



OMEGA SEED

Copyright ©2002 by Wayne South

Cover art by Ross Richdale

Electronically published in arrangement with the author

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED

Except for brief quotations embodied in critical articles or reviews, the reproduction of this work in whole or in part in any form by electronic or mechanical or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including printing, faxing, E-mail, or copying electronically, is forbidden without the permission of the author.

<http://www.ebookfiction.biz>

E-mail novels@ebookfiction.biz

Published by Atlantic Bridge Publishing

<http://www.atlanticbridge.net/publishing/nonexc/omega.htm>

This is a work of fiction. The characters, incidents, and dialogues in this book are products of the author's imagination and are not to be construed as real. Any resemblance to actual events or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

Excerpt of three chapters

PROLOGUE

Except in size, Omega could have been a 1960s vintage NASA probe placed in an orbit around the planet below. The spherical inter-galactical starship, though, was too large, being four hundred meters in diameter, too old and too advanced to have been manufactured on Earth.

The journey from the outer solar system to Earth took one week; this comparatively slow pace caused by rapid deceleration from ninety nine percent of light speed that had brought the craft across the galaxy. Computers aboard Omega homed in on what it had been searching for over the past millennium, a planet with water and oxygen in usable quantities to sustain life.

Cloaking devices made the craft's approach undetected as the vehicle swung into an orbit. The world below was penetrated with sophisticated data gathering probes, a hundred, three centimeter flying craft released into the stratosphere. These mechanical bugs plummeted into the planet's dense lower atmosphere until they reached a thousand meters altitude. At that point, tiny moving wings swung out like those of a dragonfly and minute motors propelled the craft towards predetermined targets.

The aim, though was not to destroy but to observe and study everything about the planet, from its chemical makeup to signs of civilization. Languages were recorded and television monitored, photographs taken and the inhabitants studied. Within three days, ten million pieces of data were transmitted back to the mothership's three onboard computers before a signal pulsed out and the mechanical bugs self-destructed into nothingness. During the whole process, nobody below realized their planet had been scrutinized by an alien life force, nor that the spacecraft was still in orbit above. Everything worked as it was designed a thousand years before.

Computer Beta analyzed the data against the categories retained in memory banks. The planet was over populated, polluted but could sustain life quite comfortably in the less populated temperate zones; all the large land masses in the northern hemisphere were to be avoided but several to the south showed promise.

The humanoid population was similar to their own; in fact data gathered showed it was a home seeded planet from a previous visit, three thousand years before. Even a variation of the home alphabet was still in use in what was the cradle of civilization at the time, but Greek culture had long been superseded throughout the next three millennia. After being helped to climb the first step of a collective civilization by interbreeding with the local inhabitants; humans, for a reason lost in antiquity, were left to develop on their own.

There, however, was one problem that made Computer Beta reject the planet below. Roughly forty eight percent of the human population were seeders, or males as the dominant Earth language called them. This was completely outside the guidelines of no more than five percent seeders and well beyond the one in a thousand permitted at home. Furthermore, it appeared that none of the females of adult age were neuters so all were capable of bearing offspring; once again well beyond the guidelines of ten percent females necessary to maintain population size.

To balance this to some extent, was the knowledge that the inhabitants had not yet learnt to control D.N.A aging mechanisms, so the inhabitants had a limited lifespan, something like eighty years, less than one forth that of humanoid's lifespan at home. All the data on human

development led Computer Beta to recommend that this planet be bypassed.

However, Computer Gamma provided data that the humanoid aboard could not be kept alive for the estimated two hundred years required to find another solar system containing a planet harboring life as they knew it. A vote was taken and Computer Alpha sided with Gamma to outvote Beta so the decision was made to arouse the humanoid.

Their one was a perfect specimen, short at a meter seventy eight with fair skin and brown hair which floated in the vacuum to encircle the woman's body like a natural cloak. A life sustaining umbilical cord connected to her navel. In many ways she appeared like a fetus with the body of a twenty-year-old, her natural age being a dozen years beyond that.

Once the decision to end the journey was made, minor alterations were needed and Computer Gamma set about performing them. The woman had her brain patterns transformed to understand English, the main Earth language in the territory designated for landing. All other memories and abilities remained unchanged. Computer Gamma, though, persuaded the others that the humanoid's sensations and emotions should be changed back to natural, rather than being suppressed fifty percent as was the unwritten rule back home. After all, a bearer needed emotions more than the neuter that this female used to be.

Now was the time to arouse the woman so she could prepare herself for landing and her future life ahead. It was a crude hostile planet, not a great deal superior to their first choice which had been such a disappointment nor the others unanimously rejected, but it would have to do. They could not return and this was one small chance to continue their species. Communication with Delta had been lost over a century before so perhaps their humanoids were the last of their species.

CHAPTER ONE

The young woman floated in the shower of warm compressed air as it blew away the last of the jelly substance that had protected her skin. She used electronic scissors to clip her hair to a manageable shoulder length, let the two-meter hair strands be sucked away, turned the machine to fluff and relished as puffs of warm air engulfed her. Finally, she glided out of the cleansing chamber and wriggled into a protective one-piece coverall ready for a bank of medical tests.

'You must speak orally in your new language, Pazz,' Gamma's voice in English filled the small outer room.

'I know,' she mumbled. 'You've been through this at least three times.' Her blue eyes rolled. 'Why do I feel so lousy?'

'Your emotions are not now artificially suppressed, Pazz. It's a combination of nervous anticipation and the vibrations of your stomach caused by the pitch and twenty percent roll of this space capsule and is further aggravated by...'

'Okay,' the woman said. 'I understand.' She stared out the circular window at the blue and white planet below and sighed. 'Except for the continental shapes, it could be home.'

'But it isn't, Pazz,' cautioned Gamma. 'It's a primitive planet still controlled by males who make up half the population. I would advise you to research the history chips about our own gender wars. These have yet to happen on Earth.'

'And perhaps never will,' Pazz said. 'Anyhow, isn't that my reason for being here; to replenish our stock of seeders and return home.'

Gamma's neutral voice almost showed emotion as she spoke. 'That is not now possible, Pazz. You cannot return, either by yourself or with a cargo of seeders.'

'Why?' snapped the woman. 'Of course I can return home.'

'The journey took one thousand, three hundred and eighty six years, Pazz, not three.'

'What!' Pazz's face drained of color as she stared at the tiny silver speaker on the wall. 'I was sentenced to do this job which was equivalent to seven years incarceration.'

'You were considered a problem, Pazz; too independent. Your push for individual rights and an increase in the seeder's population did not go down well at your trial. The proctors, barred by the constitution from sentencing you to death invoked Choice 23, Subclause 6.'

'Banishment!' Pazz hissed.

'The controls of Omega were set to infinity with only Computer Alpha and life support systems active. Beta and myself were reactivated three hundred and eighty two years ago.'

'Why?'

'At that stage, Alpha had put us in orbit around a planet. She needed our assistance to analyze it. The place was unsuitable so we moved on. Since then three other water planets were deemed unsuitable, as was this one.'

'Then why am I awake?' The young woman's eyebrows contracted in anxiety.

'Your body could not be maintained for the time needed to find another suitable planet. We voted two to one to place you down here.'

'So what do I do?' Pazz gasped and realized for the first time in her thirty two years of natural life, she was trembling with emotion and her eyes blinked tears. 'I am alone. Even if I went back, twenty generations would have past. Wouldn't it have been kinder to just shut down life support systems?'

'Choice 1, Subclause 16 will not allow females to be terminated unless it is at their own request and they are over one hundred and twenty years of age. This cannot apply to you. Only males can be disposed of if they fail in their basic function of seeding the community.'

Pazz glared. 'That was a millennium ago. Our planet may not even exist any more, let alone still have the constitution.'

'It is in my program.'

'Yes, I forgot you're just a machine,' Pazz snorted and another suppressed emotion rose inside her. The feeling of loneliness. She thought back to her one sister, only twelve when she left, and her mother both smiling and relieved after her trial and light sentence. When the average lifespan was two hundred and forty years, seven was only a minor sentence. A far more severe

charge would have been denial of access to anti-aging D.N.A., leading to a life span of less than a century.

Pazz grimaced and switched her thoughts into the native language; English didn't have the vocabulary to represent the memories she had in her mind.

'One other item,' interrupted the computer. ' You are a bearer now, like your mother. Our collective decision was to make you one so you'd fit into Earth society. There are no neuters on Earth. For better or for worse, that is also the reason your emotions were fully restored'

'Thank you,' Pazz said. 'That is an honor I would never have reached back home; not with my sentence.'

'You are now one of billions of Earth women, the same in every way except you will have access to anti-aging procedures.

Pazz nodded. 'Not that that matters now, anyway. Is there anything else you failed to tell me?'

'Food and energy resources held within you would last fifteen Earth days after your arrival. When they are depleted, you will have to eat, breathe and exercise normally to maintain your body.'

Pazz smiled for the first time. 'That's a relief,' she added. 'I never liked the artificial food and muscle energizers anyway.'

' According to...'

'I know! I know! The constitution did not allow these to be withheld from me.'

'One last item. Males have equal rights on Earth, are stronger than the female and, in many cases are predatory creatures. Beware when you meet them.'

'I know,' Pazz snorted.

'You have never met one in real life,' the computer warned. 'Just be warned. They are not the docile creatures you learnt about at home. They can be recognized by their facial hair, though in most cases this is shaved off and deep voice. Clothes always cover their bodies. Unlike bearers at home, who were genetically selected to be of small stature, they are powerfully built. Most of them will be taller and heavier than yourself while the females will tend to be shorter than you are.'

The girl grimaced and once again stared out at the planet below. 'When do I land?' she asked.

'The site is selected and the landing will be during the night hours in three Earth days time, three point zero six Planet Delta days. The landing pod will put down in a lightly populated area so the chance of the landing being seen is minimal. It is a risk we have to take.'

'I have to take,' Pazz corrected. 'It is my life.'

'Yes,' Gamma replied. 'Sorry for the mistake.'

It was two in the morning when the 4X4 Landcruiser screeched to a stop in a cloud of red dust off the highway which was really just a strip of bitumen through rolling desert in the driest

continent in the world; Australia.

'Bloody Hell!' gasped Greg Blackburn and dug his sleeping companion in the ribs.

Stan Saunders woke up, sensed the vehicle had stopped moving, grunted and stared out over the salt bushes reflected in the car's headlights. A silver cylinder was flying about twenty meters above the highway. That was it! There were no wings or tail, just this object like a drainage pipe with closed ends. Under it, two rows of small blue flames hissed out. As the men watched, three tiny landing skids unfolded from the craft, it wobbled to a hover before landing in a cloud of red dust a few meters to the side of the road.

'Kill your lights,' Stan gasped and reached over to where a hunter's rifle lay across the back seat. With shaking hands he fumbled in the glove box, found a carton of bullets and loaded the weapon.

'What is it?' Greg stuttered.

'How the hell would I know?'

Greg wound down the window, sneezed as fine dust swept in and clapped hands over his ears. A high pitched scream hit his eardrums with such velocity that his head rung, air swished around him and the car shook. The craft was on the ground in swirling dust that pelted the Landcruiser like a dust storm. The blue flamed engines cut and the screaming whine groaned to a stop. Silence descended on the lonely highway as the swirling dust settled.

The man stared, wide eyed at his companion, nodded and slid outside. With Stan panting beside him, he bent low and ran along the roadside towards a small cutting. They flung themselves down and crawled up the bank, parted the brush and fixed their eyes on the strange craft that now stood silently on tripod legs.

'That is no aircraft,' Stan whispered.

'No, it looks like an emergency escape vehicle.' Perhaps it's something from that secret military base over in South Australia.

The men studied the object in question. Except for protruding landing skids it was a perfect cylinder with no outward signs of windows or doors. It glistened in the dull moonlight like stainless steel but had a sort of intrinsic glow radiating out, like those reflectorised cats' eyes that mark the center of the road. For several moments the men lay and stared. Stan gripped the rifle and aimed it up at the craft.

'And a lot of bloody good that'll do you,' snapped Greg. 'Keep your head out of sight, will you?'

'So what do you suggest?' Stan argued.

'Just watch!'

The men riveted their eyes on the craft and gasped in surprise as a hatch on the top lifted like on a jet fighter and a small ladder unfolded out over the fuselage to hinge down to the ground.

'Bloody hell!' muttered Greg for a second time. 'Look!'

A light flickered on in the emergency escape jet, or whatever it was, and a girl rose behind the hatchway. She was not, though, dressed in flying clothes nor wore a helmet, as one would expect. Instead, she was dressed in a suede jacket, tank top, jeans and brown calf length boots. A backpack was slung across her shoulders. For a second she stood and gazed around before

stepping onto the ladder and descending to the ground. The men goggled in the darkness as her silhouette turned and she walked towards the road where the Landcruiser was parked.

When she reached the bitumen, though, the girl turned and stood with her hands by her side and watched the craft she'd just left. The ladder retracted, hatch closed and there was a whine as the engines started. The noise increased to the ear-shattering howl that had both men clamping hands over their ears again. The scream became louder and louder but the girl, seemly unaffected by the noise, just stood watching.

The skids folded up to be replaced by spurts of blue flames from beneath the craft. It lifted straight up like a helicopter, hovered for a few seconds, the screaming motors reached a still higher pitch, there was a slight clunk, a whoosh and it accelerated away faster than a skyrocket.

'Oh, My God!' gasped Stan.

One minute it was hovering above them, seconds later the aircraft was smaller than a white glowing tennis ball hundreds of meters up before the scream became a clap of thunder and it disappeared amongst the million stars overhead.

During the whole ascent, the only movement from the girl was her hair wavering in the downdraft. Finally she turned and stared directly at the two hidden men behind the bank.

'I know you're there,' she called in an unaccented Australian voice, 'so you might as well come out.'

A torch flickered on and she bathed the area in light. Both men stood sheepishly up and Stan clicked a bullet up into rifle's barrel ready to fire.

The girl's eyes flickered for a moment when she saw the weapon. 'That rifle is hardly needed,' she said, 'I need a ride. Can you help?'

Greg grinned. She was a local girl, bloody good looker too. Probably that was some secret machine and she was an air force woman on maneuvers. He'd heard of them. They had twenty-four hours to get back to camp without being caught or spending any money.

'Put the rifle away, Stan,' he snapped. 'Come on. The poor girl needs a ride. That's why she landed near us. Let's go.' He gave Stan a knowing glance. 'You drive. Okay!'

'Sure!' Stan said.

Pazz swallowed bile as the new emotions surged through her body; fear, terror, loneliness, feelings akin to those she'd only felt before her trial back home. The landing craft lifted, slowly at first then accelerated into night air to self-destruct twenty thousand meters up. But the alien visitor wasn't completely alone. She fingered the gold armlet through the thin jacket and immediately Epsilon, the mobile computer responded.

'We are not alone,' the thoughts flashed into Pazz's mind in her home language. 'My sensors register two humans watching us from beyond that bank, not in that wheeled vehicle.'

Pazz stared out in to the darkness and focused her eyes. The darkness shimmered as her infrared eyesight activated and she could see the lighter shimmer of body heat behind the bushes.

'I know you're there,' she called in her new language and turned the flashlight on. 'So you might

as well come out.'

'Caution,' warned Epsilon in her mind. 'They are seeders. '

'So what?' Pazz thought while she spoke orally about the rifle.

'We do not know if they can be trusted. That's all. ' Epsilon replied. ' On this planet males are the stronger gender; they were on ours too before we won the gender wars.'

By now Pazz had reached the Landcruiser, a strange craft that still used wheels to propel itself along. She'd seen one in a museum at home.

'What say we sit in the back while Stan drives,' Greg stated in a soft voice. He held the rear door open.

'No thank you!' Pazz replied. 'The front will do.' She opened the door herself and slid into the dark interior that stunk of a strange smoke and liquid. Greg shrugged and squeezed beside her.

'Take her away, Stan,' he grunted and the girl beside him noticed his sideways glance as the Landcruiser headed towards the settlement an hour's drive ahead.

'In the air force are you?' he asked casually enough. Pazz could sense his primitive emotions but jumped when a hand squeezed her leg.

'Epsilon,' she thought. 'I'm scared.'

'No,' said a strangely metallic voice and Greg's wandering hand was gripped and squeezed so hard in return he let out a stifled gasp of agony as it was thrust away.

'Who are you?' he grumbled in embarrassment as Pazz glared at him.

'I am Epsilon,' replied the same metallic voice. 'You do not touch Pazz.'

The girl suddenly blinked and the stare softened. 'Thank you. I'm okay now,' she said as if talking to herself.

'Who's Pazz?' The man grumbled but made sure he was not physically touching the leg of the girl next to him.

'I am,' Pazz said. 'Epsilon is,' she shrugged, ' my guardian angel, I guess you'd call her in English.' Her eyes turned hard. ' There is a railway settlement a hundred kilometers or so ahead, I believe. Are you heading that far?'

'Yeah,' Stan replied. 'We can take you all the way. The cattle station where we work is further on, still. '

'Thanks,' Pazz replied and began to chatter away as if nothing had happened. Greg frowned for a moment before shrugging and joining in the conversation. He'd been given the brush off before so it didn't really worry him too much.

'Have you any money cards?' Pazz asked a few moments later and shrugged. 'Credit cards, I mean.'

'Sure,' muttered Glen, 'but why?'

' Could I borrow one for a moment. I'll give it back'

'Yes, sure,' Glen stuttered and reached in his pocket. He fumbled with his wallet for a moment and extracted Visa and Cashflow cards.

'Thanks,' Pazz said when Greg handed the two cards to her and, in the darkness of the vehicle, discretely brought them up to touch the armband.

' Got it, 'Epsilon replied. "They should not be hard to duplicate but you'll have to bring them with you when we leave.'

Pazz pretended to study the name on the cards and handed them back. 'Thanks Greg,' she said and sat back to relax.

The journey which normally took over an hour was completed in fifty minutes. When the Landcruiser pulled in beside a motel lit by a neon light almost bigger than the building itself, Stan glanced at a sleeping Greg.

' This is the railway settlement. I'm not sure when the train comes through,' he said, 'but I guess you know where you're going. I'll let you out my side. Old Greg there is sleeping like a baby.'

'Thanks' Pazz replied, slid across behind the steering wheel, smiled and watched as Stan waved, clunked the 4X4 into gear and accelerated off with wheels screaming in the dust. She felt like a thief as she poked the wallet she'd extracted from Greg's pocket into her backpack.

'You're too honest, Pazz,' replied Epsilon. 'You can always return it to the man later. '

'Yes, I guess,' the guilty woman replied. She glanced around and, thanks to her English implant could read the sign on the door. 'Open 24 Hours,' it read. 'Please ring and enter.'

'Here goes,' Pazz whispered and walked into the motel.

Five minutes later she was in her very first Earth living quarters, a pleasant motel room with beds similar to at home except they were designed for two, running water and a hygienic toilet which use water to flush. For the first time in a millennium, the young woman had a drink of milk from the refrigerator and began to feel human.

'Pazz, ' communicated Epsilon as the girl lay under the sheet on the bed. It was too hot for blankets. 'Alpha, Beta and Gamma changed their mind.'

'How?' Pazz thought as sleep almost overtook her.

' I can stay with you as long as you wish, not just two weeks. When I remain on your arm I can help you. Just keep me uncovered at times so the sun can recharge my batteries.'

'I'm glad,' Pazz thought. 'Thanks for taking over and stopping that man.' she sighed. 'He made me quite scared for a moment.'

'You're a bearer now, Pazz, a woman. My memory banks tell me bearers back home often mated naturally with seeders.'

'It was illegal!' Pazz gasped out loud.

'I know,' replied the computer, 'but that's how you were conceived.'

'You mean my mother...?' Pazz gasped.

'Yes. I was her computer too, remember.'

Pazz stared into the darkness. She never really knew Zandra, her mother. Affection between bearers and their offspring was seen as a weakness back home. Female babies were raised in community buildings, the closest English word would be an orphanage and the one in a thousand male child was immediately sent to offshore islands where seeders were allowed to live until they were required to replenish the sperm banks. Thinking back, Pazz realized it was only through her mother's determination that they had been allowed to live and grow up in a family; another Earth word that really had no corresponding one in their native tongue.

'I liked how the lady wrote your name on the register,' Epsilon interrupted, really to distract her human.

Pazz picked up the invoice and grinned. 'I could hardly say my real name,' she said. 'It's unpronounceable in English and the literal translation of Fourth Flower would hardly fit so I picked an Earth flower and the fourth letter in the English alphabet. I worked it all out back on Omega.'

She read the woman's spelling which came out as D'rose.

'Pazz D'rose has a nice ring to it,' the young woman said. 'I think I'll keep it that way.'

'One other thing,' Epsilon transmitted. 'They call women Mrs., Miss or Ms and males just Mr. on Earth but don't ask me why.'

Pazz sighed. She had so much to learn but guessed her first encounter with humans hadn't come out too badly. With one hand touching the golden armband, she drifted asleep and dreamed of home. It seemed like only the week before she was in that court rooms, not a millennium ago. The intervening time period was just too much to grasp.

CHAPTER TWO

It was after nine o'clock the following morning and the sun blazed in a cloudless sky when Pazz walked into the motel office with Greg's wallet in her hand. She assumed there was something that had to be done to pay for the use of the bedroom.

'Do you want to pay by direct withdrawal?' the woman behind the counter asked in a casual voice.

'That plastic card in the wallet is a crude device similar to ours at home,' Epsilon's thoughts commented in Pazz's mind. 'Say yes but make sure you touch me against the instrument.'

'Yes, please,' Pazz replied, took a credit card from Glenn's wallet and handed it to the woman. Afterwards she casually removed the armlet and held it between her fingers so it touched the swipe machine.

The proprietress smiled, swiped took the card and glanced at Pazz. 'Your pin, please.' she said.

Pazz frowned. Pin? Why would the woman want that small metal thing like a needle? She frowned and placed the armlet back on her arm so communication with Epsilon could be reestablished.

'Take the instrument and press in the numbers 5, 9, 0, 7, then "Enter",' the computer advised.

Pazz felt her face grow hot in embarrassment; another new emotion, but the card was accepted, the woman chatted away about nothing in particular and handed it back.

'I gave you a bank account,' Epsilon explained. 'The number I gave you is called a pin number so remember it. Hold the card against me.'

Pazz did so and grinned when she looked at the card again. The signature on it now read "Pazz D'rose" in her own handwriting.

'That's the best I could do,' Epsilon apologized. 'You'll have to practice writing it that way. It's a signature, a crude identification device. You're lucky there are no automatic eye identification computers on Earth. I've given you ten thousand dollars in your bank account. It should do for now.'

'Isn't that dishonest?' Pazz complained.

'Yes,' the computer replied, 'but would you prefer being destitute? Our credits from home are useless here.'

'I guess you're right,' Pazz replied but her conscience made her feel this was all wrong.

'Remember, too, your inbuilt reserves run out soon? Everything on this planet costs money, even food,' Epsilon continued. 'According to a sign at that gas station outside air is free so I guess that is something.'

'So what now?' Pazz asked.

'Keep the money and card but dispose of that wallet. Buy a train ticket for a place called Sydney,' Epsilon replied. 'It takes several days by these slow vehicles but you can relax and watch the scenery.'

'Okay,' Pazz thought and turned back to the woman.

'Could you tell me when the train is due?' she asked.

'East or west?' the woman replied.

'Sydney,' Pazz answered.

'That means you'll have to stay another night,' the motel proprietor said. 'Look, since you arrived so late and the sheets haven't been changed yet, I won't charge you an extra day. The Indian Pacific pulls in at quarter past four in the morning. If you like, we can wake you at three. We often do this for our guests. I sell tickets, if you wish to buy one.'

'Thank you for letting me keep the room,' Pazz said. 'I would like a ticket. Can I pay with my card again?'

'Sure,' came the reply as the woman typed into her computer terminal. She glanced up. 'There's a holiday class twinette sleeper available. It's slightly dearer but well worth while if you want to sleep properly. You'll be sharing with one other woman who is getting on from here, too.'

'I'll take it,' Pazz replied and thought this Earth woman could easily be from home.

She walked into the small restaurant attached to the motel and was engulfed by the smell of food. Though her inbuilt supply still had days to run the scrumptious smell made her stomach growl, another new experience.

'Well, order something,' Epsilon suggested. 'If you eat food now, your reserves are just kept until later. I have a feeling you're going to like Earth food.'

'I'll use the proper money this time,' Pazz answered and took delight in having her first cooked meal on Earth followed by steaming coffee, a drink not unlike hot herbal drinks at home.

Afterwards, she walked up the street of the town. At over thirty degrees, it was hotter than at home but still quite bearable. The whole settlement consisted of the motel, gas station and general store, the railway station and an old wooden building which had a row of vehicles parked in front and seemed to be filled with laughing males.

'Stay out of there,' warned Epsilon. 'My sensors pick up the same stench as in that vehicle you were in. I think it serves as a drug to lubricate male's stomachs.'

Pazz crossed the road and tried not to stare at the locals. Most of the few people around were males of all description; young, old, tall, fat, thin and there were even male children. They were all dressed for the hot weather with large hats to shade the eyes and seemed quite friendly. Several even caught her eye and nodded or commented about the weather. Of course, there were women around too, but not as many. Most were like her and could have easily been from home but others had dark skin. Once again it appeared as if Earth had not learned the art of changing color pigmentation so everyone was the same.

With the two genders and races all mixing together, this was a strange planet but Pazz felt an unusual excitement tingle inside her. Though primitive, Earth could be an interesting place.

'Buy yourself a watch,' Epsilon interrupted her thoughts. 'It tells you the time. You'll need it in the morning. Their method of measuring time is not difficult to follow.'

'Right,' Pazz said out loud, walked in the general store and was fascinated by the interior. She bought a watch with digital numbers and placed it on her wrist then noticed a clothing section with blouses and skirts, a garment unfamiliar to her but one she'd seen several women wearing. In the hot weather it seemed a sensible alternative to the clothes she had on.

The woman serving her smiled in delight at the sale she had just made and clucked around with suggestions and letting her try items on. Pazz ended up buying three colorful blouses, two skirts, a summer dress, underwear and two nighties. She guessed she would not have enough money so used her bankcard again. It worked perfectly but she still felt guilty.

'Don't worry,' chided Epsilon. 'Nothing has come out of Greg's account. I've taken thousandths of a cent off hundreds of accounts to create yours. Nobody will suffer. People speculate with money here all the time and many make millions by buying and selling money.'

'You mean they use other people's money to get rich?' Pazz asked. 'That's immoral.'

'At home, maybe, but not here,' Epsilon explained. 'Once you get settled and help these people you'll more than pay this amount back, anyway.'

'I guess,' Pazz muttered.

She walked along to a small building women were walking in and out of. A sign said "Women's Rest Room" and apparently men stayed out. Pazz went in and found a toilet and other small rooms. Another female was there changing a baby. Pazz smiled shyly at the woman who began to chat. She would be in her mid-twenties, it was difficult to estimate Earth people's ages, was a little chubby, had short dark hair and warm light brown eyes.

Pazz switched her eyes to the infant and suppressed a gasp. Something was wrong with her but straight away she realized the mistake. The deformity between the baby's legs was not that at all, but male organs. The baby was a little boy.

'Lovely little boy,' she said and hoped the woman didn't notice her flushed face.

'Thank you. Jason's six weeks old now, aren't you, Sweetheart?' The woman grinned and held out her hand. 'My name's Lynn Kilmore. I guess you're waiting for the train, too.'

'Shake her hand, look into her eyes and smile,' Epsilon instructed. 'It's a sign of friendliness, here.'

'Pazz D'rose,' she introduced herself and followed the computer's instructions. 'Yes, I am going on the train.'

Lynn talked a while, said she might see Pazz later and departed. Pazz grinned and realized that the Earth people seemed friendly; even the males. She slipped into the toilet and afterwards headed back to the motel.

A feeling of excitement filled her body as she changed into new clothes. Soft material touched her skin and felt so smooth. She used a comb and brush, surprisingly similar to those at home, to comb out her hair. Finally, she replaced her hot boots with lightweight shoes she'd also purchased and packed everything else in the backpack. The computers had done a great job. This backpack looked identical to one she had seen in the shop.

'You look a beautiful Earthling; the clothes fit you well but you could do with a little make up,' Epsilon congratulated.

Pazz studied her reflection in the mirror. She knew the computer could pick up the images she was seeing, 'What's that?' she thought.

'Didn't you see Lynn paint her lips with that red tube? It's called lipstick.'

'Is it a skin protection?'

'No,' replied the computer. 'The woman brightens their lips and skin to look more attractive. They also wear little ornaments attached their ear lobes.'

'Well,' Pazz said as she walked into the tiny kitchen to put the kettle on. 'We'd better buy some hadn't we? I'm going to be on this planet for quite a while so might as well begin to look like an Earth woman.'

When the Indian Pacific Express glided into the station with its front light cutting a searchlight through the hot darkness, Pazz felt nervous in anticipation. She watched the green and yellow diesel engine sweep by with a rush of wind followed by carriage after carriage, most in darkness but a few with lights shining inside. After the eighth carriage past her Pazz stopped counting but instead concentrated on the letters showing. She was in carriage "J", Berth 6, which she had been told was near the center of the train.

Finally the massive mechanical monster stopped and a conductor stepped down from the carriage immediately in front of Pazz and smiled at her.

'Welcome aboard the Indian Pacific, Madam,' he said and examined her ticket. 'Will you follow me, please.' He picked Pazz's backpack up and waited for her to step aboard. She found herself in a long narrow, pleasantly lit and surprisingly cool corridor with a painting of a massive bird along the interior wall.

'That's the Wedge-Tailed eagle,' the conductor explained, 'the symbol of our train. Tomorrow morning just after daylight you may see one soaring over the desert.' he stopped and held a door open. 'I took the liberty in lowering the sleeping births ready for you. Can I get you a coffee before you settle in?'

Pazz smiled, walked in and inspected the tiny compartment. It reminded her of one in a starship. She sat on the bottom bunk just as the train started again and the lights of the tiny settlement disappeared in the darkness. A moment later the conductor reappeared with another passenger.

'Hello again!' It was Lynn, the woman Pazz had met at the rest room. 'We are sharing. I hope you don't mind Jason. He's asleep at the moment.' She hoisted the carrycot onto the bed and glanced at her ticket. 'Blast, I've got the top bunk. That'll be a bit hard with Bubs here.'

'Well, swap,' Pazz said and stood up. 'I don't mind the top bunk.'

She felt quite pleased to have someone she'd met before, no matter how briefly. Lynn chatted away and by the time the conductor returned with two mugs of coffee they were like old friends.

'I once shared with a grouchy old bag who moaned all day and snored all night,' Lynn laughed after they'd both settled into their bunks and the lights were turned off. 'I'm glad I have someone like yourself.'

'Me too,' Pazz smiled into the darkness and gazed out the windows at the stars. Somewhere up there, Omega was orbiting around and further away still but probably too small to see, was her home star, just called "The Light" in English. Her planet, the fourth one out was named Delta, the fourth letter of their alphabet and strangely enough one still used, according to Epsilon, by a few Earth inhabitants. Pazz wondered how many other home items survived on Earth after three thousand years.

'Are you a long way from home?' Lynn's voice made Pazz jump in fright.

'Yes,' she said. 'A long way.'

'I'm returning to Sydney after four years in Perth...' she rattled on until both women grew tired and lapsed into sleep.

Pazz dreamt of her family and sister and woke disorientated. The light below her was on and she glanced down to see Lynn breast feeding the baby. The sight made her feel all warm inside; these new emotions she was now exposed to came and went all the time. It was as if she was alive and living for the first time. Thoughts of meeting males switched to the thrill of feeling soft new clothes against her skin, the excitement when the train arrived and now this young Earth

woman feeding a male child.

'I hope Jason didn't awaken you. He howled a bit.' Lynn said when she realized Pazz was gazing at her.

'No, not at all,' Pazz replied. 'Do all the woman here breast feed their infants?'

Lynn smiled. 'Half in half. I'm sort of weaning Bubs, but will keep feeding him for a while yet. Why do you ask? You're Australian aren't you? You sound like one.'

Pazz flushed in embarrassment. What a stupid question she had asked!

'Tell her you're from Auckland, New Zealand. It's a country nearby and their accent is quite similar.' Epsilon helped.

'Auckland, New Zealand,' Pazz stuttered.

'Fair enough,' Lynn replied. 'Nice place.'

Pazz grinned. With her computer's help she was managing to fit into her new environment quite well. She chattered awhile and drifted back to sleep, this time it was dreamless as all the activity since her awakening finally caught up with her. The slight sway of the carriage and cool air conditioning may also have contributed to her sleeping well. The sun rose flooded the Indian Pacific Express with daylight when Pazz awoke.

'I thought you'd never wake up,' Lynn smiled at her. 'I brought you some breakfast. The dining car closed at nine.'

'Nine,' muttered a sleepy Pazz and glanced at her new watch that said nine thirty. 'I'm sorry. I guess I didn't realize how sleepy I was.'

'It doesn't matter,' laughed Lynn. 'There's not a lot else to do.'

Pazz glanced at the breakfast on a little tray Lynn was holding. It smelt appetizing and she realized she was hungry again.

'How do you do it?' Lynn asked a few moments later as Pazz finished munching her third piece of toast, poured out a second cup of coffee and added sugar and cream.

'Do what, Lynn?'

'Eat! You eat twice the amount I do and look at you; slim as a film star. If I ate like you I'd be as chubby as an elephant.'

Pazz flushed. She enjoyed the food but never really thought of it affecting her weight. Back home, food was automatically impregnated with additives to prevent one becoming overweight. Pazz frowned. That was how women were kept as neuters, too. Additives in the water supply suppressed female hormones and it was only by providing a neutralizer that women could become bearers and later have offspring after being artificially fertilized. Of course they had to be genetically pure and of good moral character to be allowed to breed. Everything was controlled.

That was why she was arrested in the first place. Even in her lifetime, individual freedoms were becoming more and more suppressed. She had been foolish enough to speak up at a university seminar, someone had reported her to the constabulary, and she was arrested for 'fanning flames of hatred against the common good' as the charge sheet read.

'You're deep in thought,' Lynn stared at Pazz. 'Is there something I can help you with?'

'No,' Pazz said and smiled faintly. 'Just family matters.'

'Yeah I know,' Lynn replied and her face turned serious, too. She stared out the window. 'That's why I was in that little town. I sneaked off the train there three days ago in an attempt to escape from James.'

Pazz waited, as it seemed Lynn wanted to talk.

'My husband and Jason's father...' She screwed her nose up. 'I just couldn't stick it any longer so took Jason and cleared out. I was sure he knew I was on the train last Tuesday and I reckoned he'd fly across to Sydney and find me when the train arrived. My parents are in Sydney but they don't really understand.' She shrugged. 'There's really only Jason and myself.' She grinned and glanced out the window at the desert flashing by. 'But you don't want to hear my moans, do you?'

'Why not?' Pazz replied. 'We can't keep everything in our body, can we?'

Lynn smiled. 'No, I guess not. You say the funniest things at times, Pazz but I know what you mean.' She turned and gazed outside again. 'Look!' she gasped and pointed.

Pazz followed her glance and saw a massive black and white bird soaring high above the desert. 'The largest eagle in the world,' explained Lynn. 'The Wedge-Tail Eagle like the painting in the corridor.' She sighed. 'Oh, to be free like him.'

'Yes,' Pazz replied. They had birds at home, too but she'd never really related them to freedom. She glanced at her companion but the mood was broken when the baby woke up crying and Lynn lifted him in her arms. 'He's got a rash, poor wee thing,' she said.

'Can I hold him?' Pazz asked.

'Sure,' Lynn replied, 'but I'll change his diapers first.'

Pazz watched while the job was completed and, moments later cuddled the little boy in her arms. He was so perfect and dependent upon his mother. She found tears in her eyes as she kissed the soft cheek and handed him back. Lynn looked at her intently, smiled but said nothing. Both of them, though, began to appreciate each others company; the young woman leaving an unwanted husband and the alien deposited on the world because there was nowhere else to go.

'God, we're getting melancholy,' Lynn laughed. 'Come on let's go for a walk along to the lounge car. I know you've just had breakfast but I'm ready for morning tea.'

Pazz laughed too. 'Sure,' she replied. 'That's a grand idea.'

The pair were sitting in the lounge car when a conductor came to their table with a telephone in his hand.

'Mrs. Lynn Kilmore?' he inquired.

'Yes,' answered Lynn and her face drained of color.

'There is a telephone call from Sydney for you Mrs. Kilmore.' He handed Lynn the instrument.

'Just press three to receive your call. I'll return to get the telephone later.' He smiled gave a slight bow and walked away.

'It'll be my husband,' Lynn whispered in a distressed voice. 'I know he's flown across to Sydney. I don't want to talk to him.'

'Are you sure?' Pazz asked and Lynn nodded miserably. 'Okay, give it to me.'

Pazz picked up the unfamiliar instrument, pressed the three and put it to her ear. 'Good morning. This is the senior administrative officer on the Indian Pacific Express. Can I be of assistance?'

'My name is James Kilmore and I was informed my wife, Lynn is a passenger on your train. Could I speak to her please,' came the reply

Pazz nodded at Lynn. 'I am sorry Mr. Kilmore, Mrs. Lynn Kilmore cannot be located at the moment. She is not in her apartment nor the dining car.' Her eyes met Lynn's who indicated with her fingers she was doing the correct thing.

'Wait one moment,' Pazz continued. 'I have a message coming up on my computer.' She paused. 'Yes, here it is. Apparently Mrs. Kilmore decided to break her journey and left the train in the township of Cook. I believe she will be continuing on the next train through.'

'Damn!' the male voice continued. 'Have you a forwarding address? It is rather urgent.'

'There was no address, Mr. Kilmore but Cook is only a small town. Perhaps if you give me your message, I'll send it to Cook Railway Station and they may find her.'

'Thank you. Just say James is trying to contact her and she should ring her parents in Sydney.'

Pazz repeated the message with her eyes on Lynn who nodded. 'I shall forward that through to Cook straight away, Mr. Kilmore. Thank you for your call.'

She handed the telephone to Lynn who pressed the disconnect button and gave a tiny smile. 'You're a wonder, Pazz,' she said. 'Thank you. My God, how did he trace me here?'

'I guess that wasn't too hard,' Pazz responded. She glanced at Lynn's apprehensive face. 'Why are you staying away from him?' she asked.

Lynn picked Jason up from the carrycot he was lying in and cuddled the little boy. 'He's ten years older than I am, a prosperous businessman am.' She bit on her bottom lip. 'About three months after we were married he began beating me. That's three and a half years now. Even when I was pregnant he would beat me over the slightest pretence. He gets insanely jealous and accuses me of flirting at anyone who comes near but it is all in his mind. Finally, I could stand it no longer.

'Look!' She pulled back the sleeve of her blouse to show several dark bruises on her arm. 'There's more,' she whispered. 'Oh, he was crafty and never hit me on the face. Afterwards he always apologized and said he would never do it again. For a while I believed him but the beatings became worse.' Her eyes watered as she looked at Pazz. 'I must say he has never hurt Jason. I guess that 's something.'

'So what are you going to do, Lynn?' Pazz asked in an empathetic voice.

Lynn shrugged. 'I was going home, but my parents are so old fashioned they think I should stay in the marriage.' She shrugged. 'Mind you, if Dad knew of all the beatings he'd stick up for me. I've got money so that's no problem. I think I'll just try to disappear once I arrive in Sydney. It's

a pretty big city, as you know.'

Pazz didn't, but smiled and considered her reply. 'Would you like to stay with me? I have no attachments at the moment. I was just going to the big city to look for a job. I spent a few months working on a cattle station,' she lied and hoped her face didn't look guilty.

Lynn, though seemed too worried about her own affairs to notice the slight quiver in Pazz's voice. 'I'd like that Pazz,' she said. 'Even if it's just for a while until I can get settled. What about Jason? Won't he be a nuisance?'

'Not at all,' said Pazz. 'I love babies.'

'You're doing well, Pazz.' Epsilon's voice entered her mind. 'By her facial expressions and voice tone, I would say Lynn is quite genuine. You sure heated up when you told those lies, though. Don't be so self-conscious.'

'Hush up!' Pazz snapped back in her mind and smiled at Lynn. 'Good, we stick together then. Agreed!'

'Agreed,' Lynn said and reached across to take Pazz's hands in hers.

'I notice you have a bottle for Jason,' she said. 'Can I feed him when it's time?'

'Sure,' said Lynn. 'Anytime. Change his diapers, too if you wish.'

'I might just do that,' Pazz replied and smiled into the baby's round eyes. 'You'll have to show me how, though.'

CHAPTER THREE

Pazz would have been horrified had she known that in a different part of Omega, separated by half a dozen airlocks, a young man was unintentionally brought out of suspended animation, too. He was a human, every bit as much as Pazz was but came from another world, known only on intergalactic records as Planet 38675.6, a place perfectly suited for human life but inhabited by a pre-industrial civilization.

Lunol Pendlf had managed to care for him reasonably well, considering he had no knowledge of the computer's language or how to operate electronic equipment. Now, clean-, with his hair cut short in the style he was used to on Custronomus, his home kingdom, he was still self-conscious about the strange clothes he'd been left to wear.

Worse, though, he was worried about Kagit, his woman companion who had brought him to the sky ship. In a world of sailing ships the idea of a space ship was almost beyond his comprehension.

'Oh Kagit, My Love. Where are you?' he muttered in Custron, his native language as he walked down yet another semicircular corridor and ignored the computer voices. He couldn't understand their language anyhow. He glanced around. This corridor was identical to the others except for one thing. It was painted a pale orange, not light blue. Good, at least he wasn't walking in circles like the last time. He did not know but he was on the spinning layer of Omega just below the outer skin so an artificial gravity made it just like home.

He came to an airlock and opened the tiny notebook Kagit had left him. She had tried to explain what to do when he awoke and had listed all the possibilities in her neat handwriting. For really the first time, Lunol appreciated learning how to read as he thumbed through the notes.

"The computers will not understand you," she had written but had included a few basic commands in her language, "but most equipment has a manual over ride." Lunol searched further down her list until he came for directions for opening this steel door; an airlock Kagit had called it. He read the details and glanced at the door. Yes there was a row of buttons. Now, he had to push the red and blue ones together.

'Okay,' he muttered and pushed them. The computer's voice droned out an incomprehensible command but the door slid back.

Lunol smiled when he recognized the interior. This was one of the control rooms he'd been shown when they had arrived on board. He stared up and gasped. Across from him, a gigantic television screen was playing. From his friend's earlier description he knew this moving picture showed something happening somewhere else on or outside the ship.

At the moment it showed a massive planet, just like his own with blue water, various colored landmasses and white polar sections. He consulted his notebook, walked up to a console and pressed another manual override button. The scene immediately changed to the interior of Omega; the room he was in, actually. He could see himself at the control panel. He pressed other buttons and different scenes appeared on the screen. Good, now he could try to find Kagit.

For twenty minutes he flicked through the images of electronic machinery, corridors, rooms, storage bays and more closed pods like the one he'd awoken in. There were also voice comments in Kagit's language and written information, once again in an alphabet that he could not comprehend.

Suddenly he saw her!

'Kagit!' he called. She was in a huge barn type room climbing into a small rescue pod. He could see her brown hair and when she looked up, he was sure her eyes looked directly into his.

He watched, fascinated but was also very worried as mechanical arms closed the pod and two massive doors slid open to show black sky and thousands of stars outside. The tiny craft floated in the chamber for a moment, flames burned and the craft accelerated away. A shiver of apprehension went through his body. She had gone and left him behind! Why would she do this?

He just sat staring at the scene which, without being touched, had switched to show a view of the Earth coming closer and closer. Of course, he was now seeing the view from the rescue pod. For almost an hour he watched, fascinated, until he saw darkness on the screen, there was a slight vibration and rocks and sand could be seen in shimmering red light. Suddenly she was walking in front of the craft, turned, sort of smiled and the view vanished. Kagit was safe somewhere on the world below but Lunol still did not understand why she had not waited for him.

'Damn!' he cried out loud. This was not like her. She would not just abandon him; not after everything they'd gone through. Perhaps she wanted to explore the place first and would come back. He decided to wait a few days before making any decision about what to do and shrugged. There was not much that could be done, anyway. This ship was far beyond his understanding.

On the morning of the third day, once again the artificially created days and nights were beyond Lunol's understanding; the computer spoke to him.

'Good morning, Lunol,' said a female voice. 'I am computer Alpha. We have been recording your voice and have developed a rudimentary knowledge of your language over the last three Earth days. You seemed distracted and distressed. Can I be of assistance?'

'It's Kagit,' Lunol replied. 'She's landed on that world below but has not returned. I'm worried about her.'

'I know of no name Kagit,' the computer replied. 'Perhaps in our language she has a different name.'

'I saw her on the moving picture screen.'

'That would be Pazz,' the computer replied. 'She is safe but will not return to Omega.'

Omega, Lunol knew, was the name of the ship.

'But why?' he gasped.

'She did not know you were aboard,' Alpha replied. 'She thought she was alone on Omega.'

'I see,' Lunol nodded and stared around the bunkroom he'd been using. Of course, if she thought he was dead that could explain everything.

'Can I follow her?' he asked.

'It will be difficult. You lack much of our scientific knowledge and may not survive the journey to Earth. Even if you do, we can not protect you there in the way our human is protected.'

'Why not?'

'You have not had the transplants necessary.' Lunol blinked. He did not understand what Alpha meant. 'We can however, provide you with clothing, food and water as well as a tracking device which could lead you to our human. Beware though, the distances are great and the temperatures far higher than in your country. Wouldn't it be better to stay on Omega? We could contact our human and tell her of your safe condition.'

Lunol, though, shook his head. 'I can't stay here for ever,' he said. 'No, I'd like to follow her.'

'Very well,' replied Alpha. 'We shall prepare a landing pod. The journey down should be safe but we'll give you some basic training in case anything goes wrong.'

'Thank you.' Lunol replied.

'Now we understand each other you only need to speak anywhere in Omega, we will hear your instructions and help if we can.'

'Good,' Lunol replied. 'Give me time to get dressed and have breakfast then you can show me where the landing pod is. I want to start my training straight away.'

'That sounds a good idea, Lunol,' the computer commented and went silent.

Over the next week the impatient Lunol was given intensive training by the computers on safety procedures with the landing pod, basic knowledge of the English language and desert survival techniques.

It was decided, for various technical and cultural reasons not to provide him with a powerful computer armet. After all, he was a male and therefore could not be completely trusted nor considered intelligent enough to handle such sophisticated electronics. Instead, Alpha downloaded a more basic computer named Sigma from her archives. Sigma could communicate orally rather than by direct thought waves. She could convert oral and written language and had been programmed with a basic moral code and empathy towards her owner. Also, a homing device linked with Epsilon was included.

As an extra precaution, Sigma was programmed to obey their own electronic commands or Lunol's voice patterns and had other self-preservation programs. The computer was given a female voice and had the ability to initiate speech if it was considered necessary and could respond with Earthlings who spoke to it. Though antiquated by Delta standards, Sigma was still many generations superior to computers monitored from Earth.

After studying Earth television broadcasts, Alpha's mechanical arms made Sigma into the shape of a four centimeter high stylized koala bear which could hang around Lunol's neck with an authentic looking leather cord. The workshop also produced a realistic backpack that contained extra clothing, first aid, high-energy food pellets, and a jerrican containing several liters of water. Though looking authentic by Earth standards, this was another advanced piece of equipment that could convert the driest of atmospheres into water droplets. With care, therefore, his water supply would be constantly replenished.

On Lunol's last night aboard, Alpha, Beta and Gamma had another electronic conference about their charge. The fact that he was a seeder, a male, from a primitive planet was a concern. Their memory banks showed Pazz had made no reference to this man. In fact all the time Omega was orbiting his home planet she was in suspended animation.

'We should research the other humans still asleep on board,' Gamma suggested. 'They may provide information.'

'We have only one back up human left,' Beta noted 'She is required if this planet is unsuitable and Omega has to continue her search elsewhere. Human Pazz is our prime objective for our protection. What if this seeder attempts to harm her? She still needs many weeks to adjust to Earth society.'

'We could put this man back into suspended animation,' Gamma added, 'but I would prefer not to keep him aboard.'

'Australia is a large continent.' Alpha added. 'I suggest we land him in a remote place so it takes him many weeks to find her. It will show his intentions, too. If he is genuine in his effort to seek her out, and I believe he is, this will be a true test. If not, he can just blend into the Earth society and will be no different from the other millions of males on the planet.'

The vote on Alpha's suggestion was unanimous and a spot many kilometers from Adelaide but not so remote the man would not survive, was selected. The landing pod would arrive an area away from but within walking distance of inhabitation.

In line with all inter-computer decisions, Lunol was not informed of his fate but only told the journey to Earth would take place the next day.

Lunol grinned that evening when he was shown the equipment manufactured for his use. He

slung the necklace on and jumped in fright when the computer began speaking in his own language.

'Hello Lunol,' it said. 'I am Sigma, your companion down on Earth. To communicate, just speak to me. Okay?'

'Sure!' the man answered and wondered what to ask. 'When will we land?'

'5.45 a.m., Central Standard Time, in the cooler hours of the morning,' Sigma replied in a slightly metallic voice. 'I would advise six hours sleep before you leave so you are in peak physical condition for the descent. We leave Omega at 5.00 a.m. and the journey will last forty five Earth minutes which is equivalent to 27.1 of your own minor time units in the Kingdom of Custronomus, your homeland.'

'You are precise,' Lunol smiled and gazed in excitement and some apprehension out the viewing port at Earth which now only showed as a black gap in the star strewn space. A small crescent of red and yellow showed where the sun was hidden as Australia was in darkness.

During its traverse of the galaxy, Starship Omega had been struck several times by rogue meteorites, ranging in size from that of a pea to one spinning chunk of rock as large as a golf ball. The self-sealing hull, though damaged, deflected the meteorite and a sticky white paste squeezed through the outer hull puncture and solidified. However, one tiny slither broke off the rock, became embedded in the fracture and lay there for centuries doing no harm. However, the final firing of engines to slow Omega into its Earth orbit vibrated this fragment loose. Interior air pressure pushed it out and, without a sound, for there is no sound in the vacuum of space, a cloud of life sustaining air began to escape and instantly vaporize like a long thin cloud of white beside Omega.

'We have a fracture,' Beta electronically reported mere hours after Lunol's departure. 'Air is escaping at a faster rate than it can be replenished. Unless stopped, all human and plant life aboard will cease to exist in a time span still to be determined.'

Pazz was safe on Earth but unknown to her, after she had be put in suspended animation above Planet Delta, one other person had sneaked boarded Omega and persuaded the computers to allow her to go on the journey. Unlike Pazz she was awakened above Planet 38675.6 and spent many years there before Omega continued the journey through the galaxy. This time, Pazz and Lunol were both brought back from suspended animation and were now both on Earth. This third human, in the computer logic of being kept as a backup; even in suspended animation, needed air to stay alive. Computer Beta diverted her resources to resuscitate this last human, Alpha attempted to repair the hull and Gamma used the dwindling resources to increase the air supply. Whether Omega's computers could repair the fault before all life aboard ceased was possible but the mathematical probability was low; too low unless someone else could help.

Hundreds of kilometers north east of Adelaide, a young man lay exhausted and dehydrated under a small mound of rock while insects ran over his blistered swollen skin as if to add the last insult in his effort to stay alive. It was almost three weeks since Lunol had landed and in all that time he'd met nobody.

'Wake up, Lunol,' Sigma the talking computer urged. 'It's late afternoon. You have survived another day and another liter of water has been replenished in your jerrican. You can take a few more mouthfuls of drink.'

Lunol squinted in the harsh glare. His eyelids felt like coarse sand and the fire in his throat was every bit as bad as when he had the plague back home. At least he could breathe. He grunted, thrust flies away from his face and threw sand over his legs at the hundreds of small creatures that seemed to be everywhere. Finally, he unscrewed the top of the jerrican and took two sips of water and swished the precious liquid around his mouth before swallowing. His tortured body screamed for more but he methodically screwed the top back on and wiped his sore eyes.

The Earth had no sign of humans but it did have life; insects, Sigma said the word in English, some birds in the mornings and evenings and slithery reptiles that looked highly poisonous. The land was red and covered in thorny bushes, the sky cloudless with a yellow sun and blistering heat, worse than any he had experienced. He staggered to his feet and attempted to walk, grimaced in pain, as needles seemed to shoot up his legs and muscles knotted. He collapsed back into a sitting position again.

'I think you have to reconsider your previous decision, Lunol,' Sigma spoke out.

'What now!' snorted the man but gave a mental grin. Without the computer's continuous talking and advice he would not have lasted into the week.

'Take of your boots and socks.'

'I'll never get them on again,' he argued. 'With bare feet I wouldn't last another day.'

'The medicinal ointment in your backpack is designed to replenish blistered skin. Apply some and rest until evening. It's only 2.3 hours until sunset.'

Lunol sighed but reached forward and undid the laces of his boots. With a grunt of pain, he removed one and then the other. The socks beneath stunk of perspiration and filth but with infinite care he rolled them off and examined his feet for the first time in three days. The heels were red and swollen but the skin unbroken. However, the underside consisted of several wide watery blisters and his toes were swollen and bruised with blood blisters under the nails.

'I need some of the herbal cures from home,' he muttered as he stretched and relaxed his toes in an attempt to restore circulation.

'Use the tube with the red label,' Sigma advised.

'Okay, you little know it all,' Lunol grunted, pulled his hat down lower, bent forward and squeezed the white antibiotic out. It had an anaesthetic affect and the pain began to subside. When he had finished he wiped his hands, arms and neck with the cooling paste and felt better.

'Time for dinner,' he joked, swallowed the third to last energy capsule and washed it down with one more mouthful of water. The stuff was tasteless but at least it was liquid.

'Now bind your feet with bandages before insects are attracted to it and put clean socks on,' Sigma said. 'Rest up a couple of hours and at sunset we'll be on our way.'

'We,' snorted Lunol. 'Why couldn't you grow legs and carry me?'

'I am not programmed to do that but assure you my additional weight does not sufficiently handicap your effort to walk.'

'Yeah, I know,' Lunol grinned and began wrapping a bandage around his right foot. 'Damn fool of a computer.'

'I perceive that's a joke, Lunol,' Sigma replied.

'Yeah, you're learning my little friend,' he sighed, swished flies away from his face and continued doctoring his feet.

Thank you for downloading this novel .We hope you enjoyed the first three chapters.

Omega Seed can be purchased from the publisher Atlantic Bridge Publishing.

<http://www.atlanticbridge.net/publishing/nonexc/omega.htm>

Wayne South is the pseudonym for Ross Richdale,
Visit his site for info on his eighteen novels

<http://www.ebookfiction.biz>