

Ariom Dahl



the
MOBIUS
CONSTRUCT

Prologue

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The Heebies' gunship came out of interstellar space and hovered, the shining twisted ribbon of the Möbius Construct in its sights. Finally, they had caught up with their prey. Destroying them would be the sweetest of actions and their refuge, this isolated station close to a Star Jump, would be their largest and most important target to date.

Since they had come storming out of a hostile parallel universe about a galactic standard year previously, the Heebies had made their mark, and a very bloody one it was, too, on this universe. Destruction for its own sake seemed to be their distinguishing characteristic, and a trail of dead hulks of ships marked their path.

The Möbius Construct was their greatest target to date although in no way was it the most important they could have chosen; at least as far as anyone else would think. However, the Heebies targeted the Möbius Construct deliberately. Ten years ago, the Star Jump by it had inexplicably closed; no vessels could enter or exit. However, the Star Jump on the other side of the adjacent star system continued to operate perfectly and in fact became busier.

Most occupants of the Möbius Construct had drifted off in drabs and drabs until the total population amounted to less than a hundred; whereas fifty years before, in its heyday, with vessels arriving and departing at all hours, it had been many thousands.

Those few remaining were defenceless against the Heebies and their weaponry. In all its long existence – no one knew for sure when it had actually been constructed or even by whom – the Möbius Construct had never used defensive weaponry of any kind. It had never been required. The Star Jump close by guaranteed its immunity against any minor skirmishes between warring races; they may have attacked each other but before the Heebies arrived, attacks on Star Jumps were unheard of.

Heebies however just didn't think like other inhabitants of this universe. Before opening fire on the Möbius Construct, they paused, relishing their situation. On the station itself, matters were chaotic.

It had been suspected for weeks that the Heebies intended to strike at the Möbius Construct; it was just a question of when. Many occupants had however been reluctant to leave until necessary. Some had been born on the station, some had come from elsewhere and fallen in love with the shining twisted ribbon and others were just plain stubborn.

And there were the Glass People...

They fluttered and shimmered in dismay and terror at the sight of the Heebies' vessel, certain they could expect no mercy. Guilt consumed them; they knew they, more than the Möbius Construct that had sheltered them, were the Heebies' target. They alone knew where the Heebies had originated.

On the main control deck, Artificial Intelligence which controlled the space station was communicating with a tall humanoid female, the Caretaker of the station. In her arms she cradled a sleek grey short-haired cat, which rested its chin on her shoulder, dribbling a little and purring in spite of the current situation.

"Mobia, are you able to establish any further contact with the Heebies' ship? Have they sent any more messages? Warnings, ultimatums, anything?"

The voice of the AI was also female, low and calm.

"They said only they will fire on the Möbius Construct within two hours' time, and those who wish to leave must do so now." A pause. "They did not say that any vessels leaving would not be fired upon. And they refuse to answer any of the other questions we have put to them."

"That doesn't sound good."

"It is certain that if they fire upon us, the Möbius Construct will be destroyed. You must leave while you can, even with the risk that the Heebies may target you."

"And the Glass People? They are frantic, just running in all directions and crying out. From what I have been able to understand, they seem to think they are responsible for this. The Heebies have been attacking everyone they've ever come across, although they've never attacked a target as big as this place. I suppose we've just been lucky. Until now." She shook her head. "And you – what will happen to you if the Möbius Construct is destroyed?"

The AI's voice softened.

"I am not human. I am a machine. A computer. My makers gave me intelligence and self awareness, but in fact I am nothing more than electrical circuits and wiring. I am nothing."

"You've been my friend all my life. You were here when I was born, and all the time I was away exploring other places, you were here. And now – "

"You must leave. Now. Goodbye."

"Yes. " She sighed, started away from the glowing ball that the AI used as a visual reference for her and turned back. "Mobia, thank you. From us all."

"Go."

"It's time for us all to leave," the Caretaker told the Glass People. She was relieved she had convinced them of the necessity of this action. "Goodbye and good luck. I shall hope and pray for your safety."

Torrea, their leader, shimmered into being in front of her. "And you also. We are sad this has all happened. The Heebies will destroy the Möbius Construct whether we remain or not. This way, we have a chance of making it to safety elsewhere."

The woman carried the grey cat, collected its mate on the way to an escape pod, then settled herself and them into it. The last of the other station occupants – and precious few they were! – had departed a week previously in a larger vessel, but she had been reluctant to leave until the last possible moment. During the years in which the Star Jump had been inoperative, several consortiums had sought to develop the Möbius Construct; once as a zoo and once as a museum. Half a dozen other plans, some facetious and implausible, others ambitious but pointless, had been mooted but none had come to much. Now it held a scattering of ancient artefacts and many documents, books, paintings and sculptures, mostly copies of old originals.

The animals that had been brought to the Möbius Construct during its brief phase as a zoo had been rounded up – hopefully all of them – from the various habitats and shipped off to other, safer and more profitable planets and stations. The Caretaker of the Möbius

Construct had dug in her heels and declined – no, refused! – to leave until the AI itself informed her such an action was essential to her survival.

Up until that last moment, she had hoped her home would escape undamaged. Her tiny craft shot off into space. The Heebies detected it but let it go. They watched with satisfaction as they opened fire on the space station. The fragile twisted ribbon flared with light and heat where their shots struck, then shattered, pieces of all sizes flying away in all directions. Some fragments struck other parts of the Möbius Construct and exploded upon impact. All the machinery, the habitats and miscellanea that had made up the station fractured into millions of shards.

The Möbius Construct was destroyed. Utterly.

For the Glass People, however, there wasn't any elsewhere. Although the Heebies had opted to let one small craft escape, they pursued their prey's shining vessel with malicious intent.

Try as they might, the Glass People were unable to evade the Heebies. Their vessels were more or less equal in capability and power, but this acted against rather than for them, as they were herded, against their will, towards the Uncharted Zone. Manoeuvre after manoeuvre proved pointless, till at last both vessels were in sight of the Dark Vortex.

The Glass People panicked. Escape was impossible; the alternative of self destruction was unthinkable. They entered the Dark Vortex –

– and screamed. Hovering close to its entry were dozen, no, hundreds, of Heebie ships. With the destruction of the Glass People, the Heebies stormed back out into the universe to wreak havoc for the next five hundred years and beyond. Evil triumphed.

Over the following nearly five hundred years, the Heebies multiplied and grew strong, feeding off the misery and suffering of those they destroyed. They and their descendents became the scourge of the cosmos, with no one able to stand against them. Most of the other Star Jumps, operational at the time of the destruction of the Möbius Construct, shut down or were attacked and damaged by these ferocious and ruthless enemies.

Many millions of lives were lost over those many years of galactic war. Some were human; many others were those of the other sentient races inhabiting the universe. A few, not many, were Heebies. They had become a force for evil and destruction unmatched anywhere in the cosmos.

The woman with the cats was rescued and stayed for a while on a planet close to the open Star Jump, where she encountered a man – a human man – whom she married. Exactly one year after she fled the Möbius Construct, their triplets, two girls and a boy were born on a distant Rim planet. Unfortunately the passion of their marriage did not last. When the children were three years old she left with their daughters and travelled to distant Terra, where she settled and stayed. Her daughters had inherited more human than other characteristics, and cherished those human attributes. They married and reproduced and their offspring married and reproduced, for many generations.

Their son remained with his father, and their descendants there passed into anonymity. From generation to generation a few of the children might pause in their labour to look up at the stars and wonder. Of those few who looked up and wondered, even fewer did anything as unusual as leaving the planet to see what lay beyond.

Mostly, they married into the local population, and the minor oddities that had marked their distant ancestors remained. At first glance they were humanoid, but closer examination revealed minor variations, like those between the many races of the galaxy.

Unlike the daughters' descendants on far away Terra, they accepted themselves and others, regardless of any differences. There was nothing to stress about. The husband had grieved when his wife left with their daughters, but he got on with his life. Generations passed.

A cult sprang up among her descendants on Terra. It was not through any doing or action or even wish of her own, but because her daughters and her daughters' daughters were proud and wished to feel special. They prided themselves in the fact that their First Ancestor – Blessed and Revered be her name! – had been the sole survivor of a major space disaster. Around her they built a legend – like many legends not entirely the truth.

As for the Glass People; the small group on the Möbius Construct had been alone; they had come from the space In Between the Star Jumps, curious about the vessels that passed through their domain. Their choice in coming out from In Between to investigate these vessels resulted in their deaths.

Little had ever been known about them and with their destruction they were forgotten.

Chapter 1

Over ten thousand years previously...

The Glass People developed their civilisation between the Star Jumps. Later people called this place 'In Between' but to the Glass People it was of course Home. The ancient group of the Glass People perceived the Star Jumps as openings to they did not know where, but their dominant motive was always curiosity, so they came out into the universe we know through a Star Jump and explored.

By travelling via these phenomena – some of them called them wormholes – it was possible to pass from one star system to another and also to other galaxies. The Glass People decided to build a space station beside one or more of the Star Jumps for future generations to make use of. The Möbius Construct was their first, and for some reason also their last; after they made it they returned to In Between.

Many generations passed. Space faring races rose, and eventually among them humans from Earth. They used vessels fitted with the Russell-Blieder Drive to escape the Sol system, but this drive had a nasty habit of burning out the power source after one or two trips. By this time other races had started making use of the Star Jumps and building stations beside them. The Möbius Construct was unique in its shape and design. The Star Jump it served was relatively, close, spatially speaking.

For a thousand years after the Glass People departed, the Möbius Construct sat silent and empty. Few races had as yet ventured out into the galaxy, and the majority of the Star Jumps were waiting to be discovered and utilised. The Morgats were first to find the Möbius

Construct, and they were overwhelmed. Their small vessel exited from the Star Jump to find a glitter twisted ribbon in their sights.

The Morgats were humanoid, short and solid and low to the ground, with two pairs of arms and scaly skin. They had been using the Star Jumps for less than fifty years. One of their earliest space explorers had found an anomaly in their system, and upon venturing through it, they had found themselves In Between. It appeared an empty region, filled with bizarre optical illusions, but with what they soon realised were exits to normal space. They saw no sign of any inhabitants of this area.

Exiting via the anomaly, they found themselves in a totally different area of space, and before them a curious construction hung in space.

The first reaction of the Morgats was to observe it. They swung round it, flew through its loop and took many visual images of it. They tried hailing it, but received no response. Coming closer, they tried scanning the artefact, reasoning such an object could not have just happened, but had to have been *made*.

Question, was, made by whom? And why?

They became bolder, and sent a small robot controlled flyer from their vessel. It sent back the information that there were docking bays on one surface of the ring, and they could be opened. The robot flyer entered one, docked and sent out a crawler to investigate.

It found no hazards and a manned flyer followed it with three Morgats inside. Armed, wary and curious Morgats. Their arrival triggered the awakening of the AI. Previous to their arrival, it had been running on minimal systems; now Mobia became fully operational and when the visitors found their way to her command centre, she greeted them.

“Welcome to the Möbius Construct.”

After their initial shocked reactions, the Morgats settled in enthusiastically. The first Caretaker was a Morgat. After them came the chlorine breathing Kanés, the green skinned Lorics and eventually the Terrans. By this time the Möbius Construct was a thriving community of travellers, administrators, engineers, entrepreneurs settlers and others. The Star Jump nearby saw frequent passage, and when another Star Jump on the opposite side of the system was opened up, both operated at all hours.

Chapter 2

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The elderly star ship *Sejanor* carried a mixture of older tourists, younger settlers and middle aged bureaucrats. Until now it had avoided the attention of the Heebies, but as it traversed the Lyassa system, its luck ran out. Two of the Heebies' ships lay in wait, concealed behind the system's sun. They swooped out and caught the *Sejanor* in a double pronged attack.

The speed and viciousness of the assault caught the crew of the lumbering star ship off guard, and casualties were high. The first shot took out the flight deck and most of the ship's officers and the second broke the vessel's middle. Only those passengers and crew within sprinting distance of the life crafts had any chance of escape. Many died within seconds of the first strike, when the vessel disintegrated around them and they were hurtled into the cold vacuum of space. Of the hundred people of all species aboard, a little more than half made it to safety.

Not all of those were human. Humans had of course come out into the galaxy thousands of years before, taking their places among the people of the cosmos and discovering along the way they were not the lords of creation they had considered themselves. Most had adapted to this knowledge and those who had not adapted had not survived. They had introduced the cosmos to such benefits as coffee and a standardised timekeeping system, as well as Beethoven, cats, dogs and fried chicken. In return they had had their cultural boundaries extended almost to infinity.

Without the menace of the Heebies, it would have been a win-win situation for everyone.

Chapter 3

Nerina

I had previously checked out the life crafts on the *Sejanor*, although never in my wildest dreams had I anticipated finding myself having to escape in one. It was fortunate I had been in the area when the ship wide alarm sounded, followed by garbled and panicky instructions to go to the closest evacuation point. I had been exercising Yuri and paused only to snatch him up and put him into the sling I wear for that purpose. No way was I abandoning ship without him! Yuri, I should explain, is a xinbaa – my pet and companion. He looks rather like a cat.

I wasn't the only one; as I reached the airlock a skinny sharp featured human female pushed past me and scuttled inside like a frightened rat. I followed, watched the entry and waited. We didn't have much time but I was sure the escape pod couldn't launch with only the two of us aboard, and I was also sure there would be others along soon. I certainly hoped so; I remembered when I'd seen her: as we passengers had all boarded the *Sejanor* she had been making a scene. Her name was Tamra... *Lady Tamra*, she had insisted to the unfortunate crew woman doing the necessary computer entries for her passage. *Lady Tamra*, it appeared, considered herself of considerably more importance than she had been accredited with. Discounting her pointed nose, her small eyes and narrow straight mouth reminded me of ancient paintings of the Tudor dynasty back on Earth. Bloody Mary, I thought absently.

We weren't alone for long. A man and a woman came in next. Between them they were supporting another clearly badly injured man, a crewmember by his uniform. They lowered him into a seat and the woman did up its harness then returned to the airlock while her companion settled himself into a seat. His gaze swept over me and the other woman and dismissed us, but he sat up as a small group stumbled in through the airlock.

A family, by the look of it, parents and two children, who appeared to be treating it as an adventure. Their clothing was adequate but of poor quality and I presumed they were members of the large group of settlers. All four carried backpacks; not entirely surprising as many outworlders had grown up to believe the worlds beyond theirs were populated with potential thieves and murderers, and to carry their valuables was safer than leaving them to be stolen. I'm not sure that they realised this could have the opposite effect and make them targets. They tended to stay in groups, each defending the others. Their way, I suppose. I've been around long enough to see all sorts. As they murmured to each other and their children I overheard their names: Starn and Melora.

When they were all secured, the woman by the airlock stuck her head out again and then shrugged and slid the door closed.

The man I took for a farmer looked at her. “No one else?”

She shook her head. “No, Kendrew. None that I could see or hear. We must leave. Now.”

I did up the harness, being careful not to squash Yuri between me and it. He was in the sling, protesting vehemently. Like most life craft attached to star ships, this one was adequate and that’s really about the best I could say about it. After all, life crafts were intended for short term use and also for the security of passengers; luxury was unnecessary. We were crammed into nine of the twelve available seats, arranged more or less three to a side in a square, all facing inwards. I could see these seats could be converted for sleeping and wondered how long we’d have to spend before either making planet fall somewhere or being rescued.

A calm female voice addressed us.

“Please seat yourselves and ensure your safety harnesses are secured.”

When the life craft left the *Sejanor* with a whoosh Yuri whimpered into silence and curled close to me.

Chapter 4

Nerina

We left behind us a star ship breaking up and spilling cargo, less fortunate crew and passengers into the void. The interior of the life craft dimmed and, confined as we all were, we felt jolts and thumps. The same calm voice spoke again, overriding our cries of alarm.

“This will be a rough ride. Do not be alarmed if the lighting fails. Life support is functioning at full capacity. However gravity is not totally established. Remain in your seats with the safety harnesses done up until I advise you they can be removed.”

“That’s encouraging,” I heard a male voice mutter, and a nervous high-pitched female laugh followed. The tall man who’d helped the injured crewmember aboard and the sharp-faced woman, I suspected.

“Did we get away from the bad people, Mama?” demanded a child’s voice and another piped up,

“Yes, silly, we did. But lots of other people didn’t. Shut up.”

“Hush, Adra, don’t be rude to Tem.”

The children lapsed into silence, but the other male raised his voice and addressed the others. “How many of us are there? Is anyone injured?”

There was a chorus of responses. The four outworlders and the Lady Tamra, I gathered.

The man snorted. “One at a time might help.”

“I recommend patience,” a woman’s voice said. “When the lighting is restored, we shall be able to see how many we are and in what condition.”

“*If* the lighting is restored,” he snapped.

The lights came back on and the passage of the life craft stabilised.

“Oh ye of little faith,” reproved the calm voice we had heard earlier, and then the tone became serious. “I am Helya, the onboard Artificial Intelligence. It is my responsibility to guide you all to safety. Unfortunately it appears the *Sejanor* has suffered a catastrophic attack from an unknown source –”

“It was those bloody HeebieJeebies! They blew the ship t’ bits! We were lucky we weren’t far from the life craft, or we woulda been splattered everywhere like all the others!”

“Adra, shush! Don’t swear! And it’s rude to interrupt.”

“But it’s just a computer, Mama,” protested the girl, and she looked towards the ceiling of the life craft. “Aren’t you?”

“No, *she* isn't *just a computer* at all.” This unexpected response came from the woman sitting directly opposite Adra, the one who had helped bring the injured man aboard. “To call Helya a computer is a grave insult. It's worse than calling you just a little girl.”

“I'm *not a little* girl. I'm eleven.”

“Exactly. Helya is an Artificial Intelligence, as she said, and at the moment our lives are in her hands.” She gave a tiny smile. “Figuratively if not literally.”

“Thank you. Please give me your attention, everyone. We are in a serious situation. The *Sejanor* took several direct hits and has been destroyed. Although this is not the only life craft that was able to escape, I have been unable to establish contact of any kind with the others. Tracking them is not possible. For the moment I am still able to liaise with the main onboard AI but when that link is broken, as it will be very soon, we will be on our own. The *Sejanor* was able to send out a distress signal but any help or rescue may be a long time arriving.”

A babble of voices broke out as everyone responded at the same time, but one woman's voice, shrill and terrified, was raised over the others.

“The man in the seat next to me – I think he's dead!”

“Oh, damnation!” This from the man who had helped the injured crewman aboard. “Metallica, come and check him out. Don't tell me you had me rescue a corpse!”

Metallica... what an interesting name... I looked at her and realised; she wasn't human. Neither, it appeared, was he. Now I understand why she had reprimanded the child for calling Helya ‘just a computer’.

Metallica was an android.

As for the man, I wasn't sure. He was neither human nor an android, but I had never seen his species before. He was a beautiful man, I decided. There simply wasn't any other way to describe his appearance. His skin was the colour of dark milk coffee, and smooth, dusted with almost golden hairs. On his head the hair was darker, thick and straight. He wore a beard and his eyes were a deep grey with green gold flecks. He was tall, topping the farmer by a good twenty centimetres, and was of a solid build. I had a feeling he could when necessary move with the stealth and grace of a Terran panther. From what I could see he had

the normal number of digits – no, not quite – he had two thumbs and three fingers on each hand. They were long, possibly with four or even five bones per digit.

Metallica had undone her harness and laid her fingers on the injured man's chest, very gently. She shook her head. "He still lives, but his heartbeat is very faint and his breathing is shallow. Helya, what do you recommend?"

"Get him away from here! I don't want to sit next to a corpse!"

Metallica turned her head to look straight at Tamra and spoke very quietly.

"You will sit there and be silent. Is that clear?" I saw the other woman's mouth open as if to say more, then she suddenly went pale and snapped her mouth closed and looked away. Not abashed or ashamed, but scared. I decided I rather liked Metallica.

Chapter 5

Nerina

Between them, Kendrew and Metallica converted the seat to a couch and, following Helya's instructions, arranged the wounded man carefully, strapping him in. A thick transparent cover lifted from the back of it and slid into place over him, enclosing him completely. Lights flickered into life on the status board at his feet.

"I have put him into stasis," Helya said. "His injuries are severe and there is no way to treat him until we reach safety. Then he can be attended to. When you all find it necessary to sleep, the seats will convert into couches, but the covers are closed only for stasis."

Finally, we were able to release ourselves and were able to see what other facilities the life craft had to offer. They were very little.

There was an airlock entry on one side and on the opposite a small enclosed ablutionary and toilet area. Between them on one wall was a food and water dispenser and on the other a view screen. Lockers set into the walls contained the basics required for a brief journey – thermal wraps, extra clothes, environment suits and weapons. Hand grips were set into the walls. Not exactly home away from home.

"Have you any idea, Helya, how long it may be until we do reach safety?"

“That is unknown. I have lost contact with the AI on the *Sejanor*. We are on a course which will bring us into the closest star system within forty-eight hours. There should be rescue crafts on their way towards us.”

“Should be? That doesn’t mean there will be.” Kendrew made no attempt to conceal his doubts. “Helya, as a matter of interest – there are eight of us aboard. How long can our supplies last before you need to start shutting any of your systems down, or we run out of food, or air, or water?”

“At the moment, that information is not available. However it is very unlikely that matters will deteriorate to that stage. If it becomes necessary, I can place you all in stasis and continue life support until you are rescued.”

He grunted. “Wonderful. You don’t know very much, do you?”

“Regrettably, no.”

“Oh shut it, Kendrew, she’s the ship’s AI, not a fortune teller,” snapped Starn. The two men glared at one another. I looked at Metallica and she grinned back as she stepped between them.

“Arguing will get us nowhere, you two.”

Tamra however was another matter. She looked around disdainfully.

“This really is very poor. I would have thought they’d have something better. I’m one of the True People and we are used to having the very best, always.”

“The True People?” Melora queried.

“We are descended from the First Ancestor –” She tapped her left shoulder with two fingers of her right hand and ran them down a few inches as if stroking herself, “– Blessed and Revered be her name.”

Metallica rolled her eyes. “You can tell us all about her later on. Ah, this looks more promising.” She raised her voice, addressing the ship’s AI. “Helya, Have you calculated how long the food replicator system will function, with seven to cater for?”

“Seven?” asked Adra, blinking around. “But there’s eight of us. Who’s not gunna get anything to eat?”

“Me. I don’t require food.”

“What? Aren’t you a girl? I mean, a lady.”

“I’m an android. I just look female, that’s all.”

Adra’s eyes widened. “Wow! Like a robot, you mean?”

“No. Helya, can you tell us that now?”

“There are sufficient resources to provide food, full rations, that is, for twelve people for five days. That many could then survive another five days on half rations. There is however good news. The supply of drinking water is inexhaustible, as is the air supply.”

“Great,” muttered Kendrew. He and Starn had been having a low voiced conversation on the other side of the area and seemed to have reconciled their differences. “So we’ll just starve.”

“Not at all,” Melora said. “There’s going to be plenty of everything for everyone. We’ll be rescued long before anything runs out, even if Helya does need to put us all into stasis.”

Kendrew and Starn shrugged. “Hope so.”

One of the view screens was operating although through it all we could see was stars. Kendrew spoke.

“Helya, can you show us the *Sejanor*? What remains of it anyway.”

The other flickered into life and we gaped at the debris scattered over a large volume of space. But for good fortune, we might have been part of that. No one said anything, until I turned away, shaking my head.

“Thank you, Helya. Switch it off. Please.”

Chapter 6

Nerina

I was sorry Kendrew had asked, and at the same time, felt a sense of closure. We were survivors; it remained to be seen how long we would remain survivors. Personally, I was surprised the Heebies hadn't used our life crafts as minor target practice and fun; that was their normal treatment of survivors. I hate the Heebies with a passion and I'm not ashamed to admit it.

I didn't like to wonder how many – or how few – survivors there were from the *Sejanor*. During the few days we'd been in flight I hadn't struck up any friendships with anyone, but I recalled seeing some of my fellow survivors before. We were a mixed bunch; one human (me), one member of the True People (the Lady Tamra, but in my opinion she was less like a lady than a harridan), the family group of four, probably human, Kendrew (who, from what I had seen of him either had been or still was a soldier) and an android. From all appearances, a very unusual android. Female, self aware and self-assured.

“We could all be stuck in here together for a while. And I don't know any of you. I might have seen you around, on the *Sejanor*, but –” I smiled and looked around at them, “– my memory for faces is dreadful. Facts and figures, yes, I remember them easily. But faces – no.”

I'm a terrible ham when I have to be, and in my opinion this was one of those occasions. I had seen the tension between Kendrew and Starn, and feared for the latter if it came to anything physical. Tamra gave me the willies while I itched to know more about Metallica. A Free Android? That sounded fascinating. I smiled at Melora, sitting with the children, Tem tucked between her and Starn and Adra sitting openly regarding Metallica with all the curiosity I myself felt.

“Melora, you and Starn and your children – are you on a holiday or are you travelling somewhere for a purpose? You don't mind going first and telling us about yourselves, do you?”

She shrugged. “That's fine. Our children are Adra and Tem and we are on our way to Gardea. We're going to settle there and start a farm.”

I ignored Kendrew when he muttered, ‘That figures!’ under his breath. Rude man! He'd get his, if I had anything to do with it. Melora however fixed him with a piercing blue stare.

“You do eat, don’t you, Kendrew?”

“Yeah,” he muttered unwillingly and she nodded.

“Proper food, or nutritional tablets? When you get a choice, that is.”

“All right, you’ve made your point. But answer me this – while you’re busy growing things, who protects you. Heh? People like me, that’s who.”

Melora smiled at him. “Exactly. We need you, and you need us. Here, too, Kendrew. We need to live together, even if only for a short time.”

“Maybe your children would like to tell us about themselves?” I suggested. From what I had previously noted about young Adra, she certainly wouldn’t be shy. And she wasn’t.

“I’ve nearly twelve. Tem is only eight, so he has to do what I tell him when Mama and Papa aren’t around. When we go to Gardea we’re going to meet lots of new people.”

“How is it,” demanded Tamra, “that you all have baggage with you?” Peeved, I thought, because she had nothing.

“Mama wasn’t feeling very well,” explained Adra, “so we were all in our cabin when that siren went. So we managed to grab a few things.”

Ah, so that was it. They weren’t overly suspicious of others, after all.

“Sick?” screeched Tamra, trying to edge away from Melora. “Why weren’t you in the infirmary? Is it contagious?”

Starn and Melora shared a glance and I bit my lip to hide my amusement. He looked at Tamra gravely and replied,

“I do not believe so.”

“Don’t tease her,” Melora said. She looked at the other woman and smiled. “I am pregnant, that’s all.”

Kendrew snorted. “You don’t have anything to worry about, *Lady* Tamra.”

Adra broke into the amused chuckles as she addressed Metallica. “But I really want to know all about *you*.”

Chapter 7

Nerina

Like Adra, I also was fascinated by the snippets of information about the android that I had heard. I also remembered seeing her on the *Sejanor*, although she was a passenger and not a crewmember. She was striking in appearance; at first glance human but her skin was lustrous white, like pearl shell, her eyes were dark blue, almost black, and her hair, shoulder length and tied back, was golden. If she'd been human I would have estimated her age in her forties. As for shape, she fitted nicely between skinny Tamra and plump – well, pregnant – Melora.

She had a nice smile, too, as she looked at Adra.

“I am an android. I may look female but am not fully functional as a female. To all intents and purposes I am without gender. Technically I am referred to as a gynoid but I prefer the term android. I do not require food or water or even an oxygen atmosphere.”

That was interesting; I had heard many times of androids created and treated simply as slaves or prostitutes. In my opinion, an appalling way to use technology and a criminal treatment of sentient beings. For androids, with brains and self awareness, such existences must have been hell. Even worse was the use of bastardised androids as weapons of war. It was bad enough that living sentient beings tried to kill each other; making androids do their dirty deeds was appalling.

Metallica went on. “I do however possess an empathy chip. It is something I can activate or deactivate at will.”

Adra frowned. “You’re like a robot then?”

“No. I am a Free Android. No one owns me, no one instructs me or gives me orders. I am my own person.”

Helya had been silent but now her voice spoke again.

“The AI of the *Sejanor* has been totally destroyed. Some of my functions were reliant on it. Life support will continue uninterrupted; food, water, gravity and atmosphere are not affected. However, you may notice fluctuations in light and temperature from time to time. It is also possible that some of my external functions will be affected. When we left the mother ship I set a course for a planet in the closest star system and we are maintaining that course, but I may be unable to ensure no deviations occur.”

“What? We might go off course? By much? Surely not enough to cause a problem.”

The AI’s voice was fainter. “The margin of error is, at the moment, incalculable.”

Metallica shook her head. “Poor Helya.”

“Poor Helya? What do you mean? What about us? It’s just a machine!” Tamra’s voice was shrill. “We might all die because it isn’t working properly!”

“It will not come to that.” There was sudden strength in the voice of the AI. “Your safety is my prime concern. You will die only if I am destroyed first.”

“Hmm, that’s a consolation,” Kendrew muttered.

Metallica fixed him with a cool look. “I am surprised at you. Sarcasm is not the weapon of a soldier.”

Melora chuckled, unexpectedly and by her side, Adra leaned forward.

“I like you,” she said to the android, then turned and scowled at Kendrew and Tamra. “But I don’t like you two. You’re rude to people. And my mother said it’s not nice to be rude to Helya.”

“Hush, Adra!”

Kendrew caught Tem staring at him, goggle-eyed, and wiggled all four of his thumbs at him.

“I have prehensile toes, too,” he informed the boy and reached for his boots. “Wanna see?”

“No, Tem!” his sister reprimanded before the boy could even open his mouth. She then looked straight at Kendrew. “I’m sorry I was rude to you.” Gracelessly, she addressed

Tamra. “You, too. This is the first time we’ve ever left home. Mama told us we would meet lots of...people...who didn’t look like us and it would be rude to stare. She said we might look as odd to them as they did to us.”

“Your mama is a wise woman,” Kendrew observed. “So – have you seen lots of interesting people?”

“Yes, lots!” Tem said enthusiastically. His lower lip dropped. “But I don’t like the Heebie Jeebies. They’re nasty!”

“True,” Kendrew muttered. We were all in agreement there.

Chapter 8

Nerina

The Heebies had been attacking everyone else in the galaxy on and off for half a millennium or so. In all that time no one had ever been able to find out exactly what it was, apart from killing and destroying, that they wanted. They blew vessels and space stations up, attacked planets, although less occasionally, and had made use of some isolated Star Jumps more risky than stepping out an airlock without an environment suit.

We didn’t even know where they had come from; they had burst onto the galactic scene from no-one knew where and wreaked havoc ever since.

“I wish you people would control that child better!” Tamra said. “The daughters of the True People always know their place.” Clearly, she was unimpressed with Adra’s ‘apology’.

Melora looked back at her and smiled faintly. “Do please tell us about the True People, Lady Tamra. I do not believe we have ever encountered any of your group before.”

Tamra preened herself. “We claim descent from the First Ancestor – Blessed and Revered be her name!” She performed the odd finger stroking action I had noticed earlier and then sat up very straight. From her tone, it was clear she was reciting an often-learned lesson. I had never heard of them before either, and settled myself to listen, but not before I noticed the glances exchanged between Metallica and Kendrew.

“Nearly five hundred years ago, our First Ancestor – “

“Blessed and revered be her name!” muttered Kendrew under his breath. He winked at me. Tamra gave him a look of disdain and continued.

“– was discovered in a life capsule drifting in space. After her rescue she settled on another planet, married and gave birth to three children. Later she and her daughter travelled to Earth, home of all true humans. We are the True People, totally human and perfectly formed, and can trace our ancestry back to the daughters of the First Ancestor. Each one of us is required to learn the names of all her maternal forbears.” Fortunately she stopped there for breath and Kendrew shrugged.

“Barmy.”

Metallica shrugged. “Not necessarily. Belief in something sustains all sentient races. Why not believe in your ancestors?”

“I prefer to believe in myself.”

“Tell us about yourself then,” Starn encouraged.

“Nothing to tell.” He glanced at Tamra. “I am not quite human, but some of my ancestors could have been. I spent some of my time as a soldier, fighting against the Heebies. I was born in a rim world, and never left my planet until I was twenty. I’ve never been home since, but that was where I was heading when the *Sejanor* was attacked.” He was clearly uncomfortable being the centre of attention and addressed me. “Your turn, Nerina. And tell us about that little creature in your lap.”

“Yes, it’s so pretty!” Adra said, leaning forward as if to pat Yuri. He blinked at her, yawned, curled up and went to sleep. She went, “Oh,” disappointedly.

“Never mind, Adra. Yuri spends most of his life asleep. I was making him exercise when I heard the alarm, so in a way he saved my life. He’s called a xinbaa, and is descended partly from Terran felines, but with strains of other creatures – very sedentary ones, I suspect.”

“Does he eat much?” demanded Tamra, no doubt concerned someone was going to miss out because of his presence.

“Very little. He can eat whatever I do, and drinks water.”

“And where do you come from?” asked Melora.

“Earth, originally. But I’ve been working in the Galactic Information Centre on Torros for several years. I’m an historian.”

“That must be an exciting job,” Kendrew drawled.

“At least nobody tries to kill me while I’m working,” I pointed out, and he nodded.

“I can see that would be an advantage.”

“I regret having to interrupt this discussion,” Helya said, “but unfortunately we have suffered another malfunction and my navigations systems have been knocked off-line. I no longer can ascertain our heading. My external sensors are failing.”

Chapter 9

Nerina

There was a chorus of dismay and Tamra stamped her foot in anger.

“I knew we couldn’t rely on this joke of a life craft to get us to safety!”

Kendrew looked at her, deadpan. “You can abandon ship if you wish. The airlock is that way.” He pointed and she recoiled in shock. I don’t suppose anyone had ever spoken to this self-important member of the True People the way he had.

Metallica was calm. “What do you recommend, Helya?”

“For your collective safety, it would be best for you all to agree to my placing you in stasis.”

“What?” demanded Starn. “Like him?” He indicated the injured man, stretched out under the transparent cover of his couch.

“That is correct. Our directional heading immediately previous to my system loss was definitely towards a safe planet. However, there was some disturbance and it is a possibility we have been knocked off that trajectory.”

“Oh shit!” Kendrew muttered.

Melora was practical about it all. She didn't argue, didn't dither, but simply followed Helya's instructions to convert the chairs to couches and helped Adra into the one beside her and Tem beside Starn. I watched as he checked they were secure, bent and kissed her and each of the children and then fastened himself in too. I noticed, although I wasn't quite sure if anyone else did, the quick and gentle pat he gave to her belly. She smiled reassuringly and he nodded in seeming satisfaction.

Kendrew shrugged, then gave me a wry smile and indicated the other seats.

“Which one would you prefer?” he asked, and swung round to Tamra. “And you, my lady? Or is abandoning ship still a possibility?”

She glared, swished past him and settled herself in a seat with an imperious look around and a sniff. I suspect she had practised that sniff.

“Um, Tamra,” I said, “you will need to fold it back to make a couch first.”

She said nothing, just gave me a haughty look and then complied. Kendrew went to look down at the injured man and shook his head slowly.

“I have my doubts as to whether he's going to make it, *Metallica*.”

She nodded. “I'm afraid I concur. From what I could tell, he had serious internal injuries. Stasis may prevent further deterioration for a while, but I have no idea for how long.” She touched his shoulder. “I'll see you when Helya wakes you up, whenever and wherever that may be.”

Aha, I thought! I *knew* there was something between them – although whatever there could be between an aggressive and bad-mannered ex-soldier and a Free Android was beyond me. I settled on the couch beside Adra, did up the harness and pressed the button for the stasis cover. I watched it rise to come down over me and then there was nothing.

Chapter 10

Metallica

If I had to be stuck on a tiny life craft going nobody knew where, I suppose Kendrew really was one of the companions I'd most like to have with me.

The circumstances under which he had I had met had not truly been conducive to friendship; in fact the opposite. Up until a little over ten years ago, I had been an employee of Galactic Security. Then I went on a mission to track down and bring to justice a rebel, a deserter who had decided to change sides during an operation on one of the outer planets. Clearly a case of treason, if ever there had been one.

However, when I found him I discovered matters were not what they seemed. Kendrew was not the cowardly deserter-cum renegade he had been painted to be. After further investigation, and consideration, I made a move which changed my existence completely, and joined his rebellion. It was a scandal at the time, but the rebellion was a success. Not long afterwards, through a bizarre quirk of events, he and I were able to begin new lives. We had travelled together ever since.

Tamra now, she was one of the least welcome. Nerina was interesting, as was her little pet.

I had seen them both on board the starship before our mad dash to Helya's escape vessel. Tamra had put on innumerable airs and graces, considering herself as one of what she called 'The True People' considerably above the rest of us. Kendrew knew himself anyone's equal.

The others were interesting. The family group was rather sweet. Naturally as an android I am not familiar with such groups, but their obvious concern for one another was commendable.

Kendrew and I had been sparring in the gym area near the escape pods when the alarm was raised. I had actually sensed the arrival of the first salvo from the Heebies and started for the door. He followed me and pointed down the corridor.

"Escape pods are that way, Metallica! Let's go!"

However, when I saw the sprawled body ten metres in the opposite direction I ran to it. He tried to pull me back but when he realised that was just not going to work, he helped me lift the injured man. Even then, I didn't hold out much hope for his survival. There was very little blood, but when I first touched him I knew there were massive internal injuries. It

was impossible for me to leave him there and between Kendrew and me, even with his reluctance, we got him to the escape pod and settled into a seat.

I went back to listen for anyone else, but after the farmer and his family no one else came. My sensors told me there was no one else alive within fifty metres, so we left. I'm glad I'm a Free Android; a robot such as my earliest forbears would have been bound by the First Law to return to search the wrecked vessel for by that time nonexistent survivors, and would therefore have been doomed. I have awareness and free choice, even though I am not and never will be a living creature. When I look at living creatures like Lady Tamra, I am very glad of that fact.

I had noticed her the first evening after we had embarked. As I saw and watched my companions all slip into stasis, lights flickering first amber and then green on the system boards by their feet, I remembered the way she had acted and spoken. She had abused the carrier robot for mistreating her luggage, the housemaid robot for not cleaning her mirrors to her satisfaction, and then the human waiter when he served someone else before her. I was not eating, myself, but was walking past where she had commandeered the best table in the dining area. In addition, it was my misfortune to have the cabin next to hers. Almost enough to make me wish I'd deactivated myself and been shipped as cargo. The logic of verbally abusing inanimate objects is beyond me. Possibly it makes sense to some people, and may make them feel better, but it is a pointless waste of time and effort.

As I told Adra, I have an empathy chip; I didn't dislike Tamra but felt something like pity for her. Kendrew now, was another matter entirely. He always has been enough to make me wish I was an organic.

After the others, with varying degrees of trepidation and reluctance, settled themselves into their couches and fell instantly into the deep sleep of stasis, it was very quiet. Not truly silent; I was able to hear and sense the low hum of machinery and systems. Already I missed the sounds of human, and non human voices.

"Helya," I said, "there is no need for me to go into stasis. Is there anything I am able to do to assist you?"

"You might like to listen to me," she said, with an almost wistful tone in her voice. People, most people, tend to think of AIs like Helya and androids like me as robots, without feelings. That is just not true. We can have feelings, just like other people. The difference is

that we control our emotions; they do not control us. So I sat and listened to Helya, as our tiny pod hurtled on through space to who knew where.

Her mind – the original, base organic mind that she had been built on – had been human, horribly deformed physically but brilliant mentally. Given the choice between physical death, that is to say, oblivion, and being uploaded into an AI, naturally she chose the latter. Who wouldn't have?

“The first Helya – her intelligence – was cloned, and the original became the AI of the *Sejanor*. We others – and we thought of ourselves as her children – controlled the life crafts. We were one mind, but at the same time we were many. Can you understand that? Most people seem to have trouble coping with the concept of an AI having originally been human, let alone being many and one simultaneously.”

“It's often difficult for people to relate to AIs. But yes, I do know what you mean.”

“When the *Sejanor* was destroyed our mother mind existed for a short time, but when she ceased, we all felt the pain of separation.”

“Helya, did many of the other life crafts escape? Or are we alone?”

“No, most of the others got away. But I have not been able to remain in contact with my sister AIs. We all went in different directions, and then my controls were damaged.” She sounded sad. “I do not think I have been very successful protecting those in my care.”

Just a computer? I thought not.

Suddenly the craft shuddered and if I hadn't been holding on securely to one of the hand grips around the wall, I would have been tossed around the cabin. Not that I would have been damaged, but it could have been uncomfortable, to say the least. I didn't need Helya's recommendation to find a seat and strap myself in quickly, very relieved that everyone else was in stasis and safe. An alarm screamed and then died. The capsule lighting flickered off and on and off again.

“What happened, Helya?”

“I do not know. I am losing power. My systems are failing. I –”

The rest of what Helya was about to say was lost to me. My senses failed me and I knew nothing.

Chapter 11

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“My long range sensors have picked up an unidentified vessel. It is distant, and unlike anything I have ever seen before.”

“Is it hostile? Can you tell where it has come from?”

“It does not appear to be hostile. From its current trajectory, it appears it may have originated somewhere in the Uncharted Zone.”

“Oh. That’s not good. That’s a bad area, Mobia. All sorts of nasties and who-knows-what out there. Can you tell me anything else about it yet?”

“There appear to be life forms aboard, but it has been following an unchanged trajectory since I first detected it. If it maintains that trajectory, it will fly directly through this system and into its sun.”

“What? Can you establish contact with whoever is in command of the craft?”

“That seems to be impossible. I have attempted to hail the vessel in every known language and method. It has not responded.”

“Hmm. Not likely to be the Heebie ship. They don’t go in for this sort of thing, getting aboard by deception.”

“The life forms aboard are definitely not Heebies. Neither are they Glass People.”

“When the vessel comes within range, bring it aboard, Mobia. I suggest you set it down in one of the docking bays, and we can observe the behaviour of the occupants.”

“An excellent plan. Shall we also inform the Glass People about this vessel?”

“Yes, that would be a good idea. They’re a bit touchy at the moment, now only they and I remain on the Möbius Construct. Mobia, did you hear any more from Lorean’s vessel, after they left here?”

“Yes. They have reached safety by the Delta Star Jump and intend to move on. I gather they hope to transfer the animals in stasis.”

Kyri chuckled. “Yes, a good idea, I think. I’m relieved to hear they made it safely. The Heebies seem to have been making a habit recently of targeting ships, and they’re getting closer.”

“Yes. If they make a move to attack the Möbius Construct, Kyri, you must leave. For your own safety.”

“Yes. Well, keep that vessel under observation and bring it aboard when you can. I’ll go find Torrea and he can tell the rest of his people about it.”

Still carrying the grey cat, she left the control deck and went in search of Torrea.

Chapter 12

Finding him, she realised, was easier said than done. The Glass People were a strange race, and in her time Kyri had seen many races, to come to such a conclusion. She had first met them, a little more than a year previously, when they descended on the Möbius Construct, in an unfamiliar vessel, almost transparent and reflecting light off it like a soap bubble. It had settled into one of the docking bays but had not communicated with the Möbius Construct for a week after its arrival.

Kyri had not been particularly perturbed at the arrival of their vessel; via Mobia she had watched their approach, watched them circle the now closed Star Jump, dart off in several different directions and then finally approach the Möbius Construct and settle into one of its docking bays.

They had made no attempt to communicate with anyone on the Möbius Construct. Even then the population had been shrinking; Kyri and less than a hundred others remained on a space station that had been designed, no one knew when or by whom, for thousands of

occupants. There had been something vaguely familiar about the vessel and was not until several days after its arrival that she remembered.

About the same time the Star Jump suddenly closed down, she had been watching from the command deck. Kyri loved looking out, sometimes into star-studded space and other times at the twisted ring of the space station itself. Just before a small vessel, the *Taurus*, exited the Star Jump, she thought she saw a shimmering soap-bubble-like star ship fly out from the Star Jump. She blinked and when she opened her eyes again it had disappeared.

Now, it seemed, it and its occupants, whoever or whatever they were, had returned. Strangely unafraid, Kyri had picked up her cat Yuri, and, cradling him against her chest with his chin resting on her shoulder, his favourite position, she had gone to make contact with the Glass People.

She hadn't known them by that name, of course, but when she looked through the clear window into the docking bay they had appropriated, it seemed the perfect name for them.

Chapter 13

Kyri Skorodata had been born on the Möbius Construct, almost thirty standard galactic years before. Her parents, and her parents' parents, as far back as they could remember, had lived on the space station, working in various areas. At the time of her birth the population of the station would have been several thousands, many of whom, like Kyri, had been born there.

The Möbius Construct was a world in itself, a shining ten kilometre long ribbon twisted into a ring close to a Star Jump. People lived there, people travelled through there, waiting for vessels to depart through the Star Jump to other star systems and beyond to other galaxies. Incoming vessels docked either at one of the external docking stations or those set into the ring itself. Their crews and passengers moved through the various Customs and Galactic Government examinations and beyond, sometimes to closed habitats on the ring itself, or simply to other vessels to continue their travels.

When Kyri turned sixteen, she was sent off for a tour of the known worlds. She had by then encountered many species, mostly humanoid, which appeared to be the most

common form. Among those however were many varieties of skin, hair and eye colour. Some had more limbs or digits than she did; some had less, some had the same but differently arranged.

As yet the Heebies had not entered this universe, and although naturally there were minor spats between groups and individuals, most were brief and easily settled. During the three years Kyri spent away from the Möbius Construct, she saw many sights but her heart always ached for home.

Shortly after her return, the Star Jump nearby closed.

It could have been a major disaster; the pilot of the *Taurus* which was the last vessel through in safely, reported a strange sighting of what he claimed was a ghost ship, but no sign of it was ever found.

The Star Jumps, like the Möbius Construct, belonged to a history far more ancient than any of the races that used them. No one really knew how or when or even by whom the Möbius Construct had been designed and constructed; as far as most people (of all species) knew, it had always been there, just like the Star Jumps had always been there. It wasn't until one closed that they really missed it.

Those who travelled between the Star Jumps called the area they traversed In Between. Those who dwelled In Between, naturally enough, called it Home. They were however unobserved by those who simply passed through, from one Star Jump to another.

These linked star systems and galaxies. Since their discovery, they were generally accepted as natural occurrences, and to be used. They led to a mysterious emptiness variously called limbo or hyperspace, or more commonly In Between, where a short journey of hours was equal to a trip of many light years. Passengers and crew, apart from those talented individuals who became pilots, preferred to spend those hours asleep or preferably in stasis couches. The sensations were seldom pleasurable and the after effects ranged from mild nausea to uncontrolled hallucinations and worse.

The closure of the Star Jump near the Möbius Construct was not the major disaster it could have been. No vessels were lost between Star Jumps, and pilots could find another exit point if necessary. To tell the truth, many of them were either relieved or glad the Star Jump near the Möbius Construct closed; the approach to the exit had reputedly been haunted. The

pilot of the Taurus might have been the only one ever to formally state he had seen a ghost ship, but such sightings had been commonplace, but seldom referred to or made public. Star Jump pilots were sensitive people and had no wish to have their licences revoked because they claimed to see ghost ships.

When the Star Jump closed, it was the beginning of the end for the Möbius Construct. Its whole economy depended upon the passing trade. Now that passing trade switched to the Star Jump on the other side of the system, and much of the population went with it.

Not Kyri; she loved the Möbius Construct passionately and remained as over the years, the population fell from a thousand, bit by bit, to less than ten people. Her parents and siblings and cousins all went, some thinking her crazy for staying but a few empathising with her choice.

Then the Glass People came. They were fragile, shy and harmless. Kyri never knew exactly how many of them there were; they were almost invisible to the naked eye unless one knew where and how to look. Within the confines of the Möbius Construct, they moved around by self-teleportation and she envied this talent.

Matter transmitters were in common use to shift people and objects from one surface to the other, or from one point to another further round the ring, but more frequently Kyri walked, used a small vehicle or the monorail system that ran around the Möbius Construct. From the Command Centre, she could travel around the loop, covering all of the surface of the station easily and without once leaving the vehicle.

The Möbius Construct was a shock to the system of many travellers. They may well have read about it, even seen its image hanging in space beside the Star Jump. But actually being aboard a space station where, if they started walking and kept walking in the same direction, after a twenty kilometre journey, they would find themselves back where they had started, after having traversed the ring twice, once on one surface and then on the other, although those two surfaces were truly but one, shocked many. However, shown a paper model of the Möbius Construct and its design, most gave slightly embarrassed grins and expressions of ‘Oh! So *that’s* how it works!’

To Kyri, born to it, the shape of the Möbius Construct was normal, as was its controlling AI, Mobia.

Mobia had always been there. In spite of this no one truly knew how she operated. Because of the AI's voice, she had been depicted as female.

Then the Heebies had come, and everything had gone from bad to worse.

Chapter 14

The twisted ring of the Möbius Construct glittered in the light from its distant sun. A tractor beam reached out into space and took aboard the Helya, a life craft from a space vessel that would not be built for another four hundred and eighty years. Gently, the vessel was settled into a docking bay at the edge of the ring. The roof was sealed, air restored and the bay pressurised. The majority of galactic races, Mobia knew, tended to function best in an atmosphere of mostly nitrogen and some essential oxygen.

Awareness returned with shocking abruptness to Helya and Metallica.

“My...systems...at least some of them...are back on line.”

“Ah, and mine. What a reassuring feeling.” Metallica wriggled free from her safety harness and walked around to examine the small group of survivors. The covers to their stasis couches were still locked in place and from what she could see everyone was still healthy and alive. Except for the injured crewman she and Kendrew had carried aboard...

All the lights on the board at his feet were red, not green like the others, and inside the chamber was cloudy, not clear. She sighed.

“I think we've lost him, Helya.”

“I am running a systems check. All other stasis couches are clear. Should I revive everyone else now?”

“Maybe not until we find where we are and what's happened. Are your external sensors operating?”

“No. I can see and feel nothing. I know we are in neither a black hole nor a star, and indications are we may be on a planet, but it is impossible to confirm this without more data.”

“Hmm.” Metallica considered. “Revive Kendrew. And that older woman, Nerina. They’re the most level headed of that lot.”

“Doing so now...”

The latches clicked open and the covers swung back, then the seats were gently raised to a reclining angle, not yet fully upright. Helya spoke again.

“Fetch each of them some water from the dispenser, Metallica. They are organic life forms, unlike you and I. They will be thirsty.”

“Thirsty ... dry ... thirsty ... gotta have water...” Kendrew mumbled, at the same time trying to throw off his restraints. Metallica handed him a large glassful of liquid and hurried to Nerina, who was moving more slowly, but was similarly thirsty. She took the glass and drained it and blinked up at the android.

“Have we been rescued? Where are we?”

“I regret to say I have no idea where we are,” Helya admitted.

Kendrew grunted. “Are we still in space, or on a planet? Can you tell us that?”

“No.” In a human, it would have been a shamefaced mumble.

Metallica shrugged. “At least you are all still alive.” She met Kendrew’s gaze and jerked her head towards the clouded stasis cover. “At least, most. But I do not think he would have survived in any case. He was too badly injured. His stasis couch must have malfunctioned.”

“You haven’t revived the others yet? Are they all right?” asked Nerina and Metallica nodded.

“Yes, everyone else appears to be in good condition. But I decided against waking you all until we have some better idea of what happened.” She turned her head to address the vessel’s AI. “Helya, have you been able to determine what happened to shut down both your systems and mine as well?”

“No. My external sensors have not been operating properly. This is due to the unfortunate fact that the recommended maintenance schedules were not carried out on all of the *Sejanor’s* life craft. It is more accurate to say the sensors are operating, but the connection

between them and my internal processing units broke, sometime between when we left the *Sejanor* and when I regained my systems. I am unable to see what lies outside the vessel.”

Kendrew gave a short laugh. “So something shut you down, both of you? Just goes to show artificial life forms aren’t perfect after all.”

Nerina smiled faintly. “I had wondered,” she said slowly, “just how well you two knew each other, before we had to abandon ship.”

“We have known each other for while.” Metallica didn’t say any more, but went and stood in front of the airlock door.

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?” Kendrew demanded and she turned back to face him.

“Yes, probably.”

“It’s dangerous.”

“Nowhere near as much for me as it would be for you.”

Nerina frowned. “You’re going outside the life craft? Can you do that?”

“Yes. I think a tether might be a good idea though. I cannot say I wish to end my existence as a roaming celestial body.”

Kendrew caught Nerina’s eye and she giggled. Metallica sighed.

“Humans.”

“Quite so,” Helya agreed gravely. “You will find a safety tether clipped on the inside beside the external door, and a clip to attach it to immediately outside that door, on the exterior of this craft.”

Kendrew touched Metallica on the shoulder. “Take care. You have no idea, do you, Helya, what’s outside – if anything is? We could still be in deep space.”

“Which is why,” Metallica pointed out, “an android is an ideal travel companion.”

She opened the inside door and stepped into the airlock. Kendrew shut it behind her then let out his breath and went back to his seat, pausing en route to collect another drink of

water and glance into each of the other stasis capsules. His faced tightened as he looked down at the one containing the dead man and he lifted his head.

“Helya, can we – ah – dispose of the body before we wake everyone else? Not something those children need to see.”

“That can be done. In one of the lockers below the view screen you will find some soft foil. I shall open the capsule and you can wrap him. After Metallica returns through the airlock we can jettison him.”

“Sounds a bit cold blooded,” Nerina observed and he looked at her sharply.

“Do you have any other alternatives? You can say some words over him if you wish.”

“No. Do you want me to help you?”

“It won’t be pleasant,” he warned and she shrugged.

“I’m old, Kendrew. I’ve seen a lot of unpleasant sights in my life.”

Together they managed to remove the dead man and wrap him carefully, then replaced the foil-covered shroud onto the couch. As requested, Helya swung the stasis cover shut again and switched it to opaque. As they both moved back, there was a sound within the airlock; the door slid open and Metallica stepped back into the capsule.

She was smiling.

“We have landed.”

Chapter 15

“Who are they? *What* are they?”

Kyri stared into the view screen on the Möbius Construct’s control deck. “I’ve never seen anything like that vessel. It’s an escape craft of some kind, I’d say, by the size of it, but wherever could it have come from? And that – woman, if she was a woman – she’s totally unfamiliar.”

“Did you talk with Torrea?”

“Ah, yes. His people had also detected that vessel, but they don’t seem interested. They scanned it, decided whoever was aboard posed no danger to them, and blissfully probably never thought of it again. It’s not the Heebie ship, so they’re not worried. He said you should do whatever you wanted about it. Gracious of him, don’t you think?”

“Yes. I have searched through all my memory banks and the design of the craft appears to have originated from the Trader Society. They supply high tech equipment and parts for star ships. They’ve only been in contact with most galactic races for a year or so.”

“And the woman?”

There was a slight pause and then Mobia spoke again.

“She is an android, Kyri. An artificial life form in humanoid form.”

“I’ve met androids before, Mobia. None of them ever looked like her. They were obviously not living creatures. I think we should wait and observe her, and whoever else is in that capsule, very carefully before we make ourselves known to them. I don’t really suppose they have any connection with the Heebies, but we can’t be too careful.”

“The Glass People don’t seem to be worried about them.”

“Hmm, maybe not. Let’s just wait and see, Mobia.”

Chapter 16

“Come and look,” Metallica said, holding the airlock door open. “And yes, it is perfectly safe. I have analysed the atmosphere – a nice balance of oxygen and nitrogen with all the necessary traces of others. Almost exactly the normal star ship atmospheric mix for humanoid carbon-based species. There are no nasty microbes, contaminants or nanobots around, the gravity is normal and even the temperature is fine. A little lower than some people –” she gave a mocking glance at Kendrew, “– prefer, but it is certainly within the comfort range for humans such as you and the farmers, Nerina.”

“And – the Lady Tamra?” Nerina ventured.

“She’ll be fine.” Kendrew dismissed any concerns regarding the esteemed member of the True People and followed Metallica. Nerina shrugged and joined them. Outside, she gaped in disbelief.

She hadn’t realised just how small their capsule was. In the distance she could see a high wall and in it a door. Looking in the opposite direction, she saw another the same. There were no friction burns on the smooth grey ground; it appeared that some kind of remote control had brought their craft in and landed it.

“Come around here, both of you,” Metallica called. As Nerina walked past the back of the life craft she caught her breath.

Stars. There were millions of stars in front of her. She, the other two and their tiny craft stood metres from a thick transparent wall which extended between the two light coloured walls. High above there was a logo of some kind etched into the glass-like wall. Nerina tilted her head back as far as possible but was unable to make it out.

“We’re in a docking bay of some kind,” Kendrew said. “Not on a planet. Maybe a space station, or even an enormous star ship.”

“A space station,” Metallica decided. She looked up. More stars. “And close to the galactic core, I suggest. As for exactly where we are, and how we got here, I do not know.”

“Time to wake the others up, I think,” said Nerina. “Um, what about, the, ah –“

“The body,” Kendrew said bluntly. “Maybe we should leave it aboard until we find out where we are. Can’t just dump it out here.”

“I think,” Metallica said carefully, “that might indeed be the best idea. Come on then, let’s go wake the rest of the gang.”

Chapter 17

Nerina

We woke Starn and Melora first, handing them very welcome full glasses of water and advising care before they tried to move around much.

“We appear to have landed on a space station of some kind,” I explained and Melora smiled upwards.

“Thank you, Helya.”

“Nothing to do with me, I regret to admit.”

“Oh?”

“We do not know where we are,” Metallica said. “I do not even know how long it is since we left the *Sejanor* and you all went into stasis. Something – as yet inexplicable occurred. Both Helya and I shut down. When we...awoke... we found ourselves here. Come outside. There’s something I need to show you all, before we wake the children and the...Lady Tamra.”

Curious, we all followed her. Melora smiled broadly at the starry skies, but she stopped smiling when Metallica indicated the outside of the life craft.

“I know for a fact that when we left, this vessel’s exterior was smooth and grey. Look at it now.”

We did, and I shivered. It was dull and pitted, as if it had been struck by a myriad tiny hard bodies.

“Meteorite storms,” Kendrew muttered. “More than one. And a burn here. This craft has travelled a long way –”

“And for a long time,” Metallica added. “I have no idea how long we were shut down for, and how long you were all in stasis.”

Melora shrugged. Nothing, it seemed, bothered her.

“So maybe we’re not going to get to Gardea after all?”

“That could be so,” Kendrew admitted. “After all this time, Gardea might not even be there any more.”

“And this place?” Starn waved his arm around the docking bay.

“I don’t know. Let’s go wake the children and Madam and go exploring.”

Their reactions were predictable.

Tem blinked at his mother and croaked, “Wanna drink, mama!”

Adra tried to jump up until Metallica gently but very firmly pushed her back down and handed her a tall glass.

“You must drink all this first, Adra. And then you may come and see the stars.”

Lucky me, I got to look after Tamra. She was subdued but ungracious, snatching the drink I offered her and draining it. She held the empty glass out to me. “More.” Wordlessly, I fetched another drink and then addressed her.

“When you feel stronger, unfasten the safety harness. We appear to have landed somewhere.” Then I left her to look after herself. I’m kind hearted, not soft hearted. Besides, those stars drew me back.

Outside, I joined Starn’s family group as they stood looking out at infinity. Tem and Adra were running and jumping in the manner of children all over the cosmos, excited and energetic. Lucky them. From the way they and we were able to move, the gravity on this place was close to normal. Kendrew claimed it was cold, but as for me, I was comfortable with the temperature. He fetched a jacket from one of Helya’s storage lockers and shrugged it on.

I had no idea how long we had all slept the artificial sleep of stasis, but I was tired and stiff. Considering my age, that’s hardly surprising. I had no idea how old Metallica was; androids naturally didn’t show their age unless they chose to have their bodies altered. Tamra looked to be in her late twenties or early thirties while both Starn and Melora were a little older. Kendrew was younger than me, but probably older than them.

Adra suddenly stopped and regarded her mother gravely. “Did that man who got hurt wake up too?”

Melora shook her head. “No, he didn’t. Metallica and Kendrew did everything they could, but he died.”

“That’s sad.” But that was all Adra said. She skipped off again after her brother. He had run to the other side of the landing bay and was up against it, pressing his nose hard against the glassy wall.

“Hey, Papa!” he called. “There’s another spaceship in here!”

Chapter 18

Nerina

“Is there?” shouted Adra. “Lemme see!” She ran over to him and they both waved and called excitedly. “Come and look!”

We all hurried over and stared through the wall. It was hard and glassy and dark, but when I pushed my face up close I could see through. On the other side, in what I imagined to be another docking bay, stood a very old, almost antique space craft. I was fascinated and puzzled.

“Last time I saw something like that, it was in the Galactic museum. It’s one of the original Russell/Blieder Drive ships.” They all looked blank except Metallica.

“How old d’you suppose it is, Nerina?” she asked and I shrugged.

“Impossible to say without a closer look.” For the benefit of the others, I explained.

“The Russell/Blieder Drive was what first allowed humans, from Earth, that is, to come out into the galaxy. It had a radical much FTL drive system, but it did have the drawback that it tended to burn out the main drive of most vessels. It was almost always a one way and use only once system to start with. Later it was better developed, but still had limited use. That’s fascinating! I wonder if we can get from this bay into that one to have a good look at it.”

Kendrew pulled a face and I shrugged, realising I had been rather long-winded.

“Sorry, I’m an historian. It’s not often I get the chance to lecture to a captive audience.”

Melora smiled. “I never knew all that about the – what did you call it? – the Russell/Blieder Drive? That was interesting.”

Kendrew looked at Metallica. “What about you?”

“I have heard of the Russell/Blieder drive, yes –”

“Of course. You’ve heard of *everything*.”

“Yes, well, I’m an android.”

“A bloody walking encyclopedia is more like it,” he muttered, but I could hear the affection in his tone.

By now Tamra had deigned to join us. Starn rubbed his chin. “That way, everyone? Or this way?” He pointed in turn to the doors set in each end of our docking bay area.

Tem looked gravely from one to another, then pointed. “That one!”

“Why?”

“It’s closer. C’mon, Adra, I’ll race you!”

“Wait!” Kendrew snapped. “We don’t know anything about this place, or who or what might be lurking past this docking bay.”

Starn sighed. “So what do you suggest? That we sit here and wait for some sort of reception committee?”

“Not at all. What I *do* suggest is that if you must rush off exploring, you are at least not defenceless. Come with me.” He led us all back inside the Helya and opened one of the lockers. “Here. You don’t have any objection to carrying arms, do you?”

Starn grinned. “None at all. I’m a farmer, Kendrew, not a fool.”

Kendrew said nothing, but dug around in the locker and produced several small and compact weapons. He indicated them. “This is a zinger. It will kill anything if you hit it in the right place.” It was small and black, more resembling a hand torch than a gun; some six inches long, cylindrical and with a switch trigger half way down on one side. On the other was another, with a green spot showing. “Safety,” Kendrew explained. “Switch it to red, point and press the trigger.”

Starn nodded. “And the others?”

“This is a standard stunner. Same procedure as the zinger, but all it’ll do is put whatever you shoot to sleep for half an hour or so. Doesn’t matter where you hit it, either.”

“Right. Two stunners will suffice, I think.”

“Take a zinger as well. Just in case you meet something you don’t want to just put to sleep.”

Starn chuckled. “Fair enough.” He pocketed one of each and handed the other stunner to Melora. She examined it carefully and tucked it away in a pocket of the overalls she, like Starn, wore.

“Don’t we get anything?” demanded Adra.

“I don’t think so,” Melora said, rolling her eyes. “I really think we’ll all be safer if you two don’t have anything to shoot anyone with.” She smiled at me over their heads and I held out my hand.

“Just a stunner for me, Kendrew. Anything that tries to attack me, I’ll put it to sleep and run like hell.”

“Screaming for me to come and rescue you, I suppose.”

“Probably.” I grinned.

Chapter 19

Nerina

He handed it over and then offered Tamra a stunner.

“What gives you the right to say what we may or may not have in the way of weapons?” demanded Tamra. “I want one of those,” as she indicated the zingers. He looked back at her blandly.

“Well now, seeing as at the moment I have a weapon, I would say that gives me the right to say a lot of things.” Pointedly, he gave her a stunner.

“Kendrew is right; we have no idea who or what else is beyond those doors,” the android said.

“And you – what do you want?” Kendrew asked her. She shook her head. “I’ll take a stunner.” She accepted it, but I could see it was more for show than necessity.

“Metallica,” I asked, “*could* you use a zinger? Could you kill something, or someone, if you had to?”

She gave me a steady stare.

“Am I bound by the Three Laws, do you mean?”

“Um, yes.”

She smiled, unoffended. “I consider myself bound by the Three Laws the way any thinking human being should also be. Does that answer your question?” She went on, seriously. “I can use this to defend myself, yes, and against anything or anyone who attacks me. But I would be far more likely to use it to defend someone else.”

Outside, Kendrew pointed. “Right then, let’s go have a look.”

“I have some things to do first,” Metallica said.

Kendrew scowled. “Don’t you think it would be better if we all stuck together?”

“I’ll come as far as the doorway, but I wish to return to investigate the damage to Helya’s exterior sensors.”

“Right.” He nodded. “You take the others, Starn, and keep them together. Don’t go too far, and don’t get lost. Make sure you can find your way back here.”

I’m not sure, but I think I heard Melora mutter under her breath, ‘Yes, Mum.’ I know Metallica heard, because she smiled.

There wasn’t just a single doorway; there was one obviously designed for people, but beside it an enormous sliding panel, locked shut, and past it in the same wall was a window, with a shutter over it on the other side

Metallica surveyed the control panel set into the wall beside the smaller door. Kendrew pulled a face.

“I hope one of those doesn’t open this docking bay to space,” he said and she shook her head.

“Not likely. The switch to do that should most definitely be on the other side. You really would not want to open this to vacuum while you were standing here.”

“Logical,” he grunted, “but not necessarily so.”

“True, but I’m assuming whoever built this place is logical.”

So saying, she slid the smaller door open but Kendrew insisted on going through first. Typical soldier! I’m not entirely sure what he imagined he could have done if there’d been some man-eating monster lurking behind the door, even though he carried the zinger in his hand, but we all stood back and let him. As soon as he said it was safe the children ran through, Starn and Melora hurrying after them. Past the doorway was a long wide corridor. No, two corridors, one heading ahead and the other to the left. Both were empty, although there were tantalising doors of various sizes set into all the walls, except the one to our right. I presumed that was the hull of the space station or whatever it was we had landed on or in.

“Bloody babes in the woods!” Kendrew muttered under his breath as he watched them. “They act like they’re on a bloody picnic!”

I was beginning to think maybe they should have taken the tether Metallica had used earlier, but it was a bit late and anyway not my place to make such a suggestion. Tamra however sniffed in annoyance. That woman was beginning to irritate me. If she was representative of the True People, I didn’t want to meet any more of them, ever. So I decided to stick with Kendrew and Metallica when they retraced their steps to the Helya.

“I really don’t think there’s any danger.”

“Oh?” Kendrew’s eyes glittered. “And why do you say that, madam historian?”

I sighed. “By the look of that hull, we’ve been adrift in space for a long time, maybe longer than we have any idea. But someone brought us into this landing bay. Some intelligence ensured the atmosphere was safe for us. And I have the sneaking suspicion the same intelligence is watching us even at this moment. I think they’re safe enough to go off and check out their surroundings. But me, I’m curious about what sort of things you have to do. Metallica, so I’m sticking with you two for the moment. All right?”

“Of course.” Metallica smiled at me.

I walked from one end of the landing bay to the other while she, given a hoist by Kendrew, climbed up onto the top of Helya’s craft.

“Interesting,” I said to him as I got back, having walked from our little craft to one end, from there to the other and back again. I’d also gone out the opposite door to the one the others had left through. I had come to another right angled corridor, one branch to my right and the other straight ahead of me. I’d not been able to resist the temptation to explore a little myself.

“Yeah?” But his eyes were on the android.

“This docking bay is a hundred metres long, as far as I can work out, and about forty metres from one side to the other. The roof, or ceiling, or whatever you want to call it, is about thirty metres high. And that old ship next door, it’s in another landing bay about the same size.”

“Hmm.” He grunted. “Did you go in there?”

“Yes. There’s a long wide corridor, with doorways every thirty or forty metres along it. Each one of them leads to another docking bay. But our craft and the one next door are the only ones here, as far as I could see. Wherever here is. What have you been doing, Metallica?”

She clambered down from where she had been working on Helya’s exterior hull and went back inside.

“There, Helya. I have been examining and realigning your sensor systems. It appears they did not totally go off-line; they simply failed to relay the information they had to your inside systems. Let’s have a look and see what happened, shall we?”

Kendrew and I hovered behind her at the view screen.

“Ah...” Metallica indicated the screen. “This is the last image of the *Sejanor*. There’s a great deal of boring stuff after this, just views of space and stars and mostly nothing. We can fast forward through a whole lot, up until just before the point where Helya and I shut down. Look here...”

“What the hell is that?”

We watched as first a tiny spot appeared. It swelled suddenly to fill the screen with a million bright lights and swirls. There was a brilliant warp and splash of lights and colours

across the tiny screen. The readouts went berserk and then the directional readings changed dramatically.

Then – nothing.

“Helya, do you know what that was?”

“Regrettably, no. I shall set my systems to investigate. It may take some time.”

“We’ll come back here later. Now we’re going to see if we can find anything, and to make sure nothing has happened to the others. They might even have found something interesting by now.” Kendrew patted the hull. “Don’t go away.” He took three steps away and stopped as a thought struck him. “Ah, Helya, just supposing we had to leave here in a hurry – could you? Are you damaged?”

“I am undamaged. This docking bay is however locked and requires manual operation from an exterior control system. Once that was unlocked, yes, I could leave. My controls are now all on line.”

“Hmm.”

Chapter 20

Kyri watched them gravely in a view screen.

“Mobia, have you been able to establish contact with that craft yet?”

“I am attempting to do so. It has an interesting control system. It is a highly advanced computer system with which I am not familiar.” There was a pause, then Mobia spoke again. “Kyri, there is an AI controlling that craft. This is going to take time, but I do believe I shall be able to establish contact with it soon.”

“Let me know when you do so, please. In the meantime, keep those people under observation. Are you able to listen to them?”

“Not unless they enter an area where I have auditory input from, or unless they find and use the intra-station communicator.”

“Ah, well.” Kyri sighed and stroked her cat again. “No one’s perfect, Mobia, not even you or me. Just watch them then.”

Chapter 21

Nerina

The corridor Starn’s little group had gone alone ran for perhaps another fifty metres or so. The right hand wall was opaque and featureless, but to the left passages led off and when we ventured down one, we found doors – unfortunately locked! – along each side. Each door was inscribed and although my specialty is history and not the graphic representation of language, I got the impression they were either names or numerals. I noticed one symbol in particular, recurring over and over. We weren’t really surprised to find Tamra waiting for us, sulking.

“Those children! They’re insufferable.”

Metallica and Kendrew said nothing, just exchanged amused glances.

So the four of us went along the main corridor and followed it until we came to another doorway. Tamra, predictably, had started whinging again.

“Where is everyone? Where are we? Where do you think we’re going?”

Metallica turned and gave her a cheerful grin.

“I have absolutely no idea. Shall we leave you here?”

No such luck. She continued to tag along and bring up the rear, muttering to herself. I paused for a moment and checked on Yuri. He was asleep. Not surprising. When I’d been wakened I’d taken him out of the carry sling and let him wander round inside the escape pod and then outside with me until we had woken Tamra. He had slurped up a quantity of water, shaken himself and licked his face and then curled up for more sleep. Luck beast!

I was still puzzling about those signs – names or numbers? – when from ahead of us I spotted Melora and Starn and I heard a small boy’s scream of fright.

Chapter 22

Metallica

I should not have let them get so far ahead of us. At Tem's scream I ran forward, in time to catch him as he pelted towards us. He wrenched himself free and dived into Melora's arms, sobbing in fright.

"Adra's gone! She disappeared!" He wriggled free and ran back the way he had come, the rest of us following and calling out to him to wait. I had no idea small boys could run so fast.

When we caught up he was standing on a bright blue coloured square on the ground, beside the wall that had continued uninterrupted on our right side. We had earlier passed several of these blue squares, a metre or so across and raised some ten centimetres from the floor, but had paid no heed to them. Maybe we should have.

"Where did she go?" demanded Starn, and Tem's face puckered.

"I dunno! She was standing here, just like this, and then she touched this patch on the wall –" He suited action to words and pressed his fingers against a blue circle. "Then she just dis –"

And he was gone. Melora gave a wail of terror and Starn swore. I had never heard the term, but it was clearly an oath.

I put my hand out towards her.

"Melora, don't panic. I'll find them and bring them back. *Stay here.*"

I stepped onto the blue square, tapped the circle on the wall –

– and found myself somewhere else. A matter transmitter, had to be. Beneath my feet was another blue square, and beside me in the wall a blue circle. But where had it taken me? I hoped to the same place it had taken the children.

I was in a large open area, but with shelves and cupboards and lockers everywhere. On some of the shelves were ancient books. Real books, made with paper and cardboard. A library? Nerina would want to see this. But I didn't have time to examine my surroundings

right now. I listened, for not the first time glad of my sensitive hearing. The children were close.

I took a few steps, turned corners among the jumble of storage facilities, and gave a sound of relief when I spotted them. They were sitting on the floor, and Adra appeared to be in animated – though silent – conversation, but not with her brother. Past her I could see a rainbow shimmer in the air, like a soap bubble with the sun shining on it. I focussed my eyes and could see dozens of the rainbow shapes, in a crowd past Adra and scattered in various other areas of the room. I was curious about them, but at the moment more concerned for the children. They didn't look to be in danger, but this was a totally alien place.

“Adra, Tem, your parents are worried about you.”

The shimmers in the air dissipated abruptly and she looked at me, tears starting to her eyes. But I mistook; she was angry.

“You scared them away. You scared them away, Metallica! I want them to come back. I was telling them about us all.” She looked around, wailing. “Come back, rainbow people! Come back. We won't hurt you.”

“It's all right, Adra. I'll take you back to your parents. You both gave them a scare, running off like that. Then I'll come back and find your rainbow people.”

“But I want to talk to them! I like them. They live here.” She was crying now. “You're mean, Metallica. You frightened them.”

“I didn't mean to.”

“You're not supposed to frighten people, or hurt them.”

“It'll be all right. They'll come back, I'm sure.” They had certainly moved rapidly; teleporting themselves, I decided. But where to?

“Huh.” However, she and Tem came along docilely enough. I wanted to return them to Melora and Starn, but I also wanted to see more of this place.

As we made our way back to the blue square, I lifted my gaze towards the ceiling. It wasn't as high as the docking bay area where we had left the escape capsule, but there were large clear panels set into it at intervals. Beneath one, I looked upwards. What I saw made me

stop. I could see, not stars as I had expected, but a wide glittering ribbon, arched across what I could see of the sky, from one side to the other. Just at its apex it twisted.

Adra and Tem followed my gaze.

“That’s pretty!”

Pretty? Yes, and very enlightening. I knew where we were, then and I knew it was impossible.

Chapter 23

Metallica

At the moment I had a more immediate task in hand. I smiled at the children and took them each by the hand.

“Yes, isn’t it? Come along, let’s get you two back to your parents.”

We reached the blue square. I lifted Tem into my arms and held Adra close in front of me, then I reached my elbow out to touch the circle. Logic dictated to me that it would return us to where we had started from. My emotion chip hoped I was right and wondered what I’d do if I was wrong...

Logic won out. In an instant we were facing the others and the children ran to their parents. Adra was excited, waving her arms around.

“We met the rainbow people. They live here and they’re nice. *She* scared them away.”

“Nerina, Kendrew, will you come with me please?” I pointed to the blue pad. “I believe this is a matter transmitter, and I have a feeling I know where we are. Except it’s not possible.”

“Not possible?” Kendrew laughed derisively. “You’re an android. Are you telling me you believe in something that is impossible? Isn’t that going to do terrible things to your logic circuits?”

“Come and see.” I stepped back onto the blue pad, held out my hand towards them. “I’m not sure we can all fit on here at the same time. Nerina, you wait until we’ve gone, then follow. All right?”

“I am full of curiosity,” she replied. Kendrew stood close to me, and we were suddenly back in the storage area. A moment later Nerina appeared, blinking.

“Now, that,” she remarked, “is the way to travel. Where are we?”

“You tell me.” I walked along and stood under the skylight, pointing upwards. She followed and her mouth dropped open.

“No! It can’t be. Metallica, is this what I think it is? No, you’re right, this really *is* impossible.”

“What is it?” Kendrew stared upwards and frowned. “What –“

She turned to him. “This is the Möbius Construct. Have you ever heard of it?”

“Never. No, wait a minute. Somewhere, once, a long time ago, I heard it mentioned. No, can’t remember.”

Nerina launched into lecture mode.

“The Möbius Construct was discovered thousands of years ago, when people – not just humans but all sorts of other people – started using the Star Jumps to get around. There was one nearby, and another on the other side of this star system. But this one closed and nobody ever knew why. So it became uneconomical. No one was stopping here to travel through the Star Jump; it was easier and quicker to use the other one. It was abandoned, or almost so. A few people stayed behind, because they wanted to, or it was their home, or because they were just too stubborn to move. I think there was even talk at one time of making it into some sort of galactic museum or zoo.”

He rolled his eyes. “Is all this going somewhere, Nerina, or is it just a history lesson about where we’ve found ourselves?”

“It’s definitely going somewhere,” I said. “Continue, Nerina.”

She looked at the glittering arched ribbon above us, at me and then at Kendrew. Then as she looked past us for a moment there was an expression of utter confusion on her face.

Her hand went to the sling across her chest, where her little pet slept. She touched it as if to reassure herself, blinking.

“Yuri! No... what...”

“What is it?”

She shook her head. “No. I’m imagining things. I just thought I saw a xinbaa – or a cat or something awfully like it, way over there. No. I was mistaken. Had to be. This place is beyond belief.”

“Go on. You were about to tell us...”

“The Möbius Construct was utterly destroyed. Nearly five hundred years ago. It does not exist.”

That got his attention.

“What? Are you sure? Maybe it was a common space station design?”

“No.” She looked at me and smiled faintly. “It was unique. That logo, the one we couldn’t see clearly, on the wall of the landing bay, I’ve noticed it a few times along the way. It’s a twisted loop, a Möbius strip, the symbol of this place. Somehow – and I have no idea how – we have been thrown into the past.”

“What are you saying?”

“I am saying this space station – the Möbius Construct – that we are standing on right now – was utterly destroyed. Five. Hundred. Years. Ago.”

Chapter 24

Nerina

When the three of us returned it was to find Tamra pacing back and forth agitatedly. Of the family group there was no sign.

“Where are they?” Kendrew demanded. “Don’t tell me those bloody innocent fools have gone off exploring on their own again?”

Tamra glared at him. “I don’t know where they’ve gone and I don’t care. Those children are obnoxious, bad mannered and liars into the bargain.”

“Tell me where they went,” Metallica said. “*Now.*”

Tamra shrugged and pointed towards another doorway. “That way. The children were trying to say there were funny people on here, but they were nice. And she said they saw a cat. I *hate* cats.”

Metallica looked at me. “A cat? Are you sure?”

The representative of the True People drew herself up to her full height, ignored my question and fixed us all with a malevolent expression, as if we were to blame. “And where have you all been? That wasn’t polite, leaving me alone with them! They’re common!”

Metallica ignored her, just swung and made off towards the door Tamra had indicated. Kendrew gave me a wink and followed. I shrugged and decided to do the same, but I felt it would be unkind to just leave Tamra alone and without explanation.

“We’ve found out where we are, Tamra. But it’s a puzzle.” I pointed. “Those blue squares, they’re matter transmitters. This is a space station designed in the form of a loop, and they are to travel from one surface of it to the other.” She stared at me in what I took to be total non-comprehension and I gestured with my fingers on my outstretched hand; first under then over. “We’re on one side of it. The children went to the other side. Metallica found them and brought them back, and then she and Kendrew and I went to look over there. This is an amazing place.” I hesitated. “Um, are you sure the children mentioned a cat?”

“Yes. But they had to be making it up. Little liars. They must have found out I hate cats and said it just to try to annoy me.”

In spite of myself I laughed. “Oh, I don’t think so.” I decided not to tell her I also was almost certain I also had seen a cat, or at least the flicker of a tail and sinuous body disappearing round a corner.

“You are crazy. You are all crazy.” Tamra’s face puckered and she burst into tears. “This is a horrible frightening place and we are all going to die here, I’m sure.”

“No, we’ll be all right.” I made a move as if to pat her and she recoiled. Looked like she considered me common, too. It had been different when she was thirsty and I was offering her water. Well, be like that, I decided, and followed Metallica and Kendrew.

Now that I knew when and where we were, although I had no idea how we had got there, I was way better able to visualise the place. I was excited and fascinated. As an historian, I had heard of this place and seen images. *Being* on the Möbius Construct was totally different.

Tamra ran up behind me.

“Wait, Nerina! Wait for me.”

Her face was twitching in excitement.

“Where are we? Did you say – a space station shaped like a loop? A twisted loop?”

“Yes...but..this is very difficult to explain, Tamra. Something most peculiar seems to have happened to us. I do believe, from what I have seen, that somehow we have been transported across the galaxy – and also back in time.”

“Nerina, are you telling me we are on the Möbius Construct? Is that what you’re saying? Is that where we are?”

I blinked. Amazing enough that we appeared to be in the past, but even more amazing was the effect this information was having on Tamra. Of all of us, she seemed to have heard of this place. Amazing.

“Yes. I think so. Looks like it. But...”

“She has blessed me! She has blessed me. The First Ancestor, blessed and revered be her name, has blessed me greatly!” She sank to the ground in what could only be hysterical rapture.

“Get up!” I said but she ignored me, singing and muttering incoherently to herself. What had I done? However, if she wasn’t going to respond, I certainly wasn’t going to hang around. I wanted to catch up with the others and explore this place. Not entirely reluctantly, I left her and hurried to catch up with everyone else.

Chapter 25

“They appear to have found the monorail system,” Mobia observed. “Should I set it to bring them directly here?”

Kyri considered. “That could well scare the wits out of them, some of them anyway. Those children got on well with the Glass People, but this might be too much for them. Just – if and when they all get aboard, keep them under observation. You can activate the system, but allow them to control it.”

“Very well. I am curious about these people, Kyri. I am still attempting communication with their AI, but she is a type I have not previously encountered. However, from what I have been able to ascertain so far, the AI is female and was originally sourced from a real live human brain.”

“Ugh, that’s horrible!”

“Not necessarily so. Something with which I am unfamiliar. I will continue.”

Chapter 26

Kendrew and Metallica found Starn and his little family group gathered around what could only be a vehicle. He and the android had hurried along passages and through wide open areas, some high ceilinged and with the stars clear above them, others small and maze-like. Her acute hearing had been enough to keep them on the right track, although he was tensed for another scream. One didn’t come, but he could hear the children’s excited tones when they were still fifty metres away.

“Look what we’ve found. It looks a bit like some kind of monorail system. Do you know what this place is?”

Metallica and Kendrew climbed the half dozen steps to a wide long platform. Beside it, as if waiting temptingly, was a low, semi-enclosed carriage, with what just *had* to be seats arranged along its interior. Tem and Adra had clambered aboard and were bouncing up and down enthusiastically.

“Come on, come on! Let’s see where it’ll go.”

“Before you do that, listen to me for a moment. It is important.”

“The history lady reckons she knows where we are,” added Kendrew. Melora looked past him.

“Ah, speaking of Nerina, where is she? You haven’t lost her, have you?” She smiled. “We don’t really mind if you lose the Lady Tamra –” with slight and almost malicious emphasis on ‘Lady’, “– but we’ve really become quite fond of Nerina.”

Metallica tilted her head as if listening.

“Ah, she’s coming. And I can hear Tamra further back having hysterics.”

“That sounds about right,” Starn muttered. “What were you going to say, Metallica, about where we are?”

“I am going to have to go back to Helya later on to find out how this happened, but from what we have been able to see, and what Nerina has told us, we seem to have been thrown back in time. This space station is called the Möbius Construct. It used to be the staging station for vessels using a Star Jump, but long ago that particular one ceased operating. Practically everyone left the place; it was uneconomical and there’s another relatively close by. On the other side of this star system.”

Starn shook his head. “I have this feeling there’s more to it than that. The Möbius Construct...” He frowned. “I’ve heard the name before, but I can’t remember when or where.”

“I have! I have!” Adra jumped out of the monorail carriage and waved her arm. “We learned about it at school, Papa. Oh!” Her eyes went wide in memory. “How come you think we’re on it now? How can we be?”

Metallica spoke carefully. “We managed to get Helya’s external sensors operating. They showed that at some time after we left the *Sejanor*, Helya passed into an area of space that is largely uncharted and generally avoided whenever possible. From the evidence, we encountered a space/time rift which had the effect of throwing us all back in time.”

“Can we retrace our path?” Melora inquired and Metallica shook her head.

“I doubt it very much. We are five hundred years in the past and on the other side of the galaxy. No, there is no going home. I’m sorry.”

“Everyone is gonna think we’re dead!” Tem wailed. Melora hugged him.

“But we’re not dead, Tem. We escaped. And here we have a new start. This is a fantastic place.”

“He’s right, in a way,” Nerina said mildly. “To all intents and purposes, we are dead to those in our own time. For all they will know, we perished in the attack.”

“All my friends...Granma and Granpa...”

“I’m afraid so. And we have no way of ever letting them know. We cannot retrace our steps. For better or worse we are now five hundred years, more or less, in the past, and on the other side of the galaxy.”

Metallica stood up purposefully.

“And we have a space station to save, too.”

“Save? What do you mean?”

“That’s what I remember!” Adra burst out. “Our teacher told us about the Möbius Construct. The Heebie Jeebies came along and blew it to pieces.”

Chapter 27

“Mobia, what are they talking about? They look excited about something. I *wish* we could hear them.”

“Kyri, I have finally been able to establish communication with the AI on board their escape craft. You really need to meet these people.”

“I most certainly do! And the Glass People – they were talking with the children. I wonder what they managed to find out? Before that android came along and scared them all away.” She frowned. “She gives me the creeps. And that other woman, not the old one, the young one, she’s even worse. Muttering and twitching and talking to herself.”

“What have you found out from their AI?”

“They are from the future.”

Chapter 28

Metallica

Only the fact that I am an android and incapable of inflicting harm without an excellent reason made me wait for Tamra to catch up to us. I believe everyone else would have been happy to desert her, especially when Nerina told us how she had reacted to the knowledge we had inexplicably found our way into the past. They were all puzzled at her reaction, but I pondered a few seconds and drew upon my memory banks.

“That’s it. I see. This may certainly complicate matters.” I explained to them, but quietly and quickly before Tamra arrived. “She is a member of this cult, the True People. Remember, she told us about it when we were on the life craft.” Shrugs, rolled eyes and blank looks confirmed they had either not been listening, or had not cared enough to remember. “They claim descent from the daughter of the sole survivor of the attack by the Heebies –“

“On the Möbius Construct,” Nerina finished. “Oh, so that’s what she was going on about.”

“Yes, the Heebie Jeebies, they did it,” Adra repeated. “But how can we be on it now if they blew it to bits? We’re in the past? How can we be in the past? What can we do?”

Kendrew grunted. “The lady Tamra is crazy as a loon. Barmy. I reckon we’d be better off if we did leave her behind.”

“Maybe we should have left her behind on the Sejanor,” Starn drawled. Melora suppressed a giggle and jabbed him in the ribs.

“That is not kind, Starn. Here she comes now.” She raised her voice. “Hurry, Tamra, we’re all going on a ride.” She gave Adra a stern look. “And you should be quiet for a while, I think.”

“Aw, Mama –”

“Quiet, I said. Not a word.”

Adra subsided, but rolled her eyes eloquently as Tamra regarded the seats along the single carriage of the monorail system with disdain and disbelief.

“I am not used to riding in such an archaic vehicle. And where will it take us, if we are all foolish enough to get aboard?”

Starn shrugged. “It’s clearly designed to transport groups of people from one place to another. From what we’ve seen so far, and from what the others saw when they went after the children, this is a massive construction. You may wish either to sit here along, or to walk everywhere, but we are going exploring.” He paused. “Well, are you coming?”

She sighed. “If I must.”

“Good.” He stood up to help her aboard, but she ignored him, stepped carefully into the carriage and sat down, as far away from everyone else as she could manage. Metallica and Kendrew had been investigating the controls at the front of the carriage.

“This one?” he asked, finger poised above one of the buttons. She thought for a few seconds and nodded.

“It looks promising. This icon seems to indicate a control centre of some kind.”

“How can you tell that?” demanded Adra, who had left her seat and scrambled to the front of the vehicle and was now looking with interest at the panel of buttons and icons and indicators in front of them. “Do you know a lot of languages and things, Metallica?”

Kendrew chuckled at her. “She’s an android, so of course she knows a lot of things, Adra. Now go and sit down in case this thing takes off like a rocket.”

“But I wanna see where we’re going.”

Metallica pointed. “Go and sit down. Now.”

Adra shrugged, pouted a little and made her way back to the rest of her family. But as she sat down she stage-whispered to her mother, “I like her. She’s clever.”

Melora hugged her children. “I like her, too Adra.”

“Hold on, everyone, we’re on our way.”

Chapter 29

The vehicle lumbered into life, as if it had been a long time since its last usage. Which was probably true, Kyri thought, as she watched. When the others had left, they had all been close to the docking bay where their craft awaited. She herself hadn't used the monorail for, oh, months, preferring a small skooter or her own feet. The Glass People had never, as far as she knew, made use of the monorail. It was a bit redundant when they could teleport wherever they wanted. That, she decided, was how they must have met the children. It would not have been by chance. They had *wanted* to meet the children.

That was interesting. They weren't usually as forthcoming. Apparently the young of other species interested them. or maybe there was something else that attracted them to these newcomers.

Yuri yowled. She put him down and he strolled off, cat-fashion, to find his mate Vali. Unlike Yuri, Vali had been fascinated by the Glass People. At first she had tried to swish at them with her paws, then she had taken to trying to follow them. Occasionally one of them had picked her up and teleported with her. Vali had loved this sensation and was more often with the Glass People than with Kyri or Yuri. Through some strange and inexplicable feline quirk, she had developed the knack of teleporting herself for short distances, as long as at least one of the Glass People was nearby. When she attained the skill of popping in and out of existence at will, she sat and preened herself, purring loudly.

Yuri disapproved and made his disapproval loud and clear. It didn't stop Vali's gallivanting.

Kyri turned back to Mobia.

"How long will it take them to arrive here? Ah, are any of them armed?"

"At their current speed they will arrive at the access point closest to the command centre in fifteen minutes. As for weapons, they carry stunners and the two males are armed with what appear to be more lethal weapons. From my observations this appears to be what these strangers would consider normal precautions. I can enclose you with a force field which nothing can break through, if necessary."

“No, it’s all right. They appear more interested in where they are than in any aggressive acts. I wish I had been able to listen to them. They seem to have been having some interesting conversations, and they’re all puzzled about something. Surely they must have worked out by now where they are?”

“Remember, they are from the future. I am unable to answer your question adequately, Kyri. Anything could have happened in five hundred years.”

“Hmm.”

Chapter 30

As the monorail vehicle travelled, at a reasonably sedate speed, the survivors from the *Sejanor* saw a world of kinds far different from anything they had ever previously experienced. The Möbius Construct, as Adra excitedly informed them, delighted to have superior information, covered an area of some twenty square kilometres, but some was inaccessible for various reasons; some held machinery, much held electronic and computer equipment and there were a number of habitats designed for non-humanoid and non-carbon based life forms. In places it appeared almost urban and in others there was grass, other low vegetation and open areas. The ‘roof’ varied from low and functional to high and transparent. When they were able to look up and see the curved ribbon of the Möbius Construct above them the children cried out in delight, while Tamra continued to mutter to herself, swinging from terror to semi-hysterical elation.

Nerina sat and observed quietly, as did Metallica. Starn and Melora looked delighted when the vehicle passed through the apparently ‘open’ area and frankly gaped at some of the urban dwellings clustered along the way.

Nobody missed the fact that although there were obvious stations along the way, their vehicle showed no inclination to stop at any of them. They saw no other signs of life, although mechanical robots swung into view from time to time, carrying out who knew what tasks.

Gradually, the vehicle slowed and came to a halt against a platform like the one from which they had originally boarded it. The door slid open and they all stepped out. Melora chuckled and pointed at the ground, as markings upon it appeared.

“Oh, green arrows. Do you think someone is trying to tell us something?”

Kendrew regarded the others and shrugged.

“What have we got to lose?”

“Indeed.” Nerina smiled.

“I will go first,” Metallica said. “Although I really believe we are safe. It is clear that someone, or some intelligence, brought our life craft aboard this space station. How we got to *when* we are is a puzzle. Hopefully we may find the answer soon.”

Kendrew moved to stand beside her, and with varying degrees of enthusiasm – the children with lots, and Tamra with none – they made their way along the path indicated.

Ten minutes later they arrived at the Command Centre of the Möbius Construct. Along the way they had seen robots or varying designs, but no living creatures, although once Adra had stopped and pointed down a passage. “There’s the cat! And some of the pretty rainbow people we talked to!” Tamra rolled her eyes while the others merely nodded. No one else saw anything and Adra flounced then rejoined her parents and brother.

Nerina was close behind Metallica and Kendrew, with Starn and Melora and their children behind her and Tamra, sulkily, bringing up the rear. Kendrew had taken out the zinger from Helya’s stock but none of the others had followed suit. Metallica was as relaxed as if she had been taking a stroll in totally familiar surroundings.

Ahead of them the passage opened out into a large and well lit circular area, maybe ten or fifteen metres across. There were view screens, computer systems, banks of controls and LED readouts and a myriad of other systems unfamiliar to them. Standing facing them was a tall woman, dressed in a plain long blue gown. In her arms she cradled a large grey cat which rested its head against her shoulder. As she watched them, she stroked it idly with a six-fingered hand. Her skin was close to the same chocolate hue that Kendrew’s was, but her hair, thick, curly and hanging below her shoulders, was dark auburn.

Beside her, shimmering in the light –

“Oh, wow!” Adra burst out. “That’s the Möbius Construct! It’s gotta be a holograph!”

“Your daughter is correct. She is a very intelligent child.”

Metallica's gaze swept the room and, finding no hazards or threats, she looked directly at the woman.

"And you are —"

"Kyri Skorodata. At the moment, apart from you, I believe I am the only person remaining here."

"What about the pretty rainbow people?" demanded Tem, before his sister could speak. "We met them. Do they live here too?"

Kyri nodded slowly. "Yes. They're the Glass People. But they're very shy. They don't talk to just anyone."

"They're nice. I like them." Adra turned and gave Metallica an annoyed look. "But *she* came and scared them away."

"Ah, my daughter can be somewhat outspoken at times," Melora said quickly, but neither Kyri nor Metallica showed any signs of offence.

"You're an android, aren't you?"

"That is correct. I believe we all owe you our lives. Thank you."

Kyri looked back and her gaze softened. Maybe, she thought, she had been wrong. Metallica was not what she had expected from an android and, in person the creepiness she had earlier felt dissipated. But she wasn't entirely sure about the rest of her companions. It was clear the two children and their parents were a group, all human and probably not as naïve and innocent and they first seemed. The naïve and innocent didn't always last long in the galaxy.

Two other humans, one older and carrying a small animal of some kind in a sling across her chest, and the other, young and sharp-faced and currently casting critical looks around the command centre. The other man was tall and solid and wary looking. Of the group of them, he was the only one openly displaying a weapon; Mobia had informed her they had all armed themselves before leaving the docking bay, with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

"The AI of the station detected your life craft on a direct heading for the system's sun. We thought you might prefer to come here." She smiled. In her arms the large grey cat

opened its eyes and regarded the strangers. It set its gaze on Nerina and the small animal she carried, and wriggled from Kyri's grip to leap elegantly to the floor and stroll across to her.

"Yuri is harmless," Kyri assured her and Nerina blinked.

"Yuri? Your cat is named Yuri? So is my xinbaa."

"A xinbaa? What is a xinbaa?"

Nerina walked across to her and lifted Yuri from his sling. Kyri smiled at the sight and lifted the small creature into her arms. "He's beautiful."

"Not always, believe me. And you have cats here? How many?"

"Only two now. But in the past there were many animals of different species living here. They're gone, well, most of them have gone, and all the other people have left, too." She sounded sad.

The sharp-featured younger woman pulled a face.

"Why are you dithering around talking about your stupid pets and animals? There's a great deal at stake here and we don't have much time, do we?" She switched her stare to Kyri. "What about all the other people who are here? Where are they? Where are all the *humans*?"

Chapter 31

"What are you talking about?" demanded Kyri.

"People. *Real* people. Human beings. Where are they?"

Kyri's eyes narrowed and she held up her hand, displaying her fingers.

"You do not consider me a real person?"

"You're not human."

"Oh." Kyri shrugged. "Maybe I'm not. So what?"

"This *is* the Möbius Construct, isn't it?" Tamra demanded.

“Yes. And you are my guests.” Her voice chilled. “But I suggest more good manners would not be out of place.”

Tamra blinked, whimpered and stepped back, silenced.

Kendrew stepped forward. “You’ve been observing us, ever since we arrived here?”

Kyri shrugged and gave him a smile. “We rescued you. Seemed a wise move to find out who and what you were – and where you were from. However, I have only been able to watch you. I have not been able to listen to you.”

He grunted and looked at Metallica.

“I have the feeling when we were from is more like it,” the android said smoothly. “Tell us, please, Kyri, the standard galactic date.” At the woman’s frown she added gently, “Believe me, it is important.”

“Sixty-two, ten, oh six, twenty,” Kyri said and Nerina caught her breath sharply.

“Six days! We’ve only got six days. Tell me, Kyri, what do you know about the Heebies?” She frowned. “Well, we call them the Heebies, I believe the name was in use not long after they first appeared.”

“Six days? Six days until – what? What is it that you’re so worried about?”

Nerina looked at her sadly. “Kyri, in six days’ time the Heebies’ ship is going to come and destroy the Möbius Construct.”

“*What?*”

“I’m sorry.”

“No. No, you’re not serious. You can’t be.”

“It’s true, I regret to say.” Metallica looked at Kyri. “But – even though it happened in our history, it does not have to happen now. Working together, we may be able to prevent it.”

“Mobia told me you were all from the future. I just found that hard to believe. But she also tells me she had been in contact with the AI on your vessel.”

“Helya, yes.”

“We do call them the Heebies. They have only been around for a year.”

“Do you know anything about the Heebies? Where they came from, or anything like that?”

“No. Only that they are incredibly aggressive and destructive.”

“How many ships do they have?” demanded Kendrew.

“Only one. It would be wonderful to think they could be destroyed. But –” She shook her head sadly, “– it seems not.”

“Not in the time we came from,” Nerina admitted sadly. “We have come from five hundred years in your future. In our time the Heebies have been waging war on every other species for a long time. And their numbers have increased enormously. They have destroyed ships, caused Star Jumps to be shut down, and attacked planets.”

Kyri sighed and indicated several comfortable looking lounges in a group in the centre of the room.

“Please, come and sit down and tell me what you can.”

Chapter 32

It took a while, with everyone wishing to put in their bit and tell how they personally had suffered from the depredations of the Heebies. Starn and Melora told a sad tale of a pioneer planet attacked by a dozen Heebie ships simultaneously. They had survived by hiding in caves and waiting the attack out. They had eventually been rescued and decided to move to Gardea, where galactic vessels provided greater protection. To Tem and Adra it was an adventure but both children expressed hatred for the Heebies, remembering friends who had been killed and a peaceful existence that had been rudely taken away from them.

Kendrew was regretful that his stint as a soldier had failed to diminish the Heebie population in any degree, while Nerina admitted her time was spent more in studying the past.

“I love mysteries,” she admitted candidly. “The one thing we have never been able to ascertain properly is where these creatures came from. There have been all kinds of hypotheses, from another galaxy, from another time or dimension, but no one knows. Defeating them would be wonderful, but finding out where they came from is also something I’d like to know.”

“You’re an old fool,” Tamra snapped. “And you, Kyri or whatever your name is, you still haven’t answered me. Where are all the other humans on this place?”

“Humans?” Kyri shrugged. “They’ve gone where everyone else from here went. Somewhere else.”

“When did everyone go?” Kendrew asked.

“The last vessel departed several days ago and they were heading for Delta, that’s the planet closest to the Star Jump on the other side of this system.”

“But there has to be a human here! A human female. *There has to be!*” This from Tamra.

“Why do you say that?”

Kendrew rolled his eyes. “Don’t ask. She’s got delusions of grandeur and for some weird reason she thinks –”

“I do not have any kind of delusions, you barbarian fool. I am one of the True People. We are totally human. One hundred percent, and we can trace our lineage back to the sole survivor of the destruction of the Möbius Construct.”

Kyri spread her hands wide.

“No one else remains here, only me and the Glass People.” She looked at Melora. “Your daughter’s pretty rainbow people.”

“Tell us about them,” Metallica encouraged her. “In our time, we have never encountered them.”

“They’re pretty,” sighed Adra.

“That’s true. They are very shy, too. You were honoured that they met with you.”

“I want to see them again.”

“Me, too!” cried Tem.

“Just be patient. They’ll come to you when they choose.” And to the others, she went on to explain. “They arrived here a little less than a year ago, but were very reticent about meeting with anyone. Not that there were many people left here by then anyway.” She smiled, but sadly. “They seem reluctant to be seen, and can shift themselves wherever they wish.”

“They can self-teleport?” asked Metallica and Kyri nodded.

“Yes. Most times, they’re just like a shimmer in the air, but sometimes, if they wish, they will show themselves properly.”

“They look like pretty soap bubbles,” Adra put in and Kyri nodded.

“That’s so.”

“I’m hungry,” Tem suddenly whispered to his mother. “I want something to eat.”

“Oh.” Kyri had overheard him and stood up. “Look, there is any amount of accommodation and all that type of thing available here. There are food replicators and everything else you’d need in the rooms. Come along and I’ll find you all places, and later on, after you’ve eaten and anything else you want, come back here and we’ll talk.” She addressed the AI. “Mobia, send some robot guides here please and they can help everyone find places.”

Metallica remained seated. “I’d prefer to stay and talk with you, Kyri. I don’t require food or rest, although later on I would like to clean myself somewhat.”

“Of course.” Kyri had been hoping for time to discuss these new arrivals with Mobia in private, but was gracious.

Starn frowned and tilted his head. “Kyri, tell me something, please.”

“If I can, yes.”

“I can see your mouth moving as you talk. I can hear the words, and I can understand them. But –” And he touched his fingers to his own lips. “– the shape of the words I see is not the same as the words I hear. Why is this?”

“Oh.” She smiled. “This place has always had many people of many different species coming through, going places or coming here to work. It was a diplomatic post as well as a commercial venture. Very necessary, don’t you agree, that everyone would be able to understand everyone else, all of the time?”

“It would seem to be part of the AI’s responsibility,” Metallica said. “Misunderstandings in the past have led to dreadful problems, Starn. Here everyone understands all that is said to them, regardless of their language. Am I correct, Kyri?”

“That’s wonderful,” Melora said, smiling.

“Yes, that’s how come the rainbow people were able to talk to us,” Adra chipped in.

Tamra however looked disdainful. “If every race learnt to speak the tongue of the True People, that would be the perfect solution.”

Nerina stifled a giggle and Kendrew merely rolled his eyes.

Kyri however was curious. “These True People you talk about, who are they?”

Tamra looked at her with disdain. “We are the descendants of the First Ancestor.”

“And she was –”

“The First Ancestor was the only survivor of the attack that destroyed this place. She was rescued and fled to a safe planet. When she married, she and her partner had three children, a boy and two girls. But they did not remain together. Indubitably, he mistreated her.” Tamra looked sour. “In any case, she and her daughters, one of whom became the Messenger of the True People, returned to the cradle of humanity, to Earth. I am a direct descendant. And I have been chosen. Because there is no human here. It is my destiny.”

Kendrew made a rude noise.

“Quit this nonsense, Tamra,” he said harshly. “You have no more been chosen than I have. It was pure accident that brought us here –”

“Don’t blaspheme!” Tamra leapt to her feet. “I have been chosen, I tell you! This – person – is not even human. I was sent back here, by the Messenger herself. When the Möbius Construct is destroyed by the Heebies and you are all killed, I shall escape and be rescued. I shall become the First Ancestor and all shall be put right.”

“Barmy,” Kendrew muttered.

“No, no, no! I tell you, you cannot prevent it from being destroyed.”

“In our time,” Nerina said patiently. “True, it has happened in our time, where we came from. But Tamra, it does not have to be destroyed now, in this time. We can save it.”

“If we do that,” Metallica added, “we shall make a new future, which will run parallel to, but which will be different from, the future we came from.”

Tamra was becoming hysterical. “But there is no human here to be the First Ancestor. I have been chosen, I tell you. *Me*.” Tamra clutched her hands to her chest and Kendrew shook his head.

Chapter 33

Kyri had had enough.

“We shall discuss this later. I am having difficulty getting my head around the fact you do genuinely seem to be from the future – and I am sure you also are finding this idea of being sent into the past, however it happened, just as difficult.” She looked at Metallica. “We do have some time, don’t we? Time for us to work out what has happened and how we are going to deal with it.”

“And with the Heebies,” Kendrew said.

Nerina stood up, and Starn’s family group followed suit.

“I would like the opportunity to clean myself up a bit,” she said. “And maybe I can find something for Yuri to eat.” She chuckled. “When he condescends to wake up, that is.”

“What do you feed him?” asked Adra and Nerina shrugged.

“Basically whatever I eat. But if he feels anything like the way I do, he’s probably very thirsty by now.”

“Of course,” Kyri said. “The guide robots will accompany you all to suitable accommodation.”

Mobia’s voice broke in.

“Kyri, I have been having a fascinating time communicating with the mind of the Helya. She was originally a living brain, but was transposed into a computer system.”

“That’s interesting.”

“Yes. It appears to have worked in much the same way as in the past the minds of all the Caretakers were absorbed into my core.”

Metallica blinked. “Are you organic, Mobia?”

“In a way, yes. And you?”

“Ah, my mind is composed of circuits and positronic pathways.” Metallica was frank. “I suppose, to be blunt about it, I am a machine. A very highly developed machine, but a machine nonetheless.”

“You’re an android,” Kyri said and she nodded.

“Surely in this time you are familiar with androids?”

“Yes, but they’re not quite as human seeming as you,” Kyri admitted. “Mostly they really are not more than highly advanced robots.”

“In fact, if I may make an observation,” Mobia interrupted, “Metallica has far more in common with me. She, and Helya, the mind of their escape craft, can think for themselves. They do not depend on being given instructions. In fact, they are capable of reasoning like people do.”

“Mmm.” Kyri eyed the android with new respect and not a little concern. “That is somewhat disconcerting.”

Metallic shook her head. “I am not going to go berserk and become a destroyer,” she said, a glimmer of amusement in her eyes. “I am not a robot, to be totally controlled by the Three Laws, but I am – how would you put it? A decent person.”

Kyri chuckled. “I see.”

“There is something else we need to ask of you,” Metallica said. “We are the survivors of an attack by the Heebies on a larger space vessel. On our craft, the Helya, we have a body. He was alive, barely, when we all escaped, but he failed to recover from stasis. We would like to give him a proper and respectful space burial. What facilities do you have here for such an event?”

“That can most certainly be done,” Kyri assured her. “Is he still in the Helya?”

“Yes.”

“We have a small special airlock and ejector set up for such occurrences,” Kyri explained. “Although in the past the majority of people who actually died on the Möbius Construct opted for cremation, there were those who, for one reason or another, a space burial was the preferred choice. Shall I send robots with a trolley to transfer the body?”

“Please.” Metallica knew she was capable of performing this task, but was satisfied to leave it to Kyri’s robotic aids. “There is one thing; we do not know his identity, but it is possible there are identifying tags on him. it would be preferable to give the body a name.”

“Of course.” Kyri turned to address Mobia. “Please see this is done, Mobia. And we can make a time for a ceremony if you all wish to attend.”

Chapter 34

Nerina

When I had cleaned myself up and had both a snack and a nap I returned to the command centre, to find only Kendrew there.

“Metallica and Kyri have gone back to the Helya, to take care of the body, and also, I suspect, to have a gossip,” he explained. “They get on well together, those two.”

“They do indeed.”

Kendrew leaned back and regarded me quizzically. “You’re wondering, aren’t you, about Metallica and me?”

“Mmm.” I felt myself blush; I’m old now but my face has always given me away. “You are...an unlikely pair.”

“True.” He snorted disparagingly.

“You’re a soldier – were a soldier?”

“A long time ago.”

“And you’re not a Terran, are you? From Earth?”

“Some of my ancestors were. There are many species in the galaxy, Nerina. As you well know. Many of the humanoids can inter-procreate. Hence there’s a real mix everywhere. A damn good thing too, if you ask me. People like that Tamra and her meeping about being ‘pure’ humans give me the shits.”

I smiled. “Yes. I have the feeling our Lady Tamra is in for a rather large culture shock.”

“Oh yes? Tell me.”

“Kyri *is* the only person on the Möbius Construct, apart from us, and the Glass People. They are very clearly not Tamra’s ancestors – uh, no pun intended –“

“I should bloody well hope not.” He stopped suddenly and grinned. “Oh. Nerina. Are you telling me that Kyri is the ancestor of the True People?”

I nodded. “I believe so. And that’s not all.” I lifted Yuri out from his sling. He opened his eyes, looked at Kendrew and yawned, then promptly fell asleep again. “He’s a xinbaa, remember. I told you, feline ancestry but with strains of other creatures, and genetically added, ah, bits.” I looked at the sleeping Yuri. “Mostly sloth, I sometimes think.”

“And –?” he prompted me. Dammit, he’d quite sidetracked me from asking more about him and Metallica.

“I think if we did a genetic test on my Yuri and Kyri’s pretty grey cat – which is also and coincidentally named Yuri – or maybe on the female cat Vali – there might be more similarities than differences.”

He chuckled. “A DNA test and comparison between Tamra and Kyri might be interesting, too, I reckon.”

“Quite so.”

We contemplated that idea. It boggled my mind and at the same time amused me. Tamra’s reaction, were such a thing done, could be interesting. I resisted the urge to giggle and instead looked at him again.

“You were a soldier. Did you enjoy that? Was that how you met Metallica?”

“No. And no.” My dismay at the harshness of his response must have shown on my face.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t mean –”

Kendrew shook his head. “I always thought I would enjoy being a soldier. My father was, and his father before him. My grandfather died before I was born, from the scabbing disease.”

“That’s horrible.”

“Yes. Sores that bleed, and spread, and seem to heal. They scab, and under them the microbes are burrowing into the skin. The Heebies introduced that one. My father – he killed himself when he knew he’d got it too.”

“I’m sorry I started this, Kendrew. It really is none of my business.”

“No.” He looked at me directly. “I *wanted* to be a soldier, to kill the Heebies. But, not the first assignment I got, but not long afterwards, we weren’t after them at all. We were sent to a small planet – Dramia, it was called – out near the Rim, where there had been a civilian uprising. We were to suppress it and punish the instigators. And their families.”

“Oh.” I didn’t think I wanted to hear any more and my expression must have told him. He shook his head in disgust.

“I signed up to fight, not to be a butcher. After that, I quit. I never even got one shot off at the Heebies. Might be good to have a go at them now. You know, at the moment, there is only one small ship belonging to the Heebies and they are all on it. Get rid of it and we get rid of them all.”

“Nice thought,” I agreed. Then I gave him a long hard look. ‘You – ah – quit the Army?’”

He shrugged. “Well, maybe not quite so much quit as deserted.”

“Oh.”

Chapter 35

He shook his head as Metallica and Kyri returned to the command centre. The Caretaker busied herself at a console on the other side of the room while the android came up and slipped into the seat beside him. He looked at her sideways.

“Nerina’s been giving me the third degree about you and me.”

She smiled. “I hope you told her lots of lies.”

“Actually, he didn’t tell me anything. Then we got on to the topic of the Heebies. D’you realise that’s the only Heebie ship in the galaxy? Destroy it, and we destroy them all. Forever.”

“I wish it were that easy. In this timeline, yes, we can destroy them. But our time, the one we came from, can *not* be changed.”

“Damnation,” I muttered.

“However, I do agree with Kendrew that it would be a good idea to take the opportunity to destroy them in this timeline.”

“We just need to work out how. And we need the help of the Glass People.”

“Yes. I believe they know a great deal more about the Heebies than they are willing to admit.”

“If we cannot destroy them, might we be able to make them return to wherever it was they came from. The Glass People know about the Heebies, y’know. Every time Kyri mentions them, she tells me, they get all het up and disappear to all ends of the place.”

“Almost as if they’ve got a guilty conscience.”

“I wonder if that’s it. If they know where the Heebies come from, and if they feel they’re in some way responsible.”

“Could be so.” Metallica looked at me and smiled. “Now, about Kendrew and his desertion –”

“You know? He’s told you?” I blinked; this I hadn’t imagined.

“Oh yes.” She looked at him and went on smoothly. “Will you tell her all about it, Kendrew, or shall I?”

He leaned back and motioned with his hand. “You, I think. You tell it better than I do. And you have all the extra, ah, inside information. I was just trying to save lives. Civilian lives.”

“Right.” She put her fingers to her mouth and paused, as if deciding where to start.

“A long time ago, back when Kendrew had just enlisted, I was part of the Security forces. I haven’t always been a Free Android. My work wasn’t always enjoyable.”

“That was when we first met.” Kendrew, it seemed, wasn’t going to let her do all the telling after all. He went on. “When I realised what we were expected to do, on Dramia, I didn’t so much quit as desert. And, um, after that I joined the rebels and led a further uprising against the Galactic Army.” He looked both sour and satisfied at the memory. “We ended up throwing them off the planet and getting independence.”

“Ah, so that’s who you are. I’ve heard of you. You did a good thing there.” The rebellion he had led, over ten years previously, had cost the Galactic Army dearly. “But what about you, Metallica? You didn’t turn rebel too, did you?”

“No.” She shook her head. “I was set to track him down. And I did so, without a great deal of difficulty. But then –”

“Her empathy chip started working properly,” Kendrew said, but there was a tone of affection in his voice.

“Hmm. I like mysteries,” I said. “I’m an historian, as you know, and I love delving into the past. There are many unexplained events in the past. Who built Stonehenge and why, who made some of the strange artefacts on Earth and Mars and Io. My favourite is the question of who really murdered the sons of Edward IV. I just like history, I suppose.” I stopped; when I get going on my hobbyhorse I get carried away and could tell by his glazed expression I had lost him. Metallica though was smiling encouragingly.

With an effort I came back to the present. “Which brings us to another mystery. No one ever heard of you after that rebellion. Dramia applied for and received independence and that was it. Well done. It was assumed you had been killed. But there was never any body.”

His lip curled. “An oversight on my part. I really should have provided one. Not my own, of course. But I didn’t. Metallica and I, well, we’ve been together ever since.”

“How did you get to be a Free Android?” I asked.

Kendrew chuckled. “We won the Galactic Lottery. Umpteen million credits. Enough to buy her freedom and a new identity for me.”

I laughed. “I do like that. Nice to see someone who deserves it win it.”

“Exactly.”

Metallica got to her feet and looked down at me seriously. “It really doesn’t matter anymore, this past history, but we would both ask you keep this to yourself. The, er, Lady Tamra would be horrified and it’s not something Starn and his family need to know.”

“Um, they don’t come from Dramia, do they?” I asked and she shook her head.

“No, but the story of the rebellion is well known. Best to put it behind us, I think. It doesn’t matter anymore and we have a far more pressing problem in the Heebies at the moment.”

“Yes.”

Chapter 36

During the time they spent in their cabins, eating and drinking and so on, the Lady Tamra endeavoured further to rearrange recent events to suit her view of the cosmos.

She was disgusted, appalled and had been humiliated. She, along with three other representatives of the True People, had been on a mission to planets in the Tatiana system, to preach their right to recognition as a superior race.

She had anticipated success – a glowing welcome and enthusiastic audiences. Instead, they had been housed in inferior accommodation, fed sub-standard fare, and subjected to rude heckling at their public appearances. Their departure from the Tatiana system had been early, precipitated by the injury, slight though it was, to one of her companions.

Tamra had spent most of her time on the star ship writing indignant and irate letters back to those who had so badly mishandled their Tatiana itinerary. The rest of the time she had spent deciding what legal steps the True People could take upon her return to Earth. Naturally – and regrettably – they could not see to the annihilation of the offending populations. However a strongly worded missive would help to sustain some, though very little of the indignities they had suffered.

When the alarm was given, Tamra had been alone, simply walking and mentally reviewing the punishment she would like to be able to mete out. It was horrifying to realise their ship had been attacked by the Heebies. According to all the histories of the True People, it had been the Heebies who had destroyed the space station where the First Ancestor – Blessed and Revered be her name! – had dwelled.

It had never once occurred to Tamra to question any of her beliefs. They were far too comforting, boosting her ego and providing purpose for her life. She hadn't even considered the bizarre reference to the First Ancestor; it was a recorded fact that her daughters and granddaughters had commenced the cult, but her real name was never ever mentioned. In fact, very few of the True People even knew it. Tamra was not one of them, and that stung.

There was even a legend, infrequently mentioned and never discussed in polite circles, that the First Ancestor had also had a son who had refused to participate in any way in his sisters' beliefs. Fantasies, in fact, was how he had been reputed to refer to them once. *Unbelievable*. And totally unacceptable.

Realising they had been rescued and taken into a docking bay on the legendary Möbius Construct – and then encountering the Caretaker, Kyri – tipped Tamra from mild craziness to full scale insanity. She had been chosen; she had to have been chosen, for a second chance for the True People. She would become the First Ancestor, and all her descendants would be of the True People. There would be no divisions between them, and she would be both revered and loved. The non-human Kyri could not possibly be the First Ancestor. Such a thing was unthinkable. Why, the woman – humanoid – possessed too many fingers and toes! And the colour of her skin! And her hair! No way could she have been one of the Lady Tamra's ancestors, no matter how distant. Actually, she looked rather more like a progenitor of that brutish and common ex-soldier. Similar physical characteristics. Very low types.

All her life Tamra had been, though a member of the True People, unloved and often disliked, even by those to whom she was close. There was something lacking in her make-up, some empathy she simply did not possess. She was single minded and dedicated, able to draw a mental line and say, 'This side is what I believe. Therefore it is true and right. But this side I do not believe, and therefore is it wrong.' In many ways, she was to be pitied, although she would have angrily rejected that pity or even a suggestion of it.

Although Tamra considered friendship with those who were not members of the True People an impossibility, during their brief sojourn on the *Sejanor* and the exchange of information of all these companions, she might be able to have a decent conversation with the old historian, Nerina. After all, she was human, and from Earth, and well educated. Sadly, she also seemed to have an affinity for the lower members of their group, and that abomination of a machine who dared call herself a free android. An impossibility! Androids were a little higher than computers or robots, but they were not human! The concept that they just might have some kind of self-awareness was beyond her capability to grasp.

When Tamra returned to the command centre, it was to find Metallica had been telling Kyri about their escape from the Heebies' attack. Between Mobia and Helya, they had discovered the path of the escape craft had been diverted and they had headed through the Uncharted Zone. There, they had encountered a rift in space and time, which had resulted in a surge of energy which had booted them back in time and across the galaxy. Fortunately their

passage close by the Möbius Construct had been noticed, and Mobia had brought them aboard.

“For which,” Nerina assured her, “we shall be forever grateful. Taking a dive into the sun would not have been fun.”

“We hit a space time warp?” Tamra asked and Nerina nodded.

“Seems like it. There are all kinds of unexplained phenomena in the Uncharted Zone. We’re lucky it wasn’t something worse. Someone must have been looking after us, I think.”

Tamra’s face brightened. This fitted in with her cosmic view.

“Then that’s it, you see. Has to be! It wasn’t just some accident, some freak of nature, that sent us back here. I *was* chosen. I’m the one. I have been blessed, praise be to the First Ancestor. She has chosen *me*.” She lifted her right hand to touch her left shoulder and drew the fingers down. Across the control deck from her, Kyri smiled serenely and stroked her grey cat. Nerina looked from one to the other and her face twitched with amusement.

Kendrew rolled his eyes.

“Barmy,” he commented and Tamra gave him a filthy look.

“You – you don’t believe in anything. Don’t mock one of the True People.”

Chapter 37

Starn took Kendrew aside. “We’re going to go explore this place. The children are restless, and there’s precious little either Melora or I can do here. I work with my hands, Kendrew, not my brain. If the AIs and Metallica can’t work out some plan between them to save this place, then I’m damned sure there’d be nothing I could do to help.”

Kendrew shrugged. “Well, you’re armed, Kyri assures us the place is safe and you might as well do that.” He grinned. “Hey, by the time you come back we might even have worked out how to zap the Heebies and get us back home.”

Starn’s smile was very faint. “Yeah, joke. Maybe the former, but for sure not the latter. There’s no way we can go home, and I’m not entirely sure I’m sorry. There are

opportunities here, for when the Heebies are defeated. And a new future, the way it sounds. That's good enough for us." He clapped Kendrew on the shoulder. "Kyri gave us communicators, so we'll keep in touch."

"Take care, farmer."

Starn grinned back at him as he and his family loaded themselves onto the monorail carriage to, as Melora put it, 'go and see what we can see'.

Before they had done so, he had however spent time at one of the consoles on the command deck. Mobia very obligingly produced a map for him on a portable device, showing all the areas of the Möbius Construct and their functions. Habitats posing dangers of any kind, such as one designed for non-oxygen breathers, and another for water-dwellers, were clearly marked. The entrances to them were plainly marked on the Möbius Construct itself, Mobia assured him, and there were safeguards in place to prevent breaching of the special habitats. He asked whether there were any places set up as planetary surfaces, hoping to find a place where he and his family could remain. He had every confidence in the combined abilities of Metallica, Nerina, Kyri and Mobia to prevent the Heebies from destroying the Möbius Construct in this time. The concept of parallel but different timelines had not particularly boggled him; in fact he had given it very little deep thought. If Metallica was satisfied such things existed, and Kendrew also, he had no worries.

Starn was impressed with the Möbius Construct and its lay out and varying parts. He chuckled to himself when he read through the information on the area where the Zoo had been planned, and for a while had functioned. Sadly, as numbers of visitors continued to decline, the work involved in maintaining the zoo exceeded any benefits, and it seemed the majority of the animals had been removed.

A few remained, Mobia said, and for that reason one of the Zoo habitats was closed and clearly marked with warning signs. Starn, aware that to Adra and, to a lesser degree, Tem, such a sign would be a challenge rather than a deterrent, requested Mobia to ensure the locks were child-proofed. He decided also to speak firmly to the children.

Another 'nature' area was marked safe, in spite of the fauna inhabiting it. Several species of creatures originally from Earth, Mobia explained. However, they were harmless to people, although one species did prey on another. There was grass for the group of herbivores, and the omnivores ate the smaller animals. This area had remained ecologically

balanced, although Kyri had arranged for some at least of the creatures to be taken on the last craft that left the Möbius Construct.

As for the residential, commercial, manufacturing and leisure areas, Starn had little interest, although he was interested in the layout around the ring. Like the others, he felt awed at its construction, although he was less curious about its original designers and engineers.

“Delta?” he asked. “What about Delta?”

“That is the planet on the other side of this system. There is another Star Jump there. It’s unusual,” Mobia explained, “for there to be two Star Jumps in one star system. They receive all the custom now.”

“Hmm. Nice for them,” Starn muttered. “What *did* happen to your Star Jump, Mobia?”

“It shut down. The reason is unknown. I suspect that the Glass People feel they are responsible, although the logic behind that is beyond me. It is also strange that they have remained here since their arrival. They are very highly developed technologically, and display a keen interest in everything. Kyri believed they would leave when possible, but they chose to stay here.”

“Mmm, yes. Adra and Tem have met them and talked with them.” Starn was thoughtful. “But it seems to me they are beginning to communicate telepathically rather than face to face. Some of the Glass People tend to appear more frequently than the others, and maybe they are the young of their species.”

He stretched and yawned and reached across to shut down the map. “Thank you, Mobia. You can observe us, anyway, can’t you? Let us know how things are going?”

“Certainly. In most of the areas and habitats I can hear you, so if you call, I shall answer.”

“That’s interesting. In all of them?”

“Not private accommodation, and unfortunately there are other areas where the sounds are not clear. I was unable to hear you all when you were in different areas making your way to the command centre after you first arrived.”

“Thank you, Mobia.”

“Starn, it is a pleasure. Kyri and I do hope that in spite of history, the Heebies may be defeated and this station will not be destroyed.”

Starn chuckled. “I believe Metallica and Kendrew are a match for the Heebies. With you as well,” he hastily added.

Chapter 38

So off they had gone, to return hours later, exhausted but impressed. Torrea and several of the other Glass People accompanied them. The habitat that had most impressed Starn was on the opposite surface of the Möbius Construct but close by the docking bay where the Helya sat in silent communication with Mobia.

“We found some *animals*, too!” Tem announced excitedly. Beside him Adra giggled at something one of the Glass People had said to her.

Kyri looked concerned. “What kinds of animals?”

“Dunno.” He shrugged. “What did you say they were, Adra? Funny big ones with long tails. They jumped around.” He gave a demonstration and Kyri nodded, relieved.

“Ah, those are kangaroos. From Earth.” She gave Starn a sideways glance. “They’re partial to grass, so if you decided to star a farm, we’ll have to relocate them to another habitat. I had hoped all the creatures had been rescued, but it seems a few were left. What else did you see?”

“Rabbits. Lotsa rabbits.”

“Hmm. Yes. All we had to miss were a couple of them. Any others?”

“We saw some reptiles,” Starn said. “Snakes; pretty coloured ones.”

Kyri nodded. “They’re no problem. Pythons. They helped keep the rabbit population down.”

Adra gaped. “They – *eat* the rabbits?”

Before anyone could make a consoling comment, Tem turned to their father.

“Ooh, I hope we see a snake gobbling up a rabbit next time.”

Nerina coughed and Melora, aware of her children’s bloodthirsty natures, smiled.

“We’d like to stay here, if we may,” Starn said to Kyri. He grinned. “Well, after things are done to prevent its destruction, that is. But – who owns the Möbius Construct? Do I have to make an application to someone to be able to live here? Do I have to pay something?”

“I don’t own it,” she assured him. “I am simply the Caretaker. If you wish to stay here, then of course you may. But what do you intend to do?”

He explained. “We have found one of the habitats that has soil, *proper* soil, with all the necessary elements for growing crops and vegetables. There are gene stocks aboard, and from them we can grow animals. As well, there are areas where we can grow hydroponically. It could be a garden. Travellers would come from all over the system and even from all over the galaxy to stay here and see it.”

“And the children?” asked Nerina, obviously visualising a lone and hard existence for them.

“They have the whole of the Möbius Construct to explore. Things can only get better. You’ll see, this place is going to come alive again. The Heebies will be defeated, and maybe the Star Jump will reopen. There will be travellers coming and going soon.”

“I wish,” Kyri murmured. “I have always lived here. I can’t conceive of going somewhere else. That’s why I stayed, when everyone else left. I’ve been places before. When the Star Jump was still open, I travelled all over the galaxy. I was always glad to come home again.”

“But you can’t stay,” Tamra interrupted shrilly. “The Möbius Construct is going to be destroyed. *It has to be*. And I shall be the only survivor. I have been sent back here in time, for this precise purpose.”

Starn turned on her. “Shut up, you fool. We will not allow this place to be destroyed.”

Kendrew said slowly, “What will happen when we prevent its destruction? We are changing the past – how is that going to affect us? Metallica? Will our actions change the future?”

“Yes, and no.”

He rolled his eyes. “Ah, that’s what I get for asking a computer for a clear answer.” He and the android looked at each other, and behind them Nerina smiled again.

“What can we do?” Melora frowned. “In our past, this place was destroyed. It passed into legend, and although everyone knew that it had been destroyed by the Heebies, no one ever knew exactly why they destroyed it.”

“Because of the Glass People,” Adra said, trying to be patient with these oh so slow adults. “The Heebies and the Glass People are enemies, but I haven’t been able to get them to tell me *why* they’re enemies yet. Every time I ask they either fly away or change the subject. It’s annoying.” She stamped her foot for emphasis. Torrea and other others shimmered and flickered, but stayed put.

“Hmm.” Kendrew looked at Kyri. “What can you tell us about the Glass People? I had never heard of them before, until we came here. And they’re not very talkative.”

“The Heebies must have killed them all,” Metallica explained. “When they destroyed this, the Glass People may have all still been here –”

“I wish –” interrupted Kyri, “– that you would all stop talking about *this place* as having been destroyed. It’s my home.”

“At the moment,” Nerina said gently. “But, Kyri, in our time – five hundred years in the future – we know the Heebies totally destroyed the Möbius Construct. It’s an historical fact.”

“A fact in our time,” Metallica said, “but in this time it doesn’t have to be so. It’s possible that we can prevent it, turn things around and even defeat the Heebies.”

“And change the future?” asked Melora. “Can we do that?”

“Won’t we cease to exist, if we prevent the Möbius Construct from being destroyed? That will change events, won’t it? Won’t it prevent us from even being born?” Kendrew looked at Metallica. “Or from being, ah, constructed?”

“Assembled is the word we androids prefer to use. No, we have been born. We existed in what was our present, in order to return – however it happened – into our past. Nothing can change that. What we are planning to do here, is to set up an alternate future. I believe that a bifurcation in time commenced from the moment we arrived in this space/time region, even before Mobia observed us. Whatever happens from now on, it will not affect the future we came from. It will just make another one, existing with it, but not with it.”

Kendrew grunted. “Two futures, you mean? And different?”

“Put simply, yes. Nothing we do here and now will affect what has already happened, in our time. However, if we can prevent the Möbius Construct from being destroyed, it may well set up a better future. One without the war between the Heebies and everyone else.”

Nerina sighed and took up the thread of what Metallica had been saying. “They – the Heebies – destroyed the Möbius Construct. Utterly. It was their first really big target, and even in our time people are unsure why. It’s huge, certainly, but, well, more or less useless. The Star Jump is closed and no one – no one except you, that is – lives here. It’s always been a mystery. “She sighed. “I like mysteries but this is one I’ve never been able to work out. For maximum impact, I would have thought they’d pick a large and important target.”

“I’ve never been able to work out the connection between the Glass People and the Heebies,” Kyri admitted.

They all turned to look at Torrea. He and his people shimmered and disappeared en masse from the control deck.

“I don’t think they want to talk to us about it,” Melora observed mildly.

Chapter 39

Kendrew stood up. “That’s it,” he announced. “The Heebies came here specifically to destroy *them*. Everything else was just collateral damage. That was their real target.

Destruction of the Glass People. But why? What did they have against them? They're harmless."

"We're not likely to be able to scare the Heebies off, and we have no weapons to use against them."

"I wonder about that," Nerina said slowly. "Mobia, you know everything about the Möbius Construct, don't you?"

"I am the AI controlling the Möbius Construct. It would be surprising if there were anything about it I did not know," Mobia responded. "But –"

"So you know about the history of this place?"

"Of course. Everything. Everything from the beginning, when this station was first constructed."

"How long ago was that?"

"Ten thousand years ago, as you reckon time. However, as I would have informed you had you not interrupted me, some of my knowledge is concealed. I know it is all here, but I cannot retrieve it all."

"Why is that so?" asked Metallica. "If you have the information, you must give it to us."

"No."

Kendrew gave her a look. "Shame it's impossible to put thumbscrews on a computer." She frowned.

"Can you tell me why, Mobia? Do you require a specific command, or a code word, to give us what we need?"

"Yes. I need a descendant of the original builders, and they must know the commands to give."

"I have the feeling," Nerina said slowly, "that the descendants of those original builders may be a great deal closer than you realise."

"The Glass People!" shouted Adra.

“This is nonsense,” Tamra announced. “I refuse to be a part of it.” And she staked from the command centre.

Chapter 40

6200.07.24

(Approximately ten years previously, if the date system has lost you.)

The fragile-looking spaceship, gleaming like soap bubbles in the light from the sun, burst out of the Star Jump and swooped through the star system. Those aboard observed and admired the glittering twisted ring of the Möbius Construct hanging in space. It was something they had never seen before, but an image from deep within their racial memories told them they should also feel pride in this artefact.

What they did not observe was the fact that far behind them, the opening of the Star Jump contracted to a tiny point and disappeared.

The pilot of the galactic vessel the *Taurus*, following closely behind the shimmering spaceship managed to exit the Star Jump moments before it closed down.

The shutdown of the Star Jump by the Möbius Construct had had nothing whatsoever to do with the Glass people. It was a case of sabotage, pure and simple, and remained secret for a long time. The managers of the Star Jump on the other side of the system – the Delta Station – had decided that a full share of passing through traffic was far better than a part or half share, and had put that theory into practice. After all, the Star Jumps all linked through In Between, so one was going to be disadvantaged by the closure of one minor Star Jump. Only, of course, the people whose livelihood depended on it. They didn't count when profit was considered.

They did of course, placate their consciences somewhat by A, offering the displaced workers alternative employment, albeit at lower pay rates and less pleasant conditions and B, ensuring the closure could at any time be undone – if they so chose and it was worth their while. After all, no one had been injured when the tiny explosive device detonated, and what was one less Star Jump? Nothing.

To the returning Glass People, of course, it was everything. By then they had become aware of the menace of the Heebies. No way were they going to be responsible for leading them into their home universe.

Past the system, the fragile vessel of the Glass People and all its crew revelled in their new found freedom. For the first time in their existence, they could roam and explore to their collective hearts' desire, beyond the confines of the In Between. Roam and explore they did, for over eight galactic standard years, finding more to fascinate and intrigue them every moment. They did not know what had happened to the Star Jump behind them.

Without a nearby Star Jump, the economy of the Möbius Construct fell into decline. It could no longer compete with the Delta System. A few at a time at first, and then in a steady stream, its inhabitants left for greener pastures. After eight, nearly nine years had passed, less than a hundred people, of various races, remained on the Möbius Construct. Buildings, landing bays, habitats, commercial, construction and residential areas became abandoned. But not neglected. The original computer controlled systems and robots maintained the Möbius Construct, semi deserted as it was, in perfect condition.

In the manner of all good inter stellar explorers, the people from In Between, now known by those they had encountered as the Glass People, due to their fragile – but deceptive – appearance, explored strange new worlds and sought out new civilizations and generally enjoyed widening their horizons.

They didn't intend any harm. They never ever did. The Glass People were explorers and scientists. They wanted to *know* things and like the legendary Galahad, their hearts were pure. Unfortunately they were also klutzes and rushed in where the angels would have retreated in horror.

For nearly nine galactic standard years the Glass People roamed this new universe. Previously, they had observed the vessels entering and passing through their space, and had wondered about them. There are a multitude of universes, so many believe. The realm from which the Glass People had come, In Between, was where space vessels travelled between the Star Jumps. Call it what you will – hyperspace, limbo, warp space, slipstream, In Between or anything else, it was not the same as Normal Space.

Eventually discovering an open Star Jump, they had watched and waited and built their vessel to escape and explore.

Their ship, fragile-looking but tough beyond belief, was barely visible to the eyes of those who existed in normal space. It shimmered in sunlight, but disconcerted viewers, who blinked, looked away and were unable to find it again. Hence, many stories arose regarding a 'ghost ship' that roamed the galaxy.

The Glass People themselves appeared as did their vessel – like fragile and multi coloured soap bubbles borne on the wind. Like their ship, they were tough. They were scientists and explorers. Before bursting from In Between to this universe, they had spent eons exploring their own place and knew it well. Often they observed the vessels passing through, and their exit points, and they had wondered just where these exits led.

In their past, according to records maintained for the past million or so years, groups of their kind had exited In Between and gone exploring and even building. But none of the current generation had previously left their homes.

Almost nine years after they entered normal space, they entered the region of space known to many as the Uncharted Zone. From the minimal contact they'd had with other races – eavesdropping and observation rather more than actual contact – the area had aroused their curiosity. It was a largely unexplored and generally avoided area of space, known to be fraught with dangers of all kinds. Just the sort of area that begged to be explored.

It was the same area of space that contained the temporal rift that almost five hundred years later threw Helya and her passengers back in time. The Glass People encountered a rift, not in time but in space itself. They flew into a Dark Vortex.

Chapter 41

Within was only darkness. Few stars shone, few planets orbited those suns and no other vessels existed. The Glass People looked upon the darkness and shuddered. Fear, an alien sensation, overwhelmed them and never afterwards left them. In the cold and the dark their vessel drifted, lost and alone.

Within the Dark Vortex there was an Intelligence. It was alone, as it had always been alone. And it was hungry. It detected the intruders, looked upon them, observed them and their vessel in minute detail. Then it recreated what it had seen.

The Intelligence however lacked empathy. It was a cosmic psychopath, imprisoned aeons before, when the galaxies were but a distant thought. It put itself into its creations. Unlike the Glass People, these were monsters, warped and evil in their thoughts. Their first act of aggression was instinctive; they attempted to blow the Glass People out of existence. Instead, they opened the Dark Vortex and both vessels burst back into normal space in the Uncharted Zone.

Filled with the terror they would always know, the Glass People fled from the Dark Vortex back towards the Star Jump by which they had originally entered this universe. Overwhelmed by the magnitude of their new existence and potential for dark deeds, their counterparts took the opposite direction and in evil delight, spread chaos through the galaxy.

The ship of the Glass People and the Glass People themselves resembled soap bubbles in the sunshine. The Heebies, as they quickly came to be known, on the other hand, reminded those who encountered them of oily rainbows on black water, dark and threatening. For far too many inhabitants of the galaxy, the dark ship, and later, ships of the Heebies were the last sights they would ever see.

For some reason the Heebies never showed any interest in using the Star Jumps. Possibly because they remembered they had arrived in this universe via a vortex, similar to a Star Jump, and had no wish to tempt fate.

Chapter 42

“That woman is deluded, I suspect,” Kyri observed. Metallica nodded and Nerina opened her mouth.

Kendrew however got in first. “Deluded? Barmy. Totally, completely and utterly stark raving mad.”

“Kyri, we don’t have much time.”

“What?”

“I have been conferring with your AI. She tells me that she has detected a vessel of the Heebies approaching this star system. It will be here in five days’ time.”

“And –?”

“In the future we came from, they utterly destroyed the Möbius Construct. The Glass People probably also perished. We have no records of them in our own time. You, apparently, escaped and became Tamra’s revered First Ancestor.” This idea clearly amused the android but she was grave as she continued. “It is my belief that we can circumvent this disaster and make a new future.”

Kendrew frowned. “What happens to us, then?”

"Listen, Kendrew. We have gone through this before. We are here, therefore we have been born – well, in my case, constructed – and we do exist. Nothing that we say or do now – here – can change that. But we may be able to avoid certain events occurring. That is, the destruction of the Möbius Construct. This will change the future –"

"And you all might not be born after all?" Kyri suggested. Metallica smiled.

"But we *have* been born. We are here. Let's be logical about this, shall we? Things we say here and thing you do may change your future. Then it will be a different future from the one we came from. It might even be a better one. The future we came from will still exist, side by side with any new one you may make. It is not a new theory, as I am sure you are aware, that at major events a divergence can occur, and the time line may therefore be split."

Kyri looked at her very seriously.

"It is a risk, is it not? To you?" Nerina, understanding Metallica’s words, laughed.

"We are not going to suddenly disappear in a puff of smoke, if we say or do something which may cause us never to have been born."

Kyri stared at them all.

"Nerina – Metallica – are you sure that telling me all this isn't going to affect the future? *Your* future?"

Nerina smiled.

"I think, from what we do know about it, that changing the future might be an excellent idea." She shrugged. "If Metallica's theory is correct, it will change nothing that has already happened in our time line – that will still exist, and our pasts will be unchanged. But you can create a new alternative future as well. This future will be different – and I hope better – than the future, from here, that is already our past."

"So," Kendrew said cheerfully, "all we need to do is talk the Heebies out of destroying the Möbius Construct, chase them back where they belong, and re-open the Star Jump. Nothing, really."

Starn grunted and made a, for him, callous observation. "Destroying the bastards would be a damn sight better."

Nerina nodded enthusiastically. "I agree entirely, Starn I've lost far too many friends to those horrors."

Kyri turned and gave Nerina a quick look. "Are you sure that – in your time – I was the only one to escape?"

"Yes. To Tamra, the survivor of the Möbius Construct is a revered ancestor. And she has, in her own mind, twisted matters around to fit what she has always been taught about her progenitor."

"Me." Kyri looked sour. She lifted her hand, showing the extra finger on each hand. "Such a small difference. But enough, in her eyes, to rule me as non-human and therefore not her – what did she call it? – First Ancestor."

"Mmm." Nerina lifted Yuri so he was against her shoulder, and stroked him with two fingers, eyeing the other woman and nodding at the realisation in her face.

"Oh. So that's where that movement of hers came from." She shook her head. "It would be funny if it weren't so sad."

Kendrew regarded Kyri very seriously.

"In our time," he said slowly, "after you were rescued from the life capsule, you met and married a man, and went to live on a Rim world. But after your children were born, you and your daughters went to Earth. Your partner and son remained there." He held up his

hands. “They and many of their descendants have two thumbs. He had the extra thumb, and you have the six fingers. You have six toes, too, don’t you?”

She nodded slowly. Metallica gave a chuckle and Nerina, catching on, smiled broadly.

“Ah, so this means that there is a possibility that you and Tamra are both descendants of Kyri. Almost cousins,” the android said, smirking. Kendrew pulled a face.

“Gods forbid!”

“That’s in *our* time,” Nerina said briskly. “In the time we came from. The future in this timeline will be different. *We are* going to save the Möbius Construct, Kyri. We promise you that.”

“Yeah,” Kendrew drawled. “Just gotta figure out how.”

Chapter 43

“Torrea!” Kyri waited and then repeated her call, raising her voice slightly. “Torrea, you must come and speak with us. This is very important. All our lives depend on it. Please.”

There was no response. She turned towards the AI. “Mobia, where are they? Are they hiding?”

“They are coming. They are all coming.”

And then the command centre was filled with shimmering bodies. Adra and Tem gasped with delight and ran to them, hugging their friends. Melora watched while Starn, at first taken aback, relaxed as the children came back, hand in hand with two of the Glass People.

“Mama, Papa, this is Emeria, and this is T’leria. They are our friends.”

Both of the Glass People held out their hands and smiled. To Melora’s surprise, the apparently fragile forms were solid, feeling almost human. Their bodies shimmered, indeed like the soap bubble rainbows, but she suspected they were a great deal tougher than they looked. They were humanoid in shape – two arms, two legs and a distinct neck and head set atop bodies. Their dimensions varied; some were short and chunky while others were slender

and tall. Melora even caught sight of a group sporting tails and another with trailing tentacles from their heads. The colours varied too; some were classic soap bubble rainbows while others tended to bright or muted shades. But the light reflected off all the scattered bodies, filling the command centre with rainbows.

All around, the Glass People were greeting Kyri and her cats and the survivors of the *Sejanor*. Yuri the cat sniffed in disdain, but submitted to being stroked. Yuri the xinbaa opened his eyes, blinked and yawned and to Nerina's surprise, when she held him out to Torrea, the small animal purred, allowed himself to be taken into his arms, then rubbed against him.

Him? Nerina wasn't sure; were the Glass People male and female, or neutral, or something else again? Her natural curiosity fought against her politeness and she stored that question to put to them later, possibly in private.

Kendrew simply stared and shook his head. Familiar with the ugly and dangerous in the galaxy, he felt a sense of wonder at these creatures.

Metallica was quickly surrounded by them, as fascinated with her as she was with them.

"We need your help," Kyri said to Torrea. "These people have come here from our future. And they have told us that this place will be destroyed."

"It was destroyed," Metallica said. "In our time, five hundred years in the future, we know it was destroyed. The Heebies did it."

At that name, there was a shudder of disquiet among the Glass People and some looked ready to flee, but Torrea stood his ground and none of them disappeared.

Torrea frowned. "If it was destroyed in your time, what can you do now? It has happened."

"True. In the future we came from. But we can change the future that will follow *this* here and now. I am certain of this. But we need your help to defeat the Heebies."

"We know of the Heebies." He sighed, shame faced. "They are us."

"What?"

“So that’s why you all disappeared every time they were mentioned!”

“Yes. It is a long and sad story. Shameful and painful for us.” He looked at Metallica. “Tell me, in your time, are the Heebies still around?”

She nodded. “Yes. In fact they were responsible for the destruction of the ship we were all travelling in. There has been war between them and every other race in the universe since their arrival.”

Torrea seemed to shrink in on himself. “Our doing,” he muttered. “All our doing. We should never have come out from In Between. Better that we should never have been born than to bring such an evil upon the universe.”

“You didn’t intend it, whatever it was,” Nerina said. “And with your help, we can destroy them in this time. The future you help us make will be free of them and their menace.”

“Can this be so?” Melora asked. “Can we really change the future?”

“*This* future,” Metallica said gently. “Not the future we came from. That has happened and nothing will change it.”

“No,” Kendrew interrupted. “Let’s not get started on all this again. My head is still spinning. Let’s just accept it as a given fact, and get on with making it happen. Getting rid of the Heebies while we can. That we can do.”

“Yes.” Kyri touched Torrea’s arm. “But we do need your help. Tell me, Torrea – your distant ancestors built the Möbius Construct, didn’t they?”

“We believe so.”

“And in all that time, has it ever had any weaponry systems?”

“It does, but they, and their use are well concealed.” He sighed. “Our far distant ancestors also came out from In Between, as you call it, and they made this space station to be used as an access point for the Star Jump by it.”

“They made all this?” said Nerina. “That is incredible.” She beamed around at the others. “One of those mysteries I’ve always wanted to know the answer to. No one ever knew for sure.”

Torrea shrugged, his body reflecting light everywhere as he did so.

“We...knew. In a way. But it was so long ago. When we came out into this universe, we saw it, and it touched something in our racial memories. Pride, I think, which was ultimately a bad thing for us all.”

He went on to tell them of the genesis of the Heebies, and how they had been unable to return to In Between. Rather than trying another Star Jump, they had decided upon a lifetime exile from their home, on the Möbius Construct. Bad enough that the Heebies were in this universe; leading them to In Between was unthinkable.

“We do not know what caused this Star Jump to cease operating. We do not believe it was anything we did, but in truth we don’t know. But the Heebies – they are all our fault.”

“And now you can set it right,” Nerina said gently.

“Can we?” Torrea’s expression was bitter. “We have caused so much damage and paid and destruction over the five hundred years between our time and yours. That cannot be erased.”

“Not in our time,” Metallica agreed. “But in the new future we aim to make, the Heebies will be absent. Totally. We promise you that.”

“We shall help you. Kyri, tell us what you want us to do.”

“Firstly, Mobia needs the codes or instructions to activate the weapons systems. In all the years the Möbius Construct has existed, it has never fired upon another vessel. But now, to save itself and us all, we need to be able to attack the Heebies when they arrive.”

Torrea nodded. He appeared solid and real now, and walked, or rather glided over to the console furthest from the AI’s main view screen. The keys were covered, but he pressed a key lock under the console and it lit up. He rested his hands on the controls, finger flickering rapidly, and lights on a small screen beside it suddenly lit up. Kyri blinked.

“I had often wondered what that console controlled. But it was always locked.”

“Now,” Torrea said gently, “it is unlocked, and when the Heebies approach, you can destroy them if you wish.”

Kendrew tilted his head. “Would it be better and wise, perhaps, to make them return to where they came from?”

Starn laughed. “And how do you propose to do that? Chase them with the Helya? Or the Glass People’s ship?”

“No. there has to be another way.”

“There is.”

Chapter 44

Tamra

They are insane, all of them talking about defeating the Heebies and preventing the destruction of the Möbius Construct. I cannot get them to listen to me. It doesn’t really matter anyway. They don’t count. *I* know what has happened. I have been chosen; I have been plucked from my own time and sent back here to this place here and now, to take the place of the First Ancestor. I shall be loved and revered forever. My daughters, and my daughters’ daughters, will become the one True People.

That awful creature who is here – Kyri, she calls herself – and that horrible animal she carries everywhere with her, and the other one like it that sneaks around like some little monster – they cannot possibly be anything to do with us, the True People. She’s not even human. It is impossible that she could have been the First Ancestor.

They give me a headache, with their continual blathering on about not being able to change the past, how time itself can fork and go off in different directions. They’re all too stupid to see this was all done for me. But I shall have to ensure they do not disrupt the task I have been given.

The Möbius Construct and everyone on it – except me, of course – must be destroyed. It *must*. And it is my sacred duty to ensure that it is.

Chapter 45

Kyri watched Metallica as the android stared thoughtfully at the holo Mobia projected. When Mobia was not projecting the holo of the Möbius Construct itself, everyone who looked saw her differently. According to Tem, she was his Dad, while Adra claimed to see her mother. Melora and Starn did not see their parents, but people they looked up to and admired. People they would undoubtedly have designated as superior to themselves. “What – *who* – do you see, Metallica?” she asked and the android turned to regard her.

“I see – Professor Bramwell. He was my creator.” She rubbed at her face; an almost human gesture. “We need to convince the Heebies that they are in great danger, so they will run – right back to that Dark Vortex the Glass People told us about. If they thought that another spaceship was about to attack them – a superior space ship that could destroy them, they might run rather than fight.” She tilted her head at Kendrew. “You didn’t see your father or mother, did you?”

“No.” He let out his breath slowly. “I saw the sergeant commander who trained me. He was a tough bastard. Twice my size and mean into the bargain. Bloody scary man. Well –” He shrugged. “Not a human man. His race considered themselves supermen, and believe me, they came pretty close to it too.”

“Tamra. Who do you see when you look at Mobia’s holo? When it is not simply the Möbius Construct itself.”

The other woman sniffed. “No one. I see no one. Just a blob in the air. What are you all planning? This is nonsense. You know. You can’t prevent what’s happened in the past from happening. You can’t change history. The Möbius Construct is going to be destroyed and I am going to be the First Ancestor. You cannot do anything to change that. You mustn’t.”

Nerina rolled her eyes. “You’re lying, Tamra. I know who you see when you look at Mobia. You see your precious First Ancestor and her face is –”

“No!” Tamra flew at the other woman, her nails raised, and Nerina recoiled in shock. Before any harm was done, Metallica was there, grasping her wrist and pulling her away.

“Don’t ever try to attack any one of us, Tamra.” She brought her face close to the twitching nose and now whimpering mouth and spoke very flatly. “I am not a robot,

remember. I am not bound by the First Law. I can very easily break your arm if I choose. So do not cross me. Understand?"

Shocked, Tamra backed away but Metallica's voice caught her.

"Now tell us, who do you see?"

"A – messenger of the First Ancestor. She was my teacher."

Nerina shook her head. "I was wrong. I thought you would have seen your First Ancestor."

"No." Tamra was whispering now. "No one knows what she looked like. It has always been forbidden to make any images of her. She is revered and as such, her face has always been hidden. But she was human, *human*, I tell you! She was not you!" This last was directed at Kyri, then she pulled free and ran from the area.

"Well," Kendrew said mildly. "She really doesn't like the idea of you being her umpteenth grandmother, does she now?"

Kyri stared after the other woman in bewilderment. "Most of the time I have no idea what she is talking about. But she is dead set on this place being destroyed."

"We are dead set on it not being destroyed," Metallica said. "And I promise you, Kyri, my word as a Free Android, that I will do everything possible to ensure it endures. Now I must go and find Torrea."

"Before you do that, just a minute," Nerina said. She indicated Mobia's holo. "Tell us, Kyri, how Mobia does that. How does she influence how we see her?"

"Can she read our minds?" suggested Kendrew. "That's a bit ... worrying."

"I don't know, really. I do not understand how it works. She has tried to explain it to me, but the most I can understand is that when you see her, your own mind decides how to decipher the form, unless she has specifically set it as her default image. She cannot read human, or organic minds. But she can communicate with the AI of your escape pod."

"Helya? That's interesting. Can she communicate directly with me?" asked Metallica.

“Indeed I can. But I have never encountered your – species? Would that be the correct term?” asked Mobia.

Metallica shrugged. “I’m not entirely sure. I am not unique. Androids are common all over the known worlds. We come in all varieties and forms. It depends on the purpose for which we have been intended.”

“Mobia, why do you appear in difference ways?” Nerina asked directly. “Is there a reason for it?”

“Many species require or are simply more comfortable with a visual reference point. Instead of just an amorphous blob.” There was something like a chuckle in the AI’s voice, and for a moment her holo flickered and they all saw nothing more than a glowing indistinct shape. “When I was created, my makers utilised a program that allowed those who saw my holo, if I chose not to make it the image of the Möbius Construct, to adjust in their minds what they saw. It is not of my doing. I cannot influence who or what you see. That choice is within your own minds.”

“It seems that when we look at your holo, our minds reflect back what we would see if we were to regard ourselves, but slightly superior, or more worthy, in our views?”

Mobia seemed to consider. Then: “I do believe that is an accurate, if somewhat simplified, way of describing the process and the result. It is also how most people do see me.” There was a tone almost of complacent humour in the computer’s voice. “As a somewhat superior version of themselves.”

“Mmm...and what would happen, Mobia, if that, ah, ability, program, whatever, was installed or downloaded to a space going vessel? After all, when ships are approaching the Möbius Construct, they see it as it is, and not as something just that little more superior...what if they *did* see another vessel as something greater?”

Metallica looked at the human woman. “Nerina, you have a very devious mind.”

“You are correct. If I were to – copy, not transfer – my visual recreational default to a small craft, for example, your Helya, she would then appear to any possible aggressor as a superior vessel. Slightly, but measurably superior.”

Kendrew blinked. “Nerina, I like the way you think. Let’s get Torrea and his mates in here. Then let’s go scare the Heebies right out of this universe and back where they came from.”

From where she had stopped, just beyond the command centre, Tamra had overheard this discussion and her face twisted. No. it was her sacred duty to ensure the destruction of the Möbius Construct and nothing would be allowed to come in her way. Not even an AI. She had to safeguard the future, even at the cost of these people and their lives. Against the True People, they were nothing.

How? How could she work against them all, to ensure she saved the future and the True People? What could she do? She had spoken the truth when she claimed to have seen the messenger of the First Ancestor. That First Ancestor, as she had been taught, from her earliest childhood, was a perfect human, found drifting in space. Her messenger was the title her daughter had claimed.

The Möbius Construct had to be destroyed, and she had to escape from it. Alone. That much was clear. She would have to establish communication with the Heebies, would have to warn them of the deception Mobia and the others were planning. Forewarned, they would be forearmed; events would proceed as they had, in that distant future from which she had come – had been sent – and it would be saved.

Not for one moment did she consider the effect upon the others. They did not matter. Only she and the True People mattered. She made her way back to the monorail station and keyed in the instructions for the carriage to take her back to the docking bay where the Helya still sat. It would be her escape. However, she had to get there before they were able to meddle with its AI.

Chapter 46

Tem was miffed. He and Adra had started off together, and she was supposed to be looking after him. But instead she had joined up with some of the Glass People and had gone off with them. They were teaching her to teleport herself and she had quite forgotten about him. It wasn’t fair! Well, the Glass People were trying to teach him, too, but he hadn’t quite

got the hang of it yet. He would, but, and soon, and then he'd be better at it than Adra. He would!

He was sitting quietly, not exactly sulking, but waiting for them to realise they'd gone off without him, which was exactly what Papa and Mama had told Adra not to do. Of course, he was all right by himself. He was eight years old and not afraid of anything. Besides, there was nothing on this space station to be afraid of. Only the animals in the habitats that they couldn't even get into.

He and Adra and their mother had been to look in one of those, through what Kyri had said was a force field which could not be broken. They had stood together and watched the dragon-like reptile inside as it stalked backwards and forwards, watching them just the same way they were watching it. He'd read about dragons before, in his EBook, and this didn't seem like a real dragon. It didn't have wings, and instead of eating people, it seemed happy to tear up grass and plants and gobble them up.

Kyri had said it was behind a force field for its own safety; when people saw something as fierce as this one – an orabanda dragon, she had called it – they would assume it was dangerous and try to kill it. That, she said, was when the animal could be dangerous. It would fight back, and it had big claws and teeth.

Tem was so quiet, sitting there, that when the Lady Tamra stalked past, she failed to notice him. He saw her, though, and snickered to himself as she went past, muttering to herself. Where, he wondered, was she going? Well, he could find out. No one liked the Lady Tamra, but he and Adra had been told always to be very polite to her. He had overheard Mama saying to the old lady that poor Tamra probably couldn't help being the way she was, the things she'd been taught about herself.

But he thought she was just plain weird. Careful not to make any noise, he picked himself up and followed her. She didn't hear him, didn't even seem to be worried about anyone following her. Instead of using one of the skooters or even the monorail, she walked, waving her arms and jerking her head as she talked to herself. She did look a bit scary when she did that, but he wasn't scared of her.

She walked through the library area, as old Nerina Shaw called it, not even bothering to look at any of the books or pictures or funny ornaments there. Instead, she hopped onto the blue transporter square and was gone.

Tem hesitated. Maybe he should go back and wait for Adra, or call her? No, he wouldn't. He was gonna follow Tamra and see what she was gonna do. He jumped onto the blue square, pressed the marker and was on the other side of the floor. He thought about it as a floor. Like the others, Tem had managed easily enough to get his head around the concept of artificial gravity when applied to a Möbius strip floating in space.

Ah, he knew where they were now. Along this corridor and through a big workshop area, and they'd be back where the Helya was parked. He wondered if maybe Tamra wanted to go talk to the AI. Poor Helya, she couldn't run off or make some excuse not to listen, if Tamra wanted to talk to her. He didn't go through the door, but lifted his head to peer through the wide window into the docking bay area.

Chapter 47

Helya's craft sat as they had left it – how long? Three days at least previously, when they had landed on this place. They had all made trips back to it for varying reasons. Melora had accompanied Adra and Tem to fetch the bag Adra had left there when they had first hurried aboard. From it, with a grin of triumph which was mirrored by her brother, Adra had produced a small flat device she called her Ebook. She had dug around inside the bag and handed a similar item to Tem, and for a long time the two children had been engrossed; reading, playing, and with a small stylus, drawing and writing in their Ebooks. They had enthusiastically shown them to everyone else, but Tamra's lip had curled in disdain and she had chosen to ignore the brats. Tem hadn't understood why she didn't like anyone else, but neither did he forget the disgust in her face when she looked at Kyri and Metallica. He *liked* them.

Tamra entered the long docking bay and hurried to the Helya. She entered via the air lock and scabbled around in the lockers, opening and slamming them shut in increasing frustration as she realised that although there were several stunners there, all the zingers had disappeared.

“Damnation! Helya, where are the weapons? I want a zinger. Tell me where they are!”

“They are not here.”

“Where are they?”

“I do not know.”

“And why, you horrible computer, do you not know?” Tamra’s face was red with rage and her voice trembled. Helya was unmoved.

“They are not here any longer.” A pause, almost as if the AI were shrugging. “Kendrew and Starn came back and removed them all.” Another pause. “You may take another stunner if you wish.”

Tamra stormed out of the life craft and, muttering imprecations against all those who were not of the True People, made her way back to the accommodation she had commandeered. It was, of course, the best she could find. But apart from the stunner, she remained weaponless – and furious.

What was she after? Nothing, by the look of it; when she came out again she wasn’t carrying anything, but she looked very cross. Wisely, Tem scuttled off and was out of her sight and hearing long before she left the docking bay. When he eventually found Adra again, he told her of his adventure but she scoffed at him.

“She’s just plain weird, that one! But the Glass People don’t like her much. Come one, Tem, it’s time to go back and see Mama and have something to eat.”

The Glass People loved the two children. From the moment Adra had suddenly appeared on the blue transporter pad and seen them, they had had an instant rapport with the girl. Her brother also, but Adra to a far greater degree. She was young and bright and full of curiosity. They had been disappointed when the android woman had found the function of the transporter pads to quickly and arrived. Uncertain of her and the others, the Glass People had chosen to disappear, but they had watched and gradually been drawn to this small group of strangers from the future.

Unobserved, Tamra prowled through the passages and units of the accommodation areas; firstly, the one she had taken for her own and then others. She found many interesting items – mostly valueless and abandoned as not worth the trouble taking when their owners had left the station. Pictures, book-readers, clothes and jewellery were useless.

Finally however, in a room once occupied by an elderly technician with a fetish for collecting ancient artefacts, she discovered a weapon. At first she had been puzzled as to its function, but when she held the metallic item in her hand and pressed a release button, she was gratified at the sharpness of the blade that popped out. Another touch of the button, and it was concealed. Not as good as a zinger, and requiring close contact, but unless she found something better, it would do.

Thus armed, she made her way back to the command centre.

Chapter 49

Melora lay back on one of the comfortable loungers and relaxed. The children and their father were off exploring. Much as she loved them all, a little time to herself was bliss. Especially after the events of the – well, she couldn't say 'past few days' because it seemed now very likely they had spent an immeasurable time in stasis in Helya's craft. And then somehow, gods only knew, they had ended up five hundred years in the past.

They would never get home again. Never. As far as all their family in that distant, but somehow totally separated from *this* time by more than years knew, they were all dead. And, according to Nerina, it had happened. There was no way of preventing it from happening. Regardless of what they did in *this* timeline, the future they had come from would continue to exist. Without them. They were in a new timeline.

Her head ached.

At least this was a good place to make a new beginning. Once they managed to defeat those revolting Heebies, this future could be a wonderful one. Starn had plans of sending out invitations to farming communities all over the galaxy, to come and live on the Möbius Construct. It had been deserted, but once they removed the threat of the Heebies and got the Star Jump open again, this place would come alive again. She and Starn and their two – soon

to be three – children would do what they enjoyed, coaxing food from the soil and caring for animals.

It still boggled Melora's mind; this space station in the shape of a Möbius loop. Metallica had found paper and made one for her and the children, to explain to them the uniqueness of the place. Fascinated, Tem and Adra had traced a line all the way along the paper, returning to their start without having to change from one side of the paper to the other.

The blue matter transmitter they had stood upon, Metallica explained, had moved them from one side of the strip to the other. But if they had just kept walking, sooner or later they would have returned to their start, having travelled along the full length of the Möbius Construct.

Adra was thrilled, especially at the possibility of encountering the Glass People again. She had made instant friends there, and longed to meet them again. Kyri had explained gently that Torrea and his people chose when and where and if they would interact with anyone else, and Adra's bottom lip had dropped.

“But I like them. I want to see them again.”

“You will, I'm sure,” Kyri assured her. “But it will be when they want, and where they choose. Just be patient.”

Patient was not in Adra's dictionary, so Melora had been relieved when Starn took them, proposing a long ride on the monorail. Kyri promised robots to watch over them, and Metallica assured her all areas of the Möbius Construct that were unsafe were clearly marked and impossible to enter. That was a relief. With Adra's curiosity and persistence, she was just as likely as not to demand access to a toxic atmosphere, say one with a high proportion of chlorine or methane.

‘Impossible,’ both Kyri and Mobia had assured her. Oxygen breathers were unable to enter non oxygen-rich habitats, even by error, unless they were properly equipped. And vice-versa; the occupants of such habitats – at least when such had been on the Möbius Construct – were unable to enter unsuitable habitats.

Adra had been fascinated when Mobia had given her a full lecture on some of the previous occupants of the Möbius Construct, right back to when it had first been ‘discovered’

when many of the races of the galaxy became space-faring peoples. The Kanés especially, with the reptilian features, intrigued her. Starn had promised that later, after everything was settled and the station was saved, he would take her, in suitable protective clothing and with a good air supply, into the Kanés' habitat to explore and see what they had made of it and left behind.

Once they had actually seen the shape of the Möbius Construct, it was so much easier to visualise where they all were and how to get from one place to another.

'Does it move?' was Tem's first question.

"Ah, yes, it does," Kyri told him. "The Möbius Construct actually revolves around an imaginary point in the middle of the loop. And even though most areas of the surface are covered with an opaque roof, in lots of places you can see the opposite side of the station. You can see the sun, although it's a long way off, and the stars. There's day and night, more or less. There's not enough heat energy from the sun as it's too far away, but the Möbius Construct has an energy source stored between the two surfaces. Whoever designed it – and we're really not sure who, or when – performed an incredible feat of engineering.

"The Glass People made it," Adra said. "Not these Glass People, but heir way way back ancestors."

"Did they tell you that?" asked Nerina. "You can talk with them, can't you, Adra?" She put her fingers to her forehead. "In your head, I mean. Not out loud."

"Of course." The girl stared. "Can't you?"

Nerina shook her head sadly. "I think I might be too old."

"How old are you?"

Nerina ignored Melora's gasp. "Oh, Adra, I'm way older than you. I'm seventy-seven. Earth years."

Tem gaped. "That's *old!*"

Melora turned to Nerina. "I'm sorry – my children –" But the other woman laughed.

"It's nothing, Melora. I haven't lived on Earth for many years. Maybe fifty or sixty. I've travelled and studied and taught, but I never managed to pick up a family along the way.

I do have brothers and sisters, on Earth. I was going home to visit them.” For a moment her expression dropped. “But, well, that’s not going to happen. In this timeline my grandparents won’t be born for nearly four hundred years. Assuming we don’t disrupt too many things by changing the past.”

Metallica shook her head. “Not so much changing the past as making a new future.” She held up her hands and pressed her palms together, then apart, but with her wrists still touching. “Two timelines, both existing together. We were in one, now we’re in the other.”

Nerina sighed. “Yes, I do understand that. Well, enough.” She turned back to Adra. “Now, your Glass People, where are they now?”

Adra shrugged. “They could be anywhere. You can’t always see them, unless they want you to, or the light shines on them.”

“Hmm.”

“They can...um...” Adra paused a moment as if listening. “They can self-teleport, they call it. They don’t need those blue transport platforms ‘cos they can get around by themselves.”

“I would really like to talk with them,” Nerina said. “Did they tell you where they came from?”

“In Between.” Adra wrinkled her nose. “In Between the Star Jumps. There’s a space in there. But they can’t go home again. They’re sad, even though they do like it here.” Her face dropped. “They really don’t want to talk too much about it.”

Mobia...now she was fascinating. Melora had grown up on the same agricultural world as Starn, but was nonetheless familiar with AIs and computer systems. At least with the concept of them; she hadn’t encountered many in her life although she knew about them. Even Metallica, a Free Android, did not faze her. But Mobia...now she was something else. Something *more* was more correct.

And, as Mobia and Kyri had explained, that was true. In all her millennia of existence, Mobia had built links between herself – odd as it was to consider an AI human, Melora mentally visualised both Mobia and Helya as women – and those who had been Caretakers

on the Möbius Construct. Upon their eventual deaths, their consciousnesses had been absorbed into Mobia; she was indeed more than the sum of her parts.

Only, of course, those who wished it, Kyri had hastened to reassure them. Kendrew had frowned at the concept and Tamra, predictably, had expressed distaste. AI's were not and could not be, truly human. In her eyes, that made them inferior beings.

And there was more to the holo than the pretty glittering Möbius loop it first appeared.

Looking into the holographic representation of the Möbius Construct's AI had been disconcerting, to say the least. Melora did not see either of her parents, or indeed any of her family. Instead, she saw an old, old lady, whom she remembered from her childhood. Justine Kouros had been the person who taught Melora to read. She was a teacher. As a child, Melora had worshipped her. Hence her visualisation of Justine, where Kendrew had seen his Army instructor, Metallica her creator and Starn his elder brother Lesstig.

She wondered who the Glass People would see, should they allow themselves to join in this plan. Without them, she realised, it would be impossible.

At first the concept of having been tossed backwards in time had been difficult, almost impossible, to accept. She didn't even try to understand how it could have happened. And truth to tell, when she considered it dispassionately, the idea of a new beginning, a new timeline running off from the one they had come from, intrigued her. Here and now was a good place to start that new timeline. Melora did not doubt that, should the Star Jump near the Möbius Construct reopen, new settlers would flock to the place. Explorers, farmers like herself and Starn, adventurers, all kinds of people. Their children would not be alone for long; if their plan succeeded they would have friends and playmates to replace those they had left...in the future.

Half drowsing, she did not see Tamra until the woman spoke, standing close in front of the fascia to which they addressed their words when communicating with Mobia. At her words Melora came awake and lay, listening in horror.

“You – Mobia – are you there?”

“I am here. Where else would I be?” Melora at first felt a little guilty, as if caught eavesdropping, but as the other woman continued she tensed.

“I want to leave this place.”

Oh, good, thought Melora, but immediately quashed it as unkind. Poor Tamra couldn't really help being the way she was, all things considered.

“Do you wish to use one of the escape pods? They have a limited range and it is not necessary for you to leave.”

“No. I want the vessel we came in. The one with the computer running it.”

“It is not necessary for you to run away, and even if you did, you would not be able to take the Helya. We need her. The Heebies are likely to be deceived into believing they are under attack. They will flee back to their own universe and you will all be safe.”

“No!” Tamra stamped her foot. “That is not what is going to happen. It is not. The Heebies must be allowed to destroy this place and I shall be the sole survivor.”

“It is not necessary,” Mobia repeated.

“You are a machine. You must do what you are instructed to do. I want to take the Helya and leave here. Then, if the Heebies fail to destroy you, you must commence a self destruct sequence.”

“No.”

“What do you mean, no? You are a machine and you must do as instructed.”

“Not true. You may attempt to instruct me as much as you wish, my Lady Tamra –” Still unobserved, Melora grinned to herself at the gentle irony she could detect in Mobia's voice. “However, I do not obey just anyone as regards such...terminal instructions. You are safe here. Your android companion is correct in her surmising that your future here will be very different from the future you came from.”

“But I was chosen to be the First Ancestor! That is why we were all brought back here and now. It is my destiny. You must allow me this. I must leave, and I must leave in the Helya.”

“Tamra, why are you persisting with this foolish idea?” It was Kyri, who had entered the command area and crossed to the other woman. Absorbed in their conversation, they failed to observe Melora, who opted to remain silent. She had had quite enough of the Lady Tamra’s nonsense and heartily wished she had chosen somewhere else to rest. She had quite forgotten how tiring pregnancy was...

“It is not foolishness!” Tamra shrieked. “You people are the fools, not me.”

“Mobia will not obey any stupid orders, Tamra.”

“She must! And my orders are not stupid. You are all the stupid ones, with this talk of time splitting and making different futures.” Her voice was angry. “I’ve had enough of this nonsense. I’m going to take Helya and leave here.”

“Take an escape pod if you must,” Kyri suggested, “but not Helya.”

“I want Helya.”

“You may not take her.” Kyri stepped toward Tamra, and then, appalled, she backed off as the other woman reached into the bag she carried and produced a knife.

“I couldn’t get a zinger. That bastard Kendrew took them all. But this will do for you!” And Tamra lunged at Kyri, who was unable to get out of her way. She screamed once and then again as Tamra struck at her repeatedly.

Mobia gave out an inhuman screech and fell silent.

Melora jumped up in shock. What had happened? She was in time to see Kyri stagger and fall, blood streaming from her body. Tamra gave an excited yelp.

“I shall be First Ancestor! I shall. I shall! I told you she was a pure human.”

The grey cat leapt from the fallen woman towards Tamra. It caught her a massive swipe across the face with its claws and the woman shrieked in rage and pain. She swung the knife at the animal but Melora knocked her over and they both fell to the ground, the weapon flying out of reach and under a seat. They struggled and Melora managed to push Tamra

away from her and get to her feet. Appalled, she looked at Kyri's sprawled body and then back at the other woman who, blood oozing from the scratches across her face, had stumbled to her feet.

“You idiot, Tamra! What have you done?”

Furious, Tamra pulled out the stunner from Helya, pointed it at Melora and pressed the activator button. Melora blinked and dropped like a stone. Shocked and elated, Tamra stared and then turned to flee from the command centre.

Chapter 51

They were close. Soon they would have their enjoyment. Destruction was satisfying, but this particular destruction would be the greatest they had known so far. They had been looking for these creatures, who had dared enter their universe and whose trail they had been following since their creation. It was quite irrelevant that they in fact owed their existence to the Glass People.

The Heebies were few, numerically. But in all other things they were opposite to the Glass People, who explored for the joy of it and to find new information and knowledge. The Heebies explored to find new targets to destroy and new enemies to fight.

The glittering twisted ribbon against the stars, hung before them. With its destruction, the Glass People would be no more and they could go on to greater glory and mayhem. They didn't even see the beauty of the Möbius Construct; beauty had always been an alien concept to them.

So close, with their target in view, they didn't need to hurry and could drag out the enjoyment. The space station was defenceless; they had found out about it and their brief flare of curiosity about its origins had been lost in their pleasure in its apparent lack of weaponry.

When they realised they were being hailed from their target, they were bewildered. Their bewilderment increased when their screen brought up the image of a sharp faced human female, who immediately began to berate them in a shrill and almost hysterical tone. The

Heebies knew hysteria; they'd seen it before, in their attacks on defenceless vessels. But they had never encountered anyone like the Lady Tamra.

“Do not dare to fire upon my vessel. I shall be departing this place very soon. You will let me go, and then when I have gone you will destroy the Möbius Construct. It is to be annihilated. Do you understand me?”

Being given orders by a shrill and arrogant alien did not go down well with the Heebie captain. He was captain by dint of being the largest and fastest aboard, as well as the most suspicious. Three times he had foiled attempts to displace him, and three erstwhile contenders for his position had been jettisoned. He regarded this unexpected would-be commander and scowled.

“Who are you, to dare give me orders?”

She drew herself up to her full height, glared back at him and snapped,

“I am the Lady Tamra, and I am the representative of the True People. How dare you question me?”

He smirked, his oily rainbow coloured hand poised over the controls that could annihilate both her and the Möbius Construct in an instant.

“The Lady Tamra. I am commander Jekatchno, of the race whom you petty creatures refer to as the Heebies.”

“Commander, you and I have the same goals. You desire the destruction of this space station.” Her face went sly. “And also of its inhabitants. The Glass People, we call them.”

“Go on.”

“They intend to deceive you. They have a plan to destroy you.”

He snorted. “Not possible. This place has no weapons systems.”

“Oh, but it does.” She gave an airy wave. “It is however not their weaponry that you need bother about, but their intention to deceive you. They are going to trick you.”

Jekatchno roared with harsh laughter. “Trick us! You are a fool. And so are they. We are too clever to be fooled by puny creatures such as they and you.”

“But –”

“You may leave. We shall indeed destroy this place. But you may leave first.”

“But –“

He leaned forwards and snarled into the screen. “You may leave. But say one more word, and we shall blast you out of the skies. Be silent, and we shall allow you to escape from the Möbius Construct before we blow it to pieces.”

Tamra gave up.

So intent on her own escape as she was, she failed to notice she had not been guaranteed safe passage. She had in fact been guaranteed nothing, and the Heebies had discounted her warnings entirely. They had not even listened; the concept of their being deceived was impossible for them to grasp.

Chapter 52

At Mobia’s almost human shriek of pain, broadcast throughout the station, the others came running from all parts. The Glass People were first, self teleporting in ones and twos and groups until the once again gathered in the Command centre. Not a joyful occasion this one. Their beloved Kyri lay sprawled in her own blood, and nearby the human woman Melora, mother of the two children, slumped, not dead but badly stunned.

“Mama!” screamed Adra, pulling free from Starn and rushing to her mother’s side. Melora blinked and whimpered, rolling round to hug her belly protectively.

“Why? Why did she do this? What a stupid bloody thing to do!” Nerina was appalled. Metallica rushed to Kyri, at first attempting to staunch the bleeding but realising almost as she did so it was too late. Kendrew cursed, in a fluent and harsh tone until he had run out of words.

Metallica lifted her head and looked towards the Möbius Construct holo. Her face was dry; she was not equipped with tear ducts.

“Mobia, we are so dreadfully sorry.”

“Tamra. She murdered my Kyri. My Caretaker.”

“Where is Tamra? Where did she go?”

“Where *is* Tamra now? Why did you let her get away, Mobia? She murdered Kyri. And she tried to kill Melora.”

“Tamra has been unable to reach the Helya, and is about to launch an escape pod. She may get away from the Möbius Construct, but she will *not* escape.” Mobia’s voice was more cold and implacable than the tone they had become used to over the past several days. And that wasn’t the only change. Kendrew blinked and Nerina gave a slow and sad smile.

“Kyri hasn’t really completely gone. She’s dead, but her mind lives on. Is that right, Mobia?”

“Yes. All those who have ever bonded with me as caretakers of the Möbius Construct live on, in a way. Their minds have always become a part of myself. Kyri is dead to you, but within me she lives on, in a way.”

Kendrew pulled a face. “Doesn’t it run the risk of it getting a bit, um, schizophrenic in there?”

“Hardly. It’s not like that.”

He grunted. “Sort of rule by committee, huh?”

If Mobia had been capable of sighing, and had the situation been less serious, she might have done so. Metallica interrupted just as Kendrew was about to open his mouth to make some other jibe.

“And what about the AI of our vessel? Helya?”

“I have bonded with the Helya mind. She is – beautiful.”

Chapter 53

“So what are we to do now?”

“Is it possible for us to contact the Heebies too? Without them simply blowing us out of the sky?”

Kendrew looked at Nerina sideways. “What are you planning on doing, inviting them to dinner or something?”

“I don’t really know.” She looked at Metallica. “Tamra managed to talk with them, maybe we can do the same. They came here, the Glass People told us, from another universe. It’s possible that by now they are suffering ill effects from the transfer. Or, if they’re not, maybe we can convince them that they are. Perhaps we can trick them into going back home voluntarily.”

“My idea’s better,” Kendrew grunted. “Let ‘em get within range, and blow them to pieces. Make the galaxy safe for everyone.”

“Hmm, yes, maybe. But the Glass People seem to think it is very likely the Heebies may be ill.”

“They’re sick all right, and the only cure is to kill them. Here and now while we have a chance. Look, Nerina, we are doing this to safeguard the future from here on. We can’t do anything about the time we came from, but we can make this one a safer place for everyone. And that means destroying the Heebies. *Now*, while we have the opportunity and the means.” He was implacable and finally Nerina shrugged in defeat.

“I suppose you’re right.”

“I am right.” He looked at her. “Nerina, you’re an historian. An academic. I am a man of action. And this time, action is going to work better than words.”

Metallica patted Nerina on the arm. “I know how you feel, but this time I do agree with Kendrew. We know that with the help of the Glass People and the program Mobia has running in their ship and in the Helya, that we can deceive them into thinking we can destroy them. Then we and the Glass People will force them to retreat into their Dark Vortex and it will be closed. Torrea told us they can do that, although he was a bit vague on the details. But it can be done.”

“Just as well Lady bloody Tamra didn’t manage to hijack the Helya,” Kendrew snorted. “Gods alone know what she would have done if the Heebies started to run away from *her*. As it is, she’s tried to make a run for it in a life pod.”

The Heebies, hovering between the Möbius Construct and the Star Jump, watched and waited. Then, purely out of spite, they fired one shot, striking the tiny escape pod Tamra had commandeered. In this future, she was not to have *any* descendants. Oddly, the only person on the Möbius Construct who grieved for her was Melora.

She shook her head sadly. “This should never have happened. If only she had not been so foolish –”

“Pig-headed, arrogant and a murderer, you mean,” Kendrew said angrily and Melora looked back at him.

“She just could not change the way she had always been taught to think. It’s sad. And yes, I *do* know she was a murderer. I was there, remember. She tried to kill me too. It’s fortunate she did not kill my baby.” There was fire in her expression and he was the first to look away, shrugging.

“You’re right, Melora. I’m sorry.”

“Yes.” Mobia’s tone was sad. “I was able to monitor the conversation she had with the Heebies before she tried to get away.” She quickly replayed it, and Metallica shook her head.

“She was *so* deluded. There was no way they would have let her escape.”

“Yes. But there’s nothing we can do now,” Kendrew announced, standing up and ready to leave the command centre. “Helya is ready, and so is the Glass People’s ship.” He bent to give Nerina a quick pat on the shoulder, then he and Metallica were gone.

Chapter 54

It came as a great shock to Jekatchno when two mighty vessels rose from docking bays on the other side of the space station and took up attack positions.

They were under attack? From the Möbius Construct? From the Glass People and their unimportant allies? Impossible. They scanned the vessels and for the first time felt a twinge of disquiet. These were not minor vessels. They packed a lot of firepower.

And then, to add to their shock, the space station itself opened fire. Just a minor salvo, certainly, which zoomed past them to explode harmlessly in space, but it had been totally unanticipated. The Heebies were outnumbered. Their innate cowardice rose and they turned tail and fled. For a moment, they wondered about the warning that weird woman had attempted to give them. Maybe they should have listened to *all* she had to say before shooting her down. Too late.

On the Möbius Construct, Nerina, Melora, Starn and the children watched and waited. It would take time, they knew, for their plan to succeed. They could do nothing. Frustrating, but a fact.

Helya and the Glass People's ship chased the Heebies across the void and toward the Uncharted Zone. The Glass People had records; they knew exactly where to go. Between them and Helya they herded the Heebies before them.

Furious, terrified and impotent, the Heebies knew where they were headed and could do nothing about it. When they tried to make a stand and fight back the other two merely skimmed around, forcing them further into the Uncharted Zone.

As the Glass People's vessel hovered at the entry to the Dark Vortex Torrea sent a frantic message across to Helya.

"We can see into the Vortex. There are so many of them, waiting to escape. We can prevent them, but the price is high."

"What? Isn't it enough to chase the Heebies back in there?"

"It must be closed again. They must be locked away forever. Goodbye. We have undone the evil we let loose on the universe. And we must now pay the price."

"Price? What do you mean?" demanded Kendrew.

"We can send the Heebies back through the Dark Vortex. But we must also close it. A discharge of energy – like that of the destruction of our vessel – is necessary. We are ready to pay the price."

“No!” But the communication link was broken, and they could only watch in helpless dismay as first the Heebies were forced through the Vortex and then the Glass People followed them. The following energy discharge lit up the darkness of space.

Chapter 55

The Helya docked again at the Möbius Construct; this time under her own power and guidance. As soon as the docking bay was pressurised and they could leave the vessel, the end door opened and the others hurried in to meet them. Kendrew had messaged Mobia via Helya, but had asked them to say nothing regarding the sacrifice the Glass People had made. He wanted to tell the adults first and preferably in private, knowing the effect upon Adra and Tam would be heart-breaking. In their short time on the Möbius Construct, the two children had bonded with the Glass People, and Adra had been bragging that when they came back, her two special friends were going to teach her to teleport herself. Now, he thought sadly, those two special friends would never return.

It wasn't necessary. His message had come through, but even before that, both Adra and Tem had stopped what they were doing and sat as if listening, their faces registering shock and grief. Then they had looked at each other in silence for a moment before Adra addressed their parents, tears welling to her eyes.

“Mama, Papa, the Glass People have sent the Heebies home. They're all gone.”

“Huh? How d'you know?” asked Starn.

“They told us,” Adra said simply.

“How?”

“In our minds.” Tem sat and touched the fingers of both hands to his forehead. “They told us the Heebies are gone. They're not ever coming back again.”

“And neither are the Glass People!” Adra burst into tears. “They're gone, too.”

“What? Are you sure?”

Adra's response was to fall into her mother's arms and sob. Over her head the three adults traded shocked looks. Tem sniffed and went to his father, hugging against him and trying, unsuccessfully, to stifle his tears.

"I want them to come back," he said. "I liked them."

"I think," Nerina suggested carefully, "that we need to wait until Kendrew and Metallica get back. Are they all right, Mobia? Have you heard anything from any of them?"

Mobia's voice was unusually sombre. "Adra is correct, regrettably. Helya has informed me that they chased the Heebies back through the Dark Vortex, but the Glass People followed them into it. I am unable to establish any sort of contact with them or their ship."

"Oh." Nerina hesitated. "Is there any other news? Are Metallica and Kendrew all right? Do you know when they'll be back?"

"There is nothing else. At their current speed and route, it will be at least twenty-four hours before their return. Helya informs me there has been no damage to her. Kendrew is physically healthy and Metallica is unharmed."

"That's one good thing, anyway," Starn muttered. "And then, hopefully, the Möbius Construct will get up and running again."

"There's still the problem of the shut down Star Jump," Nerina said. "We need to be able to get it open again. Just got to figure out how."

Mobia spoke.

"Ah, that might not be such a great problem after all."

"What?"

Mobia explained. "When the Star Jump closed, it was always thought to be an accident. When the Glass People came here, they seemed to believe it had been their fault, something that had done. I think they liked the Möbius Construct and didn't mind being here so much. They're funny people. They're scientists and explorers, but very shy." She hesitated. "Or I should say, they *were*. Seems as their way distant ancestors had built the Möbius Construct, they felt a fondness for it and that's why they stayed. However, upon

thoroughly investigating matters, I have discovered the closure of the Star Jump by the Möbius Construct was in fact part of a plot by the managers of the Star Jump near (name the planet!!). Sabotage, in other words.”

“Bastards!” Starn muttered under his breath. Then: “What can we do about it, Mobia? Can we undo what they did, and reopen the Star Jump?”

“Maybe a strongly worded message to the current managers might be an idea,” suggested Nerina. “Tell them we know what happened, whether or not they were responsible, and it’s going to be taken to the Galactic Judiciary.”

“For the moment, I am investigating to see if there is any way in which the Star Jump can be reopened from here,” Mobia replied smoothly. Nerina smiled. She wondered if there was indeed a dominant mind at work there. Interesting, in view of Kendrew’s sarcastic comment regarding schizophrenia.

Chapter 56

Melora leant over Adra’s sleeping form and looked up at her husband, worriedly.

“She’s so hot, running a temperature. And she’s restless. She keeps muttering in her sleep and I can’t quite make out what she’s saying. Poor little mite, losing the Glass People was just the last straw. So many bad things have happened since we set off for Gardea. It’s been really hard on her.”

He touched her shoulder gently and pulled her to her feet, giving her a quick embrace.

“Go sleep yourself, love. I’ll sit with her for a while.”

Reluctantly, she left, casting a backward glance. Starn sat on the chair beside his daughter’s bed and shook his head. A week had passed since the Glass People had followed the Heebies into the Dark Vortex. At first Adra had seemed to believe they had truly departed, and had cried herself to sleep every night. She had slept quite solidly. For the past three days, however, she had tossed and turned, and her face and body were flushed and hot. Mobia and Metallica had prescribed painkillers and lots of fluids, and they had encouraged the child to talk as much as she wanted. But Adra had refused to speak; just shaking her head and trying to hide. Tem had been affected similarly, but to a far lesser degree.

“They need us. We need to go rescue them.”

Suddenly, Adra was sitting up, her eyes still shut, but reaching out towards her father. “They need us. Now.” She shuddered and opened her eyes and looked straight at him. “Papa, the Glass People are alive, and we have to go rescue them. They’re in the Dark Vortex and can’t get out again.”

He blinked. Not once in Adra’s hearing had the term ‘Dark Vortex’ been used. He tilted his head down at her.

“Are you sure? Did they – can you hear them, Adra? Can they speak to your mind?”

“Yes.” Adra was awake and alert. He put out his hand and touched her forehead, for the first time in days finding it cool to the touch. She clambered from the bed and looked at him, puzzled. “Have I been sick?”

“Yes. We’ve been worried about you.” He took her hand. “But I think everything is going to be all right now. Let’s go see your Mama and then we’ll talk with the others.”

Chapter 57

The Glass People had not sacrificed themselves, she said. They had been prepared to do so, but the discharge of energy seen from the Helya had been due to the destruction of the Heebies’ vessel, not theirs. However, it had resulted in the Dark Vortex being slammed shut. The Glass People were trapped, and fighting off the evil presence within.

“Can Helya go through and rescue them?” Kendrew asked of Mobia, but there was no joy there.

“No. The Helya could not withstand the stresses involved.” A pause. “Ah, Helya wishes to make it clear she is an escape vessel, not a mini warship.”

Adra frowned. “Torrea said maybe the...what did he call it...?” She wrinkled her forehead. “Bleeder... something Bleeder...”

“Ah,” Nerina said. “The Russell/Blieder drive ship. Is that it?”

“Yes, that’s the one.” Adra beamed at her.

“Mobia? Is that old ship space worthy?” Kendrew looked at Nerina. “That old heap, you mean? The one we saw in the next docking bay to Helya? I thought it was a museum piece.”

“It is, I assure you, in perfect working order.”

“So what will we need to do? Go through that Dark Vortex? Is that is?”

“Yes, we have to.” Adra looked at her father very gravely. “Can I come along too?”

“I think not. It’s going to be –”

“Too dangerous, I suppose,” Adra finished and Nerina concealed a smile.

“No,” Starn started. “Well, yes, I suppose. We’ll talk about it, okay.”

“Yes, Papa,” Adra answered meekly... or maybe not so meekly, Nerina decided. She had the sneaking suspicion Starn would find himself cheerfully escorting his little daughter to the old space vessel. She decided she would also like the experience.

As it turned out, the vessel required a minimal crew of four and preferably five, so only Melora and Tem remained on the Möbius Construct. They could all see Adra was quietly elated; they were on the way to rescue her beloved Glass People and it was all her doing.

Chapter 58

Before they left, Metallica, advised by both Nerina and Melora, had sent a stiffly worded memo to the caretaker of the station by the Delta Star Jump. It formally requested a team to travel to the Möbius Construct ‘for the purpose of undoing the damage previously done to the Star Jump, by persons as yet unknown’. They had managed between them to imply the identities of those persons and those directing them were in fact not entirely unknown, and evidence had already been prepared for submission to the Galactic Judiciary within two days.

The response had been swift; a team was to be dispatched as soon as possible to make repairs to the Star Jump and the miscreants who had dared sabotage it would be found and promptly punished. There would, they hoped, be no need to go to a higher authority. The

women had chortled at this; they had anticipated far more difficulty. Perhaps the spreading news that a vessel from the Möbius Construct had been responsible for chasing the Heebies back where they had come from was a factor in their favour. Perhaps it was simply that the instigators were shocked they'd been discovered after so long.

In any case, the result would be the re-opening of their Star Jump, and hopefully an increase in the population thereof. Starn and Melora were enthusiastic about remaining and the children, it seemed, had loved the place from the moment they had encountered the Glass People. It was to be hoped they also would return, and safely. At the moment that very much depended on an ancient space vessel fitted with the Russell/Blieder drive, and its crew of five, including one child and one android.

Unlike Helya, the *Harper* did not have a sentient AI, but its computer systems were adequate for its mission. Mobia was in constant contact.

“Aren't we there yet?” moaned Adra. “C'mon, can't this old crate go any faster?”

Metallica snorted, but she regarded the girl with affection.

“Soon, Adra. Have you heard anything from them yet?”

Adra paused and tilted her head as if listening. She nodded, but did not look happy.

“They're stuck in that horrible place. Nasty. They know we're coming and say they can hang on for a while longer. But we really oughta hurry.”

“Are the Heebies there, too?” queried Kendrew and Adra shook her head doubtfully.

“No, not those Heebies exactly. But Torrea says the horrible, um, intelligence that lives in the Vortex is trying to hurt them. The Heebies they chased in there all died.” She sounded delighted at this. “They blew into a million bits when the Vortex shut. Torrea says he thought they'd all be killed then too, but they believed they deserved it. I don't think they deserved it. They didn't mean to let the Heebies out. But they all felt really bad about them, especially when we all turned up on the Möbius Construct and they discovered how awful things were where we came from.” She gave a little giggle. “Or *when* we came from, he meant.”

Metallica gave her a hug. “You are doing brilliantly, Adra. You know, if you hadn’t been able to talk with the Glass People like that – telepathically is the word we use – then we would never have known they were still alive. The nasty in the vortex might have killed them and might even have figured out some way to get out.”

“That’d be awful.” Adra wrinkled her nose. “Torrea says it’s disgusting.”

“Tell him we’ll be there very soon,” the android said and Adra shut her eyes, concentrating.

“Your daughter,” she said to Starn, “really is a very special person. Tem, too, I think. Did they ever show any signs of telepathic ability before?”

“Nah.” He shrugged. “Not to Melora ‘n’ me, that is. But they often seemed t be able to communicate with each other, when they were apart. Was a bit spooky sometimes. I s’pose we just never really thought much about it.”

“When we rescue the Glass People,” Metallica told him, “and they return to the Möbius Construct, they may very well decide they want to go home afterwards. Now we’ve been able to scare the managers of Delta Station into undoing the damage to the Star Jump near us. They may want an ambassador, a go-between the Galactic races and those of In Between. Your daughter may very well become important then.”

“Better than being a dirt grubber for the rest of her life,” Kendrew grunted.

“That will be up to her to decide,” Starn said gravely. “When the time comes. First of all, we have to rescue them.”

“Yep, and destroy that thing in the Vortex,” Kendrew added, relishing the prospect.

“The *Harper* is approaching the Vortex,” Mobia’s voice, transmitted from the Möbius Construct, announced. “Your best method is to focus on its centre, activate the Russell/Blieder Drive and fly directly into it. Once you have started, do not hesitate or deviate from your course. It will take you directly into the Dark Vortex.” A pause. “Once you enter it, communication between the *Harper* and the Möbius Construct will be impossible. You will be on your own.”

Chapter 59

“You didn’t tell us that before!” Kendrew protested, but Metallica reassured him.

“We will manage. The *Harper’s* systems are operating perfectly, and we do have the benefit of the extra programs Mobia installed before we left. C’mon, Kendrew, let’s get on and do this. Ready, everyone else?” They all nodded and ensured they were securely strapped into their flight seats. Starn, muttering to himself, double checked Adra’s. She was grinning to herself; probably carrying on a conversation with her friends, he decided.

Directly ahead of them lay the Dark Vortex, a patch of blackness against the few stars visible in the Uncharted Zone. Starn wondered idly whether the space-time rift that had brought them back from five hundred years in the future was anywhere nearby. He hoped not. They had enough to contend with. A sudden thought struck him and he turned to Kendrew.

“Um, this vessel does carry armaments, doesn’t it?”

Kendrew grinned at him, baring his teeth. “Oh, yes, Starn, the *Harper* most certainly does carry weaponry. You don’t really think we’d tackle the – whatever it is, that produced the Heebies without a bloody big gun, did you now?”

Starn chuckled. “Nah. I reckon not. Kendrew – make sure you use it.”

“Russel/Blieder drive ready to engage,” the computer’s voice announced, and began a short countdown. Five, four...three...two...”

“One!” shouted Adra in elation. And they were fired into the Vortex.

The Russell/Blieder Drive had been used to zap ships from one star system to another. Rocketing into another universe via the Dark Vortex was different, but the system worked just as effectively. In seconds, the *Harper* burst through the vortex and into a region of utter darkness. They could sense the evil entity there. Adra could hear the Glass People calling to her, even though to all other intents and purposes she and everyone else on board was blind. Gradually, though, some sight returned to them. In the far distance they could see a few dim stars. Lighting flickered, and there was faint phosphorescence lighting their way, like luminous lichen. And it all *felt* wrong.

This was a foul place indeed.

“Ahead,” she directed. “Now to the left, there’s a small planet. They landed there, but their ship’s badly damaged.” Her voice faltered. “They didn’t all survive. And they’ve been fighting off that nasty ever since.”

“How many of them are there?” Metallica inquired. “I can see the planet, Adra. My sensors and those of the *Harper* can find them. Can we land safely?”

“Yes. But when we do, they need to get aboard as soon as possible.” Then Adra screamed. “The monster!”

“Where?” But then Kendrew could see it too.

An amorphous, oily blackness, on the planet where the Glass People’s vessel had grounded. It pulsed angrily, emitting tangible waves of hatred that jarred their bodies and set their teeth on edge. Kendrew gripped the firing trigger of the *Harper*’s weapons system.

And that wasn’t all. Suddenly they were aware of dozens, no, hundreds of dark Heebies vessels, surrounding them and the planet.

“They are not real!” from Metallica. “They are illusions.”

“Are you sure?” demanded Kendrew. “They look bloody real to me. And hungry.”

“Wait...we need to get closer,” Metallica advised. “Starn, is Adra okay?”

“Yes, yes, I’m fire,” she protested. “But Torrea says that you can’t destroy it that way. You can fire at it, and hurt it, but you can’t kill it.”

“Damnation! Does he have any advice as to how we *can* kill it?” snarled Kendrew. He could have done with knowing this sooner, he thought sourly. The dipolar throntium bombs with which they were armed were supposed – *supposed* – to destroy anything.

“If you can hurt it, and then get the Glass People into our ship, they have set a trap for it in theirs. But they have to convince it that it can hide in there.” Adra’s forehead wrinkled in concentration. “He said...fire at their ship. Now!”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes! Now! Just one shot, he said.”

Kendrew scowled. “This had bloody well better work, tell Torrea!”

“It will. Then as soon as you’ve fired, land as close as possible to their ship.”

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Kendrew watched as the salvo he had fired exploded harmlessly before it reached the Glass People’s ship.

“It’s a special type of force field,” Adra said. “Now the monster will think it’ll be safe in their ship. They’re going to let the force field down...now...”

Suddenly the decks of the *Harper* were crowded with rainbow coloured shimmering as the Glass People teleported aboard.

“Are you all here?” Metallica demanded and Torrea answered gravely, “All of us who still live, yes.”

“Hah! Yay! And the monster is going into your ship,” Adra announced. “Now, Kendrew, now! Zap it!”

“My pleasure.” Salvo after salvo battered the wrecked spacecraft, and they all heard the screams as the Evil of the vortex shattered into a million fragments. The genesis of the Heebies was defeated. The dark ghostly ships dissipated, disappearing into nothingness.

“Can we all go home now, please?” asked Adra “I wanna tell Tem how much fun this all was.”

Starn rolled his eyes, but Kendrew chuckled. “Yeah, it was rather, wasn’t it? Hey, Torrea, can we do something about shutting that vortex for ever when we get out?”

“An energy discharge should be sufficient,” the leader of the Glass People assured him gravely. “Another of those throntium bombs should suffice. It was the intention of the – intelligence here, to use the destruction of our ship to provide energy to make real all those ghostly vessels. They would have swarmed out and destroyed everything and everyone they found.” He shuddered, soap-bubble rainbows flickering. “One of them caused enough damage.”

Once free of the Vortex, Kendrew fired and destroyed totally any possibility of the Heebies or the evil ever escaping. Adra was hugging her friends delightedly. She knew she should feel sad a bit for the Glass People who hadn’t escaped, but there were so many who had, and they were all deluging her mind with thanks and greetings.

“Stop a minute, please. There are so many of you, all thinking at me at once.” She held up her hands. “We are so glad you are safe.” She turned to Torrea. “And we can take you home, if you want to.”

“Home?” They all flickered and shimmered. “*Our* home?” asked Torrea. “Truly? We thought – we always believed that when we came out from our universe, that had caused the shutdown of the Star Jump.”

“Oh yes,” Metallica assured them. “A crew from Delta Station were on their way to repair the Star Jump.” She went on to explain that, in spite of all their feelings of guilt and worries for the past years, the Glass People need no longer reproach themselves. True, they had inadvertently let the Heebies loose, but the closure of the Star Jump was none of their doing.

They could go home. Back to their In Between universe, where doubtless their own people still waited for them.

Home? After all this time, and after all the things they had done?

The good things were what they should remember, Metallica told. The bad things had been inadvertent and beyond their control. The Heebies were defeated, and destroyed. In the future of this timeline, they would be but a nasty memory. The Glass People may well have been responsible for letting them free, but they had rectified that error.

“Can our ship take you home?” Starn wondered. “I don’t think Helya could make it; she was never designed to voyage through a Star Jump, but maybe the *Harper* can do so.” He gave a shrug and a grin. “Well, it got through the Vortex, a Star Jump should be chickenfeed.” He spent the next ten minutes explaining the concept of chickenfeed and why it should be easy.

The Glass People conferred among themselves. Then Torrea turned to him.

“Yes, we would like to go home. The *Harper* can go through the Star Jump to our home universe. Now there is no fear of leading the Heebies there, yes.”

“Are you sure?” Emeria asked. “Are you sure it was not our doing, that shut down the Star Jump?”

“Quite sure,” Metallica reassured them. “Delta Station admitted a general liability – although they’re all busy denying anything specific – and soon the Möbius Construct will be busy again.”

Chapter 60

The small ‘working group’ from the Delta Station were effusive and full of apologies. They were almost obsequious in their attempts to make good the ‘gross error of judgement’ made by a previous manager to ‘potentially disrupt services in the Star Jump located nearby’. They had had no part in it; it had been before their time and if they had been consulted they would have been vigorously against the idea. Nerina and Melora exchanged eloquent glances and smothered their amusement.

It was almost a party atmosphere in the command centre of the Möbius Construct. The Glass People were all there, the light reflecting from their shimmering bodies. Adra and Tem were in their element, both now tending to show off their skills at self-teleporting while their parents looked at them and each other fondly.

Kyri’s two cats, after an initial period in which Yuri moped and scratched at anyone who tried to touch him, had settled down. Vali spent most of her time with Emeria and Adra, while Yuri had adopted Metallica. The two cats had sniffed at Nerina’s xinbaa, in an almost condescending manner, but made no further advances towards the small creature. This scarcely bothered him; he was too busy sleeping.

Tem had almost literally dragged everyone along to see the animals he had found, especially the fierce-looking but docile orabanda dragon. Nerina had found it almost as fascinating as Tem; while ancient and extinct fauna from Earth and elsewhere was not her prime area of interest, she enjoyed exploring the station’s many areas and Tem’s enthusiasm was contagious.

Starn and Melora had settled on the rural appearing habitat where they wished to settle, and had already been investigating the gene stocks stored upon the Möbius Construct.

Almost without speaking or discussing the possibilities, it seemed most of them had opted to remain on the Möbius Construct, at least until it was again up and running. Kendrew

however had been quiet and withdrawn, until Adra suddenly asked him if he was going to stay and help look after them all.

“I’m not sure.” He leaned back and looked around at them all. Even the techs from Delta Station were there, awaiting the first vessels to make use of the re-opened Star Jump. In the Docking bay, the *Harper* was being readied for its voyage In Between; the Glass People had looked it over and decided it would be their ‘going home’ vessel. But they would return, they promised. Soon. After all, there were still places to see and explore...but *not* the Uncharted Zone.

Only Metallica knew how much Kendrew missed Kyri. They all did; her death had come as a shock and even though her murderer had not long survived, the pain she had caused would linger. Kyri’s absence put a damper on their celebrations. Her mind, as Mobia had assured them, remained as part of the AI, but Kyri herself was gone. In the time from which they had come, Metallica wondered, had the woman indeed been one of Kendrew’s long distant progenitors? Not impossible, but at this time, impossible ever to know.

Starn looked steadily at the other man. “I think we need you,” he said.

Kendrew sighed. “That’s what Mobia said, too.”

“Oh?”

He looked around at them all. “Mobia has asked me to become the next Caretaker.”

“That’s wonderful!” Melora said. “You will, won’t you?”

He frowned. “I need to think about it. Metallica, what would you advise?”

The android woman smiled. “Your choice. I could not become the Caretaker. Starn and Melora and the children have new lives to make here –”

“And me, I envy you the opportunity,” Nerina put in. “I would have said yes, if I had been asked.” She ginned. “If you say no, Kendrew, I’ll offer, although I think I am too old to start that. I’d prefer to explore all the archives here.” She tilted her head slightly. “Is the idea of blending your mind with Mobia what bothers you?”

“No.” He shrugged and then stood up, walking around restlessly. “It’s the idea of becoming an administrator rather than a doer, I suppose. But then, I have to do something.” He turned and addressed the holo. “Yes, Mobia, I accept. If you want me.”

At the resulting cheering, Yuri opened his eyes and blinked. All this noise, when he was trying to sleep! He burrowed deeper into the sling Nerina wore, and went back to sleep. Nerina looked down at him affectionately, and around the small group of survivors from the *Sejanor*, almost five hundred years distant from them in time and an infinity away in the timeline they now pursued. Friends, Glass People, no Heebies, and plenty more mysteries for her to look into. What more could she wish for?

Yes, there was something she wanted to know.

“There’s something else I’ve been wondering about.”

“Yes?”

“Why did your people make this space station the shape it is? Did it have some specific significance for them?”

Beside her, Adra burst out laughing.

“Oh, Nerina, that’s really funny!” She grinned at the older woman, and the shimmers in the air indicated her companions also were amused.

“Well?”

“Because – it’s *pretty!*”

They were absolutely right, she admitted. Pretty. Of course.

Within the confines of the Dark Vortex, what remained of the Evil painfully started the long process of pulling itself back together. It would take aeons, but eventually it would reunite all its scattered components. After all, it had Eternity. The war between Good and Evil would never end. It had lost this battle, but there would be others.

Five months later the first baby to be born on the Möbius Construct since the reopening of the Star Jump opened her eyes and took her first breath.

Melora looked across at Starn and murmured, “Kyri. Her name is Kyri.”

The end