arriving at the base of the support structure, the room came to a steady but firm standstill. Outside the room they could hear the sound of ground staff making ready for the next part of their journey. To the sides of the room that they were in, had been attached the mechanism that was to take it upwards through the gantry, towards the opening into the shuttle command positions. As they rose into the air, spotlights followed the room. All that could be seen at this distance by the crew was the topside of the shuttle. Either side, they could see out into the night sky. As they travelled upwards the legend on the side of this great vehicle came into view. As

it became fully visible, each of the crew found themselves breathing in, expanding their chests with a feeling of intense pride, and a sense of supreme adventure, wondering what the next few weeks would bring.

All of them sat for a while and read the legend it simply read...

1472 ALPHA
PRIDE OF GOD