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CHAPTER 1

'Trust old Thor to come up with something dramatic and enigmatic. Quantum Billiards and the Analog Brain—what the hell's that supposed to mean? Know what he's on about, Don?'

He pricked up his ears; they were talking about him.

'Some crap about analog computers, I gather. He still won't admit they died a natural death years ago.'

'I wouldn't go that far. The US defense forces use them quite a bit from what I hear.'

Thor's half-hearted attention was grabbed and focused, not only by the words—though it was indeed wonderful to hear someone defending analogs—but equally by the voice, the sensuality of which raised goosebumps in his skin.

He had a momentary flashback to another voice from years ago, back when he was in his first job with IBM—the sexy voice of a new female on the switchboard, which anyone would have to imagine belonged to the most delectable young thing. It didn't; she was a dowdy old bag with gray hair and horsy features, the dress sense of a retarded child and not much more intelligence. His phone flirtations promptly ceased.

He identified the speaker and was immediately transfixed by eyes the color of a Brisbane sky in mid-winter—large eyes that twinkled as they met his. The faint suggestion of a smile on her perfect mouth seemed to be telling him she was sharing a joke with him at the ignorance of her companions.

The group moved in around her and she was lost to his sight. Almost automatically, he started to move towards her but stopped, confused. He felt so drawn to her but he was a married man who had never once strayed in over twenty years of marriage. And anyway what would a beautiful young girl like that see in him? Sure he matched his namesake, the god, in being tall, blonde, blue-eyed and of impressive build, but his face was as lined and weather-beaten as the rocks on the headland. A jagged dagger of a scar on his forehead and a smaller horseshoe near his mouth—both legacies of a motorcycle accident when, as a twenty-year-old, he'd gone to sleep while riding to visit his parents after an all-night party and regained consciousness in an ambulance station—finished off any possible claim he had to being handsome.

He wryly thought that perhaps she was like many another woman, whose first thoughts on seeing a tall, well-built male seemed to be if his physical over-endowments extended to his genitals. That his didn't—or at least not to his own satisfaction—was a prime reason he'd never developed into a womanizer. In fact, he'd tended to shy away from sexual intimacy when it was offered.

It had been his wife who had made the moves. She'd engineered it that he was almost forced to offer to drive her home after she'd missed her train. She'd persuaded him to watch television with her and her parents. She'd thrown a blanket over their laps and fondled him while they watched. And things just got better and better—at least sexually—and continued getting better through all the years of marriage. At least they had until a couple of years ago.

The scene flashed into his mind as fresh as if it had just happened. He was trying to seduce her. Usually, this was a pretty effortless procedure but tonight it seemed unusually difficult.

'There was a survey just released that showed that most ladies would rather just cuddle than have sex,' she said.

'Just as well you're not a lady.'

But she seemed determined to act like one. There was no sex that night and for many nights after. Many sleepless nights he'd spent stewing in his frustration, completely unable to explain her behavior. For a short time, he'd suspected her of having an affair but there was nothing on which to base his suspicions and he soon dismissed this explanation. What then? He could do nothing to attempt to correct the situation when he didn't know its cause. And she wouldn't give him any rational explanation—not that he demanded any, for that would have meant a confrontation and both of them evaded anything remotely resembling a row.

Things had dragged on, sex becoming less and less a part of their lives and less and less satisfactory when it did occur. With the absence of sex came the realization of how much of their mutual attraction had depended on it. There was no talk of separation; ridiculously, she seemed quite content with life as it was, and he'd never bring up the subject. But now he was beginning to wonder if he shouldn't make a move while he was still young enough to maybe find a more suitable companion.

He'd recently discovered, quite by accident, the reason for his wife's strange behavior. She'd gone to a doctor about a dry skin problem and he'd put her on hormone replacement therapy—even though she was some way off from being menopausal. Thor had verified that lack of sexual appetite was a well-known side effect of the therapy in some women and carefully, subtly brought up the subject with his wife. To his amazement, he discovered that she had worked this out herself but that it didn't concern her; she seemed to regard that, and the hefty weight gain she'd experienced, as acceptable, regardless of what he thought about it. He knew that, whatever happened, he would never love her again as he once had—despite how well she looked after him and spoiled him in other ways.

He sipped his champagne. It tasted like vinegar. To hell with it, he'd go to bed and hope he'd drunk enough to make him sleep. He might as well be alone in his room as alone here, tacitly excluded from the myriad little cliques that hung together, resenting any intrusion into their group, talking trivia. They were all fools, jealous of any eagle who tried to soar above their little flock. He drained his glass, carefully set it down on a table and threaded his way towards the door. So intent was he on avoiding a group where a large, bearded man was holding forth that he collided with a woman.

'Sorr...y.' His hurried apology tailed off as he looked down into aching beautiful blue eyes.

'It was my fault. I think I'm a bit tipsy. That Don character keeps filling my glass. I think he's trying to get me drunk...I don't really want this.'

The voice really was incredibly sensuous, with a fascinating trace of some undefinable accent. Under its spell he took the glass from her delicate hand and drained it.

'Thanks,' she said...'Hey, you're Thor Ericson, aren't you? You're giving a talk tomorrow I hear. What's it all about?'

'Oh...not much really. I'm just pointing out that an analog computer would be better than a digital supercomputer at solving quantum problems and in analyzing and simulating the human brain. I'm also suggesting that we could use the atom itself as a computer.'

'That's pretty revolutionary, isn't it?'

'Not really original; others have suggested it before. An electron can be either spin-up or spin-down. That makes it remarkably like a binary bit. Maybe we can use that.'

'Speaking of bits, I hear you're receiving the Golden Bit Award.'

'Yeah...I guess I can't use my old line about a prophet not being without honor except in his own country any more.'

'It's for some sort of filter, isn't it? What's it all about?'

'Just another slight improvement of someone else's genius. It's an improved version of Denis Gabor's universal nonlinear filter. He invented it back about 1960.'

'What's it do?'

'It's a predictor and simulator that optimizes itself by a learning process.'

She laughed. 'Forget I asked. I'm only a rep, not a computer whiz like you...My card.'

He took the card and looked at it.

Freya Olsen...Sales Representative...Space Computers

Never heard of them, but then that wasn't too unusual; computer firms were springing up everywhere these days.

'At least the Babbage Society picked a great place for a conference. Not many places in Australia better than Conrads Jupiter on the Gold Coast. It's a pity it's only a weekend.'

'I wanted to make it Easter but some of the others had things on then...Have you tried the tables?'

Soft golden hair sparkled and glittered as she shook her head. 'Life's enough of a gamble for me.'

He nodded his agreement. 'Me too.'

She looked up at him, eyes searching his face, seeming to be in the process of making a decision. 'I know I shouldn't ask you this but...' She drew a deep breath, while he trembled between excited anticipation and caution. 'I'm supposed to be showing a new computer but I can't get the darn thing to work. I've got an engineer coming from Melbourne but he can't get here till about midday tomorrow. Do you think you could have a look at it for me?'

So that's it, he thought. I might have known it wasn't my fatal charm. He shrugged. 'I'm not an engineer,' he said diffidently, 'and I don't have any tools here anyway. I doubt if I could do much.'

'Oh,' she said, putting a world of disappointment into the single syllable. 'Couldn't you just have a look? Please...It's probably something very simple but I'm hopeless with machines.'

He looked at her, not at all sure what to make of her or the situation. What the hell! he finally decided. Maybe all those blond jokes were right and she'd forgotten to plug it in or turn it on. 'Okay, I'll have a look. But I really don't know that I'll be able to help you.'

'At least then you'll be able to see if I've done anything really stupid and the engineer won't be able to jump on me for being an absolute idiot and making him take a wasted trip.'

Fair enough. They headed out the door and he made to turn right towards the display center. She stopped him with a gentle hand on his arm. 'This way.'

He moved with her, the touch of her hand, which remained on his arm, sending tingles through his entire body. 'I thought the display center was the other way.'

'It is, but the computer is still in my room. We didn't want any advance previews till the official unveiling.'

'Oh,' he breathed, hoping he wasn't betraying his surprise and nervous anticipation. Perhaps, his thudding heart told him, this gorgeous creature really was trying to pick him up.

They left the noise of the welcoming reception behind, crossed the huge foyer with only a quick sidelong glance at the entrance to the gaming rooms, and headed for the lifts. His heartbeat seemed to quicken with every step. It was getting on for thirty years since he'd taken a woman (other than his wife) up to a hotel room and his conquest on that occasion was certainly not in the same class as Freya. Several of his colleagues had told stories of brief liaisons at these conferences and, at least if they were to be believed, as often as not the first move came from the female.

They reached the lifts and he pressed the button. Talk to her, he told himself, make bright, sparkling conversation; but words refused to come. He could talk for ages on almost any subject if someone got him started but making small talk—especially chatting up birds—was a skill that had always eluded him.

They entered the lift and the full force of her perfume enveloped him, blotting out the thousand other lingering scents. She made an unselfconscious gesture of adjusting first one and then the other cup of her strapless gown and it was all he could do to stop himself from taking her then and there.

He followed her from the lift, along a never-ending hall to the door of her room. She dived into a small, golden purse, extracted the key and handed it to him. 'Would you mind? It always seems to stick for me.'

Awkwardly, he took the key from her and, with trembling hand, fumbled it to the lock. It slipped in easily, generating in him an errant mental analogy with a more intimate entry. Blushing, he turned the handle, noting a slight catch as he did so. Maybe she really was on the level. The thought triggered a mixture of frustrated disappointment and relief.

He followed her into a large suite with rooms running off a spacious living area, and to a large table in the center,

where stood an instrument completely unlike the usual cluster of computer hardware.

This is the beast,' she said.

That's life, he told himself sourly, just another woman needing a Mister Fixit. But as he made his way to the gleaming apparatus, he felt the tension in him draining away; it really was much better if that was the case. As he actually reached the computer, curiosity and surprise swept away any last lingering traces of doubt. It sure was something new and different. Just the way it was all of a piece was different. The lifeless screen was in the center of the console, which was just a seamless box. The keyboard was molded of a piece with the screen. It was certainly a thing of beauty compared with the usual jumble of screen, keyboard, towers, printers, etcetera, but the need for a huge static space to house such a machine had long ago convinced manufacturers to abandon such monolithic structures.

As he examined it in more detail, he became more and more perplexed. The keyboard was a jumble of meaningless symbols. The seamless exterior of the machine was flawless; as far as he could see, there were no slots to insert discs, no input or output sockets, no break at all in its gleaming surface except for one finger-sized hole which seemed to be nothing but a blind depression. And no sign of any screws to remove to allow access to its interior; well, perhaps they were underneath but, by the feel of it, you'd need at least two good men to turn it on its side. He couldn't even find an on-off switch. Maybe they'd dispensed with one. Maybe it was just a case of plug in, turn on at the mains and you're away. He checked that it was plugged in and switched on at the point. He looked up at the girl. She was watching him carefully, her concentration on him seeming almost to match that of his on the problem of the computer. He had the sudden uncanny feeling that this was some sort of test and that she wanted him to fail.

He shook his head slowly, his bewilderment writ large on his face. 'I haven't a clue,' he admitted. 'It's like nothing I've ever seen or heard of. Maybe if you can tell me how it works.'

'That's a bit hard to do when it's not working.' Her lips and eyes were silently laughing at him.

He started to retort that she could at least tell him how it was meant to work but he was stopped by the suspicion that she either didn't know or wasn't going to tell him if she did know. He'd just about had enough of this farce. Either she was intent on seducing him—in which case, let her get on with it—or she was subtly putting him down, or she was some sort of hopeless bimbo, or a nut, or had some weird ulterior motive he couldn't imagine and probably wouldn't like. Maybe it was all a put-up; some of his fellow members of the Society—especially some who resented his being a Fellow while they weren't—would stop at nothing to make him look a fool. Or maybe it was a shakedown. Christ, he didn't know what was going on.

'I guess we could check the power point,' he finally suggested. 'If you've got some kind of appliance we can plug in.'

'I've got a hairdryer in the bedroom,' she said.

It seemed almost a challenge. She moved towards a door off a short hallway leading from the room they were in. Her small hand palming the knob, she looked back at him. He stared at the delicate fingers wrapped around the doorknob and could almost feel them exploring his genitals. Her eyes had become an even deeper, clearer blue and her lips were slightly parted. He flowed willy-nilly towards her and followed her into the bedroom.

Her own scent was almost overpowering the artificial one she wore. He put his arms around her and kissed her lightly on the lips. Her tongue slipped homing into his mouth. He backed away, startled, but her fingers were at his shirt, undoing buttons, touching skin, titillating hair. He pulled her gown down from her breasts and looked, absorbed, at them. It was obvious the gown was padded, but they were so perfectly shaped it didn't matter. She looked into his eyes. 'Sorry they're so small,' she said.

'Just the right size,' he murmured, 'quite perfect'.

He took the whole of one into his mouth and briefly sucked softly on it, then gently completed disrobing her.

She stepped out of the pile of velvety blue gown and sheer, silken scanties and backed away from him a little, standing, smiling uncertainly, as though inviting his inspection and approval. 'Am I pretty?' she asked.

That was the understatement of the century! 'Beautiful,' he breathed. Then doubt and self-doubt overcame him. 'As I'm sure you've been told many times,' he added.

'The only other man who has ever seen me like this is my father,' she said.

He seemed to be suspended in time and space as the full import of her words came to him. He was almost unaware that she had stepped closer to him, had pulled down the zipper of his slacks and had his pants and underwear around his ankles. She stepped back and looked at him. 'You're very beautiful too,' she said, further increasing his confusion but doing wonders for his ego.

Feeling as potent and as powerful as his namesake, Thor, in one fluid motion, swung her into his arms, placed her gently on the bed, climbed on top of her, once more started suckling one of her perfect small breasts and prepared to make his entry, but she pushed him away, rolling him onto his back, sitting astride his legs, and began moving both her hands, soft as a velvet glove, slowly up and down his ever-stiffening penis, while she watched, seemingly fascinated, the effect of her actions. Equally fascinated, he watched her, till the swelling sensation caused him to lie back, eyes closed, all his sensations focused on the spots that her hands were gently caressing. A low moan, unconscious and unnoted, escaped his lips.

The sensation suddenly stopped and he opened his eyes to see her breasts over his face, begging attention. With hands and lips he caressed them, marveling at their smooth, soft firmness, like some delectable fruit waiting to be eaten, while she murmured satisfaction. Beneath her, his swollen penis throbbed. He reached for her buttocks, holding her down

on his organ. She rubbed herself softly against him, his gasps and moans increasing.

Suddenly, she drew back, smiling a satisfied smile, kissed him lightly on the lips and drew up her hips. She placed his penis against her hot, wet crotch. He clutched her buttocks and tried to force their union. A mere inch entered. She backed off and came down again. This time, perhaps two inches penetrated. He strove with all his might to push it in all the way but she had again removed her vagina from his probing organ. She sat down hard on him again. Another inch. My God, she was tight. He had a sudden realization that she hadn't been lying when she'd told him he was the only man other than her father who had seen her nude; she was a virgin—which only made the whole thing even more incredible.

Her composure was gone now. She was breathing rapidly, moaning, uttering sharp little cries, panting with effort. He was worse. The thunder of his heartbeat drowned out all else except those incredible sensations emanating from his genitals. He was only dimly aware of her sounds of ecstasy and his own moans of delight. He clutched her low down on her buttocks, desperately trying to spread the entrance to her canal wider, thrust upward with all his might and was exulted and relieved to find his penis forced deep within in. The feeling was so good it was almost unbearable. Freya's mouth opened in a silent primal scream—of ecstasy or hurt or both he was not sure. She collapsed on top of him, totally limp, as the volcano in his genitals exploded within her.

They lay like that, unmoving, speechless until, very soon after, he fell asleep, still nestled deep inside her, feeling completely and utterly fulfilled.

CHAPTER 2

In the morning, he awoke to the sensation of the softest of hands on his penis and the lightest of kisses caressing his nipples. His penis was already hard. He reached for her automatically and as automatically attempted to enter her. She was still as tight as a surgeon's glove and his instrument barely penetrated beyond her welcoming labia. They lay on their sides, holding each other tight while his sword probed at the entry to her sheath, each attempt gaining another millimetre or two until finally he was entirely within her. He stopped moving, luxuriating in the feeling, releasing her and leaning back a little to bring his mouth to her breast. Her muscles closed around him and then she was moving her hips back and forth and he was moving again and their synchronised movements built to a crescendo and they were both panting and moaning and kissing rapturously and clutching each other and then, with a soft, open-mouthed cry, he again exploded within her. She clutched him even more firmly and went on moving for several seconds till she suddenly stiffened and, with a sharp cry of purest ecstasy, announced her release.

But if they both had been temporarily released from their passions, they were not about to release each other. They still clung tightly to each other, unmoving, sharing the mystery. True thought was impossible; only feeling remained and that was rapidly yielding to a gentle but inexorable drifting into sleep. But the mere act of closing his eyes seemed to bring the world rushing back. He struggled to sit upright and groped for his watch, on the dressing table where he'd discarded it the night before. Finding it, he peered at its face. 'Good God, it's quarter to seven. I have to be at a breakfast meeting of the Executive Council at seven. I have to go. Don and his bunch will railroad all sorts of crap through if I don't.'

He swung himself off the bed and hastily dressed. 'Sorry, darling,' he said. 'I don't want to run out on you but...' He tailed off, upset at her complete lack of reaction. She lay in the exact position into which she'd been thrust by his hurried evacuation. She'd made no move to protect her modesty, to adjust for comfort, to present herself in a more favourable light, definitely not to stop him or follow him. Only her eyes following his movements betrayed any hint that she was conscious. Her expression was absolutely inscrutable, giving not the slightest clue to what she was thinking—if, indeed, she was thinking at all. He looked down at that perfect female form and desire flooded over him. He wanted to touch every bit of that gorgeous body, kiss it, lick it, devour it, plant himself deep within it, make himself a part of it. He tore himself away.

'Sorry I couldn't get your computer working,' he muttered. 'I'm dying to see what it can do. Maybe I can call back later after the engineer has had a look...But I guess it will be in the display centre then.'

He was dismayed at the little tremor in his voice. He felt like a naughty child about to do something his mother didn't want him to do and that he knew his mother didn't want

him to do but which he also knew she would not tell him not to do. He'd seen that same reproving, disappointed look in his mother's eyes more than once. It disturbed him so much he could think of nothing more to say or do. He turned on his heel and let himself out of the room without a good-bye or a backward glance.

CHAPTER 3

Typical, he thought, as he left the breakfast meeting. Cereal he couldn't eat. Fancy omelette he couldn't eat. Rolls he couldn't eat. Toast he couldn't eat. He'd been left to make do with orange juice and coffee. And that pig, Don, had arranged the menu. And delighted in rubbing his nose in it: 'Sorry, old chap. Forgot about our coeliac. Should have had some bacon and eggs or fruit compote or something. Do better next time.'

I bet you will, thought Thor. If there's a damn thing I can eat at any of the meals or morning or afternoon teas, I'll be bloody surprised. Looks like a trip on the monorail across to the Mall. At least I'll be able to get some bacon and eggs or grilled fish there. Now, that's an idea! A sudden inspiration struck him. I could go up and see if Freya's had breakfast and take her along if she hasn't. Maybe we could even go across and have a swim. My talk's not till twelve thirty and the first session looks deadly boring.

His mind made up, he headed for the lifts. The memory of the farewell from Freya stopped him. Her attitude—physical and mental—still troubled him. He was not at all sure of his welcome. Maybe if he took some flowers? But what sort of flowers? He wasn't used to this sort of thing. Definitely not roses—too banal. Carnations were too prim and perfect. He vaguely remembered seeing some Australian natives arrangement in a florist shop somewhere but quickly decided they were altogether too earthy to belong with Freya. It had to be orchids; no other flower had the same ethereal, mysterious, sexy quality to match his (funny how he already thought about her like that) Freya.

He found a florist and the perfect orchid—a cymbidium with the most perfect shape, the white of purest snow with the most delicate blushes of pink and rose—and went up to her room.

While carefully transferring the flower, delicately wrapped in the softest of pink tissue paper, from his right hand to his left so that he could knock on the door, he noticed a chink of light that told him the door was not completely closed. He opened it gently, stepped inside, closed the door softly behind him and glided into the room. For a big man, he moved very quietly—a skill he'd developed as a boy when, for fun, he'd taught himself to move so quietly he could sneak up on any of the many cats and dogs in his parent's collection without their hearing him.

A man's voice came as a rough, nasty surprise: 'What do you mean, speak English? What is wrong with our own tongue? Maybe you have been here too long.'

'You know we're supposed to use the native language at all times, even when we're talking among ourselves. That way, we won't slip up.'

'These fools do not even have words for half the things that matter,' the man grumbled. 'Okay, I will use English. I ask again: Why did you bring that weird Earthman up here and show him the machine?'

'I told you. I wanted to see how much he really knew, how close he was. From what he's written, invented and spoken about, he's getting pretty close. I wanted to see how close. You know it would only take one computer like this, and someone who could make it work, to completely wreck out plans.'

'All the more reason you should not have shown him. Either way he knows too much. We will have to get rid of him.'

'No!' There was almost a hint of panic in her voice. 'He's too well known and he'll be missed too soon. Besides which, he doesn't know anything.'

'I think perhaps you found out more about him than his knowledge of computers.'

'What if I did? That's part of what I'm here for, isn't it?'

'Yes, but we are supposed to do the selecting.'

'I'm sure even father would approve of Thor. I'm positive he'd have the right genetic endowment.'

'We are supposed to check first. Did he by any strange chance leave a specimen with you?'

The girl's sudden intake of breath was almost a sob.

The man's laugh was almost vicious. 'I guess that means yes. Let us go and get it.'

'You stay here. I'll bring it out to you.' The girl was choking on anger and frustration.

Thor stood irresolute. What the hell was going on? What did it all mean? He was obviously right about the girl having an accent; it seemed they were both foreigners of some kind. But who was this 'weird earthy man' who might or might not know something, left specimens, and had to be got rid of? Surely not himself? But she had mentioned him by name! And what was this about selecting people? And what did her father have to do with it all?

Now that the voices had ceased, a slight hum caught his attention. He moved further into the room and saw, with surprise, that the computer screen was emitting a faint glow. So, that was it, decided Thor. The man must be the engineer who was coming from Melbourne. He must have got up early and got the computer working. And he must be all agitated about some suspected breach of security that might allow their competitors to get the jump on them. And maybe they were headhunting and he was a target—at least in Freya's mind.

He moved toward the computer as though drawn by a magnet but he was still some paces away from it when a man stormed in.

'What the hell are you doing here?' he demanded

'Sorry. The door was open. I came up to see Freya, to see if she wanted to go to breakfast or a swim or both. I thought you weren't getting here till midday. You are the engineer from Melbourne, I take it?'

'Hadding Christensen,' said the man, extending his hand. 'Got an early flight. Sorry I was rude. Got a thing about security.'

'But surely if you're exhibiting the thing...?'

'Ah, yes, but there is a lot more to it than we plan to reveal to customers. I will not go into all the reasons, but some parts we cannot patent—at least, not yet. And, in any case, we plan to service them ourselves. Basically, all the customer will be getting will be a black box—or a white box really. There is no need for him to know what makes it work, only that it does what he wants it to do for him.'

'I'd love to have a demo. It's got me intrigued. But I guess you're busy.'

'A demo?' He looked puzzled for a moment. 'Oh, yes, yes, of course. No, no, no, of course I am not too busy. I love showing it off. After all, a lot of it is my work. But let us wait until Freya comes out.'

With a shock, Thor realised he'd almost forgotten about Freya in his excitement at seeing the computer active. Love is indeed a fleeting thing when science—or any prospect of knowledge revealed or a glimpse of Truth—intervenes, he mused.

Freya entered, carrying a small opaque vial. No chance of seeing what the specimen was. She saw him and a startled blush flushed her fine features. She seemed at a loss what to do with the vial, first enclosing it between her fingers and palm and then handing it to Hadding.

'I came up to see if you wanted to go across to the Mall for breakfast. They didn't have anything I could eat at our breakfast meeting. I'm a coeliac,' he explained, feeling an unreasonable shame at his affliction. He could have sworn he saw triumph in Hadding's quick glance at Freya. 'But I see you're busy. Perhaps we can go for a swim later?'

He'd forgotten the orchid still clutched in his left hand. 'And you brought me a flower,' Freya said warmly, wonderingly. 'It's very beautiful.'

'It reminded me of you.'

'How sweet,' sneered Hadding.

'Should I wear it or put it in a vase?' mused Freya. She quickly came to a decision: 'I'll wear it.' She spun round and crossed quickly to the bedroom.

The two men maintained a suspicious, sullen silence until she returned a short time later, the orchid pinned to her blouse with an exquisite brooch. It was made of what appeared to be very old gold, beset with an incredible number of tiny stones of what seemed to be every conceivable colour, each of them pulsating and scintillating with a life of its own. Towards one edge was what may have been the Southern Cross, though it appeared to have too many stars; that is, you seemed to have a choice of five or six as to which four really made up the cross. Just next to a particularly brilliant red stone which may or may not have been part of the cross, there was a tiny pinpoint that outgleamed even it, though it was almost too small to make out what it was. A similar incredibly dazzling minute spark was on an opposite edge. Not too far away from this was an even smaller iridescent dot. Thor ached to examine the exquisite work more closely but dared not approach too near to Freya in Hadding's presence.

'That brooch!' he exclaimed. 'It's so beautiful. It must be very old and worth a fortune. Where did you get it?'

She looked down at it as though seeing it for the first time. "It's a family heirloom that's been handed down for eons. I've no idea what it's worth or where it originally came from."

'Well, to work,' said Hadding, placing his finger in the finger-sized hole Thor had noticed on his earlier inspection. 'First unique feature: the perfect security device. It will only turn on to the fingerprint of people it has been programmed to turn on for. It also actually does a quick health check: measures my temperature, pulse rate, skin conductivity, sniffs up some sweat and measures electrolytes and a few sugars, lipids and proteins.' A smiling face appeared on the screen. "See, I am healthy. If I was not, a message would come on to tell me what was wrong and what I should do about it...So, it is a computer; it computes." He hit a key on the keyboard. Watching over his shoulder, Thor saw a row of keys suddenly glow with mathematical symbols and, above it a row of numbers. Hadding's hands hovered briefly over the keys.

PRIMES BETWEEN 2 MILLION AND 3 MILLION appeared on the screen. There was the briefest of pauses, then a string of numbers appeared.

'That's incredible,' marvelled Thor. 'It must be extremely powerful.'

'You better believe it...It also does word processing...' He hit another key and the familiar 'qwerty' block appeared in the middle of the keyboard. He typed away and the message:

Freya loves Thor, but does Thor love Freya? was written on the screen. Freya and Thor shot startled glances at Hadding and at each other.

Hadding appeared not to notice. 'In almost any language...' He fiddled the keys again and a string of Greek symbols appeared.

'It's all Greek to me,' quipped Thor.

Hadding laughed abruptly, mirthlessly. 'Then again...' he went on, doing more of his magic manipulations, 'you can type in one language and it will show up in another.'

With amazement, Thor saw that he was typing away on the old 'qwerty' block but it was Spanish that was appearing on the screen:

Querido Thor,

Ya pienso que tu as terminado de trabajar en el famoso Babbage Sociedad que felicidad!

'Thanks for the felicitations,' he said, 'but I haven't quite finished with the Babbage Society yet; the new Executive Council doesn't take over till the end of the Conference...This is bloody amazing! What else can it do? How about input and output? Is it only keyboard to screen? I couldn't find anywhere else for anything to go.'

For answer, Hadding depressed another key. 'Show me the Milky Way,' he commanded. A stunning graphic of the galaxy flashed on the screen.

'Highlight Earth and Kappa Crucis,' he ordered. Two bright, twinkling spots appeared in the picture.

'Frame to include only these two features and those between them,' he continued. Again the computer obeyed.

'Now plot the best route between the two.' Thor watched stunned as the computer once more did the man's bidding. A line appeared between the two. It had the general appearance of a great circle one would draw on the Earth's globe but with the suggestion of a swing out wide and then back in again and with a pronounced irregularity at one site, as though dodging a hazard, though none was pictured.

'What's here?' demanded Hadding, lightly touching a spot on the screen. When he removed his fingernail, a symbol like an uncut cigar had appeared at the spot. 'English,' he demanded, and

Earthship 4

appeared neatly printed beside it.

'Okay. Give me some room to write,' Hadding demanded. 'Five centimetres at the bottom will do.'

The graphic obligingly moved up the screen some five centimetres. He took a pen from his pocket and wrote on a space at the bottom of the keyboard. As he wrote, writing appeared on the screen:

We are all a piece of the stars. From stardust we came
and to stardust return.

He pushed another key and the word 'comment' flashed on the screen and remained flashing there for some thirty seconds, while Thor stood, disbelieving eyes riveted to the screen. Finally, a message appeared:

insufficient information

Hadding laughed. 'Reminds me of a joke I heard. Seems when the Americans built their big supercomputer...Crayfish or something like that..'

'Cray,' Thor automatically corrected.

'Yes, Cray. When they built their Cray computer, someone decided to use it to find the answer to the old question: "Is there a God?" He spent months programming it, feeding in all the data he could think of, then finally asked the big question. After much delay, it came back with the answer: "insufficient information". He was not put off. He would give it more information. So he teamed up with a colleague with access to another Cray and linked them together, pooling masses of data. Still the same answer. So the pair of them decided to link together every supercomputer in the country, fill them all with every piece of possibly relevant information and ask again. But to do this they had to get official sanction. After all, these supercomputers ran defence installations, weather stations, all sorts of important things. This meant a Congressional Sub-Committee hearing. The trouble was no one could agree what Sub-Committee. Finally, a special Presidential Task Force was set up. You can imagine the argument. Some said it was a complete waste of funds: it would never work and, even if it did, people would still believe what they wanted to, no matter what the answer.'

'Believe the lies that make you kind and happy,' Thor quoted Vonnegut.

Except for a glare of disapproval—whether at the interruption, the sentiment expressed or both Thor had no way of knowing—Hadding ignored him and continued.

'Others argued science had no business asking such questions anyway. This was particularly the philosophers, who were afraid for their jobs, whatever the outcome. The priests were also indignant and some had the sense to be worried—not that they were not supremely confident the answer, if it came, would be "yes", but because they knew that anyone proving the proposition must automatically be the new High Priest, the new infallible channel to the mind of God. One astute Senator even realised this and the effect it would have on legislators; they would become largely irrelevant or, at best, rubber stamps—who could possibly sanction law against the will of God? His consolation was that there was at least an equal chance of the answer being negative and this would mean not only one less pressure group to consider but also no more tax exemptions for a lot of people and businesses. Eventually, it was decided to go ahead, but came the big day and the answer was still the same: "insufficient information". By this time, the project had caught the imagination of people all over Earth. Other countries with supercomputers clamoured to join in and some even began building them especially for the project. It was a massive job, with unimaginable masses of data being fed in to dozens and dozens of computers and linkages established. Came the big day. One hundred and fifty five huge computers linked in one huge network. Unbearable suspense as the question was asked. Unbearable anticlimax and disappointment as the same old answer spat out. There were some who wanted to keep going, build bigger and better computers, link more into the system, refine and enlarge the data, but the consensus was that enough was enough. Maybe there are some questions that cannot, or should not, be answered. So, it all died. But people began asking: 'If we can do all this for this question, which is pretty silly anyway, why can we not do it for really worthwhile things—like peace, making life better, solving greenhouse, exploring the universe?' That is what happened and Earth became like heaven with no want or war. And it began to take bigger and bigger steps out into the universe. And wherever Earth people went they took with them their supercomputers—not the massive Crays but much smaller yet more powerful versions. Then, one day, millennia on, a historian came upon the story of the attempt to solve the existence of God with supercomputers and had the bright idea: perhaps if we were to link up all our computers throughout the universe we might now come up with the answer. There was not a lot of enthusiasm at first but he was the brother-in-law of the President, so he eventually got his way. Can you imagine the excitement when the big moment finally came? The President himself was given the honour of typing in the big question: "Is there a God?" Unbearable tension as the message was coded, flashed to, and processed by, ten thousand linked computers, decoded and the answer flashed on the screen: "There is now".'

Thor laughed heartily, though he reflected to himself that it seemed less of a joke than a philosophy and a vision.

While telling his elaborate joke, Hadding had taken a small book from his pocket, fingered a small embossed design on the top of the computer and carefully inserted the book

into the depression that appeared. Now, as he was finishing his story, words began appearing on the screen. Hadding moved aside to give Thor a better look.

A Piece of the Stars
by The Star of the Piece

I was born in the stars
along with my mate.
Though we came out of jars
that determined our fate.

When the Big Bang began,
we both were a part,
Coalescing to plan
and then falling apart.

Our atoms were quasars, pulsars
and dust
And gases and plasmas
and primeval lust.

We matched curves and angles,
We were fashioned apart.
We became bugs and angels.
She once ate my heart.

We've been round and round in
great circles of hope,
Of doubt and of longin'.
How will we cope?

For some of my bits are
her ancestor remote
And some of her tits
some creature he smote.

We eat from a planet
and return it our waste
Which cockroach or gannet
may find to their taste.

In taxis and galaxies
our atoms abound,
Noisome or noiseless
or bursting with sound.

Before my life fluids
shall turn into grease,
Be assured, dear Druids,
I will get my piece.

COMMENT Is this relevant? No other information.

Thor laughed. 'Thank God computers haven't become critics yet.'

'Ah, but they can be,' Hadding replied. 'At least, sort of...There was another poem on God in the book I just fed into it. I'll get it to comment on that.'

Comment on "God"

he typed on the screen.

Concept or poem?

came back the query.

Poem in relation to concept

Hadding instructed. As an afterthought, he added:

Display poem first.

As Thor watched spellbound, the computer obeyed.

God!

I am God-

Yes, I whose centre of existence is my herb-regulated
bowels

and seed-stimulated prostate,

I who make pretentious poems beyond my understanding
of peace and love-

while swearing at fellow mindless travellers
on their way, like I,

to grab their piece of the stars;

I who let my arms hang down to laugh at apes-
hairy things, by definition less evolved

than sparsely hirsute I.

And you, my friend, are God-

Though you worship some complexified abstraction

Who is everything or nothing
depending on your need.

You raise your giraffe neck to the stars
while your elephantine arse squashes the daisies.

What of you, my enemy-

Are you too God?

I fear so.

I could label you 'Devil',
but Devil and God are surely one,
or they are nothing.

COMMENT I can find no concept of God resembling this
in my memory.

CAUTION As a poem, it may not be meant to be taken
literally.

It was Hadding's turn to laugh. 'Perhaps not," he said.
'What do you think of God?' he asked Thor.

'Thank God I'm an atheist,' Thor replied.

Hadding chuckled. 'That about sums you Earth people
up...And gods?'

'Primitive gods or the gods of the tales of gods and
heroes?'

'The gods of gods and heroes. Did the heroes really dare
to fight the gods? Were the gods, as von Daniken suggests,
really spacemen come down to Earth?'

'It's an interesting theory...very attractive in some ways. But most of his so-called evidence is very weak—sheer rubbish or outright lies, a lot of it. Still...I can't see that having spacemen make us in their own image is a great improvement over the Bible creation myth. It only makes it more complicated, puts things back a step—who made them? And I can't really believe that men of ancient times could have fought with space invaders and forced them to more or less keep their place in Mount Olympus or wherever—virtually forced them to withdraw and take off. If spacemen came here, I'd expect them to have as little trouble knocking us over as the Spanish did the Incas and Aztecs.'

'Perhaps they did not want to. Perhaps it was all just some great experiment.'

'Then they weren't very scientific about it, interfering so much.'

'Perhaps the interference was the point of the experiment—see what happens. Perhaps they did not like the way evolution was going and wiped out the dinosaurs with a well-aimed meteorite or two. Maybe they did the same with the odd civilisation that was not performing. Maybe some of the great figures of human history—Christ, Buddha, other great leaders who seemed to spring out of the blue—maybe they were really spacemen. Or maybe these spacemen gave knowledge to some selected Earth man—maybe Newton, Einstein, Descartes, Aristotle, whoever—when they thought the time was right.'

'Sounds like a good plot for a science fiction novel...No, I really can't believe any of that.'

'So, if I told you we are really people from a planet beyond what you call Kappa Cruris and that we are about to offer you the secrets of this computer—which you will have to agree is far in advance of any you have ever seen or even heard about—you would not believe me?'

Thor laughed. 'No, I don't think so.'

Hadding sighed. 'Not even if I showed you how it can produce perfect copies at the rate of a page a second? Or how it uses these little things...' He held up a disc about the size of a dog tag. '...to store more information than you can get on a CD-ROM, or a simple push-in program? How it can produce these discs at the rate of about one a minute? How it does a regular diagnostic on itself to tell you if any part is likely to fail? How it self-diagnoses any failure that might occur and fixes most of them itself? How about this then?' He hit another key on the keyboard and the screen was filled with the vision of an aging but still handsome face surmounted by a tonsure of white hair.

'Commander,' Hadding addressed the figure, 'I believe I have located the perfect person to receive the secrets of the computer. Can I go ahead?'

'Does Freya agree?' queried the old man.

Hadding grabbed Freya's hand and pulled her next to the screen. 'Yes,' she agreed in a choked whisper.

'Is anything wrong with you, child?' Concern showed clear on the weathered face. 'You sound strange.'

'I'm fine,' she assured him.

The old man frowned. 'I trust your judgment. Just be very sure who you pick and what you give him.'

'Freya picked him. He has already given her plenty.'

The frown on the old man's face deepened into a scowl. Hadding pressed the key again and the screen went blank. He turned to Thor. 'Now are you convinced?'

Thor still looked rather doubtful. 'So, you're going to give me all the secrets of the computer. What then?'

'Then you go ahead and use that knowledge in whatever way you like. That is the experiment. We hope you will use it for the good of your race and, therefore, the whole of the universe but it is up to you. We will be watching carefully but we will not interfere unless things go really horribly astray. There is one thing...'

Here it comes, thought Thor. There's no such thing as a free lunch.

'We will not give you the machine itself. We will give you all the details of how it works but you will have to put it together yourself. You see, it would be very suspicious if you just suddenly appeared with the completed thing. And if you do it that way you will know all about it and be able to answer any questions. Can you imagine having this supercomputer and someone asking you something about its operation and you not being able to really tell them? How fishy that would look! And you must never tell anyone where it came from. Never! Noone! And we will not give you the communicator function. It suits us to remain invisible; the experiment does not make sense if we are not.'

Hadding handed Thor several pages of diagrams, symbols and equations. Thor took them and flicked through them. 'Afraid it doesn't make a lot of sense to me,' he said doubtfully.

'It will. It will. Just study them carefully and I am sure you will work it out...Do you not have to give a talk soon?'

'Twelve thirty. Last one before lunch,' Thor replied absently. He looked at his watch. Ten thirty. He had two hours but he really should be there at the start of the session. It didn't look good for a speaker to come straggling in late. Rather rude in fact. 'I guess I'd better get there for the start of the session.'

'We will be listening with interest,' Hadding promised.

Thor was not sure he liked the sound of that.

'Maybe we can meet after for lunch?' suggested Freya.

'Why not? I always go across to the Mall. I can never eat anything at the lunches they provide here. Don sees to that.'

He departed clutching the sheaf of papers. In his room, he thrust them into his briefcase, where they joined his program and the transcript of his talk. Then he noticed the clean handkerchief in the front compartment, where his wife always put it when he was going to give a talk, along with the laser pointer, a present from his eldest son. He took the handkerchief from his pocket, threw in on the bed and replaced it with the clean one. As he did so, a small satin heart fell out. He picked it up, looked at the words "I LOVE YOU"

embroidered on it and was almost overcome with guilt. Eyes brimming, he thrust it into his pocket, hoisted his briefcase—black Pierre Cardin, another present from his family—and headed for the meeting room.

CHAPTER 4

As Thor walked up the aisle of the Gold Coast meeting room towards the front where speakers traditionally sat, he felt a restraining hand on his arm. Somewhat abstractedly, he glanced down. To his surprise, he saw the face of his secretary cum Girl Friday, Gina, beaming up at him.

'You tell 'em!' she said.

'Gina! What are you doing here?'

'Came down for some beaching and decided to sneak in and listen to your talk. Not that I'll understand much of it, but...' The unsaid words hung in the air, expressing caring that could not be spoken. 'Hope they don't spot I'm a fake and chuck me out.' She giggled.

'I can lend you my name tag.'

She giggled again. 'I think someone might spot that I wasn't Thor Ericson.'

'You'll be right. If anyone gets officious, put them on to me and I'll deal with them.' He glanced back down the rapidly filling rows and spotted Freya and Hadding in the very back row. A sudden thought came to him. He quickly extracted the notes for his talk from his briefcase, again closed the bag, twirled the knobs to lock it, and handed it to Gina. 'Do me a favour and look after this,' he said.

'Okay, boss,' she agreed.

Thor walked on, clutching his notes (more of a security blanket than a necessity), to his appointed place.

He sat and fidgeted in the uncomfortable seat as the presentations preceding his followed one another. He heard the words and saw the flickering images of slides and overheads but none of it really registered. Part of his mind was endlessly repeating bits of his talk, while another portion was running an endless replay of the encounter with Freya and Hadding. He almost missed his own introduction.

Once at the podium, things changed. His nervousness, if not completely vanished, at least shrank to a low background level. He was aware that he knew more about what he was going to discuss than anyone else in the room and indeed than almost anyone else in the world. He began confidently to describe the virtues and uses of analog computers in solving abstruse problems that were beyond the capabilities of the more familiar digital machines.

Nearing the end of his talk, in the middle of a discussion of how analog computers could be used to simulate the brain's activity, a recollection of the computer he had recently been shown hit him. It must be a hybrid, he suddenly thought, and it came to him how a hybrid computer could be an even better model of the brain than an analog. Words expressing this insight flowed out of him almost before he realised he was saying them. He saw a flash of returning interest on the faces of some who had been mentally wandering, drowsing, thinking of lunch. Gina smiled proudly. Hadding was frowning. Freya looked worried. Somewhat flustered, he wound up his presentation rather abruptly.

The Chairman thanked him and asked for questions from the floor, adding a plea to keep them brief because the luncheon

hour had arrived. Perhaps not surprisingly, there were no questions.

Thor thankfully returned to his seat and Gina slid into the seat beside him. 'You were great,' she said. 'Even I understood some of it.'

She handed him his briefcase. He took it and abstractedly slipped the notes of his talk inside. He was, as always after giving a talk, feeling deflated, exhausted.

'Where are you off to now?' he queried.

'I came down with Diane. She's playing the pokies while I'm in here. We're having lunch in the Prince Albert English Pub. Then we hit the beach. And we finish up at Fisherman's Wharf. Well, maybe not finish up; you never know your luck.' She giggled. 'Might break the drought yet.'

Thor smiled indulgently at her. Thank God he hadn't had a daughter, he thought to himself, not for the first time. If he had, she could have ended up like Gina. Gina was so sweet but she would drive a father mad with worry—or at least a father like him.

He had a sudden idea. 'Look, honey, could you do me a favour?' he asked. 'Could you look after my briefcase for me, take it back with you, give it to me on Monday? I've got things to do and I haven't got time to go up to my room and I don't want to have to lug it around everywhere with me.' Even to himself it sounded lame but he couldn't tell her he didn't want a pair of aliens to get their hands on it, could he?

She frowned. 'Couldn't you leave it at the reception desk? I wouldn't like to guarantee its safety with us pair.'

Thor hadn't thought of that. But it wouldn't work—Freya and Hadding would undoubtedly see him. 'No.'

She shrugged. 'Okay, boss. There's something going on here you don't want to tell me. Okay. Fair enough. I'm sure you have a very good reason for asking me to lug your briefcase around for you. Fine. That's what secretaries are for. I just hope you realise what a risk you're taking giving it to me to mind on a wild day—and night—on the Coast. I'll guard it with my life but you know the kind of places I get to.' Then she smiled. 'Don't worry. I'll take it and lock it up in the boot of the car right away.'

'Good girl,' Thor verbally patted her head.

'Should I stay here a while to let you get clear?' Gina suggested.

Thor was startled, surprised once again, for the fifty thousandth time, by Gina's practical common sense that always seemed to make his superior intelligence look useless.

'That would be an idea,' he agreed.

He eased his large frame from the seat and stood looking fondly down on her. 'Have fun,' he said. He suddenly became very serious. 'Look after that briefcase but don't guard it with your life. If things get rough, give it up without a fight.'

She looked at him wonderingly. 'I guess I'll hear all about it some day,' she said at length.

'Promise,' he agreed. He kissed her lightly on the cheek and walked steadily down the aisle of the almost deserted auditorium.

Freya linked her arm in his as he walked out of the room. 'Someone was obviously very taken with your talk,' she said.

'Or with the speaker,' Hadding put in. Thor noted that he had come from the direction of the other door. Had they been guarding both exits? How much had they seen? He fervently hoped he wasn't putting Gina into danger.

'How about that lunch you promised me?' Freya asked him. She was standing very close to him, making him not only very conscious of her presence but also very self-conscious and uneasy that someone would see them like that and gossip to Sheila, his wife.

'Sure,' he agreed. 'We'll go over to the Mall. They have things I can eat there.'

'Not for me,' said Hadding. 'I think I will just go up to your room and have a lie down if you do not mind, Freya. I was up very early to catch the plane. Maybe we can meet for a swim later. I love your beaches.'

'That's an idea,' said Freya. 'When does the meeting finish? Or...' She pressed even closer to him. 'Maybe we can play hookey and spend the afternoon on the beach?'

The suggestion was full of promises but also seemed to contain just a trace of threat. Still wrung out from his talk, Thor felt he was being railroaded into something he probably really shouldn't do. He felt totally inadequate, confused. What was he doing here? What should he do? He felt a sudden need for Gina to advise him but he knew that resource had just silently slipped away, unseen—or so he hoped—by Freya or Hadding. For an instant, he was a child again, with a child's abandoned misery. The moment passed but left him with a passive acceptance of whatever events were unfolding.

'Or maybe we can wait till after dark and go skinny dipping?' Freya went on, giving him the most sensual, suggestive smile. 'I guess not. Is there anywhere to change down there? Or do we lunch in swimsuits? Or what?'

'We'll put them on under our clothes. Then we can be respectable for lunch and just strip off for the beach.' Even as he said the words, he mentally reprimanded himself for allowing the decision of when to swim to be taken from him.

Freya and Thor went up to their rooms but Hadding muttered something about having coffee. I guess that's to stop me making a bolt for it, thought Thor wryly.

As he pulled off his clothes, he stopped briefly to inspect his reflection in the full length mirror. Not bad for someone his age, he decided. He pulled off his underpants and regarded his genitals. Certainly not centrespread material but adequate. He pulled on faded blue swimmers. Should have got Sheila to fix the elastic on these, he thought; I might end up showing more than I should. Black Calvin Klein sports shirt—a present from a son. Bright maroon shorts—his mother-in-law's pick. White tennis socks with green and gold stripes at the top—Sheila's selection. Finally, Reeboks—again a present from a son. He was ready for whatever might come.

Freya was waiting for him beside the lift when it descended to the foyer. She looked stunning in purest white halter top and the shortest of shorts in an uncanny sea-blue

shade. Thor held his breath, his heart racing and temperature climbing.

'Lead on,' she said.

They walked through the foyer, across the courtyard and down to the monorail station. It seemed to Thor that every eye was on them and that the looks continued as they boarded the monorail and rode it to their destination. Many of the attendees at the conference were there, either seeking something more to their taste than the lunch provided or looking for souvenirs to take home to their families. Thor saw the startled expressions on several who recognised him. Boy, would this get around!

He guided Freya to a small restaurant where he had eaten before on similar occasions. The grilled barramundi with chips and salad was, as always, delicious and they both ate heartily, though Thor thought Freya seemed to show an uncharacteristic slight awkwardness with the food. "I guess you don't have food like this on Earthship 4," he said. 'What do you eat?'

For answer, Freya raised a warning finger to her lips, alarm on her face. 'Not here,' she whispered.

They sat silent through the rest of the meal and the silence continued as they walked through the Mall and out into the street. She took his hand as they crossed Old Burleigh Road to the beach. 'I'll tell you anything you want to know,' she said, 'but not in public. Telling everyone on Earth about us is not in the plan—or at least not yet.'

Suddenly, the world was transformed. They were on the beach—a golden beach stretching for miles in either direction. Ahead of them was the Pacific Ocean, seemingly infinite. Thor was reminded again of the first time he'd seen the sea—or the first time he remembered seeing it—as a very young bush kid on the family's annual Christmas holiday trek to the beach. They'd come off the highway at Labrador and there stretching before him was endless blue water. To someone who had never seen a greater expanse of water than the few feet breadth of the Condamine, it was incomprehensible.

'What is it?' he'd breathed in bewildered wonderment.

'It's the sea,' his father had replied.

'But what is it?'

'Water.'

'Where does it end?'

'It just keeps going. Go on far enough and you'll hit into New Zealand.'

Maybe the universe is like that, mused Thor. Go on far enough and you hit into something, but it doesn't really end. Maybe, like the sea if you picked the right way to go, you could end up back where you started. Or was there anywhere you could go clear round the globe without bumping into land? Christ, he couldn't even really comprehend the Earth and the sea, let alone the universe.

Freya dropped his hand. 'It's so beautiful,' she marvelled.

'Don't they have beaches like this on your planet?'

Freya looked incredibly wistful, like an orphan imagining what it would be like to be part of a real family. 'I think

so. I don't really know. You see, I was born on the Earthship.'

'Earthship 4?'

'Yes.'

'Does that mean there are another three Earthships out there somewhere?'

"No. The first two never returned. Some think that they reached Earth and were responsible for some of your legends of gods and heroes and angels, but noone really knows what happened to them. I think they turned Earthship 3 into a museum. It's the only one that has so far returned.' She looked at him cautiously. 'I'm not sure I should be telling you all this.'

'Why not? What could I do about it? How could I attack your precious Earthship, even if I knew where it was and if I wanted to?'

'You Earthmen seem to want to attack anything you don't understand—and a lot of things you do understand.'

'That's pretty harsh...but probably true...So, you don't want to attack us? You really just want to observe us and help us?'

'We have our own hopes and plans for Earth,' she replied somewhat evasively. 'I can't promise we won't intervene somewhere along the line.'

'But only for our own good?'

'Well...not entirely. Our elders believe our interests are best served by having peace in the universe. They want Earth to develop to the stage where it can cooperate with us in our great goal of understanding and directing the universe. They think if we made direct contact now you'd either try to kill us all—and possibly succeed—or we'd be forced to kill you all, or you'd insist on taking everything we have to give and contributing nothing. You are pretty primitive but you're actually ahead of us in a few things and your different outlook and traditions could well give you answers hidden to us. As it is, our previous known contacts didn't go all that well. We were prepared to live among you, give you guidance and knowledge, but you rejected us, persecuted us and perverted our knowledge and used it for evil. Sometimes I think the whole thing's a stupid idea.'

'You think you should buzz off and leave us alone, maybe come back in a millennium or two to see who we're doing? Or that you should just take us over and be done with it?'

She looked at him sharply. 'Could a few thousand people conquer Earth? I doubt it.'

'Cortes and Co only needed a few hundred to conquer South America.'

'Yes, but they had disease on their side. We're the opposite. Our people long ago wiped out infectious disease, and most other disease, on our planet. That's great, but when you come to a grossly infected planet like Earth, it's very bad. Most of us have no immunity to any of the thousands of microorganisms you people regularly cope with. Those of us who come to Earth have to be very carefully prepared for our mission with a very long-winded and nasty procedure. And we have to take drugs all the time. Thank God we don't have to

use injections these days—at least, as long as our transdermal applicators are working; if they fail, it's back to injections. Most of us have Earth blood in us; that gives us a headstart.'

'You and Hadding both have Earth blood?'

'Yes. My great-great-grandfather was the first to marry an Earth woman. My grandfather married a descendant of another such marriage. My mother was an Earth woman. And when we lived among you we married with you and most of those who returned on Earthship 3 were at least part Earth people.'

'So, you must have some feeling for Earth?'

'If you'd spent most of your life locked up in a Earthship, if that was all you knew of life and then you came to a planet like this, you'd never want to leave it either.'

'What of your mother? Doesn't she ever want to return?'

She looked at him very wistfully. 'My mother died when I was born.'

'I'm sorry,' Thor muttered. In that moment, he felt like mothering her himself. He had no idea what to say or do next. She broke the mood herself.

'I really do love Earth more than I can ever say.'

'Then don't do anything to hurt it.'

She looked at him quizzically. 'What makes you think I might do something to hurt it?'

'If it comes to a choice between Earth and your people or between Earth and your father, which will you choose?'

She gazed out to sea a very long moment before eventually softly replying: 'I really don't know. It really could depend...' She looked at him, her eyes seeming to search his face for the answer to an unspoken, and possibly unspeakable, question. 'Enough questions,' she suddenly said briskly. 'Let's go for a swim.'

He removed his clothes and stood, uncertainly, in his faded blue bathers. She was already halfway to the water. With brisk strides, he caught up with her. 'Aren't you going to change?' he asked.

She laughed. 'Silly, isn't it, but I don't own swimmers. This is the first time I've been for a swim. I'm relying on you to show me what to do.'

He looked at her uncertainly. 'We won't go out far till you get the hang of it.'

They stepped into the water and over the dying remnants of a breaking wave. The beach sloped fairly steeply here into a foot-deep gutter. Thor felt the returning water suck at the backs and sides of his legs. 'There's a bit of a rip here,' he said. 'We'll have to be careful. Maybe we should go further along to where the flags and the people are.'

'Who needs people?' she challenged, laughing. 'There's just you and me in the whole wide world.' She sat down suddenly, knocked a little off balance by a wave. Childlike, she rolled in the water, coming up spluttering, laughing with her eyes and with her mouth. 'This is fun.'

Thor was still uncertain, but the sight of her breasts outlined in every perfect detail by the wet top swept aside all rational thought.

'Do you ride those boards?' she asked.

'No, I body surf.'

'What's that?'

'Stay here and I'll show you.' He dived under a wave and struggled out to a spot just inside the outer line of breakers. 'Here comes a beauty,' he said to himself, watching a wave form some feet beyond. He swam a few strokes toward it then, still keeping an eye on it, turned his body towards the beach. He timed it to perfection, positioning his body just below its crest. He felt a thrill of exultation, of achievement and of gratification that he would really show Freya how a wave should be ridden. He swept in towards the shore, towards his waiting lover, and grounded softly, sweetly in the shallows. But, as he went to rise, his delight turned to panic, to sheer blinding terror. He was being held down—not by the wave, but by a person. He must have bumped into someone. He struggled to release himself but the pressure merely increased. Someone was deliberately holding him down! He was sucking water into his lungs! He was drowning! Every part of his body screamed out in desperate protest. Old memories tortured him. He was again a four year old, one moment playing happily in the surf at Burleigh Heads with his mother, the next fighting for life as he was dragged out of his depth by a rip and water flooded into his lungs, burning, choking, painfully depriving him of life. This time, he knew, there would be no big brother to grab him at the last moment and drag him from its death grip. Panic gave way to blind desperation. He heaved and twisted and suddenly, miraculously, he felt the pressure release. He raised his head, his vision cleared and he saw Freya's pale and frightened face. Then his head was again thrust under and he carried with him into the blackness a vision of a siren with hair the colour of the golden beach, eyes like the winter sky and short shorts so like the sea they became invisible in it.

CHAPTER 5

Someone's lips were on his mouth but they were harsh, not soft like Sheila's. And there was a vague smell of something unpleasant about the breath that filled his mouth. He struggled to make sense of it but nothing came. 'He's breathing,' someone said from another world. He lay, hearing, feeling but not comprehending.

'You're right,' said another voice. 'He should be okay now.'

'But he still seems to be unconscious. I hope he's not brain damaged.'

He felt so weak. He couldn't even open his eyes, couldn't move the merest muscle. No, that wasn't right; the vital one in his chest was doing its job.

'Better get him to a hospital,' one of the voices was saying.

He mustn't go to hospital. Why not? He didn't know, but he was sure he mustn't. With a supreme effort, he opened his eyes.

'Hey, he's with us,' was the instant response from one of the voices. 'Okay now, old chap? Now you know why you're told to swim between the flags.'

What was he talking about? He hadn't been swimming. He'd been wrestling with someone. In the water, that's where he'd been...they'd been...in the water. Someone had tried to kill him and had very nearly succeeded. What if he found out he hadn't succeeded? Would he try again? Sure he would. That's why he couldn't go to hospital—the killer would easily find him there. Where could he go? If he just walked away—if he could walk—the killer might be watching and waiting and finish the job. What about the police? There was a reason he couldn't go to the police; what it was, he didn't remember, but there definitely was a reason. He opened his mouth to explain, to reason it out to himself.

'He said something like "kill me",' said a voice above. 'Does he think we tried to kill him or what?...You nearly did kill yourself, you silly old fool.'

Slowly, Thor's strength was returning. He struggled up to a sitting position, drew up his knees and put his head between them, waiting for the thunderous roar in his ears to stop. It didn't stop and it slowly came to him that the roar was the surf. He raised his head and looked straight ahead at the sea. 'There was a girl swimming with me. Did you see her?'

'Christ, he's delirious—people trying to kill him, non-existent girls swimming with him...What did she look like, old-timer?'

'Beautiful—hair the colour of the beach, eyes the colour of the sky, a pure white halter top that showed her breasts, short shorts the colour of the sea.'

'Christ, he's definitely hallucinating. Or, if he's not, I sure want to meet her...Maybe she went for help?'

'That's it; she must have gone for help,' Thor agreed.

'She'll be back soon...Look, I'm all right now.'

'We'd better take you to hospital, have you checked out.'

'They couldn't do any more. You blokes did it all. I can't thank you enough. You saved my life. Would it insult you if I offered you money? I've got some in my shorts up on the beach somewhere.' He looked around.

'Can't see any shorts around,' said one of the men. 'What colour were they?'

'Maroon.'

'I'll go take a look. Should be easy enough to spot. It's not for the money though. We couldn't take any money for saving your life. That's just what a bloke does for his mate. Know what I mean?'

'Yes...Thanks.'

The man went off, while his companion again tried to persuade Thor to let them take him to the hospital. Thor was adamant that he'd be right after a little rest.

'Are you staying around here?' the man asked.

'Just across the road,' Thor replied vaguely.

'Well, you make sure you go straight to bed and rest,' ordered the man.

The other man came back. 'Can't find any trace of any clothes,' he said. 'Look, you should report this to the police. Especially if you think someone tried to kill you. It couldn't have been this girl you were talking about, could it? Couldn't have been; it would take more than a girl to drown you.'

'No, no, it couldn't have been her,' agreed Thor. 'But it might have been her friend,' he added under his breath, but his listeners had sharp ears or he spoke more loudly than he thought.

'What friend?'

'Oh, she was with someone before we went swimming,' Thor replied vaguely.

'Did you know her before or had you just met her?'

'I met her yesterday.'

'Sounds like a proper shakedown to me. Oldest trick in the book. They don't usually kill, though. That's really playing it rough. Much money in your shorts?'

'Only about fifty bucks.'

'Credit cards?'

'Several.'

'Could they have known your pin numbers? You didn't write them down with the cards or anything?'

'No way.'

'Some of these smart crooks these days don't need them. They have some way round it.'

'Yeah?' put in his mate. 'How do they do that?'

'Christ, I don't know. Then again there's some sort of racket swiping credit cards and duplicating them. And I don't know how they do that either...Anyway, it's probably the credit cards they were after. You really must go to the police. They might try it again with some other sucker and succeed this time.'

Oh God, thought Thor, how am I going to get rid of these guys? He couldn't go to the police and he couldn't tell them—or the police—the truth. If he did, they'd be bundling him off to the loony bin. Maybe he could go along with the

version of the truth the men had constructed. But then he'd have to describe and implicate Freya and he was sure she was innocent. Or was she? Had she lured him to the beach so that Hadding could do his dirty deed? The memory of her desperate, frightened face assured him that she had not. Where was she? Willingly or unwillingly, she'd be with Hadding. Were they still at the hotel? Probably not. Probably they'd gone, perhaps even right back to the Earthship. Probably he'd never see her again in his life. An aching void filled him at the thought.

Freya's anxious voice cut across his thoughts. 'Darling, are you all right? I didn't know what to do. I ran to get help. Lucky I ran into Hadding.'

'Luckier still we came along,' one of the men dryly observed. 'He would have been dead by the time you got back here.' At the sound of her sob, he relented in his criticism. 'It's okay, sweetie. You did what you thought was the right thing...I guess we'll leave him to you then.'

'How can I ever thank you?' sobbed Freya.

'Just keep him happy,' replied the man.

'Lucky stiff,' muttered his friend as they walked away, then laughed at the unintentioned irony in his words.

Thor looked at Hadding. 'Come back to finish the job?'

'What do you mean?'

'Someone tried to drown me—and very nearly succeeded. I strongly suspect that someone was you.'

'Why would I do that?'

'Because you're a mean, lowdown, no good bastard who thinks I know too much and should be eliminated. All that bullshit about giving me that stuff for the good of Earth. Crap! If you are a spaceman, you certainly haven't got the interests of Earth at heart. Maybe this is all an elaborate shakedown like the guys said, but with the nasty twist that you kill your victims.'

'And the computer?'

'Probably just some fancy gadgetry to make me think it's a supercomputer...What did you do with my clothes?'

'They are safe.'

'So, you've just admitted it. Freya wouldn't have stopped to scoop up my clothes as she ran to get help. You weren't on the scene—officially at least—soon enough to grab them.'

'Very clever. Okay, let us do a swap: your clothes—with contents—for my notes.'

'I don't have them any more...So, this expedition with Freya was to give you time to get them back and when you couldn't find them you decided to kill me. What I don't understand is why you were so stupid as to give them to me in the first place if you didn't want me to have them.'

'Since you are so smart, you should be able to figure it out. But you will never be able to figure out how to make a computer from those notes.'

'Then everything you told me was bullshit? I'm quite prepared to believe that but I still can't see why you gave them to me or why you so desperately want them back.'

'They are plans for a job that took me six months to draw up. I do not intend to spend another six months doing it all again.'

'So you just handed them over to me to walk away with. Not even you would be that stupid...It looks like a standoff.'

Hadding laughed coldly. 'Have a look around you, big boy. How many people do you see? Come to think of it, how far can you see? This time there would be no mistakes and no one to save you.'

'You forget those two guys. They saw you with me.'

'They will never even hear about it. And if they do, we will be long gone.'

Thor's brain was a confused maelstrom of uncertainties, doubts and unreality, but one primitive emotion was fast shoving all else aside—blind, unthinking, desperate anger born of complete and utter frustration and desolation. He bowed his head despondently and there was more than enough of truth in the gesture to convince Hadding. The next moment, his huge right fist flashed out, colliding squarely with Hadding's chin, twisting at the moment of impact, so that Hadding's head snapped backwards and sideways. The spaceman, if that was what he was, sank limply to the ground. Round two to Earth, silently exulted Thor.

'Is he dead?' Freya's small, anxious voice verged on hysteria. 'Why do men always have to resort to violence?'

Thor dropped on one knee to examine his victim, still lying slumped on the sand, head, legs, arms all at unnatural angles. He was very still, but Thor detected a heartbeat and a shallow breath. 'He's out to it but still breathing. Let's get the hell out of here before he comes to. Where the hell are my clothes?'

'In some bushes just up the beach. Hadding threw them there. He was going through your pockets when he thought he heard someone coming, so he tossed them away and that's where they landed.'

'Quick,' urged Thor. 'He might wake up any time. We've got to get out of here—or I have.'

'I'm coming with you.'

'No, you're not...Yes, you are—but only as far as the hotel. After that, I'm on my own. I can't trust you. For all I know, you were in on the whole thing. You sure set me up nicely.'

'Honestly, I didn't know he was going to try to kill you.'

'I still don't understand why. Please tell me,' he begged.

She lowered her head and did not answer. He pushed her roughly in the direction of the beach. 'My clothes.'

They found them. He put them on and quickly checked the contents of the pockets. Everything seemed to be there. He grabbed her by the arm and hustled her off the beach and across the road to the Mall. She was almost having to run to keep up. Through the Mall to the monorail station he pushed, pulled and guided her, somewhat more circumspectly now—he didn't want someone jumping to the conclusion that he was abducting her and calling the police. They were in luck; the

train was waiting, just about to depart. He ushered her aboard, none too gently, and anxiously scanned the few additional passengers and the station for signs of pursuit. At least, with any luck, the train being there gave them an extra minute or two lead.

Still not speaking, they left their destination terminal, made their way across and into the hotel, on into the lift and up to her room. This time, the door seemed to open without the slightest difficulty. Strange that, thought Thor bitterly. He pushed her inside and was momentarily taken aback. The computer was gone. 'You people must really be in a panic,' he said.

Freya sighed. 'Hadding always gets into a panic if anything goes wrong. He's really messed this up. He thought he was being so clever and then he realised that, among the stuff he'd given you, was something that could enable you to build the real computer instead of what he wanted you to build. What a panic! We searched your room and couldn't find the stuff. We went to your talk to see if you had them there. Again nothing. The lunch and swim was to get you away so that Hadding could search your room again; he was sure it must be there. When he still couldn't find it, he came down to the beach and checked your clothes but it wasn't there either. I guess that's when he really panicked and decided to kill you. I tried to stop him but he wouldn't listen and he's too strong for me. He's such a fool,' she snorted. 'The only reason he's Field Commander instead of me is because he's male and I'm female.'

'I still don't understand. Why is it so important to you that I don't build this computer? How could that threaten you? And just what was I supposed to build with the stuff he gave me if it wasn't a computer?'

'I can't tell you.' Her reply was almost a whisper.

'You must tell me,' he demanded, advancing threateningly on her, intent on beating it out of her if necessary.

'I can't.' She faced him steadily, weeping silently. Those beautiful blue eyes were twin lakes, overbrimming into twin rivulets coursing down twin valleys between those beautiful arching cheekbones and the cute small nose, on over the slight rise up towards her luscious lips, flowing on softly round beside that gently curving prominence and round its twin termini, on down to and over that gracefully pointed chin, and finally disappearing in the beginnings of that proud white neck. Oh, shit! Thor swore silently to himself, his anger rapidly dissipating in confused sympathy and longing for what had been and what might have been. All passion drained from him and he was suddenly struck with an overpowering sense of the hopeless uselessness of it all. Oh, Christ, how did I get into this? he asked himself.

He turned away and started to walk out the door but his instincts and training intervened. 'Just tell me this,' he demanded. 'Could I really build that computer from the stuff Hadding gave me?'

She hesitated. 'I don't know. Personally, I doubt if even you could, but Hadding thinks so. In fact, after listening to your talk, he was sure you could.'

'And if I gave you back the stuff you'd just go away and leave me alone?'

'I think so.'

'You think so. You mean that even then there's a chance that maniac would come after me and never rest till he'd done away with me?'

She was really crying now, sobbing softly, breath-catchingly, like a child who's been punished for she knows not what. 'I don't know. Maybe,' she blurted out between sobs.

Thor smacked an open palm to his forehead. 'Thanks,' he said. 'Thanks a lot.'

What the hell did he do now? Go to the police? They'd never believe him. What if he invented some convincing story with nothing to do with space invaders? No, he could never sustain a lie like that. Stay here and try to ambush Hadding and do him in first? Risky; Hadding had probably been well trained in dealing with that sort of thing. And if he did succeed he'd probably end up being charged with murder. And then he thought, maybe Hadding could be hoist on his own petard. 'What weapons do you have?' he demanded

She shook her head. 'We're not allowed weapons on this kind of mission?'

He sighed. 'What kind of mission is that?' he asked.

She shook her head again. Again he had a brief urge to force it out of her, to make her tell everything she knew, but he knew he could never do that, even if his life depended on it. He also knew he could never kill Hadding in cold blood, even though his life probably did indeed depend on being able to do exactly that. All he could do was to run. But where? They could easily find his home address and his work address. Where could he go? Maybe if he got Hadding's material back and got it published, they'd leave him alone. There'd be no point in silencing him if everyone else knew what he knew. But he didn't know anything and, from the little he'd seen of Hadding's notes, he wasn't at all sure he'd know much more when he retrieved them. And if he couldn't make sense of them, it was pretty certain noone else could. But Hadding was convinced he could work it out. Maybe he could, maybe even build the computer and then he'd find out why it was so important. What he had to do was to get the notes back from Gina, find somewhere safe to sit and study them till he worked out what it was all about, and then tell the world. Sheila would wonder and worry what had happened to him but he couldn't risk getting in touch with her.

'See ya,' he said and headed for the door.

Her fingers clutched at his sleeve. 'Wait.'

He turned impatiently. She moved away from him towards the table where the computer had stood. He saw the orchid he had given her lying there and his eyes brimmed with tears of loss and self-pity. For a moment, he thought she was going to give it to him but her hand bypassed it and picked up an object beside it. He recognised the brooch she had used to clasp the flower to her blouse.

'Take this,' she said. 'Remember me sometimes and try not to think too badly of me.'

Confused and conflicting emotions flooded over him but he was not completely blinded by tears. As he averted his eyes to aim the hand-thrust conveying the brooch to a pocket of his shorts, his gaze fell on a piece of paper which seemed to be covered with symbols. He bent and picked it up. 'What's this?'

She gasped. 'It's the self-diagnostic from the computer that Hadding thought he had put in with the stuff he gave you,' she answered in a tiny voice.

'So this is what the fuss was all about and I was nearly killed for nothing?'

'Give it to me,' she said, holding out her hand for it.

It was clear to Thor that she had realised her mistake in blurting out the identity of the paper. 'No,' he simply said.

'If you leave it here with me I'll tell Hadding I found it here and he'll have no reason to worry about you any more. You'll be safe.'

Thor considered. Perhaps she was right and he would be safe, but he was becoming less and less sure that Hadding's actions would necessarily be rational or logical. He was also beginning to suspect that there might be a good dose of old-fashioned jealousy—both of him and of Freya—involved. And would anyone on Earth really be safe if he didn't solve the mystery of the computer? What plans did these aliens really have for Earth? Damn it! For once in his life he was going to stand up to the bullies, the evil, the hustlers, the liars, all the malign forces in the universe. He was going to fight for Truth and to hell with it if the heavens fell on his head.

'Goodbye,' he said.

He kissed her swiftly and softly on the lips and turned and walked quickly away, her startled sob echoing in his ears.

CHAPTER 6

Fisherman's Wharf was about the last place Thor would normally have chosen to visit. He detested loud music and hated cover bands. He was candidly afraid of the ridicule and verbal abuse he well might suffer at the hands of the hordes of brash young males and their equally brash female companions who frequented such places.

He parked his Honda City in the carpark, thankful he could squeeze it into a space too small for the Holdens, Falcons and Toranas that occupied most of the area. He cursed that he didn't know what sort of car Gina drove so that he could see if it was in the carpark and then reminded himself that she may well have come down in Diane's. He'd just have to go inside and see if he could spot her.

He made his way self-consciously to the entrance, where a bouncer demanded 'five bucks cover charge'. When he hesitated, the tough added, surprisingly gently, 'They're worth it, Dad. Damn near as good as the original Doors. Cough up, go in and enjoy yourself. I'll be around if anyone picks you.'

Still unsure, Thor paid and went in. The band was better than he had expected but he hadn't come to listen to music and his first glance convinced him that he had probably come on a fool's errand; there was no way he would ever spot Gina in this throng—if she was still here. If he did find her, it was as likely as not that she'd be with some bloke and none too happy about abandoning whatever she was doing to give him back his briefcase. Surely it could wait till Monday? No, it couldn't; by then Hadding would have staked out his office and would grab him and the notes. He couldn't catch Gina at home; he didn't know where she lived or even have her phone number since her recent address change. He pushed into the crowd, searching desperately for Gina.

Ten minutes of pushing and shoving, of being pushed and shoved, of apologising for misplaced feet and elbows and suffering the misplaced feet and elbows of others nearly broke his will, but he pushed on, ignoring the witticisms, the insults, the threats, the accidental and intentional elbows in the ribs, shoulders in the back and hands on his private parts. After twenty minutes, panic, both at his lack of success and at being trapped in this mass of an alien culture, was beginning to sweep over him. He was torn between two desperate urges—to find Gina and to get out of there. Finally he could take no more and he urgently forced his way through the throng and out into the blessed fresh air and uncongested space.

Might as well go home, he told himself, but he immediately rejected the idea. He was the only Ericson in the Brisbane phone directory and they had probably already tracked down where he lived and would be waiting for him. He felt a quick pang for Sheila's safety but persuaded himself they wouldn't harass her.

He walked distractedly to his car, striving desperately for an answer to a problem which seemed to have no answers. A burst of laughter brought him back to earth. A group of young

people stood around his car, making what they thought were witty remarks. He strode purposefully toward them.

'Excuse me,' he said, taking his keys from his pocket. They stood their ground, eyeing him with a mixture of amusement and caution.

He palmed the keys so that they protruded slightly through his closed fist. 'Shift,' he ordered a lanky lout leaning over the driver's door and resting his elbow on the hood. The youth looked calculatingly at him and slowly eased himself off the car. Still unsure whether this was a gesture of acquiescence or preparation for an attack, Thor moved cautiously toward him.

'Hey,' a female voice suddenly stopped the action. 'You're Thor, Gina's boss, aren't you? What the hell are you doing here?'

He located the source—a small blond, attractive enough in a somewhat blowzy way. He racked his memory banks and finally pulled out a picture of her with Gina. This must be Diane, Gina's friend. "I was looking for Gina."

'She shot off down to Cabarita with a spunk she picked up. Left poor little me alone with this lot.' She giggled. 'It must be important for you to come chasing her here and leave that dishy blond you were with.'

The comment was like a sharp kick in the groin. 'It'll keep,' he muttered.

The youth stood aside to let him in the car. Trembling with reaction—shock, relief, disappointment, a sense of escape and a sense of entrapment—he started up and drove slowly out of the carpark and onto Seaworld Drive. It suddenly occurred to him that, if Hadding or Freya had followed him, he was in a pretty precarious position, sitting exposed on the only road out of The Spit. The first thing to do was obviously to get away from there. And then? Well, what did he have to lose by trailing Gina down to Cabarita? It might be a good move. They would be expecting him to head north to Brisbane, not south. He took off as rapidly as he dared.

Another decision point a few seconds later. The beach road was probably slower, even despite the virtual absence of traffic lights, and was narrow but they were much more likely to be watching the Highway. A snap decision and he found himself on Main Beach Parade.

At Surfers, he stuck to his plan and crawled on down the Esplanade. On through the twisting back (or should that be front?) streets to where Old Burleigh Road took him past the Mall and the beach where he had nearly ceased to be. He drove slowly, looking for signs of a police presence, but it seemed as still as a grave. That must mean that Hadding had recovered. No, it could just mean noone had found him. Or it could mean someone had found him alive and taken him to the hospital. I should really be hoping he is dead, he told himself, but a vision of himself being locked up for murder or manslaughter drove that thought from his head.

Suddenly he was aware of time passing. It's going to take me all night to get to Cabarita at this rate, he told himself—even if I cut across on to the Gold Coast Highway. It will be much faster if I shoot across onto the Nerang road at

Margaret Avenue and take the inland route. It's awfully close to Jupiters but surely they won't be looking for me around there by now; they'd expect me to be well clear.

He put his revised plan into effect and almost immediately regretted his decision. Stopping at the fourth set of traffic lights since that decision, he looked behind in his rear vision mirror and saw a figure reminding him of Hadding. The light changed to green and he took off, almost succeeding in persuading himself that he had imagined the resemblance, but as the Fairlane drew abreast in the next lane it was obvious that it had not been his imagination.

Another set of lights loomed ahead. He suddenly flipped the wheel and shot through a slender gap into the leftmost lane. He could see that Hadding was following, amid vociferous swearing and horn-tooting from several motorists with whom he had nearly collided. Thor was delighted to see that the Fairlane was three cars back in the line. He took the green light rolling, anticipating the change by several seconds, and jumped the gun on the other cars abreast of him. Fifty metres on, the lane ended and he just managed to shoot in front of an extremely irate grey-suited businessman in a company Commodore. He was sure Hadding would have no chance of getting back into a through lane before a number of other cars had gone through.

He pulled the same hair-raising trick at the next three sets of lights and was beginning to be confident he had left Hadding behind. He turned on to the relatively deserted Gold Coast-Springbrook Road at the following set of lights. No sign of a Fairlane as far back as he could see. It just shows how useless those great tanks are, he told himself. At the same time, he was fervently wishing he had something with a bit more go than the City—even a turbo version.

He waited anxiously at the sole set of lights on the Road and again at the merging point with the Pacific Highway, but there was no sign of his pursuer. Obviously, Hadding would think he was heading for Brisbane and go the other way. It was not, however, until he reached the point where the Pacific and Gold Coast Highways join at Kirra that he finally managed to convince himself of this proposition.

Slowly he began to relax as the road took him over the Border into New South Wales, down through Kingscliff and on to Cabarita. Some semblance of rational thought had returned to him as he drove and he had come up with what seemed to him the solution to his problem: he would persuade Gina to let him stay with her for a few days. He had no clear idea yet how he would do this, but do it he would.

He nosed into the carpark of the dance hall cum bar and was again reminded of the fact that he didn't know what sort of a car Gina drove. Then again, as suddenly occurred to him, he didn't know if she was in her own car or in that of the 'spunk'. He had a sinking feeling as he realised further that he hadn't even thought about the complicating factor of the guy Gina was with. He almost drove straight out again, but a sort of inertia and inability to come up with any acceptable alternative compelled him on.

She was sitting in the bar with a well-built blond surfie-looking guy. Their eyes met and locked and he stopped dead in his tracks. This is ridiculous, he told himself. I can't just barge in on her like this and expect her to toss this good-looking guy and take me home with her. But she was smiling welcome at him, sensuous lips slightly parted. It was not the smile a woman gave to her boss when she was thinking of him as a boss. It was the smile a woman gives a man when she is telling him 'I'm interested; seduce me if you can.' It suddenly became crystal clear to him that the only way he could achieve his purpose would be to seduce her, though that was rather a forlorn hope after his adventures with Freya; at least he could give her the promise of seduction to come.

He decided the bold approach was the best. He strode to their table, dragged a spare chair across from another table and sat down. The blond guy glared.

"What are you doing here?" Gina asked.

'I went to Fisherman's Wharf looking for you. Diane told me you were here.'

'And you came all this way down here just to see me?' She looked at him suspiciously.

'Of course.'

'What happened that gorgeous blond you were with?'

'Her? Nothing?'

'Don't tell me. That creep with her was her husband. I thought you were deep into some industrial espionage or something like that...I've got your briefcase safe in my car.'

'You are the most wonderful secretary a man ever had.' Absentminded in his nervousness, he took the glass of Coke from in front of her and drained it in one fluid motion. 'I needed that,' he said.

She looked at him with a strange little smile on her lips.

'Have mine too,' said the guy. 'I don't need it.'

What did that mean? Thor asked himself as he drained the glass.

The surfie looked at Gina. 'Look, if you want me to get lost, just say so. I can take a hint.'

This is stupid, Thor told himself and rose to go. Gina rose with him, put her hand on his arm and steered him to the dance floor.

'I can't get over this,' she said, as they made some sort of slow gyrations round the floor. 'All the years I've been working for you you've never made the slightest suggestion of a pass. Now...'

'I confess. I really came because I wanted that briefcase. But then, when I saw you...Look, I can't dance; let's sit down...or I'll just get my briefcase and go and leave you with your blond boyfriend.'

'Chickening out? It's way too late for that. I've got you at my mercy.' She laughed. 'Okay, I'll take pity on you. Let's go for a walk.'

'What about Blondie?' Thor asked, but as he glanced at the table where they had been sitting and then around the room, he saw that question had already been answered; Blondie

was busy chatting up another bird sitting alone at another table.

They walked down to the deserted beach. It was a star-filled evening and a gentle breeze was blowing. The moon was bathing the beach in its romantic light. Thor was uneasy. He was sure Gina's mind was on sex and he was just as sure any attempt by him was bound to be a complete fiasco. As he stood uncertainly, she put her arms around his neck, looked into his eyes as though seeking the answer to some deep mystery there and kissed him deeply. She began unbuttoning his shirt, kissing each inch of flesh as it was revealed, and slid the shirt down his arms. She nibbled on his neck, then ran her tongue across his smooth chest, caught one of his erect nipples between her lips and flicked it with her tongue. His moans grew louder as she slid her hands down to his waist and frantically tugged at his belt. He roughly unbuttoned her shirt, exposing her breasts. 'As perfect as I knew they would be,' he said.

He started sucking her nipples, but she slid down his pants and attempted to slide down what she thought was his underwear. He pulled the drawstring on his bathers. Miraculously, the two ends separated cleanly instead of tying themselves into a knot as they usually did. With difficulty, because they snagged on his erect penis, she pulled them down. 'Bugger the swimming,' she said.

He fumbled clumsily at her skirt, but she had unfastened whatever secret device kept it up, let it fall, and was pulling down her panties before he knew what was happening. She stepped close to him and he pulled her against him and kissed her, hotly, wetly, demandingly. She responded eagerly. 'Oh, please, please,' she begged.

'Here? Now?'

'Yes, yes.'

She dropped onto her knees on their piled clothes. He entered her smoothly, easily, and straight away began pumping her, his rod sliding full length in and out with each rapid, forceful thrust.

'Oh, I love that,' she murmured. 'How long can you keep it up?'

'Long enough,' he replied through gritted teeth. Maybe too long, he added to himself; it was quite a while since he'd managed it three times in one twenty-four hour period.

He slowed his pace a little and began caressing her breasts, her nipples, her belly, her clitoris. He could feel her breathing quickening and her muscles tensing. Suddenly, she said, 'Oh, are you ready? Quick, I'm coming. Come with me. Please. Now. Now. Now.'

He thrust into her with all his might—rapid, vicious thrusts that almost sent her sprawling—until, a very short time later, he too, with a final triumphant thrust and a small, exultant cry, achieved his climax within her. But even as he marvelled in that wonderful sensation, he was thinking that it was strange something so marvellous could still be so much less satisfying and fulfilling than the episodes with Freya or with Sheila up until a few years ago.

He withdrew from her and said, 'How about a swim to cool off?'

'Hey, dumbo, we haven't got any towels. We can't sit around wet all night.'

'We'll lick it off each other.'

She laughed, a tinkling little sound of amused delight. 'Sounds great but I think maybe we should just get dressed. We can shower and do that at home if you're game.'

'You're on.'

They dressed quickly and made their way, hand in hand, back towards the night spot. 'Let's not go back in,' Thor suggested. 'Let's go home. I'm getting horny just thinking about that shower. Have you got your car?'

'There it is.' Gina pointed toward a black MG TF2.

'Wow!' breathed Thor. 'I didn't know you had one of them. What a beauty!'

Gina laughed. 'What did you think I'd drive—a mid-seventies Corolla?'

It was Thor's turn to laugh; she'd hit it right on the button. 'Well, actually, yes.' He was thinking furiously. If he went with Gina in her car, he'd fool Hadding if he was still on the lookout for him. But what about his own car? To hell with it; he'd just have to pick it up some other time. 'Why don't we both go in your car?' he suggested.

'And I guess you want to drive.' She laughed. 'Okay. But what about your car?'

'It should be safe here till I get back to pick it up. The important thing is to be with you.'

'Oh, yeah, smoothy, you just want to drive my car.'

'No, honest, I'll even let you drive.'

'No,' she insisted. 'You drive and I'll play.' She brushed him lightly on the genitals to emphasise her meaning.

She handed him the key and they climbed in. While he adjusted the seat to suit his long legs, she thrust a hand into his pocket to caress his inner thigh. 'Ouch,' she exclaimed, rapidly withdrawing her hand. A drop of blood sat on her fingertip. 'What the hell have you got in there?' she demanded. She thrust her hand in again and came out with the brooch Freya had given him.

'So,' she said, 'this wouldn't belong to that gorgeous blond creature, would it? Its absolutely beautiful. If she gave it to you, she really must think you're something special. If she didn't mean you to have it, she's sure going to want it back.'

Thor looked away in embarrassment and caught a glimpse of a figure emerging from the shadows. Hadding! How in hell had he managed to track him down here? He'd been absolutely sure he'd lost him. He quickly started the car, slammed it into gear and shot out of the carpark.

'Easy, lover,' laughed Gina. 'I'm not going to hold it against you. Or maybe I will.' She made a threatening gesture with the pin of the brooch toward his genital area. 'A prick in the prick for a prick.'

Thor glanced at the brooch and a sudden idea struck him. 'Give me that,' he said, holding out his left hand towards her. Obediently, she placed it in his hand. He cautiously

held the pin against his tongue and thought he felt a vague tingle. He jammed it against a gold filling; there was a definite tingle that time. 'Damn,' he said. 'Throw the bloody thing out the window.'

'No!' she protested. 'It's too pretty and too valuable. I am jealous as hell about it but that doesn't mean I want you to throw it away.'

'Well, pull the pin off it then,' he ordered.

She looked at him in profound puzzlement.

'Go on, do it,' he snapped, and she dumbly obeyed, pulling, twisting and tugging at the pin until it finally gave way. She threw the offending article out the window.

'Would it be too much to ask for an explanation?' she asked, with real, or pretended, meekness.

He smiled. 'That's what happens to anything that hurts you,' he replied. He was not about to tell her of his theory that the brooch had been functioning as a tracking device, allowing Hadding to follow him through all his adventures.

She laughed, apparently mollified. 'Let's hope that big prick of yours never hurts me.'

Not likely, Thor thought; she could easily handle a lot bigger than mine.

They sped on the way they had come, though this time carrying straight on along the Pacific Highway and on towards Brisbane. A Commodore sat in a small layby just past where the Pacific Highway joins the Gold Coast Highway, perilously close to the road, continuously buffeted by the speeding cars that swept by it. In the flash of headlights, Thor saw Freya's face, ghostly pale and looking deeply troubled. He hoped she hadn't seen him and anxiously watched for any sign of pursuit. Even if she had spotted him, which was most unlikely, they'd be miles up the road before she managed to get onto the road and into the stream of traffic, he assured himself.

Very soon, they were approaching the outskirts of Brisbane. 'I take it Sheila's not expecting you home tonight,' said Gina. 'Want me to take you home tomorrow and give her some story about your car breaking down?'

Thor considered. 'I don't think I ever want to go home,' he finally said.

Gina looked her surprise. 'I always thought you and Sheila were happy—the ideal marriage in fact...It's not just because of what happened tonight?'

'Not entirely. I guess we were happy, though I've often asked myself why I married her. She's honestly the most boring person I know. She has no drive at all—for anything. She'd be happy sleeping her life away till the final big sleep. She's got no conversation, no ideas, no opinions on anything. To be honest, I married her because she was a sexy little witch, but now she's damn near sexless. So, there's nothing left. Sad, isn't it?'

'Maybe that will happen with us. When the sex goes, there'll be nothing left?'

'Perhaps, but I'm not asking you to marry me.'

'Just be around when you need a good poke. Okay, at least we know where we stand.'

He glanced at her, alarmed at the bitterness in her voice. 'I didn't mean it like that. You're a wonderful person and I'm sure I could easily fall in love with you but I don't want to finish up in the same mess again.'

She squeezed his thigh. 'I understand. But if you're not going back you'll have to let her know. And you'll have to go home and pick up your stuff. I'm not sure, though, that I want to take you there when you go back to tell her; she might jump to obvious conclusions.'

'She'll find out soon enough.'

'It's no good,' Gina said firmly. 'One way or another, you're going home tomorrow. Either we go back down tomorrow and we pick up your car or we tell her I brought you back because your car broke down. Anyone you can get to bring it up for you? If not, we'll just have to go down and get it.'

'She'll want to take me,' Thor observed.

'Well, we'll just have to go back down tomorrow. Or maybe we should just go back down now?'

'Bugger it,' said Thor. 'I just want to go to bed.'

'You sexy devil. Shower first?' She laughed at Thor's quick frown. 'Don't worry, darling, I know you've had a busy day one way or another. I won't be too demanding..The fact remains, however, that we have to get you back home tomorrow. What you do after that is up to you, but you'll know where to find me if you want me. Fair enough?'

'No. I'm not going home tomorrow, the day after or ever. I'll stay with you till you throw me out. I'll phone her tomorrow and tell her and I'll slip round on Friday when she goes shopping to pick up what I need. I don't want to see her ever again.'

Gina sighed. 'Honey, that's not the way to do it. You'll have to face her some time. Better to do it straight away.' She raised a hand as he started to argue. 'Okay, okay, it's your life. You do it any way you want to.'

'How do I get to your place? It's somewhere in Coorparoo, isn't it?'

'Just behind the office. Head for there and I'll guide you.'

Minutes later, they were coming up to the building where Thor had his office. 'Left here,' Gina said.

Thor obeyed but then, instead of carrying on, swung into the lane leading to tenant's parking behind the building. 'Just thought of something,' he said. 'Won't be long.'

He retrieved his briefcase and made his way to the back door of his office, opening it rather gingerly and snapping on the light. I must be way ahead of Freya and Hadding, he told himself, but the nervous anticipation of possible ambush did not leave him. A flash of a nightmarish vision of Hadding invading his home and threatening Sheila momentarily triggered even greater fear but he quickly assured himself they weren't likely to get rough with her.

He made his way along the narrow hallway to his office and switched on the light. Nothing seemed to have been touched. He took Hadding's notes from his briefcase, crossed the hallway to Gina's smaller office and turned on the photocopier. On impulse, while it was performing its

energetic actions of preparing itself for work, he made his way stealthily to the front reception area. A faint flickering glow from street lighting and neon signs lit the room, and he was confident the lights he was showing would not be seen from the street. His heart skipped as he thought he detected a faint, involuntary movement in the shadows but several minutes steady watching convinced him it had been but his imagination.

He went back into Gina's office and made two copies of the documents. One set he put back into the briefcase, which he then placed in an obvious position on his desk. Another set he locked away in a draw in his desk. The originals he thrust into his pocket. Happy with himself, he returned to the car and Gina.

CHAPTER 7

The act of making love is the most pleasurable and most fulfilling experience two people can share, mused Thor. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, his hands caressing Gina's nicely-shaped brown legs. She lay on the bed, legs wide spread, offering herself completely to him. Why then do I feel like I'm betraying her, myself, Sheila, Freya, God and the whole bloody universe?

His eyes slid over her body. She really was very attractive, in a rather more earthy way than Freya's ethereal perfection, but still extremely attractive. And she knew it and had no qualms about letting him enjoy it. In fact, she now spread her legs even wider and thrust her hips up a little, so that her box became even more accessible to his touch. He accepted the invitation and ran his fingers up her thigh and into her mass of dark pubic hair. They lingered there, gently pinching the flesh and curling the hair, while his mouth found hers in a breath-sharing kiss, and he slid himself onto the bed between her legs. Simultaneously, he slid his lips down her neck to her full right breast and its erect nipple, and gently parted her labia with his fingers. While she murmured her satisfaction and he marvelled at her warm wetness, he inserted a long finger into her vagina and found her extra-sensitive spots. She lay back, totally immersed in her sensations. Suddenly, he removed his finger, placed both hands under her buttocks and kissed her fulsomely on her grateful genitals. His tongue probed, prodded and licked at her private parts as though determined to explore every last nook and cranny, while she squirmed with pleasure. He found her clitoris and titillated it with his tongue, sucked at it, and then, when it was hugely swollen, stroked it rapidly. She grabbed his hair and pushed his head down to the magic spot. As she tensed and stiffened in her moment of climactic ecstasy, he suddenly thrust into her, entering her fully in one powerful movement. She gasped and hugged him tight to her, clinging to him till her climax subsided.

Only then did he begin to move. Slowly, enjoying their closeness, he made love to her, seeking to convey to her not only the sexual attraction she had for him but also the feeling that was, at this moment at least, very close to love. Her legs were still spread wide, allowing him total penetration, but he resisted the temptation to pump and pound her. He varied his speed, thrust and angle, so that at one moment his knob was tickling her clitoris while the next it was pushing against her cervix; one moment he was barely moving, another he was thrusting back and forth at nearly a stroke a second; his penis gently stroked her outermost parts and prodded her G spot. He used all the accumulated tricks of years of pleasing a woman and he knew he was succeeding beyond her wildest dreams. Time and again he brought her to the brink and several times beyond. Each time she climaxed she thought he had too and was surprised and delighted when his short subsidence was followed by a resumption of activity. Eventually, with a wild surge, he could feel that he was finally reaching the point at which he was going to ejaculate.

He immediately began a rapidly repeated, almost brutal, series of thrusts, using every muscle in his body to propel himself into her, so that she moved inches back with each thrust, despite thrusting forward to meet him. They were both groaning loudly with the effort. Finally, with their mouths clinched in an ecstatic kiss, his hands encircling her breasts and pushing up into her armpits and her tugging on his scrotum, he came. It was an experience such as he had rarely had before—completely overwhelming—and he moaned in gratified release. His explosion triggered her final release and she clung to him as wave after wave flooded over her.

'Oh, boy,' she sighed after some moments, still clinging to him, 'you really are something. I thought I knew all about sex but...Now I know what young girls see in older men.' She stroked him gently. 'The trouble is, now I know what I've been missing, I'll never be satisfied with anything less. Now I've run a marathon I won't be happy with sprints. Sheila can't really be happy to be missing out on that. If she's that stupid, she deserves to lose you. I'll ring her up myself and tell her hands off you're mine.'

Problems on problems, mused Thor. This seemed a great idea at the time but it looks like backfiring. All I wanted was a temporary refuge until I could resume my normal life. Gina is great in bed and a wonderful secretary but I really can't see myself spending my life with her. If I have to spend my life with any woman, I'd prefer it to be with Sheila; sexless, dull and boring she may be but I still love her. And there's no way I'll be able to keep this up even for a few days; I must have had more sex in the past two days than I usually have in a month these days. Anyway, how the hell am I going to get any work done if she wants sex all the time?

'I must be squashing you,' he said.

'No,' she demurred, clasping him tighter. Even his penis felt the muscular embrace and, to his surprise, he felt it beginning to enlarge. What was happening? Even in his youth he couldn't have managed it five times in a day or so. She nibbled at his ear. 'Well, you are a bit,' she said and rolled him over on his back, still clasping him inside her.

She rode him, using him as a delicate instrument of pleasure, leaning now forward, now backward, now stretched out along him and rubbing and kissing, now on hands and knees and offering her breasts to his touch, now squatting and writhing on his pole. On and on she went, and though Thor played his part, fondling her breasts, stroking her flanks and her abdomen, clutching her firm buttocks, and though he was experiencing unbelievably, fantastically sensuous, erotic sensations that kept him moaning with pleasure, his uppermost thought was when will it end? He was amazed that she could keep it up so long. He was amazed he could keep it up, though that was probably more due to her superbly developed pubococcygeal muscles than anything to do with him. Boy, she must be busy doing her Kegel exercises half the day; did she do them when she was typing or even talking to him? He thought he knew now how Sheila must feel on the occasions when he kept on and on, determined to achieve an ejaculation that just wouldn't come. Finally, with a sharp cry torn from deep

within her, she sank back on his super-erect stalk, forcing it as deep within herself as it could possibly go. She leant back against Thor's hastily drawn up legs, her eyes closed and sobbing, and then collapsed forward onto his stretched-out trunk.

God, she's passed out, thought Thor. *La petite mort*, I hope. She should be okay in a few seconds. Sure enough, Gina slowly opened her eyes. She rolled off him onto her back and stretched her limbs wide. 'I'm all fucked out,' she said. 'I'll be walking bandy for a week.'

She took his hand and they lay there side by side recovering from their excesses. Finally, she turned her head towards him and asked, 'Like some breakfast?'

Thor considered. Did he have the energy to move? He felt like he'd run a couple of sequential marathons. His over-stimulated penis was still objecting and several muscles ached.

'Come on,' she said. 'You need something. How about an omelette? I make a fantastic Spanish omelette. Why don't you go and have a shower while I get it ready?'

Dumbly, reluctantly, Thor swung himself off the bed and walked stiffly to the bathroom. He relieved himself, moaning softly to himself at the slight discomfort this caused his irritated urethra.

He took a long time in the shower, feeling the soothing warm water take away his aches. He delicately soaped and rinsed his private parts and reflected how central a role that small part of his anatomy played in his life—as it did in every man's. He thought of his sexual encounters with Gina; boy, he'd unleashed a tiger there. She'd end up eating him if he wasn't careful. For about the first time in his life, he admitted to himself he was aging. He reflected on the feeling of impending fulfilment he'd had when he started making love to Gina this morning. Why now did he feel used? Surely if anyone was being used it was Gina. A sudden strange thought intruded: maybe it wasn't all his natural powers; if Freya was who she claimed, she might well have access to some super aphrodisiac. Maybe that drink she gave him was spiked?

Gina's voice broke into his thoughts. She opened the door a crack, poked her head in and ordered, 'Hurry up. It's all done and getting cold.'

Obediently, he turned off the water and stepped out, but his mind ran on. Maybe it was a true aphrodisiac—one that aroused feelings of love as well as pure lust. If ever he caught up with her again, he'd get the truth out of her. If there was such a thing, he could make a real fortune.

He towelled himself abstractedly and then reached absently for his clothes. Sheila always put out clean underwear for him—on the dirty clothes basket, close at hand—when he was having a shower. He wondered what she was doing—probably reading the *Sunday-Mail*, with one ear on the phone in case he rang up to tell her he was on the way home.

What had he done with his clothes last night? He remembered Gina leading him eagerly to the bedroom and helping him take them off. What then? Oh, yes, he'd actually dosed off. He had a vague recollection of Gina covering him with a

sheet and snuggling against him, then the blackness of exhausted sleep. He'd woken with the first shafts of sunlight entering the room, disoriented, realising he was not at home in his own familiar bed and that the figure beside him was not the familiar chunky form of his wife, but momentarily he was not sure where he was. Realisation had come quickly. He'd eased himself out of bed and tiptoed to the toilet. With a mouth like the proverbial bottom of the cocky's cage, he'd gone to the refrigerator, looking for milk. No milk, but he'd had a hearty swig from an inviting bottle of Coke, then reluctantly returned to his fate. Gina had been lying spread out, inviting, looking incredibly sexy. And then...His whole body relived the morning's experience in a confused melange of sensuous pleasure, triumph, doubt and disgust. He wrapped the towel round his waist and went out.

Gina laughed when she saw him. 'Gone all modest now, have we?' She gave the towel a quick tug, whisked it off him and threw it across the room. 'Still there. Just wanted to make sure it hadn't dropped off in the shower.'

'Wonder the poor little thing hasn't fallen off.'

'Little!' she laughed. She reached out and took it in her small hand. 'Then let's make it big again.'

He moaned inwardly, almost willing it not to respond to her touch—but it did. 'That's more like it,' she said, pulling it towards her and then letting it slap back against his taut abdomen. She laughed. 'Eat first,' she said.

They sat side by side and ate their breakfast in silence, Thor a mixture of anticipation and apprehension that Gina would at any minute start fondling him again, and feeling acutely embarrassed and ridiculous sitting eating breakfast in the nude. What if someone came to the door?

As if summoned by the thought, the doorbell rang. Gina put her fingers to her lips. 'Keep quiet and they'll think noone's home and go away,' she whispered in his ear.

They sat, deadly still, suppressing giggles, till the ringing and knocking finally stopped and they heard the sound of footsteps going back down the steps. Only when the last echo of the last sound of the intruder had vanished did they let out long, deep breaths and relax in laughter.

'Probably some collector,' Gina opined. 'We should have both opened the door together and given them a good eyeful.'

'With my luck it'd be a cop looking for somebody next door...Whoever it was was pretty persistent.'

He crossed to the window and cautiously drew the curtain aside a crack. A man was standing uncertainly just outside the garage belonging to Gina's flat. There was something familiar about the figure. Terror and disbelief flooded over him. Hadding! How had he found him here? Had he followed him? Or somehow tracked him down through Gina's car? Found someone who knew Gina? Checked out his home and his office and somehow or other found out his secretary's address and checked it out? Or had he been right about the brooch and it was a tracking device, but dead wrong that it needed the pin as an antenna? He suddenly remembered that he'd left the brooch in the car. Maybe that was why Hadding was standing there. Maybe he'd located the device but wasn't sure where he

was. Maybe he was thinking of checking whether his precious notes were with the brooch. What the hell was he going to do?

'What is it?' Gina had joined him at the window.

He dropped the curtain. 'The guy who was at the door is hanging around outside your garage.'

'Why would he do that? You don't know him, do you?' She drew her breath in sharply and looked at him in shocked agitation. 'He hasn't by any chance got something to do with all the weird business with your briefcase, has he?' She was becoming very agitated, almost hysterical. 'For God's sake, tell me what's going on,' she demanded, pleaded. 'What the hell is it all about? I've got to know. If you've taken something of his, for God's sake give it back. If he's after something of yours, call the police and quickly.' A look of sudden shocked suspicion distorted her pleasant features. 'All this wouldn't have anything to do with why you suddenly became desperate for my company, why you didn't want to go home...' She trailed off, her voice breaking.

The guilty, stricken look on his face confirmed her suspicion even more than his absence of denial.

'Oh, you louse!' she snapped. She stormed into the bedroom, quickly returned and threw his clothes at him. 'Get out of here,' she yelled at him. She turned on her heel and fled from him into the bedroom.

He was dressed, rather untidily, when she reemerged, also dressed. She looked at him in bewildered disgust, eyes brimming with stinging tears. 'Men!' she snapped. 'Can't trust any of them. Only good for one thing and most of them aren't much good at that. I guess it never occurred to you that you could be putting me in danger too? Of course it didn't; you were only thinking of your own skin. And all the time I was thinking all my dreams had come true and...and it's nothing but a fucking nightmare. How could you?'

Thor had nothing to say. It was all true, every last syllable of it. He realised he hadn't even thought of her as a person, all through the whole thing. He'd used her, abused her, misused her, treated her like something disposable, of as little worth as a disposable nappy. There was only one thing to do. Without a glance at Gina, he opened the door and slipped out.

As he walked towards the watching and waiting Hadding, he took the material Hadding had given him from his pocket and held it out in front of him. Hadding took it from him and inspected it closely, while Thor waited nervously.

Finally, Hadding looked at him and said, 'And the copies?'

Thor was stunned. How could Hadding have known he took copies? Or was he just guessing? 'What copies?' he asked, but he knew his voice betrayed him if Hadding had not already known.

'Let us go in and ask your girlfriend. Perhaps she knows what copies.'

'I took one copy. It's in my briefcase in my office.'

'Your car is in the garage?'

'No. I left it down the Coast—as you should know if you don't. We don't need a car anyway; it's just up the road. We can walk. Unless you have your car outside?'

'We will walk and you will not do anything heroic. Freya is not here to save you this time. When she knows about your other girlfriend, she may not want to anyway.'

This was something Thor had not previously thought about. Would Freya be jealous? Did she know he was married? He posed the question to Hadding.

Hadding shrugged. 'She did not tell me. What would it matter? That was past, your new girlfriend is future. Do you not know anything about women?'

'No,' Thor admitted ruefully. 'Who does?'

'True,' said Hadding. 'I do not. Especially about my beautiful cousin I do not. I am in charge here. So what does she do? She goes behind my back and contacts her father to ask what to do with you. I know what I would do with you.' He smiled a sickly smile at Thor.

'And what did her father say?'

Hadding laughed, a cruel laugh, clearly relishing Thor's discomfort and anxiety. 'He has not decided yet. It would be such a pity if I had to kill you in self-defence before he did.'

'So, as soon as I give you the copy, you'll kill me?'

Hadding scowled. 'No. I respect my superiors if Freya does not. You will live unless Odin decides otherwise.'

Odin! The name echoed in Thor's brain. This was becoming more and more fantastic. He suddenly remembered the old Norse legend in all its detail. Odin, Freya, Hadding, Thor—they were all there. It must be a bizarre joke. But Hadding trying to drown him was no joke. Perhaps it was all some feverish nightmare and he would soon wake up, at home in his own bed with Sheila.

They walked on, Thor feeling more numbed than frightened. Life at this moment seemed so chaotic that death was beginning to appear almost an acceptable escape from the dreadful uncertainty of it all. Further, he felt that somehow he'd failed his first real test of real life and had no reason to live. His psyche staggered under a load of self-imposed guilt and sense of worthlessness and the hopeless uselessness of all his endeavours.

They arrived at his office. He fumbled the key into the lock and opened the door. Hadding motioned him inside and followed him in, sticking close enough to prevent a sudden closing of the door in his face but not close enough for a surprise attack. They went through to Thor's office and Thor switched on the light. The briefcase stood on the centre of the desk where he had left it. Wordlessly, he picked it up, withdrew the papers and handed them to Hadding, who checked them over and appeared satisfied. 'No more copies?' he queried.

Thor shook his head, unable to trust his voice. Hadding picked up the telephone and dialled a number. In the still silence, Thor could hear the phone ringing at the other end and a female voice answering.

'Well?' Hadding snapped into the receiver. Thor could not hear the conversation at the other end but it was easy to see that Hadding's reaction was not favourable. Without another word, he slammed down the receiver and scowlingly faced Thor.

'Like daughter, like father, both of them not worth a shit,' he snarled. He spread his hands on the table, making an obvious effort at collecting and controlling himself, then shrugged. 'I think they will both regret this but Odin has spoken and I obey.' Clutching the papers, he pushed Thor out of the way and lurched out the door.

Thor subsided into his chair, listening in disbelief as the outer door slammed shut behind Hadding. Relief flooded over him—relief and disbelief that it was all so easy in the end. It was such an anticlimax it was strangely unsatisfying, as though something against the natural order of things had taken place. It's really true, he assured himself, I've really and truly actually won. Against all the odds, I fooled him. He was tempted to pull out the copy of the notes still securely in his desk, to peruse their strange notation and see what marvellous truth he could decipher from them. There was an almost overwhelming compulsion to open that drawer and at least make sure the copy was still there but he resisted the urge to do even that, still not quite believing that Hadding was not still lurking somewhere close at hand. Maybe he had set just this trap for him, anticipating just this reaction if he did have any more copies.

He rose and made his way out of his office, through the reception area and out onto the street, still amazed at the normalcy of his actions and of the scene. He felt that he should be turning cartwheels, jumping for joy, while a bright light beamed down from on high and angels sang. But all he felt was like a very small, very insignificant cog that had slipped a few beats but was once again firmly enmeshed, somehow, miraculously, without stripping itself.

He walked slowly, automatically, back to Gina's flat and automatically rang the doorbell. Gina's gasp brought him back to earth and he looked up in surprise.

'Oh, you're back,' she sobbed, throwing her arms around him. 'And you're all right. I thought I'd probably never see you again alive. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what to think. I only thought I might lose you. And all the time I was blaming myself for virtually throwing you out. Please forgive me.'

He held her tight and tears poured from his eyes. 'I'm the one who should beg forgiveness,' he said. 'Everything you said about me is true. I used you without a single thought of what could happen to you.'

'I'll never be sorry this morning happened. Never, as long as I live. Nothing can ever take that away from me.'

They kissed softly but deeply and then she stood back. 'Come in and tell me all about it.'

'I gave him the papers and he went away,' he said as he followed her inside.

'But...what were they? Why were they so important? Who was he?'

Thor cleared his throat to give himself time to think. 'You were right; it was some kind of industrial espionage. Anyway, it's all over now.'

She looked at him dubiously. 'I still don't understand. I just can't see you mixed up in anything like that. I can imagine it the other way, with someone wanting to steal your secrets—though I don't know that you have any secrets; you're always eager to tell the world about your discoveries even if it means less money for you.' She sighed, a deep, long sigh that seemed to come from her innermost being. 'I guess you never really know anyone no matter how well you think you do...So, it's really all over?'

He nodded.

'Everything?' She was studying his face carefully and, when he didn't answer, the intensity of her gaze seemed to be almost stripping his soul bare. He saw the tears welling in her troubled eyes as she said, 'I'll drive you home,' but he merely nodded dumb assent.

CHAPTER 8

Thor looked at the papers spread across his desk and shook his head disgustedly. I must be missing something, he told himself. For three weeks he had spent every possible moment poring over them, ignoring the steadily mounting pile of business that he should be attending to.

It had become an obsession, a fire in his belly that was slowly consuming him. When Gina came to him with letters that had to be replied to, he waved her away with a 'You put something together and I'll sign it.' When he told her he wasn't taking any phone calls, she filtered out the ones she could handle or that could be delayed and insisted he take the ones that demanded his immediate attention. She had to remind him to eat and refused to go home until he left—without taking any work home with him. Whatever trace of sanity and whatever remnant of business he had left was due solely to her. At odd moments, when his brain became so befuddled he had to go for a walk to clear his head, and the sights, sounds, smells of the everyday world intruded on his consciousness, when he became briefly aware of people and cats and dogs and streets and cars and trees silhouetted against the sky, then he thought wonderingly of her patient devotion, her unselfish goodness, her understanding though she clearly understood him not at all.

The day they had both gone back to work after their short period of intimacy had been incredibly strained and full of tension. Neither of them had mentioned the day before but it had lain unspoken between them like a lake of molasses they must both somehow cross. As the days passed, the tension had slowly eased, but the easy familiarity of before had been replaced with an excessively polite correctness, like two well-bred women hating each other's guts. As his obsession grew, their relationship changed. She had become like a mother—a mother with a particularly fractious child whose behaviour only she could control, but then only to a degree and only with enormous tact, guile and cunning.

Thor looked from the papers to the piles of textbooks occupying most of the remaining space on his desk. Most of them were overdue at one library or other. A few were books he'd used and treasured for years. Some he had purchased at exorbitant cost. Might as well give up, he thought; I would have long ago if Hadding hadn't been so certain I could work it out. I really don't know much more about it than I did after that first quick glance back at the Conference. That's not quite true; with the help of the self-diagnostic, I've worked out that it's some sort of hybrid digital/analog computer that uses some kind of superlight to activate electrons in some substance or other and uses them as a form of optical storage and a type of bar coding. And it does seem as though it might incorporate some sort of neural net with irregular oscillations. So what? I still have no more idea how it actually works that when I started studying all those diagrams and equations and comparing them with the values printed on the diagnostic. And as for actually putting it together...Christ, even if I wrote it up for *Speculations in*

Science, they'd send it back and suggest I try some science fiction magazine.

He picked up the papers and angrily threw them all into the wastepaper basket. He sorted out the textbooks into his own, which he put on the already overburdened bookshelves, and the library ones. He wondered if Gina would mind returning them for him; she could take his car. He moved to cross to Gina's office but stopped as he heard voices in the reception room. He heard a female voice with a noticeable American accent saying, 'I must see Mister Ericson as soon as possible. I've come all the way from New York. I wrote to him but I didn't get any reply, so I came on over. To tell you the truth, honey, I wanted to see the place anyway. Brisbane' (like most Americans, she pronounced the word as written and accentuating and drawing out the last syllable) 'sure ain't New York.'

Thor ducked back into his office, closed the door and ruffled through the correspondence on his desk. There was only one postmarked New York; that must be it. Funny Gina hadn't brought it to his attention-or maybe she had. Baxter, Poitras, Ross and Associates, Attorneys at Law. Sounded ominous. Well, if someone was planning to sue him, they wouldn't get much. He was tearing the letter open when Gina knocked and entered. He motioned her to silence and she stood looking at the letter in his hand. She smiled in recognition of the fact that he'd overheard and found the letter-rather like a tolerant mother resignedly forgiving a naughty boy's small, almost funny, misdemeanour. He read the letter and handed it across to her.

'Seems my old mate, Martyn Smith, has left me a bunch of junk. I can't imagine it would be worth anything. God knows why they couldn't have just posted it.'

'I guess Ms Poitras-sorry, "Call me Betsy" ' (in an attempted American twang), 'I guess Betsy Poitras knows. Will I show her in?'

'Why not?'

While he sat waiting for Gina to usher in his visitor, he remembered Martyn Smith. He'd never met him but they'd corresponded for more than twenty years, starting with guff of Martyn's designed to prove that a form of perpetual motion was possible. The relationship ended when he'd written something that had upset the old sod, who'd replied with such a scathing letter that he'd vowed to himself never to write to him again. Despite a couple more rambling, but almost conciliatory, missives from Martyn, he'd kept his vow, telling himself it was all a waste of time anyway, since as often as not he didn't have a clue what the old fellow was on about. He'd never been able to decide whether Martyn was a genius or a nut or a bit of both; certainly many of his ideas were so original as to seem almost bizarre.

He stood up to greet his visitor as she entered. She was a striking figure. She had to be all of six feet tall and built like a model-small breasts, flat tummy, slim hips and long, long legs. And when she walked it was with the proud, erect, gracefully strutting carriage of a model on the catwalk. 'Betsy Poitras, sir,' she introduced herself,

thrusting out a rather masculine-appearing hand. He took it in his and felt the long, tapering fingers wrap firmly around his. If she was meant to be giving off signals of assurance and confidence, she was sure succeeding.

He removed his hand, crossed round behind her and held a chair for her as she sat down. 'I'm sorry I haven't replied to your letter,' he said as he again took his seat. 'I've been flat out with a very special project and just haven't had much time for anything else. My secretary's been doing a wonderful job sorting out the urgent from the non-urgent but she slipped up this time.'

'A good secretary is a real treasure,' she said. 'I always find men make much better secretaries myself.'

She glanced at the open letter lying on the desk. 'I see you've had time to find my letter,' she said, 'so you know what this is all about. You never met Martyn, did you? Quiet a character. Martyn Smith of Shit Creek, Oregon. Who else would have had the balls to buy up all the clapped out, overgrown property—most of it for the price of unpaid taxes—round a stinking, stagnant little creek, clean it all up with his bare hands, build himself a snug little cabin, set up a little township with shops and garage and post office, get it officially named Shit Creek with a cock and bull story that it was named for some old Indian chief? And he even found gold in that creek, would you believe it?'

'Yes, he told me. He often boasted how he'd found gold in places noone else could... Did you know he called himself a Captain in the Confederate Navy?'

She roared. 'I don't know that I did, but I can well believe it.'

'Yet he was a very intelligent man. I'm sure he never even got through what you call grade school but his maths, physics, chemistry were fantastic. I couldn't understand half of what he wrote.'

'Your pair came up with some sort of theory of the universe, didn't you?'

He nodded. 'Sunk without trace, of course. Never mentioned nowhere. But, I suspect, used in a number of places. It's complete and utter heresy, of course. Only Martyn could have come up with an idea like that.'

'You must have added quite a bit for it to become the Smith-Ericsen theory.'

'I added a few concepts like transinfinity, but the central argument was all his.'

She laughed. 'You scientists. I can't even understand infinity, let alone transinfinity. I guess that has something to do with beyond infinity. No, don't explain. I tell you I'm lost long before we get near infinity, let alone to what's on the other side...Hey, sounds like a TV show, don't it?'

Thor's mind wandered to the eternal problem. 'Can't say I understand it myself. Just because we make up these things doesn't mean we understand them. Nobody, but nobody, understands infinity. I don't think we ever will while our brains are what they are. Maybe one day we'll evolve so that our brains change somehow so we can. Or maybe we'll someday invent a supercomputer, a real thinking machine that will do

the job for us—although then we probably still wouldn't understand its explanation.'

She held up her hands, laughing. 'Whoa,' she said, 'I'm just a poor little lawyer.'

Neither of those qualifiers are right, thought Thor.

'To business,' she went on briskly. 'As I wrote in my letter, Martyn Smith made a bequest of some property to you in his will. No money, I'm afraid, just two very large envelopes. What's in them I don't know.'

Thor frowned. "He did say once that he'd left instructions that if he fell off his perch—as he put it—there was a "whole bunch of stuff" that was to go to me. I gathered he meant stuff on his theories. I guess that what it is...One thing kinda puzzles me: couldn't you have just posted it? Did it really have to be hand delivered?'

'Well, yes it did. That was a stipulation in the will. We were going to ask you to fly over but when you didn't reply to my letter, I thought what the heck, I could do with a holiday, I'll drop it over myself. Don't worry, we'll be well and truly compensated from the estate...There's another reason; the will also stipulates as a condition of deeding that you sign an undertaking prescribing intended use.'

"Strings attached, eh?'

She nodded. 'Look, I'll just read out the relevant bit of the will.' She opened her attache case and took out a document, which she scanned. 'Ah, here it is..."To my sometime friend and colleague, Thor Ericson, of Mackay Street, Bethania Waters, Queensland, Australia, I bequeath the contents of two envelopes so annotated and signed and sealed in the presence of my attorney, Betsy Poitras, to be used as he sees fit within the provisos of the following undertaking: I, Thor Ericson, of Mackay Street, Bethania Waters, Queensland, Australia, accept the gift of the contents of two envelopes annotated and signed by Martyn Smith, of Shit Creek, Oregon, and acknowledge that this gift is conditional on my using it to further knowledge of the nature of the universe by conducting, or causing to have conducted, the experiments suggested therein, to disseminate widely the results of such experiments and any conclusions reached as a result of such experiments, and to advance our dream of travel to and beyond the stars." '

She looked up. 'Well, that's it.' She returned the document to her attache case and extracted a form. 'This just says the same thing, with the addition of a few flowery words we lawyers charge hundreds of bucks for, and provision for your signature, a witness's signature, and date. If you're prepared to accept the terms, sign it; if not, that's that.'

'What happens if I don't accept it? What happens to the stuff then?'

'Oh, there's a list of other possibles in order of declining desirability. Actually, it took some persuading to get him to include the list; he was sure you'd do it without question.'

Thor sat back in his chair, contemplating the proposition. 'Martyn knew me pretty well,' he said thoughtfully. 'There's just about nothing I wouldn't do for

knowledge. And knowledge of what makes the universe tick is just about the ultimate achievement, the final fulfilment. And travelling to the stars is a wonderful dream.' The vision of Freya and Hadding flashed through his mind. 'I've always thought of myself as a piece with the stars.' He leaned forward towards her. 'But there is one problem—these experiments Martyn wanted to do all tended to be quite exotic, probably impossible and bound to be incredibly expensive. I doubt if I could keep my part of the bargain.'

She smiled. 'No valid bequest can impose impossible conditions. As long as you've done your best, you're legally off the hook. If the conditions prove impossible, they can be set aside.'

'I'm not even sure I want to spend the time on it. It could be terribly time-consuming.'

'You couldn't be expected to let it unduly disrupt your life—ruin your business or career or home life or anything like that. All you'd have to do would be to have a go in whatever time you could spare.'

'You obviously don't know anything about how science works. You can't just slot science into a few hobby periods a night. It doesn't work that way. Experiments have to run their course, no matter how inconvenient that might be. And if you think you're on to something, it becomes an obsession. You live with it every moment. It fills your thoughts every second you're awake and half your dreams at night. There's no way you can turn it off. In the middle of making love to your wife it comes to you. Science is a bitch that enslaves you, turns you into a robot. And working on the sort of experiments Martyn talks about would be doubly, triply so. And all the time there'd be the voices crying in my ears that all this is folly. Even if Martyn is dead right in all his theories, I could spend the rest of my life trying to prove it and still be no closer the day I die. I don't know if I can commit myself to that.'

She looked at him keenly. 'You're right, I don't know about science; thank God, by the sound of it. But, I repeat, no bequest can make impossible demands on the recipient. Frankly, noone's going to be monitoring your performance. Take the bloody stuff, do what you will with it and nobody will be any the wiser. It will be between you and your conscience.' She suddenly became very serious. 'Unless, of course, there should be something very valuable in there. In that case, the other beneficiaries could kick up a helluva stink if you took it and didn't follow the provisos to the letter.'

'So, if I sign it, open the damn envelopes, find a list of impossible experiments suggested that are going to consume me till I die, together with a stack of funds so that I've got no excuse not to try, I'm obligated to go on and spend all the cash and all my time and effort at least till I've exhausted the funds?'

'Well, if you didn't any other possible beneficiaries could make it jolly awkward. But, as far as I can establish, the only one with any claim would be his wife. She gets the property, and she has no interest in science and little in

money. I gather she's rather glad to see the last of Martyn.' She smiled wryly.

The observation cast further doubt in Thor's mind. 'I can believe that; his first wife committed suicide, did you know?'

She shook her head. "No, I didn't."

They sat in silence for some time, Thor absorbed in a new vision—of Sheila suffering as a result of his obsession. Funny how, though she didn't want him sexually any more—or very rarely—she still wanted him around all the time.

'Look, why don't I let you think about it for a while?' Betsy's voice broke into his thoughts.

He came to a sudden decision. "No, I'll sign." He took the paper, signed and dated it and passed it back to her to witness his signature.

After she had signed, she took two very large envelopes from her case and handed them to him. 'Pleasure doing business,' she said, standing. 'Have a nice day.'

He saw her out, then returned and sat down heavily in his chair. He was reluctant to open the envelopes, to see what he had committed himself to. He sat staring blankly at them. Gina entered, eyebrows arched inquiringly. He pointed to the envelopes. 'A bequest from an old-time correspondent,' he answered her unspoken question.

'What is it?'

'Probably a load of junk.'

'You mean you don't know?'

'Not really.'

'Aren't you going to open them?'

Thor laughed. 'Women! Can never wait to unwrap presents.' He reached for one of the envelopes, quickly gave up his search for a letter opener, tore the envelope open and extracted a sheaf of papers. He turned the top one over and looked at it in disbelief. It was a share certificate for 10,000 AT&T shares. Numbly, he rifled through them. 10,000 IBM, 10 000 DuPont, 10 000 Standard Oil, \$50 000 treasury bond. It went on and on. Christ, there's a fortune here, the realisation struck him.

'Better put that one in the safe,' he said as he thrust the scrip back into the envelope and handed it to Gina. 'Shares and bonds,' he explained. 'Worth a bit.'

He picked up the second envelope and tore it open. This was more what he had expected—pages and pages of the familiar old Royal font manual typewriter typing with scrawled additions, amendments and comments at tops, bottoms and sides. Memories flooded back of pride when Martyn had given him joint authorship of the theory in appreciation of his suggestions, chagrin when Martyn had reviled him for other comments, a tinge of regret at his somewhat churlish decision to bring the correspondence to an end.

He thumbed through the pages, thinking that he'd have to go through them properly one day, when suddenly his attention was arrested by a discussion of crystals. Martyn was always very keen on crystals; they fascinated him, seemed to him to be at the very heart of nature. Here he was talking about an

experiment to determine the superconductivity of gold oxide. Oh, dear, that in itself would be quite a project.

An idea hit him with the suddenness of Saint Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus. Hastily, he retrieved Hadding's notes from the wastepaper basket, silently thanking God that Gina hadn't already emptied it and shredded the contents. He found the part he was seeking. That's it! he told himself. There's a crystal of gold oxide producing electron pairs superconducting a current through the network. And here there are free electrons acting as flip-flops. And here it's being converted to a soliton to act as a carrier. And here it's activating optical storage and something very like a bar coding device. But what's this crystal right at the very heart of the system? It seems to be producing a superlight of paired electrons. Maybe it's something like bacteriorhodopsin? Suddenly, with that one little clue, everything seemed to be coming clear. Now he could see that the network incorporated a filter very similar to his own device, one that not only allowed conditional probability and self-organisation but also, because of its permitted irregular oscillations, allowed the system to encode more information and to retain fidelity in the face of noise. Why didn't I see that before? he asked himself. It was staring me in the face all the time. But I can see it now, he exulted. It's like having the whole damn world in the palm of my hand!

Of course, it was not that simple. When he had calmed down, he realised he still had an enormous amount of work to do before he could say he really understood it, let alone begin to design a working prototype.

CHAPTER 9

It had taken six weeks of concentrated effort—six weeks of dismissing everything else as unimportant; six weeks of begrudging the time even to go to the toilet; six weeks of forgetting to eat; six weeks of refusing to shower, shave or sleep; six weeks of falling asleep at his desk; six weeks of zombie-like activity locked up in the confines of his thought processes; six weeks of refusing to allow other people to intrude into his consciousness or of forcing them out the moment they did; six weeks of ignoring protests and demands from Gina, Sheila, family and his few remaining friends; six weeks of frustration and failure and tantalising success; six weeks of obsession; six weeks of being driven by an urge stronger than any drug, stronger than love, stronger than sex, stronger than life itself. Finally it was finished. He had a patentable design—or rather designs for some twenty patentable devices. He'd have a year to produce a working prototype. He'd worry about that when he came to it.

He shambled across to Gina's office. She looked up at him worriedly. He ran his fingers through his tangled red beard and was suddenly aware of how he must look—unshaven, dishevelled, a real bum. He probably smelt like one too. When was the last time he'd had a shower or even changed his clothes? He was aware from the fit, or lack of fit, of his clothes that he'd lost weight. They'd all been right in their dire warnings that he'd wreck his health, but what did that matter? Better to die trying than to live as a failure anytime.

'Who's the best patent attorney in town?' he asked.

'Probably George Baxter. He's getting on, but he's real experienced.'

'Like me, eh? Yeah, I guess you're right. I'm going home to shower, shave and sleep for a week. Make an appointment for me with George for as soon as possible, will you sweetie—tomorrow if you can. I'm going to lock the stuff in the safe. It'll be in a folder labelled "New Computer—Patents". If anything should happen to me in the meantime, you keep the appointment and make sure it all gets patented. I didn't do all that work for nothing.'

She jumped up, laughing, sobbing and rushed to embrace him. 'You mean you've really done it. Oh, I'm so happy for you.'

He patted the top of her head. 'Sorry I've been such a bastard,' he said.

CHAPTER 10

Thor opened his eyes slowly. I must still be dreaming, he thought. And what a crazy dream! He'd taken Gina to Betsy Poitras to patent her as the perfect computer but Sheila burst in and said he was too late she'd already patented herself as the perfect computer and there was an argument about whether you could patent yourself or not and Freya appeared and said of course you could and then George Baxter said you could patent anything as long as it was new and worked and Gina said that let Sheila out on both counts and two men came in and..No, that wasn't part of the dream. His memory stirred. There had been two men waiting for him as he went to get into his car. If he'd been more awake, he would have noticed them earlier, wondered what two strange men were doing there, but the first thing he'd known of them had been his arms being swept behind his back and then pressure on the back of his neck and then nothing.

He looked slowly around the room, guessing he'd been mugged and was in some kind of hospital. It was a strange kind of room though—pure white and all the furnishings moulded so that everything formed one continuous curving surface. All very hygienic, he thought, but hardly cheerful. A soft glow of light that showed no shadows and came from no discernible source filled the room, adding to the feeling of eerie coldness, more like a cell than a hospital room.

He lifted his head to see better and immediately let it sink back onto the softness, realising as he did so that it was not a pillow his head was resting on but an actual part of the bed, like everything else in the room moulded to its determined shape. He looked down at his body and realised, with a surprised start, the source of the vague unease that had been with him since awakening. There were no bedclothes and nothing to cover his nakedness. If this was a hospital, it sure was a strange one.

He looked for a button to push to alert the staff. There was nothing. He rolled first on one side and then on to the other but could see no useful feature. He turned over onto his stomach and looked at the wall behind. Ah, here was something—a row of three buttons. Here goes nothing, he said to himself, and pressed the leftmost one. A small panel in the moulding dropped, forming a platform for a cup filled with a liquid that looked like water. Thor sipped it. It was water. He gulped it down and put the cup down on the platform. The platform went upward and set itself back into the wall. Okay, button number two. This time, a soupy looking brew tasting something like a Chinese hot and sour soup. Suddenly famished, Thor drained it. The third button yielded a brew with a spicy, bittersweet taste, that Thor decided was probably some sort of herbal tea. He drained that too. He barely had time to sink back onto the bed before an incredible weariness overcame him and he dropped like a stone into sleep.

When he opened his eyes again, an old man was standing over him—just how old Thor found it impossible to guess but he

was sure he was old. Despite his erect bearing and proud look, he had the look about him of age, of having lived, of having been around, of having carried too many burdens he was about to lay down. What was it that gave him this impression? Perhaps it was the eyes, with the odd, dead look of someone who has seen too many things too painful, too precious or too sacred to speak of. He was dressed in a futuristic-looking version of a boiler suit that had a military look about it.

'I am Odin,' he said.

'Hi, dad, I'm Thor.'

The old man looked puzzled and almost a little angry. Then he smiled. "Oh, I see, a joke. Of course, Thor was Odin's son in your old myths. And Freya was his daughter, as she is mine.'

'And Hadding?'

'My brother's son. But before you go jumping to conclusions, those are not our real names. Our real names are totally unpronounceable in English. I chose those names from the old Norse mythology. You see, I too have a sense of humour... How are you feeling?'

'Thor.'

Odin looked blankly at him.

'Sorry,' said Thor. 'Another joke. You know, lisping...No, you don't know. Well, you see some of our people can't pronounce esses, so "sore" comes out like "thor" '.

The old man laughed, a hearty rumble from deep in his chest. 'That is very good.'

'The joke or my being sore? Your goons must have got in a pretty low blow or two.' He felt like his scrotum had been squeezed in a vice.

Odin smiled. 'You'll soon be fine.'

'Mind telling me just where I am?'

'I thought you had worked that out. You are on Earthship 4. I am its commander.'

'And we're out in space somewhere?'

'I believe you call it that...I have work to do. You found the water, food and drink. Have as much as you like; it will not hurt you.'

'What is that tea stuff? I guess it's something medicinal but I thought you would have had something more modern than herbs for healing. Or is the spice and sweetness just to mask the drug?'

'We use herbs for nearly all our healing. Tablets, pills, injections, drugs in whatever form are nearly all inactive long before we get to the end of our journeys. So, we grow herbs and have fresh medicines all the time. They also help purify the air and it is good for people to see growing things.'

'What about that stuff you call food?'

'Bacteria and algae. We grow them in huge vats. Fed on captured dusts and recycled wastes. Very nutritious but deadly boring after a few years.'

'Don't you ever eat anything else?'

'Only when we visit planets with other edible life forms.'

'Jeez, I think I'd go bonkers without my meat and veg. But then, I guess you get used to just about anything.'

'I admit it probably does have something to do with low morale at times.' He sighed. 'But most of the time we have far bigger problems to worry about—natural and unnatural hazards galore. But then the crisis times—the meteorites, the space anomalies, the mechanical failures, the aggressive life forms—these somehow seem to always be the time when morale is highest...well, it guess it is highest when the crisis has been mastered, but even when things are really bad, almost catastrophe, it is often better than when things are, or should be, peaceful, when everything is just rolling along.'

'It's like that on Earth, but I would have thought you'd have progressed more than that.'

"We are still much the same creatures as yourselves. I know that if any of you are taken from your group, from your home surroundings even only for days, you become miserable..."homesick" I think you call it. Can you imagine what it is like to be away from your home for year after year after year, seeing nothing that looks remotely like home...and very little else...shut up in a city with people you may like or loathe but from whom you cannot escape? We are a city, with all—or most—of the problems cities have on Earth, but with a lot of others besides. If any part of a city on Earth breaks down, it can cause chaos—maybe even, if it is not fixed, slow death for the city. If any part of our city breaks down, it is almost always certain death for all of us if it is not fixed very quickly.'

'Why do it then?'

'You seriously ask that of me, or are you really asking yourself?'

'I guess I want to know just how like us you really are. Sure, we'd do the same and undoubtedly will in years to come if we survive that long. But one thing puzzles me: if you are so like us, why haven't you invaded us long ago? We would have if the roles had been reversed.' He paused. 'Or are you planning to invade us now?' he challenged.

This was the crunch question. It was not that he necessarily expected a truthful answer, but if the Commander admitted a planned invasion, his chances of getting off the Earthship alive were probably nil. If, on the other hand, he hedged or denied invasion plans—even if he was plainly prevaricating—there was, perhaps, just the slightest chance he would sometime be released.

'We have no plans of conquest. Earth is a huge experiment we will not spoil by intervening unnecessarily.'

'Yet you okayed Hadding giving me the supposed plans for the computer. And then he tried to kill me to recover them. It just doesn't gel.'

'Doesn't gel?'

'Yeah, doesn't compute. Doesn't make sense.'

'Hadding exceeded his authority. I ordered him to retrieve them. I did not order him to kill you.'

'Why give them to me in the first place?'

'What Hadding should have given you was plans for a device that would act as a computer but whose main function

would be to act as a guide beacon for us. What he did give you was something else again.'

'So, as I suspected, it was for your benefit, not ours. A guide beacon...' Thor mulled this over. 'And why would you need a guide beacon? The most logical reason I can think of is to guide an invasion fleet.'

'I have told you that is not my plan.'

'And what is your plan?'

Odin made no answer and Thor changed his tack. 'Where are Freya and Hadding now?' he asked.

'Hadding is still on his mission.'

'Which is?' The old man scowled and Thor quickly retreated. 'Okay, you're not going to tell me. Just tell me one thing—how come he's still on a mission, and presumably still a Field Commander, after he's stuffed up so badly. Surely you're not that short of leaders. Could it just be sheer nepotism? But then why not give the command to Freya? She's much more able and level-headed than Hadding. Could it be because she's a girl?'

Odin's face softened. 'Hardly a girl. A beautiful, intelligent, marvellous woman, just like her mother,' he said proudly. 'I have other plans for Freya—plans she is herself very much in favour of, in case you are wondering.'

'Where is she?'

Again Odin did not answer and they fell silent, studying each other. Finally, Thor broke the silence.

'You know,' he said thoughtfully, 'I'm really disappointed. I thought you—that is, you people as a whole, but particularly yourself—would be far in advance of us in all ways—physically, mentally, behaviourally, what I can only call spiritually. Instead, I find you're rather forlorn creatures not very different at all from us. What about your science? Surely I can at least sit at your feet and learn all the physical mysteries of the universe?'

'What universe? The one you people say began in a Big Bang?'

'I know what you mean,' Thor replied. 'I think most scientists use the term pretty loosely. The universe should, of course, mean everything, all there is, shouldn't it? Yet some scientists even talk of universes in the plural; that is a complete absurdity, and not just in the sense of Ambrose Bierce's definition of an absurdity as "a statement or belief manifestly inconsistent with one's own opinion". It's more than that, it's a question of logical definition. But anyway I'm not at all sure that the universe that was supposedly created in the Big bang is all there is. Still, why don't we start with whatever was created in the Big Bang being created? Was there in fact a Big Bang?'

'What caused this Big Bang—not Thor's hammer?'

Thor laughed. 'Well, as I understand it, it's supposed to have something to do with space-time curvature veering into infinity and the force of gravity intensifying, shattering matter and space-time into their component parts.'

'Does that mean anything at all to you?'

'Not really. But then they tell me you need a quantum theory of gravity to describe it all and I can't make head nor

tail of the quantum theory of particles so what hope have I got?'

'Let us talk about particles. You do know about the Uncertainty Principle?'

Thor nodded. 'Of course. It says something about not being able to measure the position and velocity of a subatomic particle simultaneously.'

'So, what happens if you try to measure a wave?'

'You convert it into a particle...or at least that's the way it looks.'

'But that makes the Principle of Uncertainty absurd because it implies the assumption that a rotation axis can have spin both to the left and the right at the same time.'

'Huh?'

'The future is uncertain since point events are created by rotation and gravitational potential.'

Thor looked blank and the Commander continued: 'A rotation axis contains both inertia and gravity but gravity exists without rotation.'

Thor nodded slowly. That at least made some sense, but the Commander's next statement lost him again: 'Gravity and inertia are both directional forces toward the future from the past.'

Thor shook his head. 'Oh, my brain aches,' he said.

The old man laughed. 'Time I let you have some more rest. The important thing to remember is that matter is created out of the forces making up the space and time field.'

Thor was already dozing off again. So it did all really begin with a bang, he thought; or at least I think that's what he meant. It would really be pretty apt if it did; after all, life begins with a bang. He dozed.

Thor slept and woke, slept and woke in never-ending but irregular cycles—for how long he had no way of knowing. Always when he awoke he was alone and he was beginning to feel more and more abandoned. Sometimes thirst or hunger drove him to the buttons behind his bed; in truth, boredom drove him to use them more than thirst and hunger demanded. The first time he woke with a bursting bladder he nearly panicked but he calmed himself with the thought that there must be another button for another panel for the purpose somewhere and, sure enough, he found it right beside the bed. He had barely finished relieving himself and climbed back onto the bed before Odin came in.

'Feeling more comfortable?' Odin asked.

Unsure whether the Commander was referring to the fact that he had just emptied his bladder or just to his general condition, Thor merely nodded. 'I'd be more comfortable if I had some clothes,' he observed.

'Of course. How thoughtless of me.' He crossed to the far wall, pushed another button and selected a gown from the wardrobe so revealed. 'I think this should fit,' he said, handing it to Thor.

Thor gratefully wrapped it around himself, while Odin sat on the bed.

'Been sleeping well?' asked Odin. 'Our conversation last time didn't give you nightmares?'

'No, but my brain still hurts...Just what is space-time?'

'Space-time is an energy field. There are five space-time energy fields having entropies—light, heat, cold, magnetism and time.'

'I thought cold was just an absence of heat.'

'Heat energy is the Planck quantum; cold is something else again.'

'And time is actually an energy field?'

'Time is a quantised energy field. Time quanta exist but the points in a crystal lattice structure that atoms vibrate about are inertial points, not true quanta.'

'So, time is not a fourth dimension?'

'That assumption is an artefact of measurement, not a real property of nature. The creation of a time flow is the result of gravity in motion relative to stationary inertia.'

'So, time is an energy field in the present?'

'It is impossible to go zipping about in time without any motion in space.'

'But Einstein interval time has two values.'

'From your symplectics, you should know that, if you have two concentric circles, there are always two fixed points that, no matter how convoluted their motion during a transformation, must return at the finish to their exact initial position.'

After several more cycles of sleep and waking and sleeping again, he awoke refreshed. He rose quickly and tried the door. It was, as he expected, locked. He went back and lay on the bed, his hands behind his head, and tried to make plans, but it was immediately obvious there was no hope of escape. If he did manage to get out of this room, where would he go? He knew nothing of the layout of the Earthship and would undoubtedly be captured before he got very far. Even if he did evade capture, what would he do? If he somehow managed to find food and drink, what was the point of that—spending the rest of his life on an Earthship as an escapee was hardly more desirable than spending it there as a prisoner. Even if they were planning to kill him, a quick death was probably preferable to that. But it seemed highly unlikely that he was to be killed. After all, Odin had ordered Hadding not to kill him and, on top of that, they wouldn't need to bring him here just to kill him. Maybe not just to kill him, but what if Odin wanted to interrogate him first? His mind went back to his conversations with Odin. There had certainly not been much interrogation there; in fact, he'd been the one to do the interrogating. But maybe, when Odin thought he had him off guard and his will to resist weakened by the enforced solitude, then the interrogation would start.

As if in answer to his thoughts, the lock turned in the door. A man entered and threw a boiler suit-type outfit similar to the Commander's on the bed. 'Put that on,' he ordered.

Thor shrugged and obeyed.

'Come with me.'

Thor followed the man through twisting, narrow passageways until his guide eventually stopped at a door and knocked. The Commander opened the door, ushered Thor in, signed to the guard to wait outside, and closed the door. It was a room similar in size and characteristics to the one he had just been taken from except for a desk, instead of a bed, moulded into the wall, and a huge map of the heavens covering virtually the entire wall behind the desk. A chair was moulded to the desk itself and the floor in front of the desk, while two other chairs were moulded into a far wall. The Commander led him towards these and motioned to him to take a seat.

'I trust you are feeling much better,' he said.

'Yes, thanks, but I still can't work out why it took so long. Were your thugs really that rough or was I overdosed with drugs or what?'

'Perhaps a little of each, but mainly a bad case of "space lag". It is like your "jet lag" but much worse.'

'Does everyone get it or is it just rookies like me?'

'It varies. Trauma and drugs certainly do not help and you had both. But the worst thing of all is alcohol and I think you had some of that too.'

Thor frowned, trying to remember. 'I don't think so, but maybe I had celebrated with one or two.'

Odin raised his eyebrows and Thor realised he was close to putting his foot in it. 'On Earth, there's always something to celebrate—birthdays, anniversaries, winning the casket, the cat having kittens, being alive...'

Odin laughed. 'A charming custom we have all but forgotten; birthdays, marriages and coming home are about all we celebrate.'

'I'm a little surprised to find you still have marriages. On Earth, people are always saying they'll disappear and it does seem to be going that way.'

'They used to say the same thing back home too, but we found it essential. There is no free love or consensual unions here. If a couple wants to couple, they come and see me and I decide if they can get married and perform the ceremony if I do. And if I say no and they go ahead with their games anyway, or if they do not come and see me, or if they commit what you call adultery...' He drew an expressive finger across his throat. 'You see, for this society to work, we must have happy families and we must not have unwanted or defective children.'

'So, everything is organised in families like on Earth. Does that mean that families live together? I mean, really live together, not just in adjoining rooms? You know, like in a house, and sort of responsible for each other, caring for each other, really living as a group?'

Odin nodded. 'It means just that. Early in the piece it was just barracks-type bunks for men and women and odd rooms for privileged couples or mothers with babies. We soon found out that just did not work. Originally, we thought there are so many squabbles in families, so much tension and strife, we would be better off without them, but it seems we just cannot do without them.'

'Do you ever have to break up families—stop a man beating his wife or child, or brothers feuding, or...you know?'

'Anything like that is soon put a stop to.'

'So, you have police. I guess you must have. How many people are there aboard the ship?'

Odin consulted a paper on the desk. Odin guessed it was some kind of report. 'Thirty four thousand two hundred and thirty three actually on board. And four hundred and forty five on field missions.'

'And you started with?'

'We started with three thousand four hundred and forty eight. But our peak population was sixty thousand.'

'How many of your population are kidnap victims or their descendants? Is that really why I'm here? I'm afraid you picked a dud; I had a vasectomy years ago.'

Odin smiled wryly but said nothing.

'You're not still going to try to tell me I'm just here on some sort of cross-cultural exchange? I admit when you first came in and started talking to me I had a strange romantic vision of sitting at the feet of the wise old man and having all the secrets of the universe given to me, but you've really done very little to enlighten me and I really doubt if you intend to. Okay, maybe I don't know enough for you to begin to instruct me. So, how about something a little more concrete? Is the old science fiction thing about using space warps and/or time warps for space travel fair dinkum? I do know that concentrations of gravitational matter, like galaxies and galaxy clusters, can distort the structure of space itself, bending passing light rays, but I really don't see how you could use that in space travel.'

'And you do not conclude that the fact that gravitational masses can bend light rays makes it possible for matter to cross the light barrier, Einstein's "c", for finite lengths of time, and that light itself can exceed this "c" value for finite lengths of time?'

'I'm afraid I don't see how that follows. But I do find it easier to believe that you've travelled here at least part of the way at well in excess of the speed of light than that you're hundreds of years old, which would be the only other alternative if you come, as I believe, from somewhere out near the Southern Cross formation.'

Odin ignored all the questions implicit in the statement and instead launched into another didactic: 'In real hyperspace, light velocity varies in much the same fashion as sound in Earth's atmosphere. Our galaxy seems to be a relatively stable configuration. Stars are red-shifted in the galaxy because they are in motion in the space-time structure, not because the galaxy itself is expanding. Light is a finite value located in the past. So, you do not have to be afraid of shadow matter. It will disappear like the demons, fairies, dragons and all the other monsters you stupid people have created. Do you really believe in all the higgsinos, photinos and other invisible bits flying around?'

Thor considered. 'Probably not. They always have seemed to me a bit like the strange creatures people put at the edges of medieval maps. One of our top cosmologists has called the

Higgs particle the God particle. I'm not sure what he meant by that but to me it seems rather appropriate. We seem to have created another god as an explanation for everything.'

'You do not believe in God?'

'No. God is an illogical, meaningless, unnecessary concept.'

'And if I told you God really does exist?'

'I'd say you're as much a joker as Ledermann. He subtitled his book "If the Universe is the Answer, What Is the Question?", which tells you what sort of man he is. I guess Hadding's told you the joke about asking the computer whether God exists?' Odin shook his head slowly. 'Well, as he told it, it's a pretty long story, but the guts of it is that the computer says it doesn't have enough information to decide. So, they keep building bigger and better computers and linking them together in bigger and bigger networks and feeding them more and more information until the answer finally comes back, "There is now!" '

Odin laughed uproariously.

'I don't really believe that either,' Thor went on, 'though I guess it could be true in a way. We're in danger of making gods of our computers now. Personally, I rather like the old concept that "we are all gods in the chrysalis" '.

'God help us,' Odin said and they both laughed.

'You people have a strange quirk,' Odin remarked, 'that even the ones who claim not to believe in God are always saying his name. It is "God" this and "God" that and never does it really have anything to do with God. I must admit it bewilders me as much as it does my field crews—though some of them even come back doing it themselves.'

'There's another joke saying among us: "Thank God I'm an atheist". Work that one out and you'll begin to understand us.'

'We really are quite similar people,' Odin mused. 'But then, why should we not be?'

'You mean because we're all a piece of the stars?'

'Then we would be ninety-nine percent hydrogen. No, that was not what I meant.'

'You're not going to tell me you people really did create us in your own image?'

'No we did not create you...What do you think is the structure of the universe?'

Thor had the distinct impression that Odin was deliberately changing the topic of conversation, but there was not much else he could do but reply. 'According to Einstein, it's a drum-shaped cylinder.'

'A two-torus? Why not a three-torus?'

'There are some who say it's a three D torus in four D space.'

'I have already told you that your four dimensions are nonsense. How can I possibly teach you anything when you believe rubbish like that?'

'You don't really intend to teach me anything and probably never did,' Thor challenged.

'I'm certainly not going to give you your holy grail—the theory of everything. Einstein's dream of unifying a theory

of gravity with a theory of the rest of the forces of nature was just that—a dream. And it always will be a dream until you people get out here into the real universe, in what you call Space. Then you might begin to see things as they really are.' He looked at Thor calculatingly. 'Join us and you might learn something. Think of it. Would not the secrets of the universe be the greatest fulfilment you could ever achieve?'

Thor considered. 'Do I have any choice?' he asked. 'Then again, one of our philosophers once said something about the chief aim of life being working out sums, not in getting answers.'

Odin snickered. 'And yet you have been begging me to hand it all to you on a plate without you doing any work for it. Another of your philosophers said that the chief end of life is not knowledge but action. What about that?'

Thor was silent, stupefied.

'You will get plenty of action if you join us...I must do some action—pull some superstrings.' He laughed heartily at his own witticism. 'You have much thinking to do. We will talk again.'

Back in his room, Thor thought. After all, there was very little else to do. He thought of theories of the universe, of cosmogony and cosmology, of astronomy and astrology, of what Odin had said and of what he had left unsaid, of the questions he had asked and been asked, of replies that supplied more questions than answers, of wise men speaking in parables, of Earth and the stars and the Southern Cross, of suns and moons, of space warps and time warps and warps in his brain, of Freya and Sheila and Gina and his sons, of beaches and mountains and houses and streets and streams and parks and canoes and dogs and fat people and thin people and scientists and popes, of comets and Mars and wars and God, of angels and...Stop. Rewind. Angels. Something in the Bible about angels finding the daughters of men fair. Maybe that was what Odin was talking about when he said it was no wonder they were such similar people. Freya had said something about Earthships 1 and 2 not returning but possibly giving rise to some of our legends of gods and heroes and angels. Yes, that must have been what he meant. If those ships had made it to Earth but been unable to return and the people on them had settled on Earth, there would be lots of their genes running around in Earth's population. It'd be like the Viking blue eyes spread all over the world. Come to think of it, they all seemed to have blue eyes. And Freya had said something about the people who returned on Earthship 3 being mainly at least partly of Earth stock. How would such mixed-race bastards be treated? As badly as they sometimes were on Earth—even killed to preserve the purity of the race? Or would these people see it as enriching the diversity of their gene pool and making for a better race? Maybe it was just as well he'd had a vasectomy and would never know how his—and Freya's—child would be received. He drifted off to sleep with images of himself and Freya in domestic bliss aboard the Earthship, with a family of little replicas of Freya—the daughters he had always

longed for and never had. If it had been possible, that just might have tipped the balance in favour of accepting Odin's offer—if, indeed, he did have any choice.

His diffuse thoughts transformed imperceptibly into dreams—visions of Freya and Sheila and Gina and even Betsy, in which they all appeared, singly and as weird chimeras, as mothers of his children. They were all changelings, both adults and babies, never constant for a second, changing from one image to another, one person to another to a blend of two or more or something completely strange, unknown.

CHAPTER 11

He awoke with a throbbing headache, confused and disoriented both from the headache and from the dreams that had filled his troubled sleep. Someone held a cup to his lips and, unquestioningly, he drank as though his life depended on it, the dryness in his mouth and throat urging him to drain it, which he did. He sank back exhausted and closed his eyes again. Within seconds, he felt a surge of energy through his body, a sense of power and feeling and motivation, a 'let's take on the world' drive that forced his eyes open and his upper body upright. His eyes fixed on the woman sitting on the bed.

'Freya,' he breathed. 'What are you doing here?'

'I bribed the guard. Lucky I came when I did. You were in a pretty bad way.'

'What was that stuff you gave me? It sure is the goods.'

'Just the old herbal tea.'

Realisation came quickly to Thor. 'Oh, shit!' he moaned. 'I get it. I'm hooked, right. I only stopped drinking the stuff yesterday or whenever it was...Oh, I'm sick of this. I don't even know what day it is, if days mean anything here anyway. I guess not.' He put his head in his hands and groaned. 'So, I'm an addict. That's what you're telling me, isn't it? If I ever stop drinking the stuff, I'll get withdrawal effects like I just had?' He winced at the recollection of that terrible throbbing headache, with his temples pounding, his neck feeling like it had been grabbed in a death grip, the unbearable pressure on his eyes. 'Or maybe worse? Why? Is that to keep me here or what? What happens if dear old dad decides to dump me back on Earth? Christ, you wouldn't need to worry about disposing of any of your captives if they'd been drinking that stuff. Dump them back where they came from and let them fend for themselves. They'd be useless. I doubt if they could even tell anyone what had happened to them. They'd be incapable of logical thought or speech. They'd kill themselves as soon as they could—if they could. How many of us have you done this to?'

Freya laughed unsympathetically. 'Oh, don't be such a baby,' she said. 'We all take it almost from birth to protect ourselves against radiation and toxins and the effects of gravity.'

Thor pressed his fingers to his forehead, as though using them as antennae to tune in to some higher intelligence. He took them away and looked steadily at Freya. 'Okay, radiation I can understand; you must be bombarded by it all the time here with no atmosphere to protect you.'

'And our nuclear power plant,' Freya put in, 'though it's shielded, of course.'

'That's where you get your heat, light, current output and so on. What happens if you have an accident?'

'We don't, at least not for a long time. There were some bad accidents in the early days and whole ships and their crews perished. But we don't have accidents now, or any problems that I've ever heard of. We never run out of fuel either. It keeps making its own.'

'Yeah, I thought it would be some sort of breeder, though I thought you might actually be using some sort of fusion rather than fission.'

'I think on Asgard we use fusion, but not here.'

'And that provides the drive too?'

'No, our hyperspace warp gravity control machine does that.'

Thor nodded. 'I thought it must be something like that. Odin more or less hinted as much. But I still don't understand how it could work.'

Freya frowned in concentration. 'You know that the translational symmetry of space implies conservation of momentum, that of time conservation of energy, while rotational symmetry of space implies conservation of angular momentum and spin?'

'Yes.'

'But, as your scientists proved in their experiments leading to the downfall of the Principle of Parity, nature is not symmetrical, it is ever so slightly more left-handed than right-handed.'

'Ahh, yes,' Thor exclaimed. 'How easy it seems once found, which yet unfound most would have thought impossible,' he quoted.

'That sounds like one of your poets.'

'Umm, John Milton.'

'So you do see?'

'Milton was blind and so am I. All I see is you sitting there and me sitting here and I wonder what you're really doing here and what I'm really doing here. Did you save my life for a third time? And was it really providential if you did? Or was all this set up? Is it all some sort of elaborate scam, a variation on the old interrogation technique—you harass him, I befriend him, save him from you, and naturally he spills his guts to me?'

He saw the hurt look on her face, stopped and looked away. Christ, if she's not genuine, she's a damn good actor, he thought.

'Well, even if you did save me three times, you've fingered me as many times,' he went on defensively. 'Why? Why? What do you really want from me? Tell me,' he demanded.

She stood abruptly and started walking toward the door. He moved after her, grabbed her arm and swung her around to him. 'Please tell me,' he pleaded.

She stood silent and he released her, his arms dropping helplessly to his sides. Her hands moved to the Velcro-like fastener on his suit and rapidly, smoothly unfastened it to the waist and beyond. His penis instantly swelled to her touch. She smiled, reached up and pushed, pulled and tugged his suit over his shoulders, down his chest, his waist and on down to his ankles. She dropped to her knees and the feel of her lips on his inner thighs brought a rush of passion and hot desire. Now she was licking at his penis, her tongue moving from base to tip, and then her smooth mouth enfolded it and she was sucking greedily. Thor moaned and thought: the old whore's trick; it never fails. Now she had shed her own suit in seconds and was gently pushing him back onto the bed. No

sooner was he horizontal than she was straddling him, forcing his manhood into herself. Moaning and gasping, she strove to force it ever deeper inside herself, while Thor rubbed his hands all over her body. Soon he could stand her frustrated, frustrating attempts to impale herself no longer. He turned her over on her back, spread her legs wide and viciously thrust himself into her. She gasped with real pain but, as brutal thrust succeeded brutal thrust, her vagina ballooned in orgasm and the cries wrung from her were cries of ecstasy. This was the moment nature had prepared her for. Her whole body seemed thrusting to receive him and his seed. Some perversity stopped him. He withdrew, heaved himself off her and stood looking down on her, still writhing on the bed.

'Happy now?' he asked.

'No! No! Give it to me. Give me your seed,' she demanded, begged, pleaded.

'Fat lot of use it would be to you,' he snorted. 'No little swimmers in there.'

She clambered from the bed and stuck her firm behind against his still erect penis. It was too much for any man to resist and slowly, deliberately, he entered her. She sighed, a long, drawn-out, panting sigh. Slowly he withdrew and slowly reentered, teasing her, wanting to make her suffer, wanting to show his power over her. She was moaning continuously. The sound did something to him. Desires to punish her, to hurt her, to conquer her, to possess her, to fulfil his destiny as an inseminator, to secure his release from the intolerable pressures that were building up in him, all combined to urge him into a thrust so powerful his feet almost left the floor and she slid across the bed. She uttered a choked-off half scream and made no move to recover her previous hand-supported position. Thrust after thunderous thrust he aimed at her swollen vagina and the receptive womb lying above. Though he clutched at her hips and buttocks with a finger-indenting grip, each thrust sent her sliding across the smooth surface, only adding to the overwhelming stimulation. Finally, with a drawn-out grunting moan, he came. For a moment, he stood almost upright, stretching himself so as to achieve the greatest possible penetration. Then he collapsed on top of her, panting as though he had run a mile.

They lay there exhausted for some minutes, till shame and remorse forced him off her. He eased himself from her and stood looking down at her, genuine concern filling him, but he dared not touch her or speak. She lay unmoving for long seconds, then slowly rolled over and lay clutching her legs to her chest.

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'Did I hurt you?'

'Yes.' The reply was so soft he barely heard.

'I'm sorry,' he said again, and meant it as much as he had ever meant anything in his life. 'Can I do anything...?'

Her eyes fixed on his face as though trying to read an indecipherable message there. 'Kiss me better,' she breathed.

He stretched out beside her and gently kissed her forehead, her eyes, her mouth, her neck, her breasts, her shoulders, her arms, her delicate fingers. Eyes closed, she

lay like a child being soothed after some bad experience. I could really love this woman, he thought; perhaps I already do. 'I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry,' he murmured over and over as he kissed her again along her sides, back up the smooth flow of her breasts and on up the exquisite pillar of her neck. You always hurt the one you love, the old song put it. Was that it, or had he been simply relieving all his pent-up frustrations on her? God knows I have plenty of frustrations, he ruefully reminded himself, not least the total loss of control of my life and complete ignorance of what is happening and of what might happen.

She opened her eyes and looked tenderly at him. 'Thank you,' she said.

'The least I could do,' he muttered.

'Not that. The other. Thank you for giving me your seed. I think you have made me a woman.'

'You were a woman before that,' he protested, wondering at the strange turn of the conversation. Was it really true that women enjoyed pain, being hurt? Sometimes, in moments of deepest passion, Sheila had whispered to him to hurt her but he'd never taken it seriously. An alternative explanation suddenly hit him with the force of a sledgehammer. He stroked her tenderly. 'You don't think I've made you a mother, do you?'

She nodded, her eyes sparkling her happiness at the idea.

'Sorry, honey,' he said, 'that's impossible. I had the old snip job years ago, the operation to stop that happening. It worked too, I can assure you. Sorry, but there's just no chance.'

She took his scrotum in her hand and gently kneaded at the structures therein. He mistook her intent and sighed. "You really are a glutton for punishment."

She shook her head. 'Not yet. Feel there.' Her hands were running along his vas.

Wonderingly, he explored the structure with his own fingers, his perplexity and amazement growing. It was not what he felt, but what he didn't feel—the knot of tissue where the vas had been snipped, bent back and sewn. 'So it wasn't just space lag. I was operated on here? They did a reversal?'

She nodded.

'But why?'

'So I could have your child.'

'Why me?'

'Because you are an earthman with near perfect genes and I love you.'

'How do you know my genes are good?...Oh, I see, that specimen you gave Hadding back in your hotel room was my semen. You had it analysed somehow or other and my genes checked out okay. I'd like to see the machine that does that.'

'Perhaps you will...So, you see, darling, we may well be going to have a baby. I'm sure we are.'

'How long till we know? I suppose, with your technology, you can go off to the bathroom, catch two drops of urine and come back in five minutes with the answer yea or nay.'

She laughed. 'Not quite that soon or that easy. We'll have to wait about five of your hours, then I'll have to have a sample taken from my cervix and then wait five minutes.'

'And if we struck it lucky, what then?'

'That, my darling, is up to you.'

'Will I marry you and make an honest woman of you? But, you see, I can't. I'm already married.' Pictures of Sheila, of his sons, of Earth and of his life there flashed past his mental eye, adding further to his confusion, his remorse and his growing sense of powerlessness.

'On Earth, in some cultures, men have more than one wife,' Freya observed softly.

'But not in mine...What choice do I have? Does Odin know and approve of all this? What would happen if he said, "Boy, you gunna marry my daughter," and I said, "no, doan wanna"? I can just see him saying, "oh, that's all right then. I'll send you back to your wife on the next earthbound flight'. The only way I'll ever leave here alive is if he has some use for me on Earth, isn't that true?'

Her eyes brimmed at the accusation and at the implied unwillingness to stay with her, but the truth of his statement was revealed in those eyes. Then he realised, with a wrench, that the pain shown there was not just of rejection or shame or remorse but a genuine concern, bordering on fear, for him, his safety and his happiness. 'I will love you. I will look after you. I will give everything of myself to you. I will do everything I can to make you happy. I will live, breathe, if necessary die, for you and our child, but I will have you no matter what,' those eyes were telling him.

She loved him, he knew it. Once Sheila had loved him like that; did she still love him that way now? He doubted it but he also doubted his doubt. This is all very basic, his chaotic thoughts rambled on. A girl looks for a guy she wants to father her children, finds him, gets him to impregnate her, falls in love with him and, if she can, holds on to him ever after. That's not the way it's supposed to happen, at least not on Earth. But is the old romantic, starry-eyed version that pervades western culture much more than a fairy story? When you think of it, Sheila's attitude, at least in the beginning, was not very much different to Freya's. But what of Gina and our brief affair and the innumerable such affairs that take place every day on Earth? Sex is many things and for many different purposes. I'm sure Gina had no thoughts of having my child. Or did she? Maybe in the back of every woman's mind there is this drive impelling her. Maybe in every man's too.

His mind returned to the woman whose eyes still studied his face. She reminded him, in that moment, of a dog anxiously scanning its master's face for some sign that it had been forgiven some misdemeanour and was still loved. But there is much more to it than that, he corrected himself, infinitely more. 'I wish I'd known,' he said, more to himself than to the woman. Her face showed doubt and puzzlement, but how could he explain? How could he tell her of his memory of the time Sheila and he had made love, the very first time after they had decided it was time at last to start a family,

the time they were both sure their first son had been conceived, and the tremendous feeling of fulfilment that had come over him seconds after the moment of climax. But, if he had known, would it have been the same? Probably not. He had felt that feeling much less acutely even with the putative conception of his second son.

The flood of mixed emotions became overwhelming. Tears pricked at his eyes. He took her in his arms and tenderly pressed her to him. She nestled in closely. Like the babes lost in the wood, they fell asleep. When he awoke, she was gone.

CHAPTER 12

The expected summons soon came. Thor followed the guard along the now familiar path and was, as usual, wordlessly admitted and motioned to his accustomed seat. Today (if that was the word where night and day were indistinguishable, but one had to cling to something, and if you didn't call it that, what did you call it?) the old man seemed to him to be incredibly ancient. He looked like he'd been awake all night (or whatever you called sleeptime here) wrestling with some insoluble problem. Thor longed to ask him just how old he was but did not quite dare.

'Found any God particles lately?' Odin finally sarcastically asked, smiling wryly at him.

Thor let out his breath in a long, drawn-out sighing exhalation, only then realising he had been holding it, probably ever since he had entered the room. But he knew it would be only a short reprieve and the subject of Freya and his future would inevitably, sooner or later, come up. Till then, he'd play it Odin's way. He shook his head and laughed shortly, thinking to himself how he must be betraying his nervousness. He swallowed hard and tried to make his voice sound normal. 'Do any of our particles really exist?' he asked.

'The electron is the fundamental negative charge, the proton the fundamental positive one. Inertia and gravity act like neutral charges.'

'What about neutrinos?'

'Neutrinos are gravity waves.'

'And quarks?'

'Quarks are inertial points in matter.'

'What's the difference between inertia and gravity?'

'Inertia is stationary; gravity is in motion. Since gravity is a flow of neutral current, it is possible to control gravity.'

'As you have done...as you do on this ship?'

'Of course. Without controlling gravity, noone could travel far in space. Gravity affects all the electromotive atoms in the body and there are plenty of those. If you don't control gravity, you die. It is a slow death but an inevitable one and a rather nasty one. You just keep pissing out all these atoms you need and no amount of swallowing electrolytes compensates. It can even make it worse. You can shoot the stuff into your veins but you cannot do that for years and years. The only solution is to control gravity and we cannot even do that perfectly, so we all slowly die. Oh, yes,' he answered Thor's unspoken question, 'we live much longer than you, but we still die. I have only a few years remaining. I must complete my mission and make sure I have a worthy successor before I die.'

'Your mission?'

The old man's head rose proudly, arrogantly, challengingly. 'My mission is to make your Earth the new Asgard.'

'Asgard or Valhalla? Warrior-heroes you may be; gods you are not. Perhaps once you were gods and angels. Now you are

merely strange men, strangers in a strange land. So, you would conquer and colonise Earth? I always thought that is what it would come down to. All the stories of experiments and the invisible hand helping us were just so much bullshit. If you have been buzzing around us for years, centuries, millennia and you haven't conquered us yet, it's most likely because you couldn't or you didn't think it was worth it—either because you didn't think Earth was a big enough prize or because you thought your losses would be too great to justify it. As an Earthman, I find it hard to believe anyone would not think Earth a worthwhile prize but maybe your weapons aren't as fearsome as we think or maybe they are even more fearsome and you'd be left with nothing. Maybe you could destroy the Earth but not conquer it. You know what I mean? There's no point in conquering a country—or a planet—if all you get for your efforts is a charred rock, desert and millions of stinking corpses. That's the only reason we haven't had any big wars lately. But now you think you can do it. Perhaps you have better weapons. I'm sure whatever weapons you have are infinitely superior to ours. But I warn you there are many among us who would rather see Earth a charred rock than hand it over to aliens.'

'But there are many who would not. Which are you?'

Thor considered. 'I'm not sure. On the one hand, the human urge to fight to keep what is mine—even if it is destroyed in the process—is very strong. On the other, I hate to see anything beautiful destroyed and Earth is very beautiful.'

Odin nodded. 'It is very beautiful,' he agreed. 'I also would not want to destroy it. What if I told you there would be no destruction, no killing?'

'I would be very sceptical. Bloodless coups do occur, but bloodless wars? It's a contradiction in terms.'

'I assure you it can be done. I am more than an old man desperate to fulfil a dream, to make his mark on the universe, to leave behind some trace of his existence that will give him sort of immortality. Yes, I am that, but I am more. I am someone who is presiding over the extinction of a life form. You must help me!'

'Why must I? If you know anything about Earth and its peoples, you'll know that aliens, no matter who they are or how similar, are scum, dirt, garbage, deserving of no respect and to be treated with any trace of humanity only if it suits—perhaps if they're useful, but not necessarily even then.'

Odin sighed. 'What you say is true. That is why there must be conquest, why I cannot just land my ship on Earth and say, "Friends, we need refuge. Let us live among you and we will help each other and make a better way of life together." I know as well as you do what would happen. It happened with Earthship 3. It may well have happened with Earthships 1 and 2.'

'You mean we primitive people Earth people beat you?'

Thor heckled.

'There were not many of us,' he snapped. 'Some of your well-equipped and armed European expeditions were wiped out by savages. Sorry.' He suddenly laughed. 'Even a civilised man

like myself must make excuses for military losses. Like you, we have more than our fair share of military pride.'

Silence fell between them, both men busy with their thoughts.

Odin's voice, when he finally spoke, was as hushed as that of a devout Christian in a great cathedral. 'Almost as soon as we could escape from our own planet, even before we could move beyond our own little solar system, we had been looking for Earth. Our astronomers calculated that there would be a planet very like our own somewhere in this area. It became what you call the search for the Holy Grail to find it. It took us a long, long time. Many died trying; in fact, most of those who tried died.' He sighed expressively. 'It was pathetic really when you think about it: little ships setting forth that would have taken a million years to get there. Even later, when they reached speeds a tenth the speed of light, knowing that they would never see the destination but hoping against hope that someday some of their distant descendants would reach Earth and their remote descendants would eventually return to tell us all of their findings. Some carried highly concentrated nutrient tablets and solutions, some had fancy schemes for growing their own food, some even had fanciful ideas of adding to their provisions somehow along the way. As you would expect, none ever returned. Even the fastest of them would have still been on their way when our expedition was on its way. We saw no traces of any of them.'

The old man stopped speaking, staring unseeing into the far distance. Thor sat still and silent, contemplating the almost insane courage of those early explorers. Finally, the old man seemed to recollect himself.

'Sorry,' he said, suddenly focusing on Thor. 'I am rambling. Please forgive an old man.'

'Not at all,' Thor rushed to reassure him. 'It's your story. Tell it any way you like. Don't leave anything out. I want to hear it all.'

Odin smiled his satisfaction and Thor divined it was self-satisfaction at choosing his audience well. Thor waited patiently through what had become almost a theatrical pause. Finally, after a long moment, the old man said, 'Even at home there was always debate about what we should be doing, or not doing, with Earth. There were always those who wanted a hands-off experiment, those who wanted to attack and conquer it, those who wanted peaceful contact with mutual benefit.'

So you said before, thought Thor. I hope you're not going to go off on another ramble. Maybe it's time I brought you back onto the track. But, before he could butt in, the old man went on. 'It is like that even on board this ship. My field commanders and sub-commanders are split the same way. Unfortunately, the ones with the most talent all think the wrong way.'

'Which is?'

'They want to make Earth a colony of Asgard. They do not realise that is impossible.'

'That doesn't sound much different from what you want to do.'

'There is a lot of difference. Let us look at the possibilities. Firstly, I do not think a hands-off experiment makes much sense any more for a number of reasons. The gap between us has narrowed so much it is almost irrelevant. You are far enough advanced that unobserved observation will soon become impossible if it is not already. Earthship 4 arrived here just as you put your first man up in space. How long can it be before you blunder on it? And we have already meddled enough to have completely muddled the experiment. As I told you before, I do not think an outright attack would leave us with an Earth worth having. So, we are left with the peaceful contact for mutual benefit alternative.'

'But that's not what you're planning, is it? You're really planning the old conquest from within, aren't you? Plant a Quisling—namely me. The peaceful contact would only be a Trojan horse for bringing your own people in.'

'Would any country on Earth allow us to settle as a group within their boundaries?'

Thor considered. 'Perhaps. Australia prides itself on being multicultural. Your culture is probably less alien to us than some of the cultures we've welcomed in. And the knowledge you'd bring with you could bring enormous benefits. I think if the benefits were explained to them, countries would be competing for you. You seem to have an incredible facility for language too—or is it only English you've mastered?'

'We are great linguists,' Odin said proudly. 'We know many of your languages and we can master any language very quickly. Which is pretty remarkable when you consider we have long had only one universal language at home. Then again, maybe that is why.'

'There would be one big problem. No country would want another thirty something thousand drug addicts in its borders. We've all got more than enough of our own.'

Odin looked perplexed. 'Why do you call us drug addicts?'

'That herbal tea; it's as addictive as anything I've ever come across.'

'But it does not harm you, it protects you from radiation and toxins. And withdrawal effects are no worse than for caffeine. I am sure it is no harder giving it up than giving up tobacco.'

'You've never tried to give up tobacco. I did manage to stop but even now I wouldn't call myself an ex-smoker, just a smoker who hasn't smoked for years.'

'There is another problem. I am not sure my people would be too keen on going cap in hand to your people to be allowed to make their home on Earth.'

'But you have a lot to offer. That gives you a strong bargaining position.'

'In some of your countries, a bride with a rich dowry might be able to bargain for the best. But when she is married and it all belongs to her husband, who is to say how she will be treated?'

'I am sure you people are clever enough to preserve your interests.'

'Perhaps we are too clever. Is that not why your Jews have been persecuted for centuries?'

'Perhaps. Perhaps also because they insist on calling themselves God's chosen race.'

'They are not the only race that thinks that.'

'Perhaps not, but they're the only ones who say it so loudly.'

Another long silence fell between them. Eventually, Odin looked up and asked: 'Would you be prepared to go to your government and put our case?'

Thor considered for a moment. 'I would, but chances are they'd think I'm a loony. I can't think of any way I could convince them I was fair dinkum, let alone that they should agree to it.'

They lapsed into silence again. As he bent his mind to the problem, Thor was suddenly struck by the thought: Why am I trying to solve their problems? What about my own? Perhaps the two are interlinked. Probably they are, but most likely the thing driving me on is simply the fact that my scientific mind would rather solve problems that do almost anything else. With a sinking feeling, he suddenly realised that, by not jumping at Odin's suggestion that he mediate between Odin's tribe and his own government, he may well have thrown away a perfect, perhaps the only, means of getting off the Earthship.

Odin's voice dragged him back to the present: 'Of course, that is only one way to do it. We could take over your planet without bloodshed and force you to accept us. That's the way most of us would want to do it.'

'How would you do that?'

'With our computer, we could force all your computers to do nothing but print our ultimatum. We would completely disable all your communications, much of your travel, all your sophisticated weapon and defence systems, even your traffic. A lot of your factories would stop working. Even your medical services would flounder.'

'But if we had one of your computers, we could stop you doing this? That was why you had to get back those plans?'

'Yes.'

'Your ultimatum?'

'Hand over all power to us and we will restore order.'

'And if we don't agree?'

'Would you not?' He shrugged. 'A small demonstration of our power—whiz a meteorite or two past Earth, something like that. The modern equivalent of the old shot across the bows. Oh, yes, we can do that,' he assured the dubious-looking Thor.

'If that still doesn't do the trick?'

Odin frowned, clearly becoming impatient with the suggestion of such irrational intransigence. 'A meteorite crashing into the Bay of Bengal should do it,' he snapped.

'You said without bloodshed.'

'Would you not have brought it on yourselves? You would have had plenty of warning...I could be a politician and say I would have kept my word. Millions would drown but there would be no blood shed...What would you have us do?'

'Preferably, piss off home and leave us alone.'

The old man gave him a stricken look. 'We cannot go home,' he almost whispered.

Thor looked at him and waited. There was no doubt the old man's distress and grief were genuine. Let him explain in his own good time.

'It would be best if I go right back in our history,' Odin finally began. 'You will see just how like us you are and how like you we are. We developed much like you. We tamed our world, converted it to our use, then spread out to make the whole of the universe our domain. As I told you—and as you can see—we succeeded to a degree. But we are still like children paddling on the shore while the vast ocean lies before us, unknown and only dimly comprehended. I know you still think we should have all the answers to all the questions of life and death and where the universe came from and where it is going and all those things. All those mysteries, big and small, that have perplexed and fascinated you ever since you could conceive the questions have puzzled, delighted and frustrated us. You are a scientist, so you think that eventually the patient accumulation of knowledge and the rigorous use of this knowledge in guiding and interpreting experiments will one day reveal all. Perhaps it will, but I believe no life form, let alone civilisation, race, nation, world system, will survive long enough for this to happen. If one life form could pass on all it knew to the one that was to succeed it, perhaps it could, but that seems to be impossible.' He looked challengingly at Thor. 'I do not believe that is how the universe works. There is certainly evolution and smooth, progressive change, but the change from one dominant life form to another is by a catastrophic jump and I think the same thing happens in the organisation of the universe as a whole.'

Thor sat upright. 'You mean there could be universes with other rules than ours?'

Odin scowled. 'Of course I do not mean that,' he snapped. 'Do you not understand your own language? The universe is everything, right? How could there be more than one of everything? Okay, so what you really mean is "Could there be a great bunch of stuff somewhere out there with different rules?" I do not believe so, except very transiently. You see, I think the laws of physics throughout the universe do change. This change probably starts in some tiny part of it but rapidly spreads throughout the whole.'

'Without the possibility that some little bit could be left behind and left just as it was—for the time being at least?'

'Perhaps.' The old man fell silent, appearing to be considering this proposition.

Thor decided to drag him back to the subject. 'You were about to tell me why you can't go home.'

The old man started. 'Yes,' he sighed, 'but first I think you still need more background before you can understand what I will tell you.' He drew a deep breath.

'In due course, Earthship 1 set out. That must have been some three thousand earth years ago. It was never heard of again. Perhaps it is true that they made it to Earth but

could not return. Perhaps they were the gods and heroes and angels of your legends. Perhaps not. We will never know.'

Thor was frowning in deep concentration. 'I seem to recall something about a race of blue-eyed people somewhere around Greece back then,' he said. 'Perhaps...'

'Perhaps. Perhaps not. We will never know and I suppose it does not really matter. If they did land on Earth and settle there, it was very lucky for them and for their descendants that they could not return to Asgard. We were then much at the same stage as Earth is today. We had discovered nuclear weapons some hundred years or so before and they had hung over our heads so long that eventually some imbeciles decided they could...no must...use them. Much of our planet was destroyed and much more made unlivable. Millions were killed directly, millions more died slowly from radiation, and many more millions died from starvation in the everlasting winter that ensued. You can imagine what it was like. It was exactly as your scientists have pictured it will be. But life survived, though it was centuries before the planet resembled anything like it had previously been.' Again there was a pause as both men reflected on the enormity of the occurrence.

'Perhaps an even bigger disaster followed,' Odin went on, his tone even more sombre. 'Stupidly, many of those who survived blamed not the politicians, the military, the mad powermongers who were the real villains, but the scientists and science itself. Science and its practitioners were abhorred, reviled and finally proscribed. "Right is right and left is left behind", became the catchcry. ' He looked at Thor, frowning and fidgeting. 'I should explain that it refers to the right side of brain, which was then thought to control creativity, emotion, what you would call the soul, whereas the left was thought to control rational, logical thought and mathematical skill.'

'Yes,' said Thor. 'We have a similar concept. I was really thinking of a theory that this right and left split only developed in humans about the time of the ancient Greeks and surmising that, if this is true, maybe it was your lost Earthship 1 survivors that brought it.'

Odin shrugged. 'Who can know? Anyway, we know now that it is not really like this...or perhaps it was and our brains have changed...The important thing is that all these supposed right brain functions were praised and all the supposed left-brain functions derided. It went further than that. The right brain was pictured as warm and caring, the left as cold and cruel. All that may not have mattered so much, but it was also held that the right brain's supposed method of reaching conclusions—what you call intuition—was far superior to the left brain's logic and rationality. What this meant, of course, was that guessing and wishful thinking and superstition replaced the scientific method and all forms of logical, rational thought. Religion, of course, founded as it is on divine revelation—yes, on our planet, just as on yours—provided much of the thrust for this process and seized upon it for its own purposes. Priests and other charlatans became all-powerful. They quickly came to control education and made

sure their concepts were swallowed and their precepts followed. So much time was spent in studying holy writings and in worshipping Gods of various kinds that industrial production became virtually impossible. This suited their purposes very well. They rewrote history to place the blame for all the evils that had befallen our planet on science, technology and industry. People were turned back to the land to eke out an existence, while praising the benevolence of the Gods and their servants who had so provided for them. You wonder why they did not revolt, why they did not question the sanity of those who said and did these things? They were truly using only half their brains. They had been trained not to think reasonably, rationally, logically. Words had almost ceased to exist except as poems and hymns and basic commands and simple observations that could almost as well have been conveyed by pointing. Pictures and symbols were all. Dissent was prevented by branding all criticism those who had attained power did not like as "left". Those guilty of such practices were "reeducated" until they saw the error of their ways. All this was said to be making a kinder, gentler, more tolerant society. That anyone could believe this shows how clever their methods were. In fact, amazingly enough this went on for some two thousand years. It could not last forever. Its downfall came about from some of the very monastic communities that had sustained it. Many of these became increasingly isolated from the outside world. Some communities became more intensified in their lunacy and sat round all day and half the night having visions and writing masterpieces of unintelligible gibberish. But some began to question. Some even found old books that had somehow or other escaped the numerous burnings, hidden in just this hope many years ago. One large group in a particularly isolated community way out in the desert determined their only hope was escape—to Earth. Perhaps all the right brain training was still affecting them to make them come to such an incredible decision. Somehow, they built Earthship 2 out there in the desert, disguising it as a temple. Noone knows where they got the materials to build it or how they conceived and built their drive. Noone even knows what kind it was but it is said to have been capable of speeds almost up to the speed of light. Anyway, they built it, took off and were never heard of again. I would like to think they reached Earth and found refuge there but who can know?'

Thor studied him as he spoke and noted the smile playing on his lips. Well, if it makes him happy to believe that, why not, he thought. Perhaps they really did make it here. When Odin spoke again, however, he realised that thought was not the source of Odin's satisfaction.

'Their flight proved the catalyst for change. When the news leaked out, the initial reaction was of "good riddance" but soon people began asking themselves, and then others, what was so wrong with life on the planet that people would take such a desperate gamble to escape from it. It was like your story of the emperor's new clothes. Suddenly, everyone realised the emperor was naked. Overnight, it became fashionable to be logical, rational and questioning again.

The priests and those who used religion to rule rapidly lost their power. Of course, things quickly swung too far the other way. We made the same mistakes you are busy making—over-exploiting our resources and killing ourselves and our planet with pollution. You know how we stopped it?' The question was purely rhetorical and Odin made no pause to allow an answer. 'We changed our economic system. Yes, we had gone much the same way as you. We had tried capitalism where anything went. We had tried centrally planned systems where very little freedom was allowed. And most countries had come to some sort of mix of the two, where government fiddled and the poor and the environment burned. Like on Earth, the main way of trying to deal with the problem was with regulations and fines. As on Earth, it did not work. There was always more money to be made from utilising resources at the greatest possible speed than from trying to conserve them. Raising and raising penalties to make it less worthwhile only made it more and more worthwhile to offer bigger and bigger bribes, which became more and more irresistible. And there was always the question of jobs—put a big exploiter out of business and you put thousands out of work. How did we change all this? Simple. We banned the charging and payment of interest.'

He paused dramatically and Thor looked at him blankly, not quite believing what he heard. 'You banned interest? How could you do that? How could you get away with it? Didn't that create chaos? Didn't everything grind to a halt?'

Odin nodded. 'Yes, it did. It was a tremendously bold stroke. Just think of it. Overnight, banks and most of the other financial institutions ceased to have any purpose. From being one of the most powerful organisations, they suddenly became nothing. Sure, loans still had to be paid back, but without interest. And without interest there were no more loans. Millions of debtors suddenly had their debts dramatically reduced. Millions of creditors suddenly found their incomes slashed. Millions of people were suddenly out of work. Some businesses were rescued from extinction or became vastly more profitable, while others crashed without the constant loans that had kept them afloat. Oh, it was dramatic and traumatic all right. There were riots and near revolutions. But when the dust all settled, people found they could survive without debt and credit and, more than survive, they could prosper.'

'But how was it done? How did they get away with it? I can't imagine any government surviving such a thing. They must have really had control over their people. And surely any country doing this would be at a tremendous competitive disadvantage over other countries?'

'I am not sure about that. That was something that could not be tested. You see, when this happened, we already had a single government for the entire planet. How that happened is an interesting story in itself.' Odin paused, as though asking Thor if he wanted to hear it.

'Go on. Go on,' urged Thor. He was fascinated, hanging on every word.

'There was at this time a lot of competition between our two biggest nations, not least in space travel. They spent so

much of their resources on it that both countries almost bankrupted themselves. It was not all bad. At least the wars and threat of wars that had been between them ever since they both were nations stopped. It was impossible for them to both carry on wars and put the tremendous effort into space exploration they were putting in—though a feeling that it would all eventually be worthwhile militarily was a big factor in the drive. So it proved. One of them developed the gravity control drive for its Earthship and then found its Earthship could also use this to guide meteorites to wherever it wanted to send them and lobbed one at the other country. It was only meant as a warning, a threat that would cause them to agree to whatever terms were demanded of them. Unfortunately, they erred badly in their choice of target. It landed in the most vulnerable spot possible, a place where a seething sea of magma just below the surface led down to the depths and was surrounded by a mass of fragile rock with a huge load of rock-bound water. The result was entirely predictable by any reputable scientist who had known the facts, and there should have been some who did. It was almost extinction. The effect on crops was devastating. How could anything grow when no light could penetrate the clouds of dust and steam and gases that drifted round and round the planet? Worse still, it was radioactive, as was the rain that fell from it. And there was a huge lava flow all over the continent and more volcanic explosions and water filling the crater and making more explosions. And earthquakes. And fires. And the climate of the whole planet changed. Much of it had eternal winter—snow, ice in sheets and forming glaciers. But some parts were not much different and some were even hotter. In some places, snow seemed everlasting, in others rain never ceased, while others again never saw rain. The whole structure of the planet was split; mountains came and disappeared, some parts sank beneath the sea, others emerged from it. It was a whole rebirth. Millions died—of starvation, of drowning, of disease, from earthquakes and from volcanoes, or because they tried to steal food or to cross a neighbour's borders. Oh, yes, that happened. Some people were determined to keep what they had and did not stop at murder to protect it. But others shared willingly even if it meant they themselves went short. As you can imagine, there were mass migrations in all directions at this time—well, not in all directions, but from areas where survival was hopeless to where it might be possible to live. Many died and the corpses were not buried. Diseases broke out and wave of plague after plague swept through what was left of them. This was when those countries which still had something to protect and some means of protecting it decided on extreme action—especially the island continent to the south. Boats attempting to reach it were strafed, bombed and burned before they could reach its shores. When a new land bridge looked like forming between it and the continent to the north, it was bombed with nuclear bombs to make sure it did not. How many died in all? Our historians disagree, but there was a census taken two years before which showed some eight billion. The next one taken two hundred and forty six years later counted

two point five and the fertility rate then was seven or eight and had probably been even higher. For the second time in our history, we had almost destroyed ourselves and our planet with terrible weapons.'

Thor listened to the saga in growing horror. It all rang so true—at least, potentially—of what could happen on Earth. Suddenly, his mind went back to an earlier phase of their talk and a burning rage took hold of him. 'And this is what you would do to Earth?' he demanded.

The old man looked at him as though not seeing him.

'You bastard,' Thor raged. 'We'll just drop a meteorite into the Bay of Bengal. That's what you said, isn't it. What would that do to us? Wipe us out like the dinosaurs? You cunt!'

Odin sat stunned by the outburst. He shook his head. 'No, no. Forget I said that; we would never do that. I do not know why I said it.'

'Perhaps because you've thought about it—if you haven't actually planned it. You must have at least thought about it to have picked out a target.'

'No, believe me I had not. I had never even considered that it would come to that. Even if we did do it, nothing like what happened on my planet would happen here. The situation is quite different. Millions would drown and there would be some temporary climate change but nothing else.'

'Well, that's nice to know,' Thor said sarcastically. 'We'd only lose a few million Bangladeshis. I know some people would say that would be no great loss but I don't happen to agree.'

'Neither do I...You feel nothing for the thirty four thousand people on this ship?'

'I'd swap them all for one human life.'

'We too are human. Why cannot you see that we are both the same species?'

'Perhaps...I only know four of you people. One of them I would gladly squash like the maggot he is. Two I'm fairly neutral towards. In one way or another, they have both done me harm but at the moment I'm prepared to understand their motives and think about forgiving them. And one...I don't know...I'd hate to see her hurt.'

Odin looked at him, studying his face carefully. 'But you don't really love her, is that it?'

'I don't know,' Thor snapped. 'How the hell would I know? What the hell is love? I thought I knew but now I don't have a clue. I loved my wife. I think I still love my wife. But if what I feel for Freya isn't love, what the hell is it? Maybe I even love Gina too. My secretary,' he explained in response to Odin's questioning look. 'I sure as hell don't know. Tell me, wise man,' he sneered, 'what is love? Or don't you even have such a concept? Lucky you if you don't.'

'Wrong, wrong, wrong,' Odin said sternly. 'Please stop thinking of me as the wise old man who will tell you everything, reveal all things, solve all your problems. Of course we have love...and hate...and bitterness...and courage and cowardice...joy and pain...good and evil. We hurt like you. We

can be noble like you, and petty, selfish, quarrelsome, mean like you. This is what man is and must be wherever he evolves. Perhaps it was some inevitability of design or maybe it was just a gigantic accident that made us so similar. I do not know. But I think that, even if we were physically dissimilar—if one of us had two heads or three arms or was adapted to breathing some different atmosphere—even so I think we would have been alike in this respect. I think these emotions, these behaviours, these character traits are essential for any life form to become truly dominant.' He paused and Thor was preparing to speak but he rushed on. 'I cannot tell you what love is. But I can tell you that without it you are nothing. Can you love more than one woman at a time? I do not know. Love tends to be, or to become, an obsession. It is hard enough to live with one obsession at a time. Trying to cope with two or three will probably destroy you.'

The old man's voice trailed off and Thor guessed he was remembering some obsession or obsessions of his own. Thor hovered between hoping he would reveal his thoughts, hoping he would carry on with the subject of Freya so that perhaps they could come to some conclusion about his future and hers, dreading that he would return to the subject and reveal what plans, if any, he had for his daughter and for him, wishing he would finish his story of life on his planet, and longing to be able to just get up and go out and away on his own to think—preferably back to his own little study at home. The vision of himself working away at his own computer at his own desk in his own study while his wife brought him cups of coffee and his sons strolled in and out or sat on the floor or leaned on his desk asking him questions or telling him little stories of very minor, mundane happenings which were significant to them was so sharp and compelling that when the Commander spoke again the voice seemed distant, unreal, as in a dream.

'I would like to talk to you more of these things later,' he was saying, 'but I would like to finish telling you my story of what happened on my planet and why we cannot go back. Ah, no, it is not because it was devastated by the meteorite impact. Many species were lost and the whole mix of life was changed, as was the whole topography. There were many beautiful species that vanished—scarlet birds, plants with the most gorgeous delicate flowers, iridescent fungi—and many useful ones—fruits that had been among our favourite foods, plants that gave us medicines we thought we could not survive without. But others took their place. There was argument among our scientists about some of these whether they had been there all the time and just expanded their range or whether the dramatic change in conditions had sparked mutations. Yes, and in some cases mountains so majestic they had been worshipped millennia before by our primitive ancestors were now reduced to rubble and lush green valleys had become deserts. But in other places there were blue hills and emerald dales and sparkling streams and still, clear lakes of incredible beauty and other marvels where before there was nothing to lift the spirit. The huge lava flows and the

pulverised rock and ash that fell slowly broke down and made incredibly fertile soil. It could even be argued—and many did so—that our world was a more beautiful, more useful place after the impact than before.'

He stopped and seemed to be pondering the question. There was more than a trace of bitterness in his voice when he began again. 'The main reason they thought that—I am sure they would admit this if they were honest—the main reason was not any increase in beauty or the fertile soil created, but the minerals brought up, concentrated, created, deposited by the volcanoes. Oh, what a time it must have been—gold rushes, silver rushes, copper rushes, tin rushes, diamond rushes, platinum rushes, iron rushes, new coal fields, new oil fields all waiting to be exploited. And exploited they were. And their products were. Factories everywhere creating all the things needed to restore the planet to its former glory—materials for building ever-bigger buildings, vehicles of all descriptions, all the useful and trivial things we had enjoyed before and many more just invented. And old and new implements for farming and working the newly formed soil. And rip down the forests almost before they exist. And what about these new species—what can we use them for? And to hell with pollution; people have got to eat, have they not. We need all these things. We cannot live without them. You cannot stop progress. Oh, and have as many children as you possibly can; we must bring our population back up. Our path back up the slope was just like it had been before the impact, only many times speeded up. Some grabbed more and more of the cake while others were left with the crumbs. It was amazing how quickly the old institutions returned—particularly the old financial institutions. In the really boom areas, hands-off capitalism tended to prevail, while in many of the less favoured areas some form of communalism or communism or socialism was often adopted. This, of course, led to the capitalists claiming it was their system that created all the wealth in their parts and to some of the other countries trying to emulate them. Just as before, nothing learned; borrow money from the rich countries overseas—with interest, of course—use their methods and systems and soon we would be as rich as them. And, just as before, the rich got richer and the poor got poorer. You see, like you, we are very slow learners.' He smiled briefly, abstractedly at Thor. 'It was not long before there was bloodshed. There was small-scale murder like in your Wild West. There were gangs and bands who killed and robbed. There were rich countries who forcibly took what they wanted from poorer ones and poor countries who tried to forcibly seize what they wanted from the rich. And then there was Vespusia, the country that had brought the calamity on the planet. Within hours of being told what damage they had inflicted, their President had seized almost total power for himself. This was ironic because Vespusia had always prided itself on being perhaps the freest country on the planet. But hidden in its Constitution and in its laws were the emergency powers which allowed its President to seize control of virtually everything in the country and to regulate just about everything everyone did in the country. Why he

chose to do this I really cannot say. Perhaps he had always dreamed of absolute power and seized the perfect opportunity presented him. Perhaps he honestly thought he needed these powers to deal with the crisis. Or perhaps he was forestalling the, probably real, possibility that the people would tear him apart for bringing this disaster on the planet. Why ever he did it, he did it and he got away with it. The President became a dictator and this tradition carried on after his death. Vespusia suffered terribly in the long winter. Most of its crops failed. It experienced giant earthquakes and fires that destroyed probably a quarter of its area. Huge areas were lost to the sea. Much of it became so cold that it was covered with permanent ice and snow. Those who could fled south. It seemed to be left with nothing. But what it did have was weapons. Before the calamity, it had had huge stocks. Many of these had been lost but it still possessed probably twice as many deadly weapons as all the other countries on the planet put together. And now it was looking enviously at its former enemy, the country it had almost obliterated but which was now blossoming as people poured back into its borders to till the fertile soil and work its abundant minerals.'

He stopped and looked at Thor. 'Am I boring you? You wish I would get to the point? If I did, I would only have to go backwards to explain it, so I would rather start at the beginning and go to the end.'

Thor waved his hand. 'No, no, it's fascinating. It's your story; you tell it your way.' This was true, but only as far as it went. He was hoping it didn't take the old man much longer to get to the point, so that he could perhaps find out what was intended for him.

Odin, still looking at him somewhat doubtfully, continued. 'The most important country in the long run turned out to be the great southland, a huge island continent, rather sparsely populated, that had escaped most of the ravages of the great catastrophe. The global circulation was such that it even missed most of the dust clouds, and most of the debris that did blow over went over fairly rapidly and little of it fell. I think I told you before how they destroyed ships full of refugees trying to reach their shores and even stopped what might have become a land bridge forming. Now, they sat as in a time warp, still much as they were before the big event, but very much poorer. You see, most of their wealth had been built on exporting coal, oil, minerals, wool, grains, other raw materials. Now many of their former customers had plenty of these things and anyway, after their behaviour during the crisis, noone wanted to buy from them or sell to them or to have anything to do with them. They were a lost people, buried in guilt and shame. Only one man had stood out against their beggarly policy and he had been forced to flee for his life. He went to an old mining town out in the desert, abandoned but still well preserved. I do not know how he did it but somehow, amid the isolation and desolation, he built a laboratory the equal of anything then surviving. Here he experimented on a new computer technology and worked out a method of wireless data capture from other computers. By this

means, he enlarged his already immense knowledge and worked out a method of storage that meant he had access to just about everything that was computer readable—and that was a lot because people were always discovering fresh treasure troves of old files with everything from novels to weather reports to farm prices to the latest cosmological theory. But he did not spend all his time in the laboratory. Sometimes he went out collecting samples and making notes on the area to compare with what data he had on it before the catastrophe. You see, this was one of the few parts of the continent that had been affected. There had been some volcanic intrusion and one or more earthquakes. It was on one of these excursions that he found what seemed to be a volcanic intrusion. He did some digging and in an unusual-looking clay found some brown crystals. He took them back to the laboratory, analysed them and worked out that they were gold oxide. If he had been an average person, he would have seen the crystals as a source of gold and, therefore, of great wealth, but he was a true scientist. He experimented with them and found he could use them to generate electron pairs. This delighted him because it fitted in with his theories. But he was amazed to find that he could also produce paired photons with them. That did not fit with his theories, so he looked harder at those little brown crystals and eventually found there was a minute yellow crystal at the centre of each of them. After much work, he eventually determined they were made of an iridium-containing complex. After studying the problem for some weeks, he formulated the theory that the yellow crystals had either been contained in, or had fossilised, bacteria which had accreted to themselves gold, probably in colloidal form. The gold had presumably been released, and the gold oxide crystals formed, through volcanic activity. Then he set out to see how he could use these strange crystals and their strange properties and it was not too long before he found how to superconduct those paired electrons through a network, using the paired photons as a soliton carrier, and regenerate free electrons to act as flip-flops. We still use the same principle in our supercomputer.'

Thor was now hanging on every word. So, I didn't quite get it right, he thought. 'How could Hadding have ever thought I could work that out with the data he gave me!' He was surprised to hear his own voice; he had not really meant to speak aloud.

Odin looked at him. 'Hadding tends to judge everyone by himself. He is extremely intelligent. He is also extremely sure of the truth of his own beliefs and the correctness of his actions. And he can be quite ruthless. Perhaps these are not bad things in a leader. Perhaps I am too soft, too able to see both sides of a question.' He lapsed again into a pensive silence.

Thor had the impression that the old man was considering, even longing, to take him into his confidence about the personal element of the command situation, but when the Commander spoke again it was as though he had not been interrupted.

'This young man, probably the greatest genius our planet has ever seen,' he said, awe and reverence in his voice, 'quickly put his new computer to work. In a matter of days, he worked out the theory of the universe we still hold today—well, with a few minor variations.' He looked up and smiled. 'No, I will not go into what it is; at least, not now. Perhaps some other time. He then used this to show how to make space travel much safer and faster—he forecast up to OSG 2, twice the speed of light. Actually, we have still only got up to OSG 1.2 but that is a lot better than what we were doing then. He was brought back from the stars when a visitor told him of the impending war between the two old antagonists. He determined to stop it. He found that, not only could his computer tap into any other computer, but it could also direct or disable that computer, and even a great array of other electronic devices. He did it. He briefly disabled every other computer and a great range of other electronic devices and then sent a message to all the computers demanding the attendance of all the planet's leaders at a certain place at a certain time. If they refused, he would permanently disable all their computers and other electronic devices. They had very little alternative but to do what he said.'

'As we would have very little alternative if you did the same thing to Earth,' broke in Thor. 'But what was to stop them from just nabbing him at this meeting?'

'Ah, yes, he had thought of that. He programmed his computer to automatically proceed with its disabling trick if he did not stop the program exactly two of our days after he activated it. That allowed very little bargaining time, and too bad if his plane came down or was excessively delayed. Anyway, they all turned up. He showed them his computer—actually, a second one—what it could do, and promised to supply one to every country which agreed to his plan.'

'Wouldn't that be dangerous?' Thor objected. 'Wouldn't you have all these potentially powerful weapons sitting around just waiting for someone to make the first strike? Wasn't that what worried Hadding about my being able to make one?'

'No, no, it was not like that. The Joleh computer could not be put out of action, even by another Joleh computer. In fact, not only was it immune itself but it could protect other computers and other devices.'

'And your current computers are still Joleh computers?' queried Thor, even more puzzled.

'Not exactly...Well, anyway, reluctantly, and probably with many of them planning to go back on the deal, they all agreed. But if any of them had planned to cheat, they were foiled by their people. You see, he made sure that the complete details of his plan were printed all round the planet on every computer that was linked to a printer—which was, of course, the great majority of them. In fact, most countries had computers linked directly to newspaper and television networks, so it was very widely distributed. His plan was both simple and complex, quite audacious in concept. He proposed a form of government to cover the entire planet. Nothing new in that, of course. Like Earth, we had tried to do something like that many times before and always it had

failed—largely because, when it came to the crunch, people were far more concerned with their own national interests than with those of the planet as a whole. Also, of course, leaders did not want to give up any of their powers, and citizens did not want anyone outside their country telling them what to do. But his plan was quite different from anything proposed or tried before. His plan was based on allowing people to form themselves into small groups, each one of which then combined into larger groups, and so on. The smallest groups were of ten—or, rather, not less than ten and not more than nineteen. These groups could be based on any common interest—or, indeed, on no common interest other than that they wanted to form themselves into a group. Many of them were family groups, but there were a lot of groups based on other things like living areas, workplaces, drinking groups, all sorts of things. Each of these groups elected a representative to represent them in the next largest group, so that you had ten people representing the interests of a group of one hundred formed from ten groups of ten. Again, which groups the groups of ten chose to combine with was entirely of their own choosing. And so it went on up the line until finally there were two people representing the two giant blocks of around a billion people each. One of these was designated the Lord Temporal and was like a kind of Chief Executive Officer for the entire planet. The other was the Lord Spiritual and was responsible for ensuring that the non-material aspects of life on the planet were well catered for. The ten representatives just below them acted like a Board of Directors. This might all seem incredibly bureaucratic, clumsy and likely to end up as an autocratic dictatorship, but none of this was really true. You see, responsibilities and rights remained strongest the nearer to the bottom of the pyramid, and it was just as easy to remove a representative as to appoint him. Of course, all this took a while to put in place. It must have been fascinating watching the groups and supergroups forming. I guess it was pretty scary too—something completely different, something many believed would fail miserably and bring chaos in its wake. It did not. In fact, it seemed to be working even beyond the expectations of those who had believed in it. All the old hatreds founded on race, nationality, sex, political beliefs, religion, etcetera, all seemed to vanish. You would think that there would be plenty of scope for new rivalries and hatreds to build up between all the groups created but that did not seem to happen. Perhaps it was because people were forced to look for commonalties when forming these groups and came to realise they had much more in common than they had separating them. Then, as I said, they changed the entire economic outlook and banned the paying of interest. Well, as I told you, this did create its share of chaos, but people adjusted and before long everyone was speaking of the golden age that had settled on the planet. And it must have seemed so. Not only was everyone fed, clothed, sheltered, free, but they were happy and healthy. With the Joleh computer driving, life was transformed. Inventions and discoveries abounded. Life became very easy but with a sense of challenge and purpose. We were the gods

of the universe and anything was possible. We all but conquered disease. We played with our genes and eliminated many of our inborn diseases and cancers. We played with the genes of bacteria and either forced them into suicide by introducing a lethal plasmid or changed them to what we wanted. The average lifespan reached two hundred and six years. And all this was due to Joleh and his computer. Yet he became the most hated person in the entire history of the planet, though no fair-minded person could really blame him for what happened.'

He paused, whether for dramatic effect, to collect his thoughts, to think how best to phrase what he was going to say, or simply to give his voice a short rest, Thor was unable to decide. Odin sat looking at him a few moments more, as though expecting some response and then, getting none, went on.

'The Joleh computers had been remarkably reliable. Some of the very first ones made had operated continuously and had never once needed repair or even service. But now many of these started playing up. Joleh was dead by now. Exactly what he died of is a bit of a mystery, but the bit of desert where he had his laboratory was later found to have a very high background radiation, though the crystals themselves were never found to be radioactive. Anyway, that is beside the point. What matters is that when his computers started playing up and engineers started trying to fix them, every one of them quickly came down with an unknown disease and very quickly died of it. And everyone who came in contact with these secondary cases also died. And so on—virtually a hundred percent mortality among anyone who opened one of these computers or came in contact with anyone who had opened one. Thousands, tens of thousands died almost before anyone was aware of what was happening. Soon, it was a plague spreading over the entire surface of the planet. The Crimson Death they called it—at least, in your language that is what it would be. Its victims turned crimson all over. At least they were easily spotted, which gave some possibility of control. Either because it was a new bacterium or because we had weakened our immune systems with all our playing with genes, there seemed to be absolutely no resistance to it. All that could be done was to absolutely forbid anyone opening a Joleh computer and to strictly quarantine anyone suffering from the disease or who might have had contact with a victim. And that was strictly enforced. It became not only lawful but actually required by law to kill any possibly infected person approaching an uninfected person or attempting to enter an uninfected area. Such things may shock you, but it was very likely everyone on the planet would have perished without such measures. As it was, it is believed that about thirty-seven percent of the entire population of the planet perished. And then there were smaller flare-ups when the survivors went about the business of burning the bodies—which usually meant also burning the buildings they were in—and incinerating all the Joleh computers in especially constructed incinerators. In all, probably some forty-five percent of the population, or nine hundred million people, died. A huge area around the

crystal pipe and Joleh's laboratory was fenced and declared off limits for everyone. You can see now why Joleh became the most hated man in our history, even though it was not really his fault. Even now Joleh is our term for someone who has a bright idea that turns into a disaster.'

'So this is why you can't go back?' asked Thor.

'No, not in itself. We managed to survive even that calamity and to rebuild. But, of course, it changed things. Well, obviously. There were no more supercomputers and no prospect of anyone wanting to build one. And the whole group structure thing broke down. There were just too many deaths leaving too many blank spots and anyway that was a Joleh system and all his ideas were suddenly bad. As it happened, the Lord Temporal and Lord Spiritual at that time were a male-female couple who now planned to marry. They had organised the response to the Crimson Death, brilliantly so most survivors felt. Indeed, it was generally felt that without them directing operations everyone on the planet may well have died. So when they were crowned joint emperors, everyone—or nearly everyone—applauded. My great-great-great-great-grandfather was one who did not. He could see what would happen, and it did happen. They actually used a kind of reverse form of the Joleh group idea, where they directly controlled ten people, each of whom had direct control over ten others, and so on. All the controllers were appointed by the one above them and reported directly to them. The emperor and empress also instituted a sophisticated system of tracking reports that enabled them to keep tabs on everything that was happening throughout the planet. In effect, one almost needed their permission to breathe. But there was a loophole in the system and my great-great-great-grandfather found it. As you can imagine, it was impossible to know who had lived and who had died in the great plague. So, everyone had to be registered. But he merely dodged the registration and, with a couple of hundred like-minded people, went out into the desert, to an area where he had previously detected the possible existence of a huge underground sea, probably created during the cataclysm. They tapped into this and made themselves an oasis. The news spread on the grapevine and, before long, they had a sizeable settlement of some ten thousand people. The authorities did not know quite what to do about all this. It was clearly a rebellion which could spread but they did not feel strong enough to attack directly. Great-great-great-great-grandfather had been the youngest ever Commander at the age of twenty and was, even at that age, acknowledged as a brilliant military tactician. They could not believe he would not have made sure his settlement was well defended. As it happened, it was virtually defenceless, but they did not know that. They sent spies to try to find out the situation but these all converted and stayed. So, the colony survived. More than that, it prospered, and it eventually became strong enough to ensure it remained independent. And it continued to be a Mecca for those who valued freedom. My great-great-great-grandfather was born there. When he grew up, he set to work to construct a safer version of the Joleh computer and he eventually succeeded. He

discovered that, using a specially constructed protein as a seed, he could build up the iridium complex crystals and then, by some chemical magic, deposit the gold oxide as a crystal around that. The resulting computer was not quite the same as the old one—in some ways better, in some ways worse. But it could certainly do most of the things the Joleh computer could do and a few other things as well. The computer we use now is very, very similar. Now he went to Joleh's old laboratory and found all his papers, including the ones dealing with design of an Earthship and flight faster than the speed of light. Using these and his own knowledge and ingenuity, he built an Earthship out there in the desert, one bigger and better than anything seen before. That was Earthship 3. It made a flight to Earth—the first flight at superlight speeds. Great-great-great-grandfather did not live to see Earth. My great-great-grandfather, who had been born on the flight, took over. There had been three thousand five hundred and twenty people on the flight when it left. When it reached Earth, there were six hundred and twenty one, though the peak population had exceeded fifty thousand. My great-great-grandfather set up a settlement somewhere on Earth; it is difficult to say exactly where but perhaps somewhere in Northern Europe. When he died thirty years later, the number had built up to four thousand seven hundred and seventy five. As you can imagine, many of these were Earth people or partly Earth people. His youngest son, a mere youth of twenty at the time, somehow or other managed to become Commander. At this time, there were tremendous pressures on the Earth settlement. It was really no wonder that the native population were becoming more and more unfriendly. Our people had little to give and therefore took what they needed, including brides and husbands and even babies. Great-grandfather decided it was time to return to Asgard. Three thousand four hundred and forty eight went with him. He married an Earth child who had been taken aboard and reared on the spaceship. He died just before the flight reached Asgard with three thousand three hundred and ninety people from a peak population of some thirty thousand. A number of very useful facts were discovered on this trip. Faster-than-light travel seemed to have a good effect on aging. Those who did not die from various misadventures—mainly accidents and Earth diseases—lived an average of three hundred and five of your years, as against the two hundred and twelve average at home. Unfortunately, nearly all of us who came in contact with any of the hundreds of nasty microbes on your planet died; even eating ripened cheese could be enough. That is, if they were pure-bred Asgardians, they died. But if they had Earth genes in them, they would probably survive. Another thing was that males almost invariably became sterile. And mothers died in childbirth.'

Thor sat bolt upright. 'Hold on,' he said. 'Let me get this straight. Any mother exposed to faster-than-light travel dies in childbirth?'

'Not quite all. There seems to be some kind of dose-exposure effect.'

'And Freya? How's her dose-exposure?'

Odin smiled. 'Zero. She was born after we arrived here, of course.'

'Of course,' Thor replied, almost dumbstruck by the thought that he had not realised this obvious fact before. But the realisation raised another question. 'But her mother died in childbirth. Did she have any exposure?'

The reaction was completely unexpected. The old man buried his head in his hands and began uncontrollably weeping. Thor watched uncomfortably. This was private grief, of a kind that should never be seen by a stranger. It was also a side to the Commander's character he had never suspected. He was almost moved to comfort the old man as he would have his father.

CHAPTER 13

Odin's sobs finally ceased, but he remained silent and shrunken into himself. How long they sat like that Thor had no way of knowing. It seemed an eternity. Each man (I call Odin 'man', for what else should I call him? Obviously his species and *Homo sapiens* are, to all intents and purposes, identical) was lost in his own thoughts—thoughts too deep, too private, too personal to be communicated to anyone, let alone a virtual stranger.

Finally, Odin collected himself. 'No, she had no, or very little, exposure. I snatched her from Earth. You might have expected her to resent me, to hate me. She had every reason to. It was not necessary for her to love me, or even to like me, or that I love her. It was only necessary that she give me a child. You must have worked out by now that, even with faster-than-light flight and our relatively long lifespans, noone makes a return trip, so babies must be born and raised and carry on the flight. I seriously doubt if faster-than-light flight, with all its problems, is worth it. If we could get up to the theoretically achievable twice the speed of light, maybe, but I don't know if the increase in speed from OSG 0.9 that Earthships 1 and 2 used to the OSG 1.2 Earthships 3 and 4 achieved is worth all the problems.'

This seemed to Thor a diversionary tactic. He was determined not to let Odin get away with it. 'Tell me about your wife,' he urged.

'I loved my wife dearly,' Odin continued. Tears again trickled, unheeded, down his face. 'I do not know if you can truly comprehend how deeply I loved her. I was, obviously, already an old man when we met. She was beautiful—golden hair, a face that looked perfectly moulded when she slept and flashed in five hundred different types of smile when she was awake, a body that consisted of nothing but perfect curves, a brain that was the equal of any, a nature so loving and generous that noone could dislike her.' The trickle of tears had become a river.

He stopped and Thor decided he had pushed the subject of Odin's wife enough. But he was still anxious to know about all those deaths in childbirth. 'So, not all the deaths in childbirth were related to faster-than-light travel?' he asked. 'Did they all die the same way?'

Odin nodded. 'Yes, they bled to death—just kept bleeding and bleeding and there was nothing our doctors could do to stop it.'

'Your wife died the same way?'

Odin looked at him, a strange, indecipherable expression on his face. 'No, not really.'

Thor waited for further explanation but, when none was forthcoming, decided not to press the matter further, for fear that Odin would again break down. He was frankly puzzled by what he had been told. He was trying to visualise a mechanism by which faster-than-light travel could cause uncontrollable bleeding in childbirth and he was completely unable to do so. His scientific interest was piqued. 'No other effects? No osteoporosis or anything like that?' he asked.

Odin looked blank.

'Loss of bone strength.'

'No. Why do you ask?'

'I may be quite wrong, but I would have expected the main effect to have been on mineral metabolism—calcium, sodium, iron. When you talked about women dying in childbirth, I thought it would have been because of weakening of the pelvic bone structure.'

Odin shook his head. 'No. I think that did happen on the small ships before we learned to control gravity and make it the same as on our planet. I am not sure about Earthships 1 and 2. It certainly did not happen with Earthships 3 and 4.'

'So the horrendous loss of life on Earthship 3 was due mainly to deaths in childbirth?'

'Yes.'

'Why were there so many fewer on the return trip?'

'Because so many of them were Earth people. Earth people seem to be somewhat genetically protected.'

'How many started on this trip?'

'Ten thousand six hundred and fifteen.'

'And you reached a maximum of about sixty thousand and are now down to about thirty four thousand?'

'Yes.'

'How do you know all this?'

'My father told me and there are records on the ship.'

'Computer records?'

'Yes.'

The idea of records of the history of the planet being available on the ship excited Thor. 'Could these records be printed out in English?' he asked.

'Our computer could do that, but you would need more paper than we have on board.'

'Is the computer Hadding showed me still on Earth? If it is—or another like it—I could take the discs and print them on Earth. That just might be what I need to convince my people to help you.'

Odin smiled wryly. 'Perhaps...Thanks for your kind offer.' There was more than a hint of irony in his tone.

The old bastard thinks I'm trying to set up an escape, thought Thor. He's right. Even a delectable lover like Freya wouldn't keep me given half a chance to get out of here—even if she is carrying my child. The thought of Freya's possible pregnancy brought him back to the idea that had seized him when Odin had spoken of women bleeding to death in childbirth. Steeling himself for an angry reaction, he asked: 'Are you sure this was due to faster-than-light flight? Have you looked at other factors?'

Odin's reaction was not of anger, merely of puzzlement. 'Well, not really,' he slowly said. 'There seemed no point. It seemed so obvious. We had no trouble like this before faster-than-light flights. What else could it be?'

Thor shrugged. 'When did you first start using that vile tea brew?'

'On the first expedition.' He looked at Thor doubtfully. 'What could that have to do with it?'

'Perhaps nothing. I was beginning to think I had the makings of a theory, but now I'm not so sure. You see, the combination of women with excessive bleeding in childbirth and sterile men suggests to me a common exposure to a toxic chemical with oestrogen-like activity. But there are some puzzling things. Does this happen to all your women, or do some escape? You said there seems to be some sort of dose-exposure effect. Does that mean that women who give birth early in the passage, or should I say women who have only recently joined the crew from either end, do these women also die? Is your wife the only one who hadn't been through faster-than-light travel who died?'

Odin frowned. 'No, there were others—a few. Why I said there seems to be a dose-exposure effect is because it only seems to happen some years out,' he grudgingly admitted.

'Perhaps only in the daughters of the original female crew?'

Odin considered. 'Perhaps,' he said at last. 'I cannot vouch for that, but I think sufficient time had elapsed for them all to be second generation. But how could it have been the tea? All the Earth women brought aboard drank the tea but they did not die. Even my mother drank it. As you yourself observed, there were far fewer deaths on the return flight of Earthship 3 than on its flight out. That must have been because they had some genetic protection...But their daughters suffered and died just like those who were pure Asgardian,' he admitted in a low voice.

'Your wife drank the tea?'

'No. I gave it to her once and she had a violent allergic reaction, so I never gave it to her again.'

'Your wife didn't drink the tea?' Thor's voice was full of delighted, relieved surprise.

Odin looked at him, obviously at a loss. 'As far as I know, only that once. Why?'

Thor waved a hand. 'Not yet. There are still a couple of things that don't compute. Well, just one thing really: there's the question of your lack of sterility. That doesn't fit with my theory. But I guess there are exceptions to everything.'

'Ah, but it does fit,' corrected Odin, grinning. 'I have never drunk the stuff. None of us rulers ever have. We have always believed that radiation was a lesser hazard than addiction.'

'Adequately proved by the fact that you've all lived to ripe old ages nonetheless,' observed Thor dryly.

'Okay, okay,' snapped Odin. 'The prime purpose of the stuff is, always was, to keep the masses under control. Believe me, we need it. Can you imagine the result of a breakdown in discipline on a ship like this?'

'Yes, but the thought of having a ship like this run by thousands of addicts doesn't reassure me much either. Neither does the thought of settling thousands of addicts on Earth appeal much to me. We've got enough of our own. What happens? Do they grow the stuff and introduce one more addictive drug to our planet? That we don't need. But the thought of all those people trying to go cold turkey also

gives me the cold shivers. Have you thought of this? ' His lips curled in a snarl. 'I bet you've got it all worked out. You'll get it growing, get everyone on Earth drinking the stuff and have them all like the trained monkeys here.'

Odin sighed deeply. 'You are right. It's inexcusable. But remember this: we could have destroyed your people and taken over Earth long ago.'

'Rubbish. From what you've told me and from Earth's history, the crews of your earlier Earthships were lucky to survive—if they did. Now you probably could do it, but you've lost all your immunity. Well, I've got news for you, buddy. It's probably your precious tea that's responsible for that too. Sure, I know all that bullshit you told me about people with Earth genes being okay and those without not, but I'll tell you how I think it is and you tell me if I'm right or wrong, okay?'

He rushed on without waiting for any sign of assent. 'Immune field commanders are all of your family, all have Earth genes and don't drink the tea. Right?'

Odin considered and slowly nodded.

'All the ones who died were pure Asgardians who drank tea. Right?'

Again Odin nodded.

'And it never occurred to you that the difference could be between those that drank the tea and those that didn't, not between those with Earth genes and those without? Obviously, it didn't. After all, your mother was made to drink the stuff and even your wife would have had to if she hadn't reacted so badly. What great men! Have to keep their wives doped!' he scoffed.

Sparks flashed in Odin's angry eyes and for a moment Thor thought he was going to strike him but the Commander still had his temper under tight control. 'You are not only insulting but also stupid,' he snapped. 'I have already told you that my mother drank the tea and she was fine.'

'Yes, but it's not that simple. You see, the effect is on the baby before it is born. If the mother has the exposure at this time, the baby, if it is a girl, will die in childbirth when she has a child...So Freya will be all right,' he said triumphantly.

Odin's expression showed relief as great as his, but also lingering doubts.

'And if the baby is a boy, he will be sterile,' Thor went on.

'That's not right,' Odin snapped. 'I am not sterile...or, at least, I was not sterile.'

A faint smirk crossed Thor's face. 'That's true. I guess there's no doubt Freya is your child?'

The next moment, a huge fist crashed into his jaw. Taken completely by surprise, he had no time for evasion. His head snapped back, he slumped senseless sideways across the arm of the chair and crashed heavily to the floor.

CHAPTER 14

Thor lay on his bed, still dazed, groggy, head throbbing. He gingerly felt his aching jaw where Odin had hit him and the sore spot on his head where he had hit the floor. What a fool I am! he reprimanded himself. In just a few short minutes, I completely alienated Odin and showed him how to remove the one block stopping him from invading Earth. He was sure his theory was correct, even if Odin had been fertile and his wife had died in childbirth. Her death seemed to have been different from the others. And perhaps Odin's mother hadn't really drunk the brew? Perhaps Freya really was someone else's child? It could explain why Odin reacted so violently to the veiled suggestion—not so veiled really—that Freya might not be his child. Perhaps he knew something he would not admit—perhaps not even to himself.

The strange thing is that I was beginning to like Odin and feel for him, Thor mused. I guess I was even beginning to see myself as a defacto son-in-law. The truth is that now Freya's got what she wants—or, I assume she has—I'll probably never see her again. I'll probably never even see our child. Which might be just as well; Freya and a cute little replica of Freya just might be a completely irresistible combination, one for which I would willingly desert wife, sons and planet. Or would it? He found himself thinking of Earth and his old life there with almost unbearable longing. But Earth will still be Earth even if these aliens take over. And, after all, they are not complete aliens; they are very like us and many of them apparently have Earth genes in their lineage.

Then there was the question why losses had progressively declined on each flight. It could be that so many had died on the trip out in Earthship 3 because they were all mature couples who produced plenty of children, but children who either died in childbirth or were infertile. The reason almost as many made it back to Asgard as started on the return flight could be that there was a much greater range of ages, with many infants among them, so that births were more staggered. Or maybe Odin's great-grandfather had worked out the effect of the tea and stopped using it. Maybe, he just saw no need to use it. If he had worked out its ill effects, he certainly couldn't have passed them on to his son, since it was widely used on Earthship 4. But perhaps he did and that was the reason his family, and maybe others of the ruling elite, didn't drink it. And that could be why there were still some thirty four thousand left alive.

There was something else that didn't add up—the bit about only those with Earth genes being able to resist Earth's diseases. The first ones to visit Earth, at least, could not have had Earth genes. Freya had said something about using drugs to increase immunity but he had the feeling that was largely ritual or window-dressing or irrelevant anyway. He also had a feeling the whole problem had come into being only on the last two expeditions, when faster-than-light travel and the tea had both come into use.

There were so many things he didn't know, couldn't know, and it was extremely unlikely he would be given access to whatever records they had.

My brain hurts, he moaned to himself. All this thinking is making my head worse. But he couldn't stop the thoughts, the queries, the doubts tumbling around his brain. It seems we've been interbreeding with them for centuries, perhaps millennia—willingly or unwillingly—he reminded himself. Does that give them a greater claim on us? Or less, because of the way they've used us? He felt an immense pity for this lost tribe—for that was how he was beginning to think of them. Hadn't Odin said they couldn't return to their planet—though, with all his long-winded account of the history of the planet, he still hadn't told him why. Thor wondered if it were all true. Why wouldn't it be? he asked himself, but the clear impression remained that Odin had at least been padding it out, playing for time. Why?

They certainly seem a lost tribe, Thor admitted to himself. They're stuck out here in the middle of nowhere with, if what Odin says is true, absolutely nowhere to go but Earth and very unsure if they can go there. And, for all their knowledge and power, they seem pretty helpless. Their science is quite hopeless if they can't even keep accurate records and investigate deaths with basic epidemiological methods. Their thought processes, their reasoning, their very intelligence must have atrophied. Maybe they rely too much on their computer to think for them, work things out for them. Or maybe there's just a dearth of scientists, thinkers, teachers because of the declining population. Maybe that was another reason they had been so keen to kidnap him.

Don't feel too sorry for them, Thor cautioned himself. A society in decline is often at its most dangerous. Rome was at its nastiest when its empire was going and almost gone. The only reason they haven't taken Earth for themselves so far is because they couldn't. And now they have the means they are stopped by their lack of immunity to our bugs. And I may well have just handed them the solution to that difficulty. He moaned aloud.

A soft hand stroked his head. Despite the softness of the touch, he winced and the stroking stopped. He opened his eyes. 'Freya,' he breathed. 'Where did you come from? How long have you been here?'

'A while. I wasn't sure if you were awake or asleep. How do you feel?'

'Like I've been stampeded over by a herd of wild horses. Your old man sure packs a wallop.'

'Whatever did you do to make him do that? I've never known him to hit anyone—certainly not a guest.'

He looked at her. She certainly looked like Odin's daughter. 'I suggested you might not be his daughter.'

She caught her breath. 'Why?'

'I just let my tongue run away with me. It doesn't fit my theory for him to be fertile.'

She looked puzzled. 'What theory?'

'I suspect that the tea you told me everyone here drinks...' He stopped, stunned by a sudden nasty thought. Why hadn't that occurred to him before?

'You lied to me, didn't you.' It was more of a plea than an accusation. 'You don't drink the tea, do you? You never have?'

She blushed. 'No,' she admitted. 'I didn't mean to mislead you, but you were being such a sook about it and everyone else does drink it—except for our family, that is. Dad told me we can't drink it because there is something in it that we're allergic to. I'm sorry I lied to you but it didn't mean anything and surely it's not that important...' Her voice trailed off and she looked at him with the confused defensiveness of a child caught out in a misdemeanour she had thought trivial but her father obviously thinks otherwise.

He couldn't help it; he laughed. He was laughing as much with relief as with quiet, loving amusement at her. 'It's all right,' he assured her. 'More than that, it's wonderful. Our child—if we have a child—will be fine. You see I'm convinced the tea contains an oestrogen-mimicking substance that affects the foetus and causes the child to die in childbirth—when it in turn gives birth, that is—if it's a girl, or to be sterile if it's a boy.'

She looked at him wonderingly. 'Could this be true? Why haven't our scientists ever suggested it? They've always been convinced it was the faster-than-light travel.'

'Perhaps it is. But, to me, it doesn't fit. Not the sort of effect I'd expect faster-than-light travel or meddling with gravity to produce. But just the sort of effect I'd expect some universally imbibed hormone-mimicking substance to cause. Your scientists just don't appear to have been very scientific. From what I gather, they don't seem to have conducted the most basic epidemiological studies. I doubt if they even have the records to do it.'

'Oh, we have the records all right. The entire health records of this trip are on one disc and I think we have a copy of the disc from the previous one on board too.'

'Could we access them? Would I be allowed to look at them?'

Freya studied him speculatively. 'I could talk to my father, but I don't think he's too taken with your theory at the moment. Her eyes seemed to be taking in every lineament of his face, searching his soul for truth. 'There is one way we could arrange it,' she said slowly. 'If you were my husband,' her voice became soft, almost caressing, 'you'd become one of us and be allowed freedom to move about and do more or less what you liked. You'd be trusted. And, after all, you can't leave.'

'Yeah, it's not quite a case of climbing the wall and running off into the distance, is it,' he said ruefully. 'I can see two problems with that. One is that I'm already married. The other is that I can't imagine your father being exactly delirious about the idea.'

'According to our law, Earth marriages are automatically void here, as are marriages made here void on Earth. I think you can see why this is necessary.'

'Very convenient, if not necessary,' Thor said dryly. She looked at him sharply. 'My father, believe it or not, was beginning to look on you as the son he never had. You would have hurt him very deeply suggesting I'm not his daughter. He loves me very much. And I love him as much. Even if I was not his seed, I'd love him just as much. I am, and always will be, his daughter. You must apologise.'

'You're right, I must. But will he accept it?'

'He is a good man. He does not hold grudges.'

'I believe you. But I am not at all sure he would be happy if he knew we were looking through the records. Frankly, I think he just might be afraid of what we might find. He reacted a bit strongly to what was only a throwaway line. I think he is quietly terrified I might prove you're not his daughter; that would destroy not only his claim to you but his memory of his loving wife.'

'I think your imagination has run away with you. Look at me. Am I not my father's daughter? I would be devastated if you proved somehow I was not his biological daughter but I have absolutely no fears that you will, and I'm sure neither does he. But, anyway, if you're my husband, you'll be free to accompany me anywhere. We won't need to ask his permission.'

Thor considered. He thought of Sheila. Well, Freya was right; there were good reasons marriages on Earth should be void here and vice versa. It would certainly make life easier and increase his chances of survival and, perhaps, escape. He took both of her hands and locked her eyes with his.

'Darling, will you marry me?' he asked.

'I will,' was the tremulous reply.

CHAPTER 15

The wedding took place in a room that remarkably resembled a small chapel—rows of moulded chairs, a central aisle and a moulded lectern out the front. No organ, but a small computer softly putting out melodies completely unknown to Thor but which he could easily have believed to be composed by Beethoven or Bach. The walls were decorated with ever-changing laser murals. There were even delicately flowered plants in special moulded niches along the walls.

Thor sat in a front seat, his best man beside him. Oh, yes, there had to be a best man, though they didn't call him that. As Odin laughingly explained to Thor, their term for him translated into English as something like 'holder-upper'. His function was the same as a best man's—to make sure the bridegroom got to the ceremony and to remember all the little details, like the ring. Yes, there was a ring, or rather a pair of rings—exquisite creations of a jet black stone decorated with delicate blue, iridescent green and deepest red stones arranged in an intricate pattern, made so that each ring fitted exactly to its mate by a close-fitting male-female type join and a number of interweaving clasps. Apparently there were stocks of these ready for these occasions, each varying in some detail. As on Earth, it was the bride's privilege to choose.

Thor glanced at his best man, fidgeting in a small pocket, probably making sure he had the rings. He was a likeable enough lad for a jailer—for that's what he was, the guard who had several times conveyed Thor to and from his meetings with Odin. When Odin had explained the need to have a best man, he'd naturally been at a loss, but when Odin had suggested Hadding, he burst out that he'd rather have his guard and so it happened. He understood the bride also had her attendant—probably some friend or relative—but he'd never met her.

It was funny how compliant Odin had been to their request to marry, he reflected. You could almost call him eager. The wedding had been arranged with the minimum possible delay. It seemed there was a statutory procedure like the old calling of the banns, which meant that the marriage had to be proclaimed (in this case, merely by putting the announcement on all the computers on board the ship) at least one futilight (in Earth time, about three and a half days) ahead of the event.

So, here he sat while the rows behind him filled with Freya's relatives and friends and he thought to himself, What the hell am I doing here? Suddenly, startlingly, incongruously in this setting, the computer struck up the Wedding March, adding to Thor's feeling of total unreality and flooding him again with memories of his first wedding and of his marriage to Sheila. The best man was urging him to his feet. He struggled upright and turned to look down the aisle. He caught his breath and his heart skipped several beats. The bride wore not traditional bridal dress, but the shimmering silver suit emphasised her exquisite lines of face and figure as well as any Paris creation ever could have done. She really is the most beautiful, most gorgeous creature I've ever

seen, Thor told himself—and perhaps the most loving too. I might not be here entirely by choice, he told himself, but I can't say I wouldn't be here if I did have a real choice.

They linked arms as she came up to where he stood and walked the few paces to where Odin waited. Their attendants stood by their sides. Odin gently unlinked their arms and clasped one hand of each between his own two hands.

'My children,' he said. There was a definite catch in his voice. 'You have both come here of your own free will to declare your love for each other before those assembled and to promise to guide, guard, protect and support each other in all trials that may beset you, to share each other's joys and sorrows, and to cling to each other to the exclusion of all others as long as you both live. Do you both now so declare and promise?'

'I do.' Freya's voice was firm and clear.

'I do,' came Thor's more hesitant reply.

'Please exchange rings.'

They did so. Odin brought the matching halves together and deftly united them.

'As I have united these rings, let this couple now be united,' he solemnly intoned. He smiled at Thor. 'Normally, that is the end of the ceremony, but if you want to kiss the bride, as in the Earth tradition, please do so.'

Freya looked up at him, her eyes dancing with pleasure. He bent and kissed her tenderly, then more firmly as he felt her lips responding to his. A murmur came from the rows of seats.

'We might have to add that to our ceremony,' Odin chuckled. He took his daughter's hand and led them, their hands still joined by their clasped rings, to an adjoining room with a large table with about thirty attached moulded chairs. He sat them at the head of the table. 'Even here there is no escape from the boring wedding reception,' he said and took himself off to the other end of the table. Their attendants now joined them and seated themselves beside their respective charges.

Thor looked down the table, where other people were now taking their places. Each place had a small cake and a glass of some liquid in front of it.

'Honey cakes,' Freya explained. 'It's okay, you can eat them—definitely no gluten. They, and the wine there, have come all the way from Asgard with us. They were brought along just for this purpose. It's the only time we have them. People love weddings because of them.'

She apparently caught a signal from her father, for now she took her little cake and delicately took a small bite, then motioned for Thor to do the same. He did so. The taste was beyond his powers of description—sweet but not sickly, bursting on the tastebuds with a fresh tingle and vanishing into a deliciously satisfying aftertaste. 'Worth getting married for,' he said.

She smiled, raised her glass and sipped from it. He followed her lead. Again the taste was incredible—velvety smooth, caressing the tastebuds with a full, rich but not overpowering, sweet but not sickly, blend of flavours.

'Ummm,' he murmured his satisfaction. 'When's the next wedding?'

Freya happily rubbed her smooth cheek over the red beard, now fully sprouted, that made him look even more like one of his Viking ancestors.

One by one, beginning with the best man and working around the table but skipping Odin, each person stood in turn, said a few words, raised his or her glass and they all sipped the liquor. It was all in their own language, so Thor could not understand a word, nor did Freya translate for him. Most of the time she sat demurely with eyes downturned; sometimes she blushed; sometimes she laughed; sometimes she looked at the speaker with shining emotion. Thor guessed the short speeches were similar to those at a wedding on Earth—full of good wishes, reminiscences and faintly risqué jokes.

Finally, when the bride's attendant had said her piece and sat down and the glasses were almost drained, Odin stood. 'Well, children,' he said, 'time for bed.' He repeated his comment in his own language and everyone laughed, stood and drained what was left in their glasses in one motion and then thronged around the bridal couple. The couple were raised to their feet, hoisted aloft and carried, amid much singing, laughing and constant chatter, to another room. At the entrance, they stood the couple on their feet.

Odin came along and placed his hands on both their heads. 'May you two always be as one,' he said. He carefully separated the two halves of the rings, which had still been interlocked, and said, 'May these rings always remind you of your oneness.' Then he flung open the door and said to Thor, 'now you carry your bride over the threshold.'

Thor looked at Freya, the very picture of a happy bride, and was overwhelmed with a flood of tenderness, tinged with a touch of remorse that this was all, in a sense, play-acting. Even as he swung her into his arms, the title of the song, 'Where were you when I was falling in love?', kept running through his brain. But as he carried Freya into the room, he was asking himself if he'd ever really been in love. Love was giving your all—body and mind—and he'd never really done that with Sheila. At first, he had come close, but more and more he'd retreated into his private thoughts and kept his secret fears, hopes, ambitions, even his likes and dislikes, locked away within himself. Would it be like that with Freya? Probably even more so since they were of such different cultures.

He lay her gently on the bed and looked around to check that the noise he had heard had indeed been the door closing softly behind them. He was relieved to see that it had been and that they were alone. His imagination had begun torturing him with an uneasy feeling that there might be some sort of obligatory public ritual. Why should I have imagined that? he asked himself as he stood uncertainly, looking down on Freya. Wordlessly, she held out her arms to him.

He lay down beside her and took her in his arms. They lay looking deeply into each other's eyes and Thor was amazed and dismayed to feel tears welling in his own eyes and to see answering tears moistening hers. 'Hey, this is supposed to be

a happy occasion,' he said, gently kissing her tears away. She cried the more and he joined her in the flood.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' he asked. 'Why couldn't you have been the first?'

She nodded.

'And why this couldn't have been a normal wedding without our two cultures being perhaps on collision course?'

Again she nodded.

'And how either or both or us will likely be forced to betray either the other or our friends and families or maybe both?'

She nodded once more and sobbed.

'I don't know what will happen to us, darling, but whatever does, I know one thing—I will always love you.'

'And I will always love you. No matter what happens, no matter what you do, no matter what you do to me, to my family, to my people, no matter what I do to you, I will always love you.'

'You know how your mother died when you were born,' Thor said hesitantly, 'I don't want any chance of that happening to you. According to my theory, you should be safe, but then your mother should have been too. I don't want to risk losing you. I want to take you back to Earth till the baby is born just in case it has something to do with giving birth out here.'

She shook her head. 'I believe your theory is true. What happened to my mother must have been due to some other cause. I've never asked my father for any details; it always seemed to hurt him so much to mention it. Did he say anything to you about how it happened?' she asked rather wistfully.

Thor shook his head. 'No. Like you, I didn't want to say too much; it upset him so much to talk about it.'

'In any case, my father would not let us go,' Freya said bleakly.

'We could escape. You must know how to fly one of the little spaceships?'

'I do, but between us and Earth is an anomaly and only father has ever flown through one of them and lived.'

'Then how did you get here from Earth?'

'The Earthship has moved since we got here. We park here for the protection and invisibility the anomaly provides us.'

'And to prevent escapes?'

She flushed but did not answer. He gently stroked her soft hair and she closed her eyes, absorbing his touch.

'You really are pregnant, aren't you?' he suddenly asked.

She opened startled eyes, then a smile broke through the remnant of her tears like a sunbeam penetrating a dying shower. 'Sure am. You made sure of that.'

'I'm sorry,' he said. 'No, no, not sorry I made you pregnant,' he hastened to assure her, noting the little open-mouthed gasp. 'I'm sorry I was so rough, so cruel, so brutal.'

'Don't be,' she said. 'I'm not. You did hurt me, but you certainly made sure I became pregnant. Actually, I enjoyed it,' she assured him, biting his lip, 'I was sore for ages afterwards but every time I felt that soreness I felt

again you pushing yourself into me and bringing me pleasure I had never known before. It felt so real sometimes I was sure you were inside me. I ached for you and I ache for you now. Every part of me is screaming out for your touch. Don't talk any more, darling, please—just love me. Not rough like last time, though. We can't risk hurting our baby.'

He fondled her breasts and she murmured her pleasure. He sighed. 'Sometimes I think mother love is the most mysterious thing in the universe. Women will go through just about anything to have a baby—or at least most of them will. And they'll do just about anything to protect their babies.'

She looked at him with faint annoyance that he was still talking and not using his mouth for more pleasurable things. 'Lucky it is like that. The species would soon die out otherwise.'

He kissed her softly, gently and whispered, 'What would your father say if I asked to be returned to Earth so that I could analyse the tea and prove or disprove my theory?'

'He'd say, "Why bother when we have a laboratory aboard with everything in it you could possibly need?", or maybe he'd just tell you to leave all that to our scientists.'

'Do you think he'd let me work in the laboratory here?'

'I don't see why not. I think it would be good for you and for us if you did and it's not as though you could escape with any secrets. Ask him. And I'll tell him he should let you.'

'You're just like...' he bit off the words but it was too late.

'My wife,' she finished for him. She burst into tears, a sobbing torrent that saturated the shoulder of his suit. He clung to her and she to him.

'I'm sorry,' he said when her sobbing had eased somewhat, 'but that's what she is. I lived with her for over twenty years. I can't just erase her from my memory banks, as though she never existed.'

She raised her head from his chest and stared into his eyes as though seeking therein the answer to every secret in the universe that really mattered. 'If you live with me for twenty years, will you love me more than you love her now?' she asked.

'Right at this moment, I love you more than I have ever loved anyone—wife, mother, father, sister, brother, friends...anyone. If I live with you for twenty years, it's very likely, though it is hard to conceive it now, that I will love you even more. But,' he said sadly, 'in twenty years I may well be dead. I was a heavy smoker in my youth.'

'We can make you live another hundred, even two hundred, years,' she said confidently.

He was silent. The prospect both excited and terrified him. To live two hundred, three hundred years—it was too awesome to contemplate. Maybe if you stayed young until you suddenly died it would be okay but it could be like the terrible torment of the guy in the old fable who was granted eternal life but not eternal youth and just kept getting older and older but unable to die. He remembered, way back in his youth, telling a friend that life was like a dull party where

it always looked like something good was about to happen but it never did, so that you really wanted to go home to bed but hung around just in case things did suddenly get lively. Well, the party had certainly been lively lately, but he still wasn't sure it wasn't a party he'd rather have missed. Then again, he was reminded of the young lad in the Meatloaf song who promises to love the girl forever and ends up praying for the end of time. It is a lot like that a lot too often, he told himself. It's pretty much like that with me and Sheila now. Perhaps in time it will be like that with me and Freya.

He had been absently rubbing his hand over Freya's smooth contours. Now it was being lifted from her body. He looked at her and it was as though he was seeing her for the first time. Guiltily, he realised what he had been doing and a sudden flash of insight came to him. How many times had he been like this with Sheila—enjoying her body but not touching her with his mind. Perhaps that was the real reason she had cooled toward him.

Suddenly, he wanted to make love to the woman beside him—not just have sex with her but truly make love to her, to worship her with his body, to comfort and reassure her as well as pleasure and delight her, to achieve a perfect oneness with her, a oneness that encompassed not only body but what many call soul, a blending and mutual awareness of every aspect of their beings.

Gently, ever so gently, he removed her suit, caressing each newly exposed area of her body as he did so. He quickly removed his own suit and once more lay beside her, caressing her with hands, mouth, eyes and words.

'Your hair is like spun gold,' he said, as he gently ran his hands through it and flicked it gently across his own skin. 'Yet far softer, more glistening and more precious than gold.'

'Your ears have been so finely sculpted they could be the centrepiece in any art gallery anywhere in the universe,' he said, tracing their intricate contours with fingertip and lips and tongue and breathing softly into them.

'Your face is so perfect no artist could ever capture its beauty,' he told her, caressing it with fingers and lips.

'Your eyes are bluer than the bluest Brisbane sky. They sparkle like stars. They mirror a soul that makes that of any saint appear dross. Even the eyelids that hide them from me,' he went on as she closed them in response to his tender kiss upon them, 'are so beautiful I can forgive them for hiding from me this treasure. Their lashes are as fine as magic cobwebs, as soft as a cloud. Your eyebrows, so soft and tender, perfectly frame them.'

Those eyes gazed at him in rapt attention. There was no flicker of doubt in them, no thought that this was mere flattery; why should it be—he already owned her and he must know that she was already more than ready to yield to him.

For a brief moment, Thor mentally stepped back and looked at himself in bewildered wonderment; never had he spoken to a woman like this—not even when prolonged wooing would obviously be necessary to obtain consent. What is happening to me? he asked himself and thoughts of wondrous aphrodisiacs recurred

to him but his doubts seemed to be drowned in a warm sea of sensual spirituality and he heard himself saying, 'What can I say about your nose? Cleopatra would have died to have had it.'

Freya smiled. 'It exists only to smell the wonderful scent of you,' she softly said.

'And those lips. ' He brushed them softly with his own, then traced their contours with his fingertips. 'How can anyone see them and not want to kiss them?'

'They are only for you,' she told him.

'And your gorgeous neck,' as he swept its curves with lips and fingers and palm and hair, 'there must be a God to have created such perfect contours.'

He swept on down and caressed her firm breasts with hands and lips and tongue. 'Could anyone but God have designed such perfectly formed, perfectly shaped, perfectly textured structures?' he demanded.

'They ache for you, for your touch,' she said.

He went over her entire body thus, caressing and praising each portion in turn, but reserving the prized possession between her legs for last. She lay still, mainly silent but occasionally responding with a comment that assured him that she was his, that she wanted him alone and that all of the body he was worshipping was for him alone. Though she made no move to caress him in turn or to direct his caresses or to move her body in any way so as to enhance or modify sensations, it was clear to Thor that this was not a lack of response, but rather a complete and total response. She was allowing herself to be worshipped and thereby worshipping him.

He came at last to her genital area. He gently moved his fingers through the soft, curly hair and along the outer lips and spread the inner lips and gently swept the rim of her vagina and followed the same path with lips and tongue. He could feel and hear her breathing increasing its rate and its depth. "What can I say of this beautiful perfumed box, this secret garden, this wonderful organ of life and love and pleasure? To say it is beautiful is insufferably trite. To say it is perfectly designed and shaped and moulded is stating something so obvious I would be ashamed to say it. I would that I could enter it as completely and be as completely a part of you as I was with my mother.'

'I long for you to do so,' she told him.

She felt his penis at her entrance and prepared herself for the joyous pain of his entry but he did not do so. She looked down and saw him holding his swollen penis in his hand, moving it round her nether lips, which seemed to have taken on a life of their own, straining to embrace it. Her pulse was racing, her breath had quickened as though she were running. Now he was rubbing her erectile organ with his own. Still her only movements were her breathing and faint involuntary tremors in her inner thighs and small muscular spasms in her firm buttocks.

A sudden sharp cry signalled her climax. He stretched out along her and caressed her softly with his whole body. 'All of me loves all of you,' he said, 'and will for ever more.'

She moved to lift her arms to embrace him but he was sitting up on her stomach, again caressing, teasing her by gently rubbing his erect organ across her skin. He gradually moved up until he was caressing her breasts with it, then he had it between them, clasping them around it and gently moving it backwards and forwards. When he moved up again and rubbed her lips with its blood-reddened head, her panting mouth parted and welcomed it in. He did not, however, long linger there. Soon he was gone, slithering his way back down her body, leaving but a taste of his fluids in her mouth.

'Please,' she begged, 'please.'

He was back at her entrance. Slowly, gently he pushed his way into the welcoming cavity until he had fully entered her, filling her. But instead of moving it in and out, he kept it still inside her and again began caressing and kissing her face, her hair, her neck, her ears, her breasts, her hands and arms—every last piece of her body he could reach.

She was moaning continuously. Suddenly, her hips rose and she stretched herself taut. He could feel the waves within her and, with a few long full strokes, joined her in 1.25 second intervals of nirvana.

Their writhings gradually ceased and they lay in each other's arms, looking at each other in wonderment, eyes full of unframed, unaskable and unanswerable questions. To hell with all the other mysteries of the universe, Thor thought, love is definitely the greatest mystery, the most unfathomable phenomenon. Whoever said God is love almost got it right; the truth is that Love is God.

CHAPTER 16

Thor had never been happier. He was working in a beautifully appointed laboratory with all the equipment he could dream of, working on a project which, if successful—and he had no doubts that it would be—would directly benefit tens of thousands of people and change the course of history of two peoples. And his beautiful, lovely wife was working alongside him, helping him, inspiring him, and loving him both day and night. And they had acquired an assistant—a lively, intelligent, cheerful, very competent young man named Plarisoc who, though obviously captivated by Freya, was respectful and helpful to them both.

Thor frequently acknowledged to himself that, without Plarisoc, they would not have got very far. He himself had been a biochemist before he turned to computer science. He had been well trained and had made a determined effort to keep up to date but had to admit that his skills were very rusty and that there were large gaps in his knowledge. Freya also was no stranger to a laboratory. As a girl, she had been tutored in all aspects of science. Lately, however, her education had taken other directions—first in the practical skills she needed as a member of field crews and potential Field Commander, then in the secrets of wifhood and motherhood.

Plarisoc, though only about Freya's age, was the complete scientist—always questioning, ever alert to what was happening, detailed and scrupulous in his observations, meticulous in his recording of results, always seeking to understand what he was observing and to work out as many alternative explanations as possible for his observations, and with the sense of fun and play that distinguishes so many great scientists.

Thor had been delighted to find that science was indeed not only international but even interplanetary. There was a real bond between Plarisoc and himself that could only exist between two scientists—two people whose search for knowledge and truth was so overarching that they would pursue them though the heavens might fall, two people who believed at heart that the acquisition of knowledge and truth was the only true path to fulfilment.

He felt the same bond, though to a lesser extent, between himself and Freya. She too possessed something of the same spirit but, at the same time, he could feel that, to her, motherhood was the ultimate fulfilment and that even being a loved and loving wife was more of an achievement than proving Thor's theory would be. Nonetheless, the extra bond was there and he rejoiced in it.

Then her morning sickness started. Thor watched and listened in frustrated, wretched helplessness as she retched repeatedly. His mind went back to Sheila's second pregnancy when she'd had the same problem and their GP had advised that she have a light snack before getting out of bed in the morning. So, every morning for some two months he'd dutifully brought her a cup of tea and a piece of sultana cake in bed. Whether it really did good or not he was never too sure but at

least he felt like he was doing something. He would have been happy to have done the same for Freya but the only tea available seemed to be the brew he suspected of doing evil things and the only cake the wedding fare honey cake.

'There must be a doctor on board who can give you something,' he demanded. 'Surely you people have worked out a cure for morning sickness by now.'

She looked at him, face blotchy, pale and swollen but still lovely, chin jutting forward challengingly. She looked so like a defiant, rebellious child misinterpreting concern for censure that he was torn between laughing, crying and rushing to hug her.

'There is something they use,' she said, 'but it's a herbal brew and after what you've told me about the herbal tea there's no way I'm going to drink anything like that while I'm pregnant.'

He patted her awkwardly, uncertainly. There was logic of a kind in what she said, but it distressed him to see her so ill and not be able to do anything about it. 'Why don't you get some of this brew and I'll check it out and see if it contains anything likely to be injurious?'

She shook her head. 'By the time you finished checking it to my satisfaction, I'd be through that stage. You go on with your work; that's more important.' She looked up at him, smiling wanly. 'Off you go. I'll be all right. I'll be over it soon and then I'll be along to see how you're getting on. You won't even miss me.'

He started to protest, realised it was pointless, kissed her and went off to the laboratory.

Plarisoc was waiting for him in a state of extreme excitement. 'I think we've done it,' he said. 'I've just finished running all our sequence analysis data through the computer and this is what it's come up with. It certainly looks to me like it could be an oestrogenic compound.'

Thor looked closely at the image on the screen. It was clearly a complex cyclic organic compound that could easily be an oestrogen, or at least act like one, but he was too much of a scientist to unquestioningly accept the obvious, even when it was the result he wanted and had worked for. 'Looks good,' he said, 'but let's check it all through before we get too excited.'

Plarisoc nodded and reached for his notebook.

'Okay,' Thor began. 'We prepared a human placental tissue cytosol, added oestrogen and subjected the mix to immobilised ion affinity chromatography. Transformed receptor was retained by zinc-chelated gel, recovered by affinity elution with EDTA and dithiothreitol, and purified by heparin-sepharose chromatography. So, what we ended up with there could only be oestrogen receptor. Right?'

Plarisoc nodded.

'Next step preparation of a monoclonal antibody to the receptor by immunising one of your cute little golden porkers with a recombinant receptor/*E.coli* fusion protein and subjecting the antiserum to ammonium sulphate precipitation and DEAE column chromatography to obtain pure monoclonal immunoglobulin G.'

'Which tested ninety nine point nine nine percent pure,' put in Plarisoc.

'We prepared our cell line by transfecting a human placental cell line with a receptor-reporter gene construct and growing it in culture.'

'Which did everything it should have done when we added pure oestrogen.'

'Then we added the tea to the cells. The receptor bound to an oestrogenic substance in the tea and also to the monoclonal antibody directed against the receptor, which was bound to magnetic beads. A magnetic separation, elution with a high salt buffer, another magnetic separation and we had the stuff. Nothing wrong there?'

'No way.'

'Finally, sequence analysis by degradation/reverse flow high pressure liquid chromatography, followed by computer analysis, and here we have this wonderful structure.' Thor peered again at the structure displayed on the screen. Something about it was disturbingly familiar—and not just its class resemblance to an oestrogen. Slowly, it came to him. He compared mental images again and again and was certain he was right. Except for an ethyl group substituting for a methyl, it was a dead ringer for zearalenone, a mycotoxin oestrogen. 'Yes, that's what it is all right,' he said aloud.

'It is definitely an oestrogen?' Plarisoc asked.

Thor nodded. 'Yes. It's zearalenone, a mycotoxin oestrogen—well, except for an ethyl instead of a methyl, it is.'

Plarisoc stared at him. 'You sure?' he asked dubiously. 'How can you remember a structure like that?'

Thor grinned. 'I have what they call a photographic memory for things like that—sort of take a mental snapshot and remember it.'

Plarisoc was awestruck. 'I knew you were very intelligent,' he said. 'I knew part of the reason you were chosen is because you're a member of some society made up of Earth's top point one percent in IQ. But I still didn't realise you were that smart.'

'What do you mean, "part of the reason you were chosen"? Chosen for what? To be Freya's husband? Or what?'

'Ahh, ye...yes,' Plarisoc stammered.

'And?'

'And to lead us to the new promised land—Earth.'

'Who chose me? And how?'

'Odin. He makes all the decisions. You know that we can't go back to our planet, so that our only hope for the future is to settle on Earth? His plan was, if possible, to do it peacefully. Failing that we would do it using our computer and threats. Failing that, we will be forced to invade. He wanted to get an Earth person who could tell him what our chances were for success in each of the alternatives. This meant that he virtually had to be a computer expert, since our plans depended heavily on computers and it was necessary to know about the machines on Earth and what people on Earth knew about computers. This person should also be someone who could help us to settle on Earth, as an

intermediary or by other means. From the reports from his Field Commanders, Odin selected you as a possible. Freya was sent to check you out and, if she thought you suitable, to persuade you to return with her or, if she could not do that, to arrange for you to be kidnapped. Two things went wrong. Firstly, she immediately fell in love with you. That didn't matter so much, since she would have soon been required to select a husband from Earth anyway.' There was here a certain wistful note in his voice. 'And then there was Hadding. He was working on the alternative plan—or, rather, plans. First, he had to make sure that noone had a computer, or even plans for a computer, than was near enough alike to ours that we could not control it. Second, he had to somehow or other devise a way to put beacons on Earth to guide us in. Well, it seems he made a real mess of it. If he had left it to Freya, I think you may have willingly come back with her. As it was, you had to be kidnapped.'

Thor looked at Plarisoc with a new interest. 'How do you know all this?' he asked. 'I'd gathered the impression that such affairs of state were kept within the family as it were.'

Plarisoc flushed guiltily. 'Hadding and Freya talk to me and tell me things,' he admitted.

'Then have they told you why you can't return to your planet? Odin started to tell me but got lost in a long-winded history of your planet and never quite got to the point. I'm not sure it wasn't deliberate.'

'I can understand that.' They both started and turned to face the speaker. Hadding stood, looking incredibly jaunty in a pale blue uniform, smirking at them.

'It is not something he would be proud to tell,' he went on. 'The reason we cannot go back to our planet is because there is no planet to go back to. Odin's father destroyed it taking off under gravity control drive.'

'How come?' queried Thor. 'Didn't he know what would happen?'

'Sure he knew. But he was in such a hurry to get away that it did not matter to him. You see, the flight was all prepared and ready to go, just waiting for Odin's grandfather, who was to command the flight, and the rest of the family to come on board and start the countdown when Odin's grandfather was arrested. There were all sorts of charges against him—treason, armed insurrection, murder, bribery, theft and many others. Whether they were real or trumped up I do not know. He was the leading dissident of his day and the rulers were out to get him. You would think that they would have been happy to have just let him go, but...' He shrugged. 'Perhaps they thought he would use the Earthship as a base to attack them. Anyway, Odin's father got wind of the arrest and guessed they would probably be coming to get him too. He abducted a woman he had always been sweet on—actually a cousin. He was in such a panic he took off under gravity control drive and blasted the planet to bits. So, we have nothing to go back to.'

Thor was silent for some moments, digesting this information. 'I see,' he said at last. 'So you really are a

lost tribe unless you can settle on Earth or somewhere very similar.'

'And there is nowhere similar we know of. Perhaps there is somewhere out there, but that does not help us.'

'So it's Earth or nothing...The crucial question is how—conquest, cooperation or cap-in-hand?'

'Odin thought you would supply the answer to that question; perhaps he still thinks so. But I must warn you that we will not go cap in hand, so if you cannot work out a way it can be done cooperatively—and soon—it will be conquest.'

'Do you really think you few thousand can conquer Earth? Sure, you probably have the means to annihilate our population, but would Earth still be habitable?'

'Cortes only needed a few thousand to conquer South America.'

'Sure, but he was helped by smallpox, tuberculosis and other diseases. The boot is on the other foot here; you're the ones with the lack of immunity.'

'One way or another, you could help us solve that. I hear you suspect our tea may have something to do with it—though how a radioprotectant could also destroy immunity I really do not know.'

'That's only one possibility. But is that stuff really a radioprotectant anyway? I'm not sure it wasn't introduced more as a drug to keep the general population more controllable.'

Hadding shrugged. 'You could be right. Many of us—of what you would call the elite—have never drunk it and have never suffered any ill effects from radiation—or anything else...So, what have you found?'

'We've extracted an oestrogenic substance from the tea. By the look of its structure, it could well be a mycotoxin. I don't know if it has anything to do with immunity, but I suspect it is the reason so many mothers die in childbirth and so many males are sterile.'

'How would that work?'

'By affecting the foetus. We've proved similar effects for various oestrogenic substances on Earth.'

'But you do not really know if this stuff does what you think. Can you prove it?'

'Perhaps. But I think the suspicion in itself is enough reason for at least all pregnant women—and all women likely to become pregnant—to stop drinking the tea.'

'On the other hand, if you are right and it is a mycotoxin, all we have to do is to stop the tea going mouldy and there is no problem.'

'True,' Thor conceded, 'if that's possible.'

'Let us go and see.'

Hadding firstly dived into cupboards and extracted sealed containers, sterile forceps, swabs and a small air sampler. Then he led the way down a seemingly endless maze of corridors to where the raw materials for the tea were stored in a series of bins moulded into the structure of the ship.

'Looks ideal for growing mould,' Thor observed. 'Bugger all ventilation...Is there a good reason everything is moulded

into the structure? I've wondered about that ever since I arrived here.'

'Because of the gravity control drive. The ship would be likely to fly apart when it was operating otherwise.'

'Well, I'm no engineer, but somehow or other we have to get those bins better ventilated or dehumidified or both.'

'We could probably direct a bit of heat from somewhere.'

'You'd still have to take away the moisture. These moulds are likely to be thermophilic and just grow better otherwise.'

'Heat and purging with carbon dioxide?'

'That could do it. Can it be done?'

Hadding shrugged. 'I do not see why not. Technically, I should have Odin's permission, but...' He shrugged again. 'You still have not proved anything, but I know that moulds do produce lots of toxins that can have all sorts of nasty effects and whether they are doing any of the things you think they are doing or not I think we should get rid of them...Do you think you can prove your theory?'

'I'd need lots of experimental animals.'

'There are always plenty of golden porkers. The things breed like humans.' He laughed. 'Only joking. They become capable of breeding at four days and have a gestation period of sixteen days. They normally only bear one young at a time but we can make them superovulate and bear up to twelve. How many do you need?'

'Let's see. I could abbreviate this, but ideally I'd like to test water as a control versus a group fed mouldy tea, another fed non-mouldy tea, one fed the pure oestrogenic substance, and one fed mould extract. Each of the additives should be in three concentrations. I'd want twenty breeding pairs in each group, so that's thirteen groups of twenty pairs—five hundred and twenty animals in all. Possible?'

Hadding turned to Plarisoc. 'How many breeding age porkers do we have?'

'Six males and ten females. We've deliberately been keeping stocks low.'

'Dangerously so, I would have thought, since they are irreplaceable,' Hadding reproached him. 'If we superovulate them, we can do it in about thirty seven days total. How long for the actual experiment?'

'Feed the mothers. Mate them. Mate the young again. Brings it up to somewhere about ninety days at least.'

'That is a long time. Any way to shorten it?'

'Well, assuming the best case, starting with just ten females and assuming we get the maximum size litter for each and all survive and there are equal numbers of male and female, we will only get sixty breeding pairs. That would be just enough for three groups. You couldn't have fewer members in a group and achieve anything like statistical significance. I guess we could do that—use, say, water, mouldy tea and our pure oestrogenic substance and only use a single concentration, or maybe water and tea or pure oestrogenic substance at two concentrations. But I'd rather have the five groups and three concentrations and we'd be bloody lucky to get our hundred and twenty animals in one generation anyway.'

Two generations are definitely necessary for the actual experiment, so that can't be shortened a lot. I'm only allowing a two week feeding period, which is incredibly short; it's usually twenty-six weeks, but with such a short gestation period, I'm hoping it will be enough.'

'No other way of doing it?'

'If we had an easier detected endpoint, we could use embryo culture, but there's really no way of observing the expected effect in an embryo. We would have to wait for the embryo to mature and reproduce itself and the effect can really only be observed in the whole animal. Even if you can grow the embryo into a whole animal outside the body...' He looked enquiringly at Hadding, who shook his head, 'that would presumably take as long as doing it in the animal anyway. Perhaps if I had access to the records I could prove it epidemiologically, but I doubt it. We'd need to know who drank tea, who didn't, when the tea was mouldy and when it wasn't. Still, there might be enough data to be suggestive at least.'

Hadding pondered briefly. 'Right,' he said, 'this is what we will do. Right now, you take samples of this mouldy tea. I'll get you a sample of some freshly prepared non-mouldy stuff. You can get busy making your extracts and working out your protocol and finding whatever else you may need. Plarisoc will start the breeding program. I'll work on the engineering problem of stopping the tea going mouldy. And I'll get Freya working on the records. By the way, congratulations on your wedding and on the pregnancy. You pair certainly did not waste any time.' There was just a hint of bitterness in his voice.

He expertly sampled the tea, a deposit of mould and the atmosphere above the bin and handed them to Thor.

Back in the laboratory, Thor quickly made a mount of the mould and placed it under the microscope. As a crystal clear television image flashed up on the screen, he instantly recognised it as an *Aspergillus*, a type of mould well known for producing mycotoxins. Perhaps he was indeed on the right track.

CHAPTER 17

Thor was rapidly becoming more and more impatient and frustrated. He was anxious to complete his experiments and prove his theory but nothing more could be done till he had sufficient animals. He'd prepared all his required extracts and gone over his protocol innumerable times. For something to do, he checked over all his neatly set out tables where the data would be recorded—clinical findings, body weights, fertility, number of litters per pair, number of live young per litter, proportion of young born alive, body weights of young at birth, feed and water composition, uterine cytology of females, body and testis weights of males, spermatid head counts; all these both for original animals in each group and for their progeny. Statistics would be just a matter of comparing each dose group to the control group using Fisher's exact test, but then they probably had some program in the computer that would do it all more easily for him; he'd ask Plarisoc about that.

He'd also worked out a protocol for proving the tea had an effect on immunity, but that required more animals—another hundred of them: a group of twenty for each of water control, mouldy tea, nonmouldy tea, pure oestrogenic substance and mould extract. There'd be plenty when the second generation of animals had been born, but that was a long time to wait and meant he'd have to run both the experiments simultaneously.

He was running over this protocol when Hadding walked in. Thor put down the notebook and Hadding picked it up. 'Ah,' he said approvingly, "I was going to ask you when we could do something about proving your theory of an effect on immunity—not that I believe it myself."

Thor shrugged. 'We'll see. Mycotoxins are well-known immunosuppressants as well.'

'So, when can you start?'

'When we have enough animals. We need another hundred.'

'We will have a hundred and twenty soon. We can use a hundred of them.'

'Then we'd have to wait another generation before we could start the other experiment. We'll wait for the second generation.'

'We will not,' Hadding said firmly. 'This is more important. After all, getting rid of the mould should get rid of the other problem if your theory is right.'

'And this one too perhaps. But if it isn't the mould more women will die and more men become sterile.'

'Why not just see if you can isolate the oestrogen from a mould extract?'

Why not indeed, thought Thor. Trust me to miss the obvious. 'I guess I could do that,' he agreed.

'That would mean you would only need four hundred animals for the oestrogen experiment instead of five hundred and twenty.'

'Yes, but we'd only have a hundred and twenty.'

'If you dropped the mould extract group out of the immune effect experiment, you would need only eighty animals for that

and you would end up with two hundred and forty for your oestrogen experiment.'

'Not enough.'

'Well, then, you will just have to postpone your oestrogen experiment. I want the immunity one done first.'

'No way.'

Hadding smirked at him. 'Do you really think you have any choice? You may be Freya's husband and Odin's son-in-law but you are still a captive alien with the authority of a cockroach. I could crush you like you Earth people delight in crushing those creatures.'

'Why don't we take it to Odin to decide?'

Hadding shrugged. 'If you like. I know what the answer would be. You must know what he thinks of your oestrogen theory; after all, if you prove it, it casts doubt on him being fertile and Freya being his daughter. On the other hand, he is desperately interested in any prospect of raising our immunity; we cannot live on Earth without it.'

Thor turned away, all the old frustration flooding back over him that he had felt when, as an employee, he had been ordered to work on projects he had thought trivial, forcing him to abandon ideas that excited him and which he considered extremely worthwhile and important. It had made him determined to work for himself as soon as he possibly could and he had not been happy until he had succeeded in doing so.

He said nothing as Hadding exited, refrained even from uttering the profanity that lingered on the tip of his tongue. He merely carefully drew a large cross through the tables relating to the omitted groups, feeling like he was murdering a friend as he did so. It was obvious he had no choice. Well, running the mould extract through the procedure to see if it contains the oestrogen will at least keep me busy for a while, he thought. Carl Jung said: 'Man needs difficulties; they are necessary for health'. I should be very healthy.

It was not so. His work was not enough to keep him busy and his difficulties oppressed him more and more. He began to brood and hate. He hated himself. He hated the smug, self-sufficient, sure-of-his-own-powers individual he had been and the weak, vacillating, negative person he now felt himself to be. He hated himself for his inability to find a way out of his own personal predicament and for his failure to come up with a solution to the problem of the Earthship dwellers. He hated himself for his powerlessness even as he hated himself for the power he had over Freya and even over Plarisoc, who had become almost a disciple. He hated himself as a collaborator with the enemy and he hated himself as one who would condemn them all to death to save a single human life or even so that he could return to his old life on Earth. He hated Odin for having brought him here against his will, for treating him like a pawn to be used for his own purposes, for being ruthless and cruel, and for being weak and unable to make essential decisions. He hated Hadding for the attempt on his life and the terror it had caused him, for the power the bastard had over him and the delight he took in that power, for his evident sense of superiority. He was beginning to hate Freya for her very gentleness, her eagerness to please,

to sacrifice herself. It was very flattering that she had chosen him but it also reinforced his feeling of being used and manipulated. Most of all, he hated the ship, its bleak monotony, the everlasting sameness. He longed to see a blue sky, to feel the sun warm on his skin, the refreshing chill of a breeze, the cool sharpness of sand or the springy softness of grass under his feet, to hear the sounds of birds and traffic and neighbours calling and the postman's motorbike. In short, he was incredibly homesick.

He might have succumbed to his malaise if Freya had not produced some material from her searches of the records that snapped him out of his self-absorption. Lost as he was in his own morbid thoughts, he barely glanced at her lying on the bed when he walked into their room, but even that quick, resentful glance was enough to tell him something was seriously wrong. A quick, unreasonable and unreasoning flash of anger at this intrusion into his thoughts seared him. He was as frustrated by Freya's failure to find any useful data in the records as he was by his sense of marking time in his own endeavours while events and time flooded over and past him. He realised he was being quite unfair but the unreasonable thought that she wasn't trying hard enough or that she was incompetent, that he could have done better, kept surfacing.

He crossed to her and saw she had been crying. His exasperation was only just beginning to be submerged by compassion and his 'What's wrong?' was tinged with more than a little asperity.

She looked through him as though unseeing, seeming to be trying to focus on the source of the question and to make sense of it.

A wave of tenderness flooded over him. He sat on the bed and took her small hand in both of his. 'Darling, what's wrong?' he asked again.

She held herself to him and sobbed uncontrollably. He sat stroking her hair till the paroxysm subsided. 'Oh, oh,' she moaned.

He could sense she was trying to tell him something but could not bring herself to do so. He could think of only one thing that could upset her so much and shock her so deeply.

'Something to do with the baby?' he softly asked.

'No,' she asserted strongly, the evident relief in her voice making his heart skip.

He had a flash of inspiration. 'Something you discovered in the records?'

She nodded and shuddered. 'It's too horrible,' she said and buried her face in her hands.

'Tell me,' he softly urged. 'You'll feel better if you do.'

She made as if to speak but nothing came out.

'It's not good for the baby your being like this,' Thor said.

That was the key. She uncovered her face, wiped her eyes and, with a determined effort, propped herself up. Her eyes explored his face and she seemed to take some comfort from what she saw. 'My father,' she said and shuddered. 'My grandfather.' An even bigger shudder. Her eyes were wide and

staring, like someone who has just witnessed a particularly brutal murder.

She took a deep breath and said, 'I know why we can't go back home—ever.'

Thor sighed. Thank God that's all it is, he thought. 'I know too,' he said softly. 'Hadding told me.'

Her eyes widened even more. 'Hadding told you? He knew? I wonder if he knows the rest of it.' Her speech was agitated, breathless, wild.

'There's more?'

She grimaced and nodded. 'You were right about the tea. My great-great-great-great-grandfather introduced it because the plant that formed its basis was supposed to protect against radiation. I don't know if it did or not or if it was just better design but apparently there were few problems with radiation effects on his expedition, Earthship 3. But great-grandfather changed it so that its main, or only, purpose was as a drug to keep the people quiet, to keep them happy to be slaves, rather like the South American Indians chewing coca leaves to make their lives bearable. I don't know why he thought that was necessary; perhaps something happened on the return trip of Earthship 3 that persuaded him it was. It seems very strange why he would have thought so. When Earthship 3 returned to Asgard, its people were treated as curiosities, even freaks. This was because so many of them were descendants of Earth people. It was blatant racism at its worst. They were forced to live together for protection. This only increased the resentment, because the population of the settlement rapidly increased and because it became very rich. In your science, you talk about "cross-breed vigour"; perhaps that's what it was, or perhaps it was just that they were forced to stick together and help each other. Earthship 4 was built for them to return to Earth to avoid a brewing massacre.'

'Incredible!' Thor burst out. 'Your family...your tribe...originally fled Asgard, tried to settle on Earth, was forced to flee there and return to Asgard and was forced to flee from there again! What a sorry tale! You really are the wandering Jews of the galaxy, aren't you?'

'Now you know just how desperate our situation really is. Perhaps grandfather meant to take off under gravity control drive to prevent them being followed and attacked, or to teach them a lesson. Perhaps he didn't know what would happen. Or perhaps he was in too much of a blind panic to think about it. I don't know. But, for whatever reason, he did it and destroyed the planet. We have no home to go home to.'

Thor's heart went out to her and her people, but he could think of no words of solace.

'Perhaps it was because the people were, to put it mildly, upset with him for destroying Asgard that he used the drugged tea to control them. It seems they may well have killed him except for the tea and a brutal crackdown by his hand-picked police force. The tea was all they were given to drink so they couldn't avoid it and rapidly became addicted. They were told it was to protect them from radiation and toxins and the effects of gravity control and superlight

travel. Only a few select families were given water instead of tea.'

'But even some of the wives and mothers in your family were given it.'

'They were the ones stolen from Earth. They were so miserably homesick they would have suicided otherwise.'

'I can understand that.'

She looked at him with tender concern. 'You poor dear. It must be awful for you. I didn't realise just how awful until I read my mother's story. I wish I had never found it.' Her voice trailed off and she began sobbing again.

'Did you find anything to link the tea to deaths in childbirth and male sterility?' Thor asked, as much to change the subject as to know the answer.

'Oh, yes,' Freya bitterly replied. 'There was a report by one of our scientists suggesting a possible link very early on. He apparently died mysteriously shortly after and no action was taken.'

'Power corrupts,' Thor observed.

'And corruption gets power. At least that was how it was with grandfather. He got power by being corrupt.'

'And by being his father's son.'

'Which was the same way my father got power. But he was, and is, just as corrupt and just as ruthless.' She looked at him squarely. 'My mother didn't die in childbirth as he always told me. He had her executed along with his brother, Hadding's father.' She started sobbing again. 'He's not even my father. My father was his brother, Hadding's father. All my life I've loved him as much as any daughter ever loved her father. And all the time it was he who took my mother away from me before I even knew her. I hate him. I'll kill him. Hadding will help me if you won't.'

Thor looked at her in stunned disbelief. It all fitted in with his theory about the tea, removed the most telling piece of evidence against it, but he still could not believe it of the Commander. 'You're sure about all this?' he asked at last.

She picked up a sheaf of papers from the floor and threw them at him. 'Read it yourself if you don't believe me,' she shrilled. She was almost hysterical. 'I thought you might find it hard to believe of your charming father-in-law, so I printed out an English translation. It's all there.'

Dazedly, Thor picked up the sheets and assembled them into order. He went and sat down on the one chair in the room and began to read.

TRANSCRIPT OF TRIAL OF AGCET AND PIUAM 5, 17,
1012206733/53

ON THE CHARGE OF ADULTERY
COMPLAINT BROUGHT BY COMMANDER SPLCLPL
FIELDCOMMANDER ALSSPSO PRESIDING
EABBHFS PROSECUTING
WWTSW DEFENDING

PRESIDENT: What is your complaint?

COMPLAINANT: My complaint is that the defendants, Agcet and Piuam, both being legally wedded to other spouses, did

knowingly and willingly enter into an adulterous relationship which continued over a considerable period of time.

PRESIDENT: Prosecutor, are you persuaded that a valid complaint worthy of the attention of the court exists?

PROSECUTOR: The facts have been admitted by the defendants and have been documented in separate diaries kept by the defendants. These diaries have been admitted by the defendants to be their own work and in their own handwriting and not to have been tampered with in any way.

PRESIDENT: Defendant Agcet, do you admit these charges?

AGCET: Yes.

PRESIDENT: Do you have anything to say in your defence?

AGCET: If the complainant had any sense, he would realise I acted in the best interests of everyone, including himself, and of the expedition. He acted extremely badly and should be charged with the ultimate offence of endangering the safety of the expedition.

PRESIDENT: Complainant, please resume your seat. You too, Defendant Agcet. Defendant Piuam, do you admit these charges?

PIUAM: Yes.

PRESIDENT: Do you have anything to say in your defence?

PIUAM: No.

PRESIDENT: Defender, do you have anything to add?

DEFENDER: If you read the diaries, which the Prosecutor has presented to you as documenting the facts of the case, you will find that there are considerable mitigating circumstances.

PROSECUTOR: I did not say that everything in the diaries is fact, only that the actual fact of adultery is admitted in them.

DEFENDER: Is it reasonable to accept only what you want to be true as fact?

PROSECUTOR: There is fact and there is opinion. The fact contained in the diaries is the admission of adultery; the rest is opinion.

DEFENDER: Very convenient. Nonetheless, I think that it is up to the President himself to decide what is fact and what is opinion.

PRESIDENT: Yes. I will adjourn the court and read these diaries.

1012206915/53

PRESIDENT: I have read the diaries. Before I decide on their relevance, I would like to call the Complainant and the Defendants into private conference.

1012206923/53

PRESIDENT: I find the complaint established beyond doubt. Taking into account the serious nature of the offence, the absence of extenuating circumstances, the fact that the Defendants have shown no remorse, the wishes of the Complainant, and the need to enforce justice impartially, I order the Defendants to be executed forthwith. I order further that publication of the diaries be suppressed.

1012206939/53

The execution of Defendants Agcet and Piuam was duly carried out in accordance with the order of the Court.

'Sounds like a real kangaroo court to me,' Thor observed. Freya raised her tear-stained face in question.

'One where the verdict is decided before the trial,' he explained.

She nodded in agreement.

'This Commander...however you pronounce it...making the complaint is your father?'

She nodded again.

'I know now why he calls himself Odin...Did you find the diaries?'

She held out more sheaves of printouts to him. He stroked her hair tenderly as he took them and sat down again to read.

Agcet's diary corroborated Odin's story up to a point. It told how his brother, shortly after he had succeeded their father as Commander and was therefore prevented from taking part in field expeditions, had sent him to Earth specifically to abduct a girl he had chosen as his bride. Apparently, he had not abducted her earlier because it was first required that an analysis be performed of her genes; this had obviously been successful.

As soon as he'd seen Piuam (or Simone, as she was called in her native village in Alsace), Agcet had been captivated. Her turquoise eyes had sparkled, twinkled, challenged. Her soft, spun-gold, long locks had seemed to capture and hold the sunlight. Her perfectly featured face had changed expression constantly in a never-ending display of inner warmth and liveliness. When he had approached her with a request for information, her natural warmth and friendliness had charmed him utterly. With a sense of capturing a beautiful bird that was meant to fly free, he had abducted her and brought her back to his brother.

Odin had been obviously besotted. He had hardly been able to contain his admiration for her and had endlessly praised her to anyone who would listen. But then, as time passed, things had changed. The first, and worst, disappointment had been that there was no sign of a pregnancy. Agcet's reminder to him that sterility was a common occurrence among males on the Earthship and that Odin should have himself tested had produced a towering rage that had settled into a constantly simmering, seething choler that nothing would shift. He had become more arbitrary and demanding than ever, both of Piuam and of everyone else he had contact with. Particularly, he started finding fault with everything Piuam did. He was beginning to admit to himself that his fond hope that she would grow to love him and be a true wife to him was never going to be realised. Even he could see that she was becoming more and more miserable, though he had failed to recognise that the cause was a mixture of homesickness and his treatment of her, and that a liberal dose of kindness, consideration and affection might well have achieved the result he desired.

Agcet had seen and given her what she had needed. To her, he had been a lifebelt thrown to a drowning person in a wild and stormy sea and she had clung to him—first mentally and then physically. Yet, attracted though they undoubtedly had been to each other, they had both been determined their relationship would stop short of its natural consummation. They had never discussed this, but it had been something clearly understood between them. So, when Agcet had advanced the argument that Piuam's misery would be greatly alleviated if she were to bear a child and that he, Agcet, was the logical person to make this possible, was he acting for his own benefit, for hers, or for his brother's? It was a question he debated at length in his diary and he had come to the conclusion that, though he desired her greatly, it was primarily to benefit Piuam and her husband.

His diary gave no details of how he had persuaded her, but it was clear that he did. It was clear, also, that their sexual union had created for him a bond he did not wish to have severed. But when it had become clear that she was pregnant, that which he had originally intended—if such had indeed been his motive—happened and Odin overnight had become an attentive, loving husband—so much so that there had been scant opportunity for Agcet and Piuam to meet. Despite the fact that, in his honest moments, Agcet had bemoaned the fact that his actions had brought about the result he had supposedly been working for, there was nothing he could do but accept the situation.

Agcet recorded Odin's reactions, and his own, to the birth of the child. It was obvious that both had been equally smitten. Looking at Freya now, Thor could well understand this; she must have been a beautiful baby. The remainder of Agcet's diary was little more than a paean of praise to her.

Thor put it aside and reached for Piuam's diary, wondering as he did so how her account would square with Agcet's.

I am lost. Where am I? What is going to happen to me? Why was I brought here? Why did they leave this...thing here? Do they want me to write so that I can reveal myself, betray myself? No matter, I will use it. There is nothing else to do here. I am a prisoner in a small room, a strange room, with a strange bed and a strange chair and light that never stops shining, though I cannot see where it comes from. Even my clothes have been taken away from me. Someone must have stripped me and put this funny outfit, something like a mechanic's overalls, on me while I was unconscious. The people who bring me food and drink—and what terrible, tasteless stuff it is—all wear the same thing. Why? What is it all about? They will not tell me, will not even speak to me. I thought perhaps they did not understand me, that they must be foreign, but when I swore badly at one woman the look on her face showed that she understood very well. Why was I brought here? Why am I kept here? I wish someone would just tell me what they want with me.

I know now what they want with me. It is not very good. I was surprised when a man, Pierre, who had come to my village just before I was somehow brought here, came to see me. He at least was something somewhat familiar, something to link me with my village. He was very solicitous, very apologetic, but he made it clear I would do what they wanted or suffer worse. He told me a fantastic story. I do not yet know if I should believe it. He told me we are on a spaceship with several thousand people from a planet millions of miles away, that he himself is from this planet, that his brother is commander of the spaceship (or Earthship, as he calls it) and that he abducted me to become his brother's wife. When I asked what would happen if I refused to marry his brother, he said that his brother would probably take me anyway and make me bear his children, that it was absolutely necessary that his brother have children and highly desirable that their mother be an Earth woman. I expect I will meet his brother soon. He must be a terrible hunchback or something if he has to have someone abduct his bride for him.

What a surprise! Commander Odin—that is what he told me to call him because I could not pronounce his real name—came to see me and I had seen him before in my village. I blush to admit that I had romantic dreams about him. He is so handsome—tall, straight, blond hair, blue eyes, looks like a god! And he was so courteous then he made me feel like a fair lady to whom a knight was paying court. I fell in love with him on first sight and dreamed of him coming to take me away to his castle. But having his brother kidnap me and bring me to his Earthship is not quite the same thing. I want to go back to my village but I do not think he will ever let me go.

Odin has started bringing me presents. It seems he is going to court me after a fashion, to try to make me a more willing victim. He has brought me French books of all kinds and delightful little sweets and some beautiful jewellery. He even brought me what was supposed to be French champagne but it tasted like no champagne I have ever had and made me very sick. I could tell he was very angry but he tried hard to pretend not to be upset. He does make lovely little compliments all the time. But I am not charmed. How can you love someone when you know he will take what he wants if it is not given?

Odin finally took me out of my room to show me the ship. I think I was supposed to be impressed but it meant nothing. It made me feel even more confined, claustrophobic. Outside my room there is nothing but more rooms. Nowhere, nowhere can you see outside. In one room there was a big screen where I was told you could see what was outside but there was nothing to see but blackness and a few specks of light. I think I will go mad if I do not see the sky and clouds and sunshine soon. And grass and trees and flowers and streets and birds and houses. And hear rain and horses and dogs and people chattering and laughing and arguing. And smell fresh bread baking and flowers and earth. If Odin were the most handsome,

sweetest, most generous, kindest, richest man who ever lived, even if I were madly in love with him—which I am not—I could not bear to stay here. How will I survive? Yet there is no way I can ever escape.

Odin finally asked me to marry him. I said no. What will happen now I do not know.

I am, apparently, married, though I honestly cannot remember it happening. I do sort of remember being with Odin and a group of people but what actually happened I do not really know. If that was a marriage ceremony, I must have been drugged. I do remember Odin bringing me something special to drink just before then; perhaps it was drugged. Anyway, I have been moved to Odin's quarters and people have been coming in to congratulate us, so I guess it is true. Whether married or not, I am no longer a virgin. I never imagined it would hurt so much or go on for so long. I hope he soon makes me pregnant.

Odin is upset with me. I am still not pregnant and he thinks it is all my fault. He keeps calling me a sexless little bitch. He wants us to try to make a baby nearly all the time and he goes on and on and on and I get sorer and sorer and it hurts more and more and I often cannot hide the pain and that makes him angry and he calls me a baby and hurts me all the more. Why cannot I have a baby?

Things are better in one way but much worse in another. Odin does not do it to me so much now—hardly at all in fact. When he tries, it just will not swell up for him. He blames me for that too. He says if I was not such a sexless little bitch, he would not have any trouble and we would have had a baby long ago. The only time he looks at me, talks to me, touches me now is when he is trying to make me pregnant or if he has to. He has not hit me yet but sometimes he gets so angry I am sure he will kill me. If he does not, I will kill myself soon unless something happens. I cannot go on like this.

Agcet came looking for Odin. Why he came here, I do not know; Odin is never here except to sleep. Thank God for that! He has given up forcing me to have sex, but only because he cannot force himself to. When he is here, he is so bad tempered and complaining and finding fault with everything I do that it is a great relief when he goes. According to Agcet, he is like that with everyone now. Agcet is worried Odin will go too far and provoke a mutiny among the subcommanders. He says it is all because I have not given Odin a baby and it is probably Odin's fault because many of the men on the ship are sterile. Agcet is not; he has already had a son. He says he is sure if I became pregnant everything would change. But how will that happen if Odin is sterile? At least it is nice to talk to someone who talks to me like a lady, who tells me I am sweet and beautiful and good. I was

beginning to believe that it is all my fault and that I am very unworthy.

I know now what Agcet had in mind. I was stunned when he came out with it. The idea had never occurred to me, though I can see now he had been hinting at it all the time. He wants to father my child and let Odin believe he is the father. It could solve the problem but I do not know if I dare. What if he found out? That would make things even worse. But they are physically very alike and the child would probably look enough like Odin to fool him even if it took after Agcet. I wonder why Agcet is trying to persuade me? Does he really think it would be best for me or does he want to help his brother or is he concerned about the running of the ship or does he actually want me himself? What a mess I am in! What should I do?

I have not seen Odin for a long time. Apparently, he sleeps in his office—when he sleeps at all. In one way, this is good, but Agcet says there soon could be bad trouble; there could be mutiny and power struggles and bloodshed and anything might happen. He says the only way to stop it is for me to become pregnant. What would happen to me if there was a mutiny; would I be better off or worse?

My question has been answered. One of the women who guarded me when I was first brought here came here to warn me not to allow any of the subcommanders into the room. She had heard that some of them blamed me for Odin's mood and were planning to dispose of me. They were going to take me to the area where the smaller spaceships were kept, kill me there and say I had been trying to escape and been killed when they tried to stop me. It seems, bad as Odin is, the alternative may be much worse.

I...we...did it. That is, I gave in and agreed to Agcet's proposal. I was scared stiff, both of being caught and because I was afraid Agcet would hurt me like Odin does. Neither thing happened. Agcet was so gentle, so loving. I think perhaps he really does love me. Why could it not have been him I married instead of his brother? I could almost bear it here being married to him. I want to do it again with him. Is this love?

Agcet and I are lovers. We no longer pretend it is just to make me pregnant so that I can bear his brother a child. We are lovers. I never imagined sex could be so wonderful! We spend as much time as we can together but it is never enough. With him, I feel alive, I feel like a woman. If I could have him all the time, I could endure this place. Even when he is not with me I feel his hands, his body on me, in me. But I know it must end; sooner or later we will be found out and then there will be the devil to pay. But I cannot stop and neither can he.

Odin nearly caught us. He came to our room just as Agcet was leaving. Fortunately, he thought Agcet had just got there looking for him and Agcet managed to think up some good reason for looking for him and Odin did not notice anything. Agcet went away and Odin came in and found what he was looking for and went to go again but then he did an amazing thing. He took me by the shoulders and kissed me and before I knew it he had stripped me and carried me to the bed and was caressing me and kissing me all over and I was kissing him back and stroking him and then he entered me and there was no pain only a swelling passion that sucked him in and made him cling to me and prolong his delight and mine till we both exploded in exhausted ecstasy. I still do not know how it happened. Perhaps he smelled the excitement that still clung to me and perhaps that lingering excitement allowed me to respond to him. However it happened, it was great—even better than with Agcet. And it had an immediate effect on Odin. He begged me to forgive him for treating me so badly and vowed he loved me and would always love me even if we never had children. Let law and custom go to hell, he said. And if he never had children to succeed him, Agcet and his children would do just as well. No one can imagine how guilty I felt. If only he had been like this in the first place!

Odin and I are still like honeymooners. I blush to say how often we make love—and making love it is! Odin has learnt to please me beyond my imagination and I allow him everything and return him everything. We worship each other with our bodies. If he does not start it, I do. How I wish I could have this man's child and make him completely happy! Agcet comes by on one excuse or another now and then but he can see how things are and his visits are becoming less and less frequent. I can see by the look in his eyes that he does not understand and is hurt but he should be glad since this is what he originally wanted—or so he said.

I do not know whether to be deliriously happy, sorry or plain terrified. I am pregnant, no doubt about it; I have missed several periods and now the morning sickness has started. If I were sure it is Odin's child, I would be very happy, but I am afraid it is Agcet's and that Odin will find out that it is Agcet's. There is nothing I can do. I will not end it. Odin is sure it is his and has become even more loving, considerate and caring. Oh, I wish I could be sure it is our baby.

There has not been much to write about lately and no time to write it. I am busy with all the arrangements for the baby and Odin will not leave me alone, fussing over me like I was the first woman in the world to have a baby.

It is finally over. I am a mother. I know now why they call it labour; it was very hard work, the birth. But they gave me something so that I felt no pain. And the sight of that beautiful little girl would have made up for any amount

of pain. Odin is enraptured. He says she looks just like me and that we will call her Freya.

Freya grows prettier and livelier every day. She does look like me but she has Odin's blue eyes and her hair is more his colour and there is something of him in her jaw structure. I am sure she must be his child. I love her more than anything. With her to live for, I think I can even face living in this bleak world forever. The only fly in the ointment is that, since the birth, I just do not feel like sex. When I was pregnant, he was actually the first to say that we should stop having sex to protect the baby but now he wants it again and each time he makes love to me and I do not respond he looks more bewildered and hurt and unsure. He is trying very hard to be patient but I wonder how long his patience will last.

I still do not enjoy sex like I did but I have learned to fake (the woman who warned me about the plot to kill me told me that was what I should do and how to do it) and Odin is happy again. Why do men feel such failures if they cannot make their wives enjoy sex?

What I feared has happened, and in the unluckiest way. They have some sort of tonic here that people take when they are feeling poorly. Odin and I have both had it and it tastes all right. The funny thing about it is that it tastes incredibly bitter to some people. I do not understand it but Odin told me that if it tastes bitter to both parents, it will also taste bitter to most, but not all, of their children. If it tastes bitter to one and not the other, then there is an equal chance of it tasting bitter to any one of their children. However, if neither parent can taste the bitterness, none of their children should be able to either. It happened that Freya had been a little bit sick and Odin gave her some of the mixture. When she made a face and refused to take it, his face immediately turned to thunder. 'Whose child is this?' he demanded and when I said 'Yours' he shook me and shouted at me that he would have tests done on everyone on the ship if necessary till he found out so I might as well tell him. He hit me but I would not tell him. What will become of me and of my child?

The diary broke off and Thor was left to guess the rest. He looked compassionately at Freya, still weeping and spasmodically sobbing while she watched him read. He went to her and held her and she sobbed uncontrollably against his chest. He could think of nothing to say. All he could utter was her name, whispered softly over and over as he stroked her soft hair.

CHAPTER 18

'Did you find any effect on immunity?'

Thor looked up from his patient work of checking and rechecking his figures. Amazing how Hadding always seems to pop up just at the right time, he thought. Is it Freya or Plarisoc or both who keeps him abreast of developments? I certainly haven't seen him or communicated in any way since I've started the experiments. I hope he hasn't found out what happened to his father; if he ever does, he's sure to want revenge.

'You could say that,' he replied. He consulted his notes. 'Antibody response down 21%; no effect on lymphocyte proliferation—that's the only piece of good news; 84% reduction in natural killer cell activity; 31% decrease in cytotoxic lymphocyte activity; granulocyte progenitor cells down 51%; and a threefold increase in mortality on challenge with *Listeria*.'

'Jesus!' Hadding stared at him in amazement. 'And all this is due to the same thing?'

'I guess it's likely. But it's not the oestrogen. Within experimental limits, the results for the pure oestrogen were the same as those for pure water—no effect. On the other hand, both mouldy tea and nonmouldy tea played hell with the immune system.'

'So it is something actually in the tea itself that causes the effect on immunity.'

'Yes. I noticed something else. Animals fed the tea drank much more of it than those given pure water or water containing the pure oestrogen. It strongly suggests the tea contains something addictive.'

'We already knew that. The question is: is the addictive principle the same thing as whatever is causing the immune effects?'

Thor shrugged. 'The real question is: how soon can we turn off the tap, pull out the plug, stop everyone drinking the stuff?'

Hadding looked at him and beyond him. 'I guess you are right', he finally said, 'but only Odin can give that order and I doubt if he will.'

'Why not?'

Hadding started to say something but apparently changed his mind. 'I'll let him explain,' he said. 'We will go and see him.'

Odin listened intently to their account of all they had done and what they had discovered. But when Thor said that the only thing to do was to immediately stop everyone drinking the tea, he frowned. 'Have you ever tried to break an addiction?' he queried. 'Can you imagine thousands of people going "cold turkey", as you call it? It would be complete chaos.'

'Wean them off. Make it progressively weaker till they're drinking pure water.'

'They would only drink more until they got the same amount of the drug. We would run out of water.'

'If we can isolate the substance, perhaps we can work out how to remove it.'

'I will not have the addictive substance, whatever it is, removed. Take them out of their drugged existence and they are likely to do anything. The least harmful thing that could happen would be that they would do nothing—absolutely nothing but sit around. The worst would be that they would go completely mad, run amok. If you can find what the substance is that affects the immune system and it is not the same thing as whatever causes the addiction and you find out how to remove it, fine, you can go ahead. But if they are the same thing, you will forget it and do nothing.'

'That means that if they are the same thing, most of your people will be condemned to stay here. If they go to earth, they will quickly succumb to disease. I thought your plan was to establish a colony or enclave on Earth for all your people. It's not, is it? You'd either use them as cannon fodder in conquering Earth, disposable pawns who'd perish themselves when they'd fulfilled their purpose, or you'd take off with the elite and leave all the others to rot here. That's it, isn't it?'

Odin sneered. 'If you knew these people, you would know why.'

He was flushing angrily. He turned to Hadding. 'Perhaps it is time he found out. Take him. Show him. But go armed and be wary.'

Once again he faced Thor. 'You may soon be forced to choose whether you will be part of the elite or suffer with the scum. When you know both alternatives, I am sure which way you will decide.'

CHAPTER 19

'About what I expected,' Hadding sneered as they closed the door behind them. 'Well, not really. I sure did not expect him to tell me to show you the real people on the ship. It seemed to me he had been doing everything possible to stop you finding out what things are really like for most of the people here. I guess you just really got him stoked and he flipped. Let's get going before he changes his mind.'

He strode off down the corridor and Thor had little choice but to follow. They came to an elevator and rode it down for what seemed an eternity in the small, claustrophobic space. They stepped out into a room much larger than any Thor had so far seen on the ship. It was oppressively hot and humid, as steamy as any jungle.

'This is one of the most important rooms in the entire ship,' Hadding said. 'Here plants produce our food, purify our air and make much of our water.'

They walked through row upon row of moulded vats full of algal-like plants and banks upon banks of herbaceous plants.

'What do they grow on?' Thor queried.

'Dusts brought in from outside and collected from inside, the carbon dioxide and other gases we emit, and our wastes.'

They came to a container where particularly lush huge plants looking like gargantuan Venus fly traps nodded. 'This is our recycling plant,' Hadding said. 'Anything that dies is brought here—including people. Yes, they are just what they look like—huge carnivorous plants. They digest everything. Nothing solid is left. Even the bacteria are digested. Criminals to be executed are thrown in alive. Not a nice way to die, I wouldn't think.'

Thor looked at him. The mix of intense sorrow and hatred written plainly on Hadding's face brought instant certainty.

'You know?' he asked. 'About your father and Freya's mother?'

'I know. I hated him before. Now...' He seemed lost for words to convey his feelings. 'I will see him punished,' he finally spat out.

'It must have been a shock.'

'A shock? Not a shock that Odin would have behaved the way he did. Not even a shock that my father would have done what he did. I am sure he did it to bring happiness and peace to Piuam and Odin and everyone.' He looked at Thor as though asking him to confirm this. Thor said nothing; there was nothing to say. 'Of course it was a shock, you fool. How would you feel if you suddenly found out your father did not die on a mission as you had always been told but had been eaten alive by one of those things?'

He seemed close to breakdown but controlled himself with a tangible effort. When he spoke again it was very quietly, almost in a whisper. 'The biggest shock,' he said, 'was finding out that Freya is actually my sister—or my half-sister at least. As you have probably realised, I was—am—very much in love with her, and not in a brotherly way. We have bans on incest, just as you do. In fact, you probably got it from us. That is not to say it does not happen. It has been told that

Odin's father's parents were brother and sister, but I am not sure of that. You see the dynasty has always been very closeknit. Marriages between cousins—which is not approved by our law but is not prevented—have always been quite common.' He turned to face Thor squarely. 'When I found out you had married her, I felt like killing you. I must admit it was jealousy as much as fears for the safety of the Earthship which drove me to try to drown you. I tell you this: if you ever do her any harm, I will certainly kill you.'

Thor was surprised by a sudden flood of tears to his eyes. He turned away from Hadding's questioning look, lost in a heart-wrenching feeling of inevitability that he must someday hurt her badly.

They walked on in silence, out of the room and into a seemingly endless corridor.

'Do you want to see the reactor?' Hadding asked.

'Seen one reactor you've seen them all,' Thor replied.

'Good. It is boring. Runs itself. Or the computer does. Safer that way than allowing any person to touch it. The gravity control drive gadget is even more boring but I guess you want to see that?'

'I'm sure it won't mean much to me but yes I would.'

After they had walked what seemed to be—and perhaps even was—miles down the corridor, Hadding opened a door and ushered Thor inside. 'That is it,' he said.

In the middle of the room was a large moulded dome-topped box-like structure. 'That's it?' he queried. 'Where's the drive? I mean, what does it drive?'

'No axles, no gears, no shafts, no drive trains? No. If you look at the wall at the other end, you will find that it is shaped like a slightly asymmetrical hyperbola. That, with what is in the box, is what produces the drive. The figure is continued outside the wall within a sphere that forms part of the outside shell of the ship and can be manoeuvred to provide direction.'

Thor stared at it in fascination. He was no closer to understanding how it worked than he ever was but that no longer felt very important.

'Seen enough?' Hadding asked.

He nodded and they went out and continued on their journey. Thor was beginning to wonder when he would see the people he had supposedly come to meet. He was very puzzled by the fact that they had not so far encountered a single person. Where were all these thousands of people?

'Where is everyone?' he asked.

Hadding laughed, a dry, bitter, laugh. 'In their cages.'

'What do you mean "in their cages"?'

'This is not a city. It is a zoo. Everyone has a nice, warm, comfortable cage and there is nothing to do outside so why leave it?'

'What does everyone do?'

'Most of them are too drugged with the tea to do anything—except for the guards, police, maintenance people and a few others with special jobs. They get a special stimulant brew on the job to keep them going. What do they do? What most animals kept in zoos do. They eat, they drink, they

fuck, they masturbate, they huddle, they squabble, they drive themselves and each other mad. They do have "music" piped into their rooms, but it is not really music. How can I describe it? It is a kind of melodic, rhythmic noise that has been found to have a profound tranquillising effect. The walls of their rooms have a programmed visual display designed for the same effect.'

'Don't they have books, games, movies, television...?'

'All those things are on computer and only the elite have computers. I understand that happened long before the ship left home. I think it goes back a long way—everything being on computer, I mean. There are people who sit around and make up and tell each other stories but they are few. There are even games people have made up and made rules for but only very few play them and they live in terror of being caught.'

'You mean they'd be punished for having them? Why?'

'I cannot truly say that they would be punished but they think they would be, so it is probably true. If it is, I do not know if it is an official law or if it is just the police being bastards as usual.'

'What about sport? Don't they get any chance to play outdoor games?'

'You cannot do anything like that on board this ship. Even a single ball bouncing could destroy the ship. You have seen how everything is moulded, how we all wear the same clothes, how everything electrical is always running so that switches are eliminated. That is how careful we have to be.'

'I can see what Odin meant when he told me he wasn't sure the gravity control device was worth it.'

Hadding scowled at the mention of Odin's name but then graciously admitted that he could be right.

'So, when am I going to meet your average suburban family?' Thor asked.

Hadding smiled. 'I will spare you that. It is not their fault but Odin is right about that; they are not a pretty sight. I think you will find the people I am taking you to meet more interesting.'

They branched off suddenly into a dark, dingy passageway. Not far along it, they stopped. Hadding stood with his back pressed against the wall and motioned for Thor to do the same. Side by side they stood, Thor wondering a little uneasily what was coming. Slowly the section of roadway on which they stood slid down the wall, coming to rest some ten feet below. They stepped off it and it returned above.

The place was airless, gloomy and smelly. 'Don't tell me people live here,' Thor expressed his disgust.

'Not exactly. Come.'

They walked along the gloomy passage in silence. Suddenly, Hadding turned to Thor. 'Know where you are yet?' he queried.

'Well...I've been half expecting to see brown liquid and rats scurrying any minute. If we were on Earth, I'd be thinking we were entering the sewers.'

'Good guess. You will not see brown liquid. That is down beneath, flowing along in a very closely controlled flow. Of course, even here people do sometimes have to get down into

it to fix things. And, of course, you will not see rats. But, just as on Earth, this is the Underground, where people come to escape the law and to plot.'

Almost as he spoke the passage widened out into a small chamber where about a dozen men sat on the floor. Thor was surprised to see Plarisoc among them. He gave Thor a smile of recognition, but it was a rather wary smile, not at all like his usual warm, friendly, welcoming grin. Hadding greeted them in his own language and there was a murmur of greeting in return. Thor felt distinctly uneasy at the sullen, distrustful way the men looked at him.

Hadding spoke at length to the men in their own language. He was frequently interrupted by mutterings and harsh outcries but his voice remained gentle, almost soothing. Eventually, there were grunts of apparent assent from each of the men and Hadding turned to Thor.

"If you had been plotting for a long time to take over the ship and were now on the verge of doing so, knowing all the time that if you were caught or even suspected you would be fed alive to one of those plants, you would not be too keen on having a stranger brought in--and a very suspect stranger at that, one without any allegiance to your cause or any reason for allegiance, and one who is known to be favoured by the person you plan to depose," he said. "I believe I have persuaded them it is necessary. You see, you are an essential part of my plan. I do not think I could have persuaded you on my own to join us but if you hear their stories I am sure you will."

'How can I hear their stories if they don't speak English? If I have to accept your translation, you might just as well have told me yourself upstairs.'

'You forget our computer wizardry. They will each speak in their language but you will hear it in yours.'

He took a small box from Plarisoc and placed it in the centre of the group. 'Rtfduats, you go first,' he ordered. After an almost imperceptible delay, the machine also spoke, in what Thor guessed was a translation in the Asgardian language.

One of the men stirred and began to speak. He was a very old man. He spoke of Odin in his youth and of the young Agcet and how there was always intense rivalry between them, especially on Odin's part, and how Odin always seemed able to make his brother appear weak and incompetent and to blame for any quarrel between them and for anything wrong the pair of them did. He spoke of Odin's father and mother, his mother an unwilling bride, brought drugged aboard the starship and kept in secluded, drugged impassivity, a rare beauty but dying of boredom, homesickness and her husband's insensitivity. He confirmed the story of Agcet and Piuam. He spoke passionately of Odin's dithering incompetence and his ruthless clinging to power.

Tdhs, the second speaker, verified the details of the execution of Agcet and Piuam in graphic detail, claiming to be a member of the execution squad. Even now he was an executioner. The job had been forced on him as punishment for questioning Odin's judgment in connection with a visit to an

asteroid they had passed in their travels. That he had been right (they had lost a spaceship with all its crew) had not saved him. With Plarisoc's help, however, he now managed to save many of the intended victims. Plarisoc had invented a cream which could be rubbed on the victims to resist the plant's digestive juices. If this could be applied (which might be done by one of the jailers belonging to the gang, by friend or family or friendly medico on a jail visit, or by a co-conspiratorial nurse or doctor on the mandatory pre-execution hospital visit to check for disease which might survive the plant's digestion—not that any such was known or ever found) and he could be dragged out of the plant quickly enough (ensured by another Plarisoc invention), he would survive. There was one other problem in the scheme—the 'Big Brother' eye present in every room on the ship (except for Odin's private quarters), which showed police in the central control room exactly what was happening at any time. Hadding had solved that problem. He invented an image interrupt system which showed the controllers what the gang wanted them to see, not what was actually happening. This had been installed in every strategic location where they could use it to their advantage. Without it, they would not have been able to meet where they now were.

The next speaker introduced himself as Tdhtss, though he explained this was not his real name but what he called himself in the group. It meant something like 'saved by Tdhs'. He was blind. Unfortunately, when he'd been thrown to the plant for bringing back works of Democritus and translating and distributing them, he'd reflexly opened his eyes, the one part of the body to which Plarisoc's ointment had not been applied, and they had been digested before he could be retrieved. From memory, he quoted at length from the immortal words of Democritus: 'Not out of fear but of a feeling of what is right should we abstain from doing wrong...Virtue is based, most of all, upon respecting the other man...Every man is a little world of his own...We ought to do our utmost to help those who have suffered injustice...To be good means to do no wrong; and also, not to want to do wrong...It is good deeds, not words, that count...The poverty of a democracy is better than the prosperity which allegedly goes with aristocracy or monarchy, just as liberty is better than slavery...The wise man belongs to all countries, for the home of a great soul is the whole world.'

Thor was greatly stirred, both by the man's story and by the words of Democritus. He could feel a deep empathy developing with the group. This feeling was reinforced when Plarisoc observed, 'He also said: "I would rather find a single causal law than be king of Persia!" '

The next five men to speak were all members of the sewer maintenance crew. The first had been demoted to sewer duty because he had stolen one of the sweets the elite hoarded for their celebration parties. The rest had been selected by a medical and psychological screening process they'd submitted to because they were told it would lead to interesting work of great importance to the mission. Now they were virtual slaves, kept away from the rest of the people and with their

every moment monitored. They were only able to be at the meeting because Hadding's image interrupt system was showing their controllers images of them working in a different part of the system.

Next followed two men who identified themselves as brothers of one of the men who had just spoken. They confirmed that they were prevented from having any communication with him—even to inform him of their mother's illness and subsequent death. They also gave a picture of the boring, brutish, stuporous life of the mass of the population very similar to what Hadding had told Thor.

Lastly, Plarisoc spoke. He admitted that, as a member of the ruling elite, he had always been treated well. But he chafed under the lack of real freedom and the knowledge that what freedom he had could be terminated at an instant at the whim of Odin and others of his close cohort. And then he told of his background and it was obvious that he had good reason to hate the regime. He had been brought up by a childless elite couple and had always imagined himself their natural son until, in the old records in the computer archives, he had stumbled upon the real story. He was the bastard scion of a union between an elite female and a guard. Both had been executed for their crime but, such was the need for babies on the ship—especially among the elite, who always felt in danger of dying out as a class—that they had kept his mother alive until she had given birth. Now he believed they had perfected the means to easily and bloodlessly take over the ship. The system which conveyed waste gases from every room to the plant room would be reversed to carry an immobilising agent to every room throughout. All the plotters and their agents would be given antidote patches to stick to their skin. They would simply walk in and take over.

'And then?' queried Thor.

'We will run the ship,' replied Plarisoc.

'And the people you call the elite? What will you do with them?'

'There are some who are already with us and some who will join us,' replied Hadding. 'But the really guilty and those who will not join us will feed the plants. What alternative do we have?'

'Imprisonment?'

'There are not enough of us to act as jailers. If we enlisted the common people as jailers, it would end up bloodier than the French Revolution. I admit our masses are dangerous brutes. Odin is right about that. But they are like that because he and his lot have made them like that. We will get them out of their drugged existence. Plarisoc has worked out a combination antidote/blocker/substitute/weaning procedure that will do that. We will give them decent stimulation and worthwhile things to do. We will give them purpose. We will give them freedom. They will come good. But right now there is no way I am going to trust them with any hint of power. A society breakdown on Earth is disaster; here, it would mean death for everyone. I guess we could put all the guilty ones in a spaceship and send them off, but what would they do? I will tell you. They could hang around and

try some sort of counterattack. Of course it would not succeed but it could mean disaster for everyone; this ship is more easily damaged than you might imagine. Or they could end up dying out there. Is that any better than dying here? The only worthwhile place they could head is Earth. Do you want them there? I sure as hell do not; that is where we are going.'

'So you still intend to settle on Earth.'

'We have no choice. We cannot stay here forever. And there is nowhere else to go.'

'How do you plan to do it?'

'We will land our ship on Earth and ask to be allowed to settle peacefully in return for the benefits we can bring. I am sure there must be at least one of your nations that will see the advantages and agree. That is where I am relying on your advice and help.'

'Let me think about that. What else do you want me to do?'

'We have to know the exact movements of everyone, especially the commanders, the disposition of the guards and of all weapons. I will give the signal for the attack and my men will move in and take over. You might be able to assist with all that, but your most important job is to persuade Freya to join us and to fly you to Earth.'

'That might be difficult. On Earth, she will no longer be my wife.'

'From what I have seen, formal marriage ties do not seem to matter all that much on Earth.'

'I doubt if she will be content just to be my mistress.'

'That is something you will have to work out. It is something you will have to face sooner or later anyway. We are all coming to Earth and she will certainly be with us.'

'What about the anomaly? She told me there is an anomaly between us and Earth that only Odin knows how to fly through...Yet, you obviously flew through it.'

'I worked it out. I am sure she can,' he said, but he sounded not at all sure of that.

'Are you willing to risk your sister's life on that? Can you explain it to her?'

'I can try, but it is harder to explain than trying to explain the blue of a Brisbane sky to a blind person or one of our sewer workers.'

'Why not just move the Earthship the other side and let us go from there?'

Hadding shook his head. 'I do not want to move the Earthship yet.'

'Why not?'

'Think about it. There are something like thirty four thousand people on this ship. Of them, less than a thousand are the elite group who really run the show. They have reasonably active, reasonably purposeful lives. But of them probably less than a hundred really know everything that is going on. Then there are the field crews—not the commanders, they are part of the elite, but the crews themselves. They come and go to and from Earth and other places and, on the whole, are very happy with life. Many of them have no real

idea what goes on on board; they are never here long enough to find out. Then there are the police and guards—trained dogs, happy as long as they have someone to attack, and they have plenty of opportunity for that. Over a thousand of them, probably closer to two thousand. There could be another couple of thousand people with special jobs, from doctors to sewer men. Many of them live pretty miserable lives but their work does at least give them some purpose. The remaining twenty eight thousand or so are living ballast, kept as insensible as possible.'

'But why?' broke in Thor. 'Why have them if they're not being used?'

'Ah, but they do have their uses. They are breeding units. They are experimental units. They are living sentinels to monitor potentially hostile environments. They are our manpower reserve. They are our ultimate fallback against genetic breakdown. They are our final source of food if all else fails.'

'Shit!' Thor felt like being violently ill.

'Let your imagination run riot a little. We have taken over—with no bloodshed and very little fuss. We have rounded up the baddies and dealt appropriately with them.'

'Just a moment,' broke in Thor. 'Care to expand on that?'

'Okay. Initially, all the police and guards will be imprisoned. There will not be room enough in our jails—they will be kept for the ones needing top security—so a section of the sewer has been prepared to hold them. All the eliters and the field crews who are not in our group will be locked in their quarters. So will the special workers. The rest of the population will remain in their present state until we have finished dealing with the other groups. All the detainees will be questioned. Those with a particularly bad record will be killed by lethal injection and fed to the plants, as will all those who our psychologists determine will work for our downfall. For the remainder, we will determine in what way each person can best contribute to the welfare of the ship and they will be encouraged and helped to make that contribution. Some will stay where they are, some will move up, some down, others to other tasks with equivalent status. When we have done all that, we will move to freeing the general population, to detoxifying them, to giving them useful and entertaining things to do. And all the time we will be preparing for our final voyage to Earth, preparing everyone mentally and physically so that when we announce our plans to everyone they will see the logic and look forward to making their homes on Earth.'

Thor considered all this a long moment and Hadding let him muse in silence. 'Perhaps it is the only way to do it,' he said at last. 'At first the process sounded too much like the French Revolution and your end result not much better than the start, but I think I may have been judging you too harshly.'

'That is just it,' Hadding said eagerly. 'If we let it get out of hand, it would be just like the French Revolution. Our man-eating plants would be busier than Madame Guillotine,

especially if we immediately let all the mass of the population in on it. If we moved, someone would ask why and someone would find out and soon it would all come out and there would be mayhem. But that is only half the story. There is only one way we can land the Earthship on your planet. If we tried to bring it in under gravity control drive, we would destroy Earth the same way my grandfather destroyed our planet. So, it must glide in. But it can only do this if there is a beam to guide it in. This beam is a neutrino beam generated by a beacon incorporated in our supercomputer. At least, that was the way we were going to do it. That was the prime function of the supercomputer I showed you. Unfortunately, the beam generator was damaged. The plans I gave you were meant to have enabled you to build a computer whose prime purpose would have been to have produced this beam. Unfortunately, I screwed up and, if you had got a computer operating from the plans I gave you, it would have jammed all the computer systems on board the Earthship. That is why I had to stop you—even if I had to kill you to do it. The spaceship you will be flying in will have a beam generator fitted. We will turn it on when we are ready to come. It has an override so you can turn it off if it is not safe for us to come. But the manual "on" switch will be well and truly disabled so that you cannot turn the generator on. If you did so while we still had the gravity control drive operating, the ship would disintegrate.'

'We still haven't solved our problem of how to get through the anomaly. Either you must come or you must allow Odin to come.'

Hadding scowled. 'Odin must die as my father died,' he said flatly.

'You would risk your sister's life for your vengeance?'

'No.' He sighed resignedly, almost wearily. 'Odin goes with you. One way or another, he will die soon anyway. Freya goes too. I could not trust him to fly the ship; Freya must still do that. You also must not trust him. Watch him all the time. He will have no scruples about doing anything to either of you if it means saving his life or regaining power.'

Thor could not imagine Odin doing anything to harm Freya but 'We'll watch him,' he agreed. 'I can see one other problem for your success on Earth,' he went on. 'If you stop everyone drinking that evil tea, it will stop destroying your immunity. But that won't give you immunity; that can only come from contact over time or by immunisation. You'll all have to be quarantined when you arrive and immunised against everything.'

'No quick way?'

'Well,' Thor said dubiously, "I don't know if anyone has ever actually tried this, but theoretically, if you had a suitable source of spleen memory cells and the right antigens, you could isolate specific antibody-producing cells by flow cytometry or magnetic activated cell separation, then isolate the messenger ribonucleic acid directly from culture by magnetic isolation and transmit this to donor spleen memory cells.'

'You would be a suitable source of spleen memory cells?'

'I guess so, but you wouldn't have the antigens.'

'You mean extracts of the relevant disease-producing organisms?'

'Yes.'

'We just might. I will ask Plarisoc. Would you be willing to donate spleen cells if he thinks it is feasible?'

'I guess so.'

Hadding put his hand on Thor's arm. 'I am asking a lot of you. Can I ask something more? Will you help me with the process of preparing antigens and antibodies? Only you and Plarisoc could do that. I also want you to go on and finish your oestrogen experiments; it is important that we know the truth about that.'

Thor hesitated. The feel of Hadding's hand on his arm reminded him forcibly of the attempt on his life. Perhaps Hadding realised this too, for he dropped his hand.

'Cannot you see how important, how utterly crucial you are to all this?' he demanded. 'Without your help and cooperation, it is all doomed. Finally, we will all die.'

Despite himself, Thor was moved, all his misgivings swamped by an overwhelming desire to rescue these people from their situation and a sense of fulfilling his destiny. Slowly, he nodded assent. 'I'll do it,' he said.

Thor and Hadding left the group and returned along the way they had come until Hadding suddenly halted. He ushered Thor into an elevator, which rose rapidly. They emerged and went into a kind of large tube.

'Lie down like this,' Hadding commanded and Thor did as he was shown, lying flat on his back with his feet forward and his hands clasped behind his head. Next thing, they were being sucked along at a tremendous pace through the tube. A few terrifying minutes later, they stopped.

'Better than Dreamworld?' Hadding asked, helping a shaken Thor to his feet and out a door into the corridor. They were back where the tour had begun a seeming eternity ago. Odin stood there. 'Well?' he queried.

'Perhaps you're right,' Thor replied.

'I picked you as someone of considerable sense,' Odin said, a self-congratulatory smirk on his face.

CHAPTER 20

'Christ, he'd better come to soon,' Thor muttered. 'I hope to hell Hadding knew what he was doing.'

'Plarisoc worked it all out. I'm sure it will be right,' Freya assured him.

Thor looked at her wonderingly. There had been a note almost of admiration in her voice; did he have unexpected competition?

'Yes, but did Hadding carry it out properly?' he retorted.

Freya eyed him sharply. 'You think he could have overdosed Odin? Accidentally or deliberately?'

'Either. He could just have stuffed it up. After all, things were pretty tense there. Then again, I wouldn't put it past him to put vengeance before all else.'

'Even his sister's safety?'

'Perhaps...Perhaps not.'

They lapsed into silence. Thor reflected on events. Hadding's plans seemed to have worked out just as he anticipated. At least as far as Thor was aware, the takeover had gone entirely to plan and the ship was now securely in Hadding's hands. Whether the rest of the scheme was proceeding as smoothly, he had no way of knowing. He and Freya had been thrust aboard the spaceship early in the piece, together with Odin—unconscious but with a transdermal patch containing the antidote that would return him to consciousness firmly attached to his skin. The trouble was that Odin showed no signs of awakening. With each passing moment, he could feel Freya's anxiety growing as surely as his own. It was bad enough for her to have to fly the spaceship on her own—though he did not doubt her competence. But they must be nearing the dreaded anomaly and she had no more idea than he how to get through it.

'Can't we go around this damned anomaly?' he asked.

'I guess so,' she replied uncertainly, 'but I don't have charts...' The indecision and fear were clear in her voice.

'Maybe the old bastard's foxing.'

'He's a better actor than I've ever known him to be if he is...but then he was acting all the time, wasn't he?' she observed bitterly.

'Christ, look at that!' Thor suddenly shouted.

She peered anxiously in all directions, then looked at him. 'What?' she queried. 'I don't see anything.'

Thor was grinning, a self-satisfied smirk. He had seen Odin's eyes involuntarily flick open for a second.

'Come on, you old fake,' he said. 'Wake up. Unless you want to die in this bloody anomaly.'

Odin opened his eyes wide and looked steadily at them. 'I don't much care if I do,' he said.

'If you don't care about yourself or me or your people, what about your daughter. Isn't she worth saving?'

'Yes.' The reply was quick but so soft that Thor had to strain to hear it.

'Well?' Thor queried.

Odin sighed. 'Going through the anomaly is—or was—a test of fitness to command, something you had to do to prove you were worthy to be Commander. Agcet, Hadding's father, would not do it. That is why I became Commander instead of him. Like father, like son; Hadding was afraid to try.'

'But,' Freya objected, 'he must have flown through it to get to the Earthship.'

Odin shook his head. 'No. He took a long detour around it. That is why he took so long getting back.'

'So you were just sitting there hoping Freya would prove her worth by managing to fly through it?' Thor asked incredulously. 'You were prepared to risk her life and yours and the mission and everyone on the Earthship to prove your daughter's worth to take up a role that no longer really exists?'

'When you put it like that, it does seem stupid. But it is something worth achieving. No one who does it can ever be the same person again.'

'Are you sure it's not just a question of fatherly pride?'

'How could it be?' Freya's voice broke across the men's conversation. 'He's not even really my father.'

Odin sighed, deep and long, as though the breath came from somewhere in the very core of his being. 'That is where you are wrong,' he said. 'I brought you up as my daughter and I have loved you as my daughter, even though I believed you were Agcet's child. No one could have helped love you. You were a wonderful child—beautiful, cheerful, caring, thoughtful, warm, loving. And you are the same as a woman. I would that everyone in the universe could be like you.' He broke off with a sob and Thor felt a wave of unexpected sympathy for the loss and the hurt at the loss the man obviously felt. He glanced at Freya and saw the tears there and knew she was feeling not only her own double loss but her father's as well. Odin was right: if everyone in the universe were like her, what a wonderful place it would be.

'You said you believed I was Agcet's daughter.' Freya's soft voice trembled with anguished hope.

'I cannot even remember how it came up, but just after you went off on your last mission to Earth I was talking to Plarisoc and I mentioned the taste test that had revealed your mother's secret to me. He assured me I had it wrong and it was quite possible for two non-taster parents to have a taster child. I still cannot explain it, but I was so sure it must be as Plarisoc said that, when you came back and they were doing pregnancy tests on you, I got them to compare my DNA and yours and Agcet's and there was no doubt you were my daughter, not my brother's.'

'Where did you get Agcet's specimen?' broke in Thor.

'Oh, Plarisoc found it. It seems we have thousands of preserved samples from people going back to the beginning of the flight. I am not sure why they were kept; some sort of experiment, I expect. I did not even know about them, but Plarisoc did.'

Thor was beginning to have a new respect for Plarisoc. Thor had always thought of him just as his assistant but he

seemed to be of considerable importance on the ship, someone who knew many things not known to others. Looking back on his own experiments, he admitted to himself, for the first time, that Plarisoc's contribution had been much greater than his own.

Another thought occurred to him. 'So you really weren't sterile,' he voiced it. 'My theory was right but one of the premises on which I founded it was wrong.'

'As often happens,' observed Odin. "I suppose I was just lucky my mother always got tea that had not gone mouldy.'

There was a pause, during which each of them seemed about to speak but did not. It seemed to Thor as though each of them was carefully weighing each word they would utter. It was Odin who finally broke the silence.

'I hated my mother,' he said. The sudden unexpectedness of it shocked like an outburst of swearing in a cathedral. 'She rejected me, wanted nothing to do with me. I realise now it was because she was desperately unhappy. Like Freya's mother, she was snatched from her home, though in her case it was Asgard, not Earth. Unlike my wife, she stayed sullen, morose, withdrawn, until she finally killed herself when she found she was having another child. I hated my father even more. He was a cruel, callous, unfeeling, uncaring tyrant who thought of no one but himself—at least, that was how I saw him. I realise now that the pressures of trying to run the ship under tremendous difficulties—he was a great Commander; my job has been relatively simple because of him—and having a wife who refused to even acknowledge his presence made him like that. He cared nothing for the mass of the people. I think great-great-great-grandfather honestly believed the tea was good for everyone when he introduced it, but my father knew it was addictive and he used its addictive powers to keep the masses in line. It has always worried me but I could never work out what to do about it.'

Thor saw a sudden flash of anger on Freya's face. 'I was beginning to feel sorry for you,' she said, 'but you've just reminded me that you're really no different from what you say your father was. You only think of yourself and your power as Commander. I hope I take after my mother and not after you—if I am your daughter.'

'You are my daughter, but you do take after your mother much more than you do after me. Which is just as well. The worst, the stupidest thing I ever did in my life was to have your mother killed. As soon as she was gone, I realised what I had done. Believe it or not, I loved her more than I have ever loved anyone else—even you, my daughter. And you are so like her. Every time I have looked at you, held you, talked to you, watched you doing little things, it has been like an ache inside me that almost burst me apart. Can you ever forgive me?'

Freya turned her face squarely to the front. 'No. Not for what you did to her. Not for what you did to me, taking her away from me.'

Both of them sat silent, with tears cursing down their faces. Suddenly, realisation of where they were came crashing back to Thor.

'Christ,' he said. 'Look, you pair, come back to Earth—to what we're supposed to be doing.' He realised he was becoming almost incoherent in his agitation and took a deep breath to steady himself. 'Let's not forget about this anomaly thing we're supposed to be going through any tick of the clock. Odin, you can take us through it?'

'Of course,' Odin snapped. 'I have already told you I had to do it before I became Commander.'

'Yes. Well...what happens?'

'It is like going through a breaking wave. If you walk into it, you will be knocked down. If you dive into the breaking part, you will be destroyed. But if you dive beneath the breaking part and you avoid the turbulence and if you time it just right, you will be sucked out beyond the line of breakers.'

'Sounds simple, but I bet it's not. Come to think of it, the theory doesn't always work out either. I've dived beneath waves and been buried in the sand. Or gone through one, come up and immediately been flattened by a following one.'

Odin shrugged. 'Like I said, you have to do it all perfectly and time it all just right.'

'Let's hope you haven't lost your timing then. Take charge and get us through it.'

'No. Freya will do it.'

Freya turned pale. 'But I can't. I don't know what to do,' she wailed. 'You do it. Please.'

'No.' He was looking at her huge, round, pleading eyes, but there was no hint of compromise in his voice. 'This is where you show yourself my true daughter. Believe me, once you have done it, you will be a different person. You are a wonderful woman now. After this, you will be a goddess.'

'I don't want to be a goddess. I just want to be a woman.'

'You cannot deny your destiny. You are my daughter. I will help you, talk you through.'

'No!'

'Yes.'

'I don't know what to do,' she wailed again.

'I will tell you, help you through. You can do it. Have we ever failed each other? Cut the thrust back almost to zero.'

She did so. To Thor, there seemed to be no difference, but he wasn't sure if that was just inertia keeping the ship going or if it was the lack of referents that made it difficult at any time to judge speed. Then the craft seemed to wallow a little and he had the distinct impression that it was being sucked forwards and sideways, a sensation very akin to that he had many times experienced wallowing in the shallows at the edge of a beach.

'Fire your right docking engine,' Odin ordered, 'and use it to keep us straight to the electromagnetic front on the screen.'

Freya did as she was told and Thor watched fascinated as an arrow, which he surmised represented the ship, became pointed at a right angle to the wavy line advancing toward it.

'If we go sideways at all, we will be like a boat broaching to a wave—swamped and sunk before we know it,' Odin explained. 'Bring the image up—amplify it and three-dimensionalise it.'

'How...? You mean...?' Freya was obviously flustered but quickly regained her control and fiddled with the instruments in front of her. 'Oh, yes, that's it,' she exclaimed in triumph as a three-dimensional image of an advancing wave front filled the screen.

'Cut your main engines and reverse thrust just enough to hold us where we are.'

Freya carried out the operation and the image seemed to freeze on the screen. Then the wave collapsed in chaos and she had to increase the thrust to keep them stationary. They all watched the wave re-form.

As it built again to a clearly discernible wave front, Odin calmly said, 'Be ready to give your main engines full forward power.' The tension was almost unbearable as they waited, then 'Now!' he urgently commanded.

Freya instantly obeyed and the ship was flung forward as from a catapult.

'Keep it aimed at the base—no, just above the base,' Odin ordered.

The screen suddenly filled with pyrotechnics. The atmosphere inside the craft became charged, crackling and sparking. 'I thought there was no charge inside a Coulomb conductor,' Thor muttered to himself.

'Most of your laws of physics break down under these conditions,' Odin replied.

Suddenly the ship began to toss up and down and to vibrate. 'Dive lower. Head it down,' Odin snapped, 'but not too far.'

'How far?' asked Freya anxiously.

Odin didn't answer directly. 'Easy, baby,' he said, 'you are doing well.'

Next instant, the screen seemed to go blank. 'What's happening?' Freya demanded.

Odin leaned back and stretched, a broad smile on his face. 'We are out of it, my darling. You did it. I knew you would.'

'I still don't feel like a goddess.'

'You always were one to me.'

'And to me,' added Thor.

Freya suddenly broke out in unexpected sobs and tears. Both men looked at her in dismay, not knowing what had caused the outburst or what to do about it. Probably a reaction to the tension of flying through the anomaly, Thor surmised. Odin had apparently reached the same conclusion.

'I will take over,' he said. 'You have done very well, but it is an exhausting experience. I will take over.'

Freya gratefully relinquished the controls.

'I must admit I was not sure how the new drive would affect things,' Odin observed.

'New drive?' Thor queried, his interest piqued, while at the back of his mind lurked a numbed realisation of the incredible risks Odin was calmly prepared to take.

'Yes. Our spaceships used to be all nuclear powered. Fine, but many of them were getting near the stage of needing recharging. We have been stealing material from Earth, but the material you use is not really the best for us—too bulky for the energy supplied. And our reactors have to be considerably modified to use it; we use flat sheets, rather than rods. That is rather hazardous. Plarisoc and Hadding recently invented a microwave generator that annihilates quarks and antiquarks and produces a perfect vacuum. This immediately decays to produce more quarks and antiquarks and large amounts of energy.'

'Hold on,' Thor objected. 'You told me all our particles are just figments of our imaginations.'

'So they are. I am just putting it in terms you will understand.'

'Or still trying to confuse me? I'm not sure you're not as confused as I am yourself.'

Odin laughed. 'You are right. I never was much of a scientist—more a man of action. Plarisoc is our only real scientist—well, maybe Hadding too to an extent. I am ashamed to admit I have let our science run down, probably because I have never really understood science or scientists. My father before me was the same. Many of our instruments have long ago ceased functioning because noone knew how to keep them running or even how they worked. Methods and protocols have either been lost or buried in the archives, along with masses of results noone knows how to access or use. Even many of our basic concepts have been lost. I know you thought we would have all the secrets of the universe, but if we ever had them we have long since forgotten them. With Plarisoc, things have changed somewhat. He has dug back into the records and revived concepts, ideas, instruments, techniques. And he has had our field crews raid Earth for books, journals, ideas, instruments, techniques, reagents. Without him, our science would be almost completely dead by now.'

'What about Hadding? He seems to know something about science.'

Odin frowned. 'Hadding will learn anything that he thinks he needs to know to fulfil his purpose.'

'Which is?'

'To be number one. To be the great leader. To lead his people to some great and manifest destiny. And he has decided that great and manifest destiny is to conquer Earth. That is why he has acted to oust me. I have always vigorously opposed his plan—both because I think it will not work and because I think it is wrong. But he has been getting more and more support for his point of view, especially among the younger, more hot-blooded field commanders and their crews.'

'How does he plan to conquer Earth with some thirty thousand people? What weapons does he have?'

'It will not be thirty thousand; more like two thousand. The Earthship's gravity control drive can be used as a stupendous weapon. The trouble is it is too stupendous. Used directly, it would completely destroy Earth—not just the surface, the whole of the planet. It could be used to lob a meteorite at Earth but even that is very dangerous and would

make life damned uncomfortable if not impossible. After all, that is probably what wiped out the dinosaurs and gave mammals their chance. It might be possible to give some sort of demonstration of its power and use it as a threat. That could work but it would still be hazardous and be an enormous energy drain on the Earthship. I guess that might not matter if the Earthship got to Earth quickly enough. But I do not think Hadding plans to use the Earthship. I think, in fact, that he may well abandon it and leave most of the people to their fate. Perhaps I am unkind to him. Perhaps he does plan to bring the Earthship in when he has completed his conquest of Earth. Whether or not, I think he plans to use the spaceships. There are eighteen of them left on the ship. Each of them can carry ninety four crew and passengers or troops.'

'So that makes your two thousand,' Thor said, doing a quick mental calculation.

'Not quite. A bit less than eighteen hundred. But I am adding in the four hundred and forty five crew currently on station in a hundred and thirty countries on Earth. I am not sure how many of these Hadding has recruited but I would have to guess most of them.'

'Are they armed?'

Odin shrugged. 'I have always forbidden field crews to carry weapons. They are well enough trained to kill without weapons and can always get hold of local weapons if they need them. It has always been a very contentious issue, especially when we have lost someone because some trigger-happy human shot him or some drunken lout suddenly produced a knife and used it. Hadding has always argued strongly that they should be able to carry weapons to protect themselves but I just would not allow it. But I would not like to guarantee that he has not managed to smuggle weapons to them.'

'What sort of weapons?'

'Probably hand-helds. Lasers that can blast a hole through just about anything, microwave generators that can immobilise, stun, stop computers and other electronic equipment, electronic impulse generators that can stop a heart beat or completely disrupt brain function. All very impressive, like machine guns against spears. But, as I have always warned him, given enough spears...'

'What about the spaceships?'

'Even more impressive. Masers that can blow just about anything apart. Plasma generators that can melt, vaporise, make things explode. Deadly destructive. Too much so if you come up against people who will not just immediately give up and surrender. If they keep resisting and you have to keep using your weapons, there is nothing left worth occupying.'

'Does our spaceship have these weapons?'

'I am not sure. I will check later. It depends if it has been rearmed since it came back from its refit. Then again, can you imagine Hadding giving us an armed ship?'

'Of course not...What was that about a refit?'

'I told you all the spaceships used to be nuclear powered and have now been fitted with Plarisoc's new drive. We could not do it on the Earthship, so it was all done in the Nevada

Desert. Believe it or not, we had scientists and engineers from several government departments—National Aeronautics and Space Administration, Department of Energy—and several universities working on it. They thought they were working on a scramjet. Actually, it is a scramjet in the Earth's atmosphere. The vacuum generating thing will not work till you get out of the atmosphere and into a near vacuum. The funny thing is that nineteen spaceships have been through and the twentieth is still being done and they think it has all been the same ship. The place is guarded by the Central Intelligence Agency and the Federal Bureau of Investigation and it is kept very quiet. They plan to use it for military purposes.'

'Our brass are as bad as Hadding,' Thor said.

'Perhaps they are. I think I was as naive about you as you were about me. You thought I could tell you all the secrets of the universe. I thought you could tell me not only how our two peoples could live together but how together we could make Earth the best of all possible worlds.'

'Why did you think that?'

Odin considered. 'I really do not know,' he replied thoughtfully. 'There was something about you. Perhaps it was because I thought anyone who could have such a profound effect on my daughter must be some sort of superman. Perhaps it was really much the same for both of us. I honestly think we were both being lazy. Is that the word I want? I am not sure if it is, but you know what I mean. You and I, your people and mine are very much alike. We will do anything to save ourselves having to really reason, to think things out for ourselves. It is not bad to turn to an authority sometimes. He really might know more than you and might even help you find answers; the child must learn from the master. There is nothing wrong with that, but people look for someone to give them all the answers; that is the worry. That is why I was so upset when you seemed to be thinking I could, and would, tell you everything about everything. But then I realised it was not entirely like that and that you were questioning everything I said and judging me all the time. For a while, you seemed so wise and knowing I fell into the same trap myself. And it probably is true that Freya was bound up in it all.' He looked fondly at his sleeping daughter. 'I suppose every man wants what is best for his daughter. I love her so much I wanted a husband for her that could never exist—absolute perfection. When it became clear that she meant to have you whatever I thought, I think I had to persuade myself you were that perfection. You know, I even saw you as taking my place—not as Commander of the Earthship, but as leader of my people on Earth. I still think you would have been ideal for the job, but perhaps I am being naive again.'

A heavy silence fell between them. There was so much to say but Thor could not decide where to begin, could not begin to put all the things he wanted to ask and to say into words. His thoughts lead him round and round in circles and he lapsed into a reverie that imperceptibly graded into sleep.

He awoke with a start. Completely disoriented, he looked about him, letting the sights bring him back to a realisation of where he was. He lingered for a long moment on Freya's face, soft and serene but with signs of strain showing in little creases around the eyes, the mouth slightly open, pouting pertly, begging to be kissed. God I love that woman, he thought, his breath unconsciously matching her softly sighing exhalations. Then the confusing, alarming thought came to him: technically, she soon will no longer be my wife. Freya had explained that, according to Asgardian law, marriages on Earth were not recognised on the Earthship and vice versa. So, where does that leave me at this very moment? Married to neither or married to both? It's all nonsense anyway, he told himself. No matter what anyone's law says, I am forever wedded to both Freya and to Sheila. But will I be forced to choose? How can I not be? I can't see either of them willing to share and I don't know that an arrangement like that would work out anyway. What can I do? What should I do? If I am not careful, I could well lose both. The thought produced in him a feeling of total desolation and he buried his face in his hands and wept.

Men don't cry. The old-remembered dictum drummed itself into his consciousness and he suddenly remembered Odin. Guiltily, he lifted his face and took in Odin sitting straight and staring ahead with the fixed, unseeing gaze of someone whose thoughts are miles away from what he is doing. He was obviously too lost in his thoughts to worry about Thor. Was that safe? Shouldn't he be paying more attention to flying the ship? Not quite knowing what he was going to say, Thor went to speak to him but his attention was suddenly caught by a blinking red light. Red means danger and something told him he had not seen that light before. Something must be wrong. He was about to ask Odin what it was when Hadding's voice in his inner ear supplied the answer. He was hearing Hadding's voice explaining to him how the beam generator worked and how a blinking red light would come on to show it had been activated.

'Hadding's activated the beam generator,' he said. 'What does that mean?' His puzzlement was clear in his voice.

Odin started but said nothing. Thor's vision was filled with that blinking red light. It held him transfixed. He could not pull his eyes away from it.

'I don't understand,' he went on, almost begging Odin to enlighten him. 'Hadding said it would not be activated until we gave the signal that everything was ready for him on Earth. He said if it was activated while the gravity control drive was operating, the Earthship would be destroyed. What does it mean? What can have happened? He can't have gone through the anomaly already, can he?'

'He will never go through the anomaly.'

Odin's assertion increased Thor's anxiety and puzzlement. Then Thor became aware of a detail that had previously escaped him—or, at least, that had not impressed itself on his consciousness. The device had a three position switch: the first position was for remote activation, the second was direct on, and the third was direct off. The switch was in

position two. The manual 'on' was supposed to have been disabled but, somehow or other, Odin must have activated it!

'Odin,' he said sharply, 'the beam generator, have you turned it on?'

Odin nodded. 'Any fool knows it is impossible to securely disable one position on a three position switch.'

'Why? Won't the Earthship be destroyed?'

'I hope so. It is the only way to stop Hadding. If we can destroy the Earthship before Hadding and the others take off, Earth will be saved.'

'At the cost of all your people's lives?'

'If necessary.'

'Why?'

'Why am I a traitor? Because Earth is all I have left to believe in. If Hadding succeeds in his plan, there will be death and destruction and another beautiful planet will be ruined, perhaps irreparably. It is the greatest of flukes that essentially similar human life should have developed on two planets, even though there has been a lot of cross-breeding. How many chances will man be given? I am sure there are many other places in the universe where there is life and life still evolving but the chances of *Homo* arising again must surely be remote. Perhaps somewhere in some distant corner. Perhaps not. What does it matter? Perhaps nothing; but to me it does. And Earth matters even more. Perhaps Hadding is right and my Earth genes have corrupted me and made me a traitor to my own people.'

Thor frowned puzzledly at him and Odin stopped.

'Perhaps I should explain that,' Odin went on. 'Hadding has almost as many Earth genes as me—great-grandfather married an Earth child—but he likes to forget that. The difference is that Agcet's mother was a pure Asgardian woman, while mine was pure Earth.'

Thor looked even more bewildered and Odin laughed. "It is quite a story," he said. 'My father was only twenty when he took off in the Earthship, but he was already married and had a son—it was what you call a shotgun marriage. Agcet was that son. Like many shotgun marriages, it was a disaster and when father skipped the planet he left the mother behind and instead abducted my mother, who he had always fancied but had never been able to interest at all. Her ancestors had been among several boys and girls captured from Earth. Many of these had gone into marriages with Asgardians but some were deliberately kept apart and allowed only to marry among themselves—both by their own tradition and occasional active interference by our authorities. So, while it is not strictly true, Hadding sees himself as Asgardian and me as contaminated with Earth genes and he has used this to help stir up trouble with some of the crew. But I do not think it really has anything to do with it. I would say that, if anything did it, it was my parents. I told you I hated my father. I did come to understand him but I still hate everything he stood for—power for power's sake, aristocracy, a belief in a kind of divine right to rule, a belief that he was always right in all his ideas, beliefs, opinions, actions. A belief that he was the most important person in the universe. I also told you I

hated my mother. I did, but I also loved her. She was sad, she was sullen, she was totally immersed in her own suffering, she neglected and rejected me. But she was so soft and vulnerable sometimes my heart ached for her and I longed to take her to her spiritual home—Earth. Sometimes she told me stories of Earth and she made it sound such a magical place. When we finally arrived at Earth, I found she had not exaggerated. It was beautiful beyond belief. Even her stories had not prepared me for my first incredible sight of that blue planet. We headed for a land that stood out bluer than all the rest, that I subsequently found out was your Australia. We landed in some tall green grass. I stepped out and looked at the sky, incredibly blue and with little white clouds, and blue hills on the horizon. I heard birds singing and the rustle of leaves in the trees and felt the breeze on my face. And the clear, fresh smell! I was instantly smitten and I could not believe most of my companions were happy to leave and get back to the Earthship and their mates. I probably still hold the record for the number of missions flown to Earth, even though, when I became Commander, I could no longer go. In the normal course of events, my elder brother, Agcet, would have become Commander, but he was weak, incompetent, a coward. As I told you, he absolutely refused to take the anomaly test. So I became Commander when my father died. Agcet appeared not to mind. In fact, I think he was greatly relieved I had taken the burden from him. He only flew two missions to Earth and both of them were after I became Commander and practically forced him to go. The first was when he brought back my wife for me. On his second, he landed in China, was confronted by locals, fired on them—he had picked up some local weapons somewhere—but was overrun. Only he and two of his crew managed to escape. After that, he flew a solo mission to look for dust fields and went crazy. We had to send out another ship to rescue him. After that, he just sat around and did nothing but, very sneakily, everything he could to undermine me—including teaching his son to hate me bitterly. I was weak. I should have put a stop to it—one way or another. But I thought of him as a brother, even if he was only a half-brother. I never realised just how bitter he was toward me. I think his bitterness toward me was probably the main reason he seduced my wife. The way I treated Simone is the one real regret of my life. It was not just for genetic reasons that I decided to marry an earthwoman. It was the memory of my mother, together with what I had seen of them on my visits to Earth. It was almost as if fate directed me to that little village in France. I fell in love with her the moment I saw her.'

'So you abducted her—or had your brother abduct her.'

'What else could I do—say, "Will you marry me and come away with me on my spaceship to live forever on an Earthship where you will never see Earth again?" We have always abducted Earth women and, despite everything, most have settled down to become very good wives.'

'Only because you keep them drugged. Even your mother was kept drugged. You would have kept your wife drugged too except she reacted badly to your evil tea.'

Odin seemed to slump in the chair. "You are right," he admitted. "It is an abominable practice—but a very necessary one."

"Perhaps you are right. You do need fresh genetic material from time to time. And I guess they wouldn't come willingly. I wonder if the babies you also snatched were better or worse off."

Freya opened her eyes. "Men!" she snapped. "You're all bastards."

Both the men were completely taken aback, surprised, embarrassed, a little ashamed. Obviously, she had been listening. Thor recovered first.

"Women have also been known to have had husbands kidnapped," he observed.

She blushed. "You could have gone back if you had wanted to," she muttered.

Thor laughed. "Really? It didn't look that way to me."

She looked at him rather wistfully. "Would you have gone if you could have?" she softly asked.

This is the time I should assure her I would never have left her if I had been free as a bird, Thor thought, but I can't do it. "We will never know," he said, but there was enough warmth and tenderness in his voice that she could believe he was only teasing her if she so wished. It was obvious that she did so wish.

Enough, thought Thor, we have more pressing matters at hand. "You know that Odin has turned on the beam generator to destroy the Earthship?" he asked her.

"What?"

"He says Hadding plans to attack Earth and will end up destroying it and it's the only way to stop him."

"Killing everyone on board?"

"That is the way it has to be," Odin replied.

"Why? He won't use the Earthship to attack, will he? He'll use the spaceships, won't he?"

"Yes, but..."

"So why destroy the Earthship?"

"Because we have no way of destroying the spaceships."

"Oh..."

"So, you see we have no choice."

"Perhaps we do," said Thor. "Hadding told me the plans he gave me would build a computer that could interfere with every computer on all your spaceships and stop a landing on Earth. That was why he was so desperate to get the plans back and why he tried to kill me. This detour he will have to make—how long will that give us after we get to Earth before he can get there?"

Odin considered. "I would say about twenty of your days, give or take a day or two. How many computers could you build in that time?"

Thor was thinking hard. "Ideal world estimate: twelve days to get the components and workers, two days to build, six days to deploy. Cutting it fine, but we could just make it."

Odin reached up and turned the switch on the beam generator back to remote activation. "Okay, we will do it your way," he said. "I just hope it works."

'So do I,' agreed Thor. 'And I hope it's not too late.'

There was silence for several minutes, then Odin said abruptly, 'I have not told you the worst part of Hadding's plan for taking Earth. He plans to use what he calls "the Cortes factor". You know what that means? I see you do.' There was no mistaking the expression of disgust and horror on Thor's face.

'As he tells it,' Odin went on, 'the diseases Cortes and his men brought with them killed something like ninety percent of the people in the countries they invaded, so that they had to do virtually no fighting.'

'We spoke of this,' Thor said, 'but it seemed the boot was on the other foot this time. You all told me stories of your people being threatened by our diseases. One way or another, I probably solved that problem for you. But you're telling me Hadding has some new disease he is going to use—new to us, that is?'

'New to us too. He has taken your influenza virus and produced some new strain that is antigenically quite different from all the current and previous strains. You remember that a new strain of influenza killed millions of people after your second world war. His would do the same only more so, because it actually attacks the heart muscle as well as causing influenza and pneumonia. It is quite likely that it would kill some ninety percent of your population and make it possible for him to conquer Earth without having to fight for it.'

'I didn't know Hadding was that much of a scientist.'

'Perhaps Plarisoc helped him. I do not think he would do that, but I cannot be sure. After all, Hadding got you to help him. Do not ever underrate Hadding. He can do just about anything he sets his mind to—as long as it does not require too much courage.'

'He must have immunised all his people. I wonder how many. I doubt if he would have been able to do everyone.'

'I would think just his couple thousand followers. I seriously doubt if the rest of our people are included in his plans.'

They flew on in silence. Thor had much to think about, many problems to which there were no ready solutions, or perhaps any solution at all. He had no doubt the others were deeply occupied in wrestling with similar thoughts. It suddenly occurred to him that he really had little reason to prefer Odin's version of coming events to Hadding's. After all, Odin had lied to him about his wife's death and about her abduction...come to think of it, no he hadn't; he had certainly done nothing to correct Thor's misinterpretation, but he had never actually lied. Still, it amounted to the same thing and also he was obviously as little worried about sacrificing the mass of their population as he claimed Hadding to be. He remembered Hadding's warning not to trust Odin and to watch him. Perhaps everything Hadding had told him was true and Odin was even now just scheming to get back his lost power. Then his mind flashed back to the help he had given Hadding to increase his people's immunity and certain of Hadding's unexplained anomalous actions suddenly made sense. He groaned

mentally with the conviction that he had been an unwitting accomplice in creating the virus and ensuring the immunity of Hadding's followers to it.

Suddenly, there were noises and vibrations and the feeling of strange movements. 'What's happening?' he asked, somewhat anxiously.

'We are coming into Earth's atmosphere,' Odin replied. 'In space, we travel with our vacuum drive and the ship is teardrop shaped. When we get to Earth's atmosphere, we change to a sort of scramjet drive and the craft becomes more cylindrical. Oh, and we give ourselves some window space instead of just relying on image screens. When we get closer to our landing site, the ship rounds up and looks like a flying saucer. We actually glide in, but there is a thing like a revolving girdle round the middle that acts as a brake, stops the bumps and stops us overheating. When we get close to Earth, it acts rather like a helicopter's rotor and lets us land gently and direct our flight whichever way we want to go. All very ingenious really. You see, our people were great engineers. The ships all came from Asgard like that, except for the new drives Plarisoc invented to replace the nuclear power. We would not have been able to do them without our base on Earth.'

'Tell me more about that.'

'It is somewhere in the desert in Nevada. It is actually run with a United States Government grant—or grants. I think the Department of Energy, the Defence Department, National Aeronautics and Space Agency and probably other departments and agencies are involved. It has all been rather cute. They do not know about the vacuum drive. They think we are developing a scramjet—which, of course, we did. We have been outfitting our ships, flying them in and out and they think it has all been the same ship. The combination of possible commercial and possible defence uses means it is all tightly guarded, very secret and, really, no one but ourselves knows what is going on. Of course, we flood them with masses of documents of supposed results of test flights and modifications and theoretical developments and accounting for every last bolt. It is all rubbish but it is very impressive, full of jargon and equations and page after page of figures. I am sure no one reads them, except for the bit where we say it is getting better and better, will be perfect in just so many more trials, only so many more million dollars worth of such and such materials. We are probably the reason their manned space programs had to be put on hold. Quite amazing people, the Americans, but I should not laugh at them—that was very probably just about how great-great-great-great-grandfather got Earthship One built. Bureaucracies are probably the same everywhere in the universe.'

'Look!' Freya burst out.

Thor looked out the huge window in front of them and saw the most beautiful sight he had ever seen—a beautiful blue ball hanging in space in the distance. God, it was unspeakably beautiful. He could imagine how it must have appeared to the space travellers on their first sighting after years of being shut up in the Earthship. Every person on

Earth should be brought up here to see this sight, he thought. Perhaps then they might respect and love their planet as it deserved to be respected and loved.

As they came closer, he watched fascinated as the view took shape. He could see a tremendous thunderstorm lashing somewhere on Earth—exactly where he as yet had no idea. He saw the tangled mountains of Iran. But always his eyes were drawn to a land that remained blue, even seemed to intensify in blueness, as the rest of Earth became more mundane-hued. This he knew could only be his homeland, Australia. Seeing it raised passion in him he had never expected to experience. How could he, a self-styled citizen of the world and even of the universe, feel such a passionate, nationalistic stirring for one small part of it? Yet, he did and a fierce determination to protect it at all costs flooded over him.

They had slowed now and the girdle thing was spinning, emitting a soft whirring. Gradually, Thor realised that they had ceased movement altogether and were hovering miles above Earth. He looked inquiringly at Odin.

'We do not want to frighten the populace,' Odin explained. 'We will go in just on sundown, when we are least likely to be spotted.'

'You have a regular landing site?'

'We have a number of them.'

Thor watched the band of darkness creeping across the Earth's surface. Gradually, he was aware that the ship was slowly sinking towards the planet. As he watched, it seemed to him that the rate of descent and the angle of approach were being very carefully controlled, though for what purpose he could not yet discern. He thought to ask Odin but the old man seemed totally absorbed in flying the craft and he dared not interrupt him. He considered asking Freya but he was experiencing a strange reluctance to address her, perhaps because to talk to her at all was to risk bringing the matter of their future life together out into the open and that was a question to which he knew no answer.

But at least as they neared Earth, close enough now to dimly see trees through the gathering darkness, he believed he had answered his question of the significance of the particular mode of approach they were making; the old fox was bringing it in in such a way that the rays of the setting sun would make it very difficult for an observer on the ground to spot them and almost impossible for him to tell what the object he was looking at was.

They came low over mountains, turned into a valley, skimmed over the tops of trees, banked across paddocks where Thor could see bulls unconcernedly grazing, then flew straight into the mouth of a huge cave. Good Lord, thought Thor, where in hell are we?

The whirring stopped and there was a sudden still silence. Sitting still and silent in the blackness was incredibly, almost unbearably, claustrophobic and Thor had to fight down anxiety verging on panic.

'I could switch on lights,' Odin said, seeming to sense his unease, 'but it is better not to make ourselves more

visible than we have to. Someone just might have seen us come in and come looking for us.'

'What now?'

'We sit and wait for our transport.'

'You mean someone is coming to pick us up? How does he know where to find us?'

'I have just activated a signal via our computer to tell him. His computer will have fixed our position by now and informed him. If he is not there, the message will be waiting for him as soon as he returns. He undoubtedly knows all about this landing field anyway. It is one we use from time to time.'

'Whereabouts are we exactly?'

'It is a place the locals call Blackfellow's Gully. I do not think you will find it on any map. It is a couple of hundred kilometres from Brisbane.'

'Not by any chance near a little place called Killarney?'

'Well, yes. Do you know it?'

'Do I know it? I was born there. I once hiked up here with my brothers and cousins. We'd heard stories of a cave up here "big enough to turn a bullock dray around in". We didn't find it, mainly because we got sick of being chased by snakes and bulls and gave up. I hope your man knows something about the bush.'

'I doubt it. He would have been born on the Earthship, has probably spent about two years here and probably has not been outside Brisbane. If we are very lucky, he may have made this trip before, but the odds are against it.'

'Perhaps we should meet him. Then again, perhaps not. It would look pretty suspicious three people without any obvious transport blundering around here in the dark—especially dressed as we are. Do we have any Earth type clothing on the ship or will he bring some?'

'I am getting stupid in my old age,' said Odin. 'I will have to send another message. I hope he has not already got the first one and started out. No, I am sure he will wait till first light tomorrow. He will not want to go blundering around here in the dark and it will look a lot less suspicious if he waits till morning.'

'Why don't you send him a message telling him to bring us hiking gear and to come at first light tomorrow morning? You'll need to give him our sizes too.'

'Sizes?'

'Yes, sizes. We'll look more than suspicious if he turns up with clothes that are far too big or far too small for us.'

'You expect me to remember my size in your stupid measurements?' Odin snapped.

Thor laughed. 'Not really. I can't remember my own. Got anything we can measure ourselves with? I guess it will be in your measurements if you have and then we—or your man—will have to convert.' He laughed again. 'What dills we are.'

'I do not see anything funny about it,' Odin said crossly. 'We will have to send pictograms and we will need light for that. I will send the message first and then follow with the pictograms.'

Thor watched the green glow of the computer screen as it filled with the message. Then light suddenly flooded the ship. 'Let's get this over with quickly,' Odin said. 'You first. Stand up.'

Thor did as he was told and watched the screen, expecting to see some kind of image appear there. Instead, a long string of symbols flashed across it and disappeared. Of course, he thought, they'd do it that way rather than send an actual picture. The receiving computer would translate and he guessed the person at the other end would have some means of extracting measurements from that.

Freya's and Odin's pictograms were sent and the lights extinguished within seconds. The whole procedure had probably taken less than a minute. Yet Odin was worried lest that had been enough to draw someone's attention to their whereabouts. 'I think I will go out and check that noone is around,' he said. 'Do you two want to come?'

'Yes,' Thor quickly agreed.

Freya's rather hesitant agreement followed.

In the dim glow from the computer screen, Thor saw Odin take something from a container in front of him and hand it to Freya. While he was wondering what was going on, Odin repeated the procedure and he found himself clutching what he saw was a pair of gloves. He could dimly see Freya struggling hers on and he did the same. Next moment, Freya's hands were glowing. He looked at his own gloves but they were still dark. Still puzzled, he saw Odin press his gloved hands together and light appear. Suddenly enlightened, he did the same and saw his own hands glow. It must be some sort of pressure-activated chemiluminescence, he decided. Now Odin was leading the way from the craft, guiding his path by the light from his cupped hands, held so that the light shone directly down and would be invisible to anyone more than a few feet away. Freya and Thor followed him.

'God, our burglars would love these,' Thor observed.

Odin glared at him, indicating silence. They moved towards the mouth of the cave. Odin made a quick wiping movement of his palms across each other. There was a small flash of light and then blackness. Freya and Thor followed his example.

They edged closer still toward the cave's mouth. Then, almost simultaneously, the three of them stood stock still, transfixed. There, standing just above the gloomy rim of rugged hills to the east, was a fulgent moon, huge, entire, complete, yellow, incredibly bright, flooding the small valley with light, revealing tall trees, small scrub, a small creek or gully snaking along, bulls and cows and horses standing, smaller animals moving through tall grass, filling the whole scene with a sense of wonder.

The three stood looking at the scene in silence and then looked at each other. Freya was between the two men. She took a hand of each and held it in hers. To Thor, it was as though a silent compact had been made. Together they would save this planet from Hadding and his followers and from whatever other threats there might ever be. He was sure the

others felt the same. He felt too that, as long as they lived, they were all linked with an indissoluble bond.

They stood for a long time looking. Finally, Odin said, 'I am an old man. I must sleep,' and left them.

Thor took Freya in his arms and stroked her tenderly as she cuddled close. They stood, silent tears flowing down both their faces. He sighed, a deep, never-ending sigh, full of all his doubts and fears and feelings and longings and memories and projections for an uncertain future.

'Don't ever leave me,' she said.

'Oh, Freya, Freya, Freya,' he sobbed.

She raised her face and he kissed her, breathing in her breath and her scent as though trying to capture her essence, her soul. He licked at the salty tears still coursing down from her eyes. She giggled a little uncertainly. 'I want you,' he said.

'And I want you-forever.'

'Forever?' he echoed. He seemed to chew on the word, taste it, inspect it for meaning. 'There is no forever.'

'I want you forever,' she said again, fiercely, defiantly. 'I'll do anything I have to do to keep you. What do you want me to do? Ask and it's yours. Anything except going away and leaving you.'

'Oh, Freya.' He dropped his hands from her and stood looking down at her. 'It's not that simple.'

'Your wife? Remember I am your wife too. You do love me, don't you? You need me, you want me. I need you, I want you. Has she ever given you anything I haven't given you or won't give you? I need you more than she does. And our child needs you.' She was becoming almost hysterical.

He put his arms around her again and held her close. 'I need you,' he murmured into her soft hair. 'I want you. I love you. Forever.'

She sighed and nestled into him, surrendering herself completely to his care and protection. I do, I do, thought Thor. I want this woman so much. But if Sheila were here saying the same things to me, I probably would say the same things to her.

CHAPTER 21

Thor woke uneasily. Every joint and muscle ached and there was a strong undercurrent of anxiety in his consciousness. He slowly eased his aching back, shoulders, neck, head from the rock of the cave mouth and slowly tried to arrange his limbs and trunk into a position with some semblance of comfort—ever so slowly and ever so gently so as not to disturb the sleeping woman lying back on his chest and between his propped-up legs. She stirred slightly and moved her lips in a suggestion of a pout. He breathed through the soft golden hair that had fallen across his mouth and looked at her. God she was beautiful! In sleep, she looked so perfect, so innocent, so complete, so trusting, childlike and yet maternal, an idealised representation of the eternal woman. There was a faint smile on her lips now, a smile with a hint of self-satisfaction, of destiny fulfilled, a smile that spoke of cosmic order and the fitness of things. Her hands were folded across her protuberant belly, as though protecting, almost caressing, the precious burden inside. How could I ever leave her? Thor asked himself.

Suddenly, she opened her eyes. 'Good morning, starshine,' Thor said.

She reached her hands up behind his head and pulled his face down to hers and kissed him. 'Hello, darling.'

The first rays of the morning sun were beginning to creep over the hills, more a harbinger of dawn than dawn itself. It was almost a penumbra outside—a lessening of darkness more than a lightening. But, within minutes it seemed light was filling the little valley, the dawn chorus of birds had begun and cows were gently lowing. Thor watched the mist rising from the valley floor and was struck by the timelessness of the scene. He remembered scenes exactly like this from his youth thirty years or more ago. Undoubtedly, this valley had been like that many years before he was born and would be many years after he died. Even if Hadding conquered Earth, this scene could very well remain. The people might go, but the rest—even the cattle—might well stay, promising a transcendent continuity and eventual rebirth and regeneration. For a moment, Thor was almost overcome by an old feeling of the insignificance of his efforts, but he mentally shook himself out of it; what he was trying to do was definitely worthwhile and no one else could do it.

'I wonder when our driver will get here,' he spoke his thoughts out loud.

As if in answer, there was a loud bellow of rage from below. Thor gently pushed Freya forwards and eased himself up. His cramped legs would scarcely support him. He stretched every bit of his body and gingerly, clumsily moved forward. He found he was very close to the lip of the cave entrance, dropped to his knees and crawled forward almost to the very edge. He saw a man desperately struggling through a fence, its barbs tangling in his clothes, while a bull was charging down on him. 'We nearly had to walk,' he said to himself as the man finally made it through the fence mere seconds before the bull reached him.

Freya had crawled up to join him and they watched the man pick himself up, inspect his clothes and pick up a heavy pack he had obviously had the good sense to throw over the fence before attempting to negotiate it himself.

'Definitely our driver,' Thor said. 'Couldn't be anyone else equipped like that. He certainly took Odin literally when he said to be here at first light. I hope he makes it up here. Maybe I should go and meet him.'

'What if he isn't? How would you explain being here and dressed like that?'

She had a point, but the man, though obviously quick-witted, was just as obviously not used to the ways of the bush. As Thor hesitated, he disappeared from view, lost in the overhang of the cliff. Thor wondered how obvious the path up would be; probably fairly well concealed, he concluded, or a lot more people would know about the cave. Did the man know? Had he perhaps been here before or had some kind of map or instructions to guide him? Or was he merely blindly following a signal?

The minutes dragged on and Thor's anxious indecision increased. Finally, he could take it no longer. 'I'm going to meet him,' he said.

Freya moved a hand to restrain him as he struggled to his feet but she let it drop, clearly signalling that he must do what he thought best. He was still stiff, sore and awkward in his movements, but he cautiously cast about for some sign of a track coming up. There was none. The best hope he could see was a jagged split between two massive boulders jutting up from the ground and partially screening the cave. He crouched down on to his haunches and cautiously edged himself off the ledge and down the steep slope towards it. He made the split and edged himself, back against the rock, through it. Below he could see only tangled scrub.

He stood irresolute, wondering whether to go down, back up or stay where he was. Suddenly, he saw a movement well off to the right. It was a rock wallaby jumping down the cliff. Was that a path?

He had almost made up his mind to move over towards where he had seen the wallaby when a golden flash on his left attracted his attention. There, standing looking at him with mild curiosity, was a full-grown male dingo. It inspected him for a long moment, then casually turned away and padded down what Thor could now see was a path. Clumsily, blundering into branches, tripping and stumbling over rocks and roots and vines, his soft footwear slipping on rock and twisting his ankles, he followed. It was, at best, a mere suggestion of a path and, without occasional golden flashes as the dingo's magnificent coat caught the morning sun, he would probably have quickly lost it.

The slope was decreasing now and he became aware of the sound of flowing water. He pushed through a last clump of low gums and stopped entranced. A small stream babbled its way down a series of cataracts. He stepped carefully across the flat rock it was bisecting, drawn as though by a magnet to the crystal clear water. He dropped down, cupped his hands and drank thirstily from one of the miniature waterfalls. The

water tasted better than anything he had ever drunk, and again and again he filled his hands and drank until he could feel his stomach swelling in his abdomen. Nostalgia flooded over him and he embraced it, wallowed in it till it was suddenly replaced by a flaming, searing passion to preserve this beautiful, wonderful, marvellous Earth whatever it took to do so.

But the water was having a physical effect on him as well as a mental one. The urge to urinate became almost irresistible. Laughing to himself at how his high-flying emotions had been brought down to earth, he moved back to the trees and relieved himself.

He turned back to continue his trek and saw his path blocked by a heavy-set bearded man dressed in a checked lumberjack shirt and matching jacket over a pair of blue denims. All had obviously been ripped on barbed wire, as had various parts of the man's body. The man thankfully shrugged what was obviously a heavy pack from his back and let it fall to the ground.

'Those bulls are pretty mean,' Thor said, laughing.

The man did not laugh. He was inspecting Thor carefully. Thor must have passed his inspection, for suddenly he placed his hand on Thor's shoulder in the Asgardian greeting. 'Hqli,' he introduced himself, 'though I'm known as Tony here. You are?'

'Thor.'

Now the man did laugh. 'So bloody well am I,' he quipped and laughed uproariously at his own joke.

'Don't you think you should keep your voice down?' Thor urged. 'There may be people about.'

Tony instantly fell silent, but not for long. 'Just as well you came to meet me,' he said. 'I was following the signal but it's bloody tough going. I reckon I would have got bushed before I found you. Far to go?'

'Not far, but it's pretty rough and all uphill.'

'Christ! Is it okay if I wait here?'

Thor shrugged and picked up the pack. 'Suit yourself,' he said.

He was breathless, exhausted, scratched in several places and quite out of sorts by the time he had struggled back to the cave, but the sight of the anxiety lines on Freya's beautiful face instantly disappearing and being replaced with a joyous smile did much to revive his spirits. Then she realised he was alone and frowned in worried puzzlement. 'Where's our driver?' she asked. 'Nothing's happened to him, has it?'

'He's all right. Just decided to take a rest,' he replied shortly, unable to keep the annoyance out of his voice.

'He would need a rest after being chased by the bull,' Freya observed reasonably and he was shamed into acknowledging his complete selfishness and lack of consideration.

'Let's see what he brought us,' he said and tumbled the clothes on to the floor of the cave. When he had spread them out, he collapsed into unrestrained laughter. The outfits were all replicas of what the man was wearing. 'They'll sure

pick us for tourists wearing this gear. Chuck in a pair of waders and a fly rod and we'd pass for gentlemen trout fishermen. Never mind; they're better than what we're wearing. Come and I'll help you get yours on.'

'Behave yourself,' she said. 'There's always more undressing than dressing when you help me dress. You get dressed while I go and wake Dad.'

'Get dressed first,' he said, his voice husky, and thrust her outfit at her.

'Okay, but stay there.' She stepped back and, deliberately flaunting her body at him, stripped off the clothes she was wearing, then held out her hand to take the new outfit.

He grabbed her wrist and pulled her towards him. 'You still look sexy,' he said.

'I look gross. You're just a sex maniac.'

Smoothly she helped him shrug out of his clothes and they stood pressing naked flesh together, holding each other as closely as her swollen belly would allow. They stood locked in an embrace, relishing their closeness. Everything else in the universe seemed to have faded from reality, leaving only the pair of them, united in a commitment to one another. Their breaths mingled in open-mouthed kisses punctuated by quickening, gasping inspirations and sighing expirations. He bent and took as much of her right breast, swollen in preparation for motherhood, as he could into his mouth and sucked greedily. Suddenly, he uttered a little cry and burst out laughing. She looked at him questioningly.

'The little blighter kicked me,' he explained.

'Just saying hello to her daddy and saying she loves you too.'

'Get dressed. You're getting cold.'

'Chicken.'

'You know we can't.'

'Just teasing.'

Slowly, Thor became aware of a presence. His movement alerted Freya, who released him, crossed to her father and, completely unashamed, threw her arms around his neck and kissed him. He absently patted her shoulders, while his eyes filled and overflowed.

Thor moved to the pair and embraced them both, kissing first one and then the other. 'My darlings,' he murmured.

They were interrupted by scrabbling sounds from the cave mouth. Thor instinctively placed himself between Freya and the entrance. He moved quickly to pick up her clothes, throw them to her, grab his own and again interpose himself between the intruder and his wife.

Tony hauled himself up and sat panting just inside the entrance. 'Christ, what a bloody climb,' he moaned.

The three travellers quickly dressed. Thor looked at Odin and Freya and had some difficulty in refraining from laughing aloud. The clothes seemed perfectly incongruous and would make them stand out. Never mind, perhaps it would work in their favour; the locals would take one look and dismiss them as mad tourists.

Tony's eyes popped when he saw Odin. 'Commander!' he exclaimed. 'I didn't know it was you I was meeting.' He became shame-faced. 'Sorry about taking so long and letting Thor bring the pack up,' he muttered an apology. 'I must make a bigger effort to keep fit.'

Odin clasped his shoulder. 'You did well finding good clothes for us and getting here so promptly,' he said, and the young man visibly straightened.

'This is my daughter, Freya,' Odin went on, putting an arm around her waist.

Freya smiled at him and Tony blushingly acknowledged her.

Their guide led them back to the road, though it was sometimes Thor who took the lead, showing them how to skirt the bull paddocks and frequently finding an easier path than the route by which Tony had come. At times, the years seemed to drop away and he was a boy again exploring with his brothers and cousins. If someone had told me then that one day I'd be coming back this way after having just landed in a spaceship, I'd have thought he was completely mad, he thought.

When they finally reached the road, Thor could not help but burst out laughing. There stood a Nissan Patrol festooned with fly rods. 'Should have made it a Rex Hunt Special Edition,' he said.

Tony nodded enthusiastically. 'Rex Hunt. Yes. Very good, hey. Shows how to catch the fish. Trout in little streams, no. Trout up here, yes.'

'Trout up here, no. A few carp and yellowbelly. Anyone sees us fishing for trout up here will think we're complete nongs.'

'Nongs?'

'Idiots.'

'Oh.' Tony appeared completely crestfallen.

'Never mind,' Thor said. 'I tell you what. Seeing you brought the Patrol, we'll make good use of it. We'll go back over the Head.'

'The Head?'

'The head of the Condamine River. It's a shorter, though not necessarily quicker, route. You can do it in an ordinary car sometimes but it's much better in a four wheel drive.'

'Shouldn't we be going the fastest way?' asked Freya.

'There's not much in it and if someone did by some strange chance follow Tony we may throw them off the scent.'

'Do you think that's likely?'

'No, but it's a good enough excuse.' He turned to Tony. 'Do you want me to shout directions or would you like me to drive?'

Tony stood indecisive. 'Whatever you prefer, sir,' he said after some moments.

Thor held out his hand and Tony gave him the key. Thor unlocked the doors, came round and ushered Freya into the front passenger seat and Odin into the rear. Tony scrambled into an unoccupied rear seat.

As they took off into the strengthening sunshine on the narrow gravel road, Freya's hand resting lightly on his leg, Thor lapsed into a deep reverie. Every sight, sound and smell—the blue hills in the distance, the willow trees

following Spring Creek, the sagging old church, the derelict school, the carrot weed and scotch thistles, the mist clinging to the hollows, the cows trudging along the road, the caw of crows, the far-off noise of the town awakening—brought memories flooding back. Even the feel of the tyres hitting ruts was nostalgic.

They went up the narrow road past Brown's Falls, Dagg's Falls, Queen Mary's Falls and on past farms into the rain forest remnant. The road was not a good one, with tricky bends and dips and climbs and parts that were wet and slippery, but he drove with little conscious attention, almost by instinct. It was a journey into the past and into the future. There was no pattern to his thought. It skipped between impressions, memories and questions. It was more like a dream or a meditation, all jumbled, nonsequential. Yet at the core of it all were the questions: How? Why? What now?

They came out of the forest and onto a more standard country road, narrow still and with numerous ups, downs and unexpected turns, but smoother surfaced. Here man's influence was more marked but nature still appeared paramount.

The town of Boonah had experienced something of a building boom since he'd last seen it but it still did not take many minutes to pass through and out again into less settled country. A person must be something special to be able to live miles from a neighbour, he thought. Could I do it?

Traffic was more frequent now. Suddenly, they were on the Highway, cars everywhere, houses stretching into the distance, noise and bustle and a conglomeration of people. He almost wanted to turn around, go back where he had come from, hide in the cave, become a hermit. It was a feeling that had beset him often in his life, though he had no clear idea from whence it sprung. Now pictures of torturings and emotional bullyings in his remote childhood—by both family and non-family—flashed through his mind. And then the terrible truth hit him: it was his kind, gentle, loving mother who had most done this to him. As far as he knew, she'd never been violent in her life. She'd never even said anything to him, never berated him, when he'd failed or done less than she expected—and she expected so much. No, she just turned her face from him, in the biblical phrase—withdrew, shut him out, made him feel completely unworthy of her love.

The tears streamed down his face at the memory. He felt a pressure on his knee and looked down quickly at Freya's hand. He stared ahead until he could trust himself to flick a glance at Freya's face. She was studying him with a look of total love and compassion. He wanted to say something to her, to explain, to express his gratitude and devotion, but his thoughts were tangled, his very concept of her a cobweb of conflicting, confused emotions, and nothing came.

They crossed the City of Brisbane boundary and his attention was catapulted back to his mission. He glanced back to see if Tony was awake. He was. 'Where's your base?' he asked him.

'Apartment in Highgate Hill. Dornoch Terrace.'

'Not in Torbreck with the blue rinse set?'

Tony hesitated, obviously trying to work this out. 'No,' he finally said, 'a bit down the road and on the other side.'

Thor found the place without any trouble and stopped outside. 'This is where I leave you,' he said. 'Sorry, Tony, this is urgent. I'll have to take the car.'

Tony went to object but Odin said, 'We are relying on you,' rested a hand briefly on Thor's shoulder and got out. Tony shrugged and followed. Freya gave Thor a hug and a kiss and she too went. Thor took off for his office.

He pulled in around the back of his office and inserted the key in the lock. It wouldn't open; the key wouldn't turn! What the hell! He knocked and knocked but there was no answer. He walked around to the front. It was shut, silent, dark and empty. This was even stranger. But then, he told himself, after all the time he had been away, it was not so strange. The strange thing was that he had given no thought to how the business would continue without him all this time. What was Sheila living on—deserted wife's pension? Then he remembered all the scrip his erstwhile friend had bequeathed to him and his mind eased; there was certainly enough there to keep her going for some time—even if, strictly speaking, it should not be used for that purpose.

It suddenly occurred to him that the building might just be temporarily vacated while Gina was out for some reason. Even as the idea came to him, he realised that it was probably mere wishful thinking. Nonetheless, propelled by desperate hope, he made his way to the front door to see if there was, by some good fortune, such a message on it. There was. It read:

Thor Ericson
Computer Consultants
have moved to
1 Computer Court
Eight Mile Plains
(Brisbane Technology Park)

The message mystified as much as enlightened. What was going on? There was only one way to find out. He raced back to the car and drove as fast as he dared to the new address.

When he found it, he sat stunned for several seconds, unable to believe the evidence of his own eyes. An ultra-modern office building fronted what looked like acres of building behind.

High on this building, huge letters proclaimed ERICSEN ELECTRONICS to the world.

He got out and walked slowly to the entrance. The reception lounge was softly carpeted, with several softly padded tastefully modern chairs, most of which were occupied. Behind a solid timber desk with padded front, clearly labelled RECEPTION, sat an attractive, fashionably but demurely dressed lady in her late thirties or early forties. She looked up as Thor approached.

'Where's Gina?' he asked.

'You wish to see Ms Whatley? Do you have an appointment?'

'I don't need one. I'm Thor Ericson. You are?'

'Carolyn Lucas,' she stammered. 'I didn't know you were expected, Mister Ericson. I mean, I didn't know you were back. I...I'll see if she's available.' She reached for the telephone.

'Don't bother,' Thor said. 'Just point me in the right direction.'

Reluctantly, the receptionist put down the phone and stood up. 'Follow me,' she said.

She led him to an office with a plate proclaiming GENERAL MANAGER bold on the door, and knocked. 'Come in,' said a voice, but as she opened the door Thor brushed past her and walked in.

Gina looked up from the papers on her desk. Surprise, delight, anxiety all showed on her face. For a moment, the enormity of it overwhelmed her and all she could say was his name. Then the questions came tumbling out. 'What happened to you? Where have you been? Was it that creepy guy? Or did you run off with that blond? Or...? Tell me all about it.'

Thor laughed. 'You've got some explaining to do yourself,' he said, 'but do you mind if I sit down first?'

He took a seat as Carolyn quickly summed up the situation and shut the door softly behind herself as she exited. Quickly, but in full detail, Thor told Gina all that had happened. She sat silent for long moments digesting it all. Her comment, when it finally came, took Thor completely by surprise.

'So you married this Freya woman?' she said.

'Afraid so. It seemed like the only sensible thing to do at the time.'

'And she's having your baby?'

'Yes.'

'Do you love her?'

'Yes.'

'And Sheila?'

'That's the strange thing. I really do think I love her too. I certainly don't want to hurt her.'

'What are you going to do?'

'About Freya and Sheila? I honestly don't know.' He smiled wryly. 'You know, I think I was quietly hoping Sheila had found herself a new guy and the decision would be made for me.'

Gina smiled and shook her head. 'Sorry. She's still yours.'

Thor sighed. 'Anyway, that will have to wait. Right now all that matters is to save Earth from invasion and destruction.'

'You're right. I'd almost forgotten about that it seems so unreal. How do you plan to do it?'

'I told you. Build enough computers according to those plans I gave you to patent that we can send out messages that will foul up their computers and stop them landing...You did lodge those patents?'

'Where do you think all this came from? It's a winner all right.'

'You mean all this has come from my new computer? You've actually got it into production?'

She nodded.

'Gina, you're an absolute whiz. I always knew you were smart but this is incredible.'

'It would be if I did it on my own but of course I didn't. Remember Betsy the New York lawyer? She was the one who got worldwide patents and showed me how to use the power of attorney you gave me and arranged to sell scrip for start-up capital and did all the legal stuff and organised all the rigmarole of setting up the business. Now, she's not only our legal eagle and in charge of licensing arrangements but she's our Sales Chief. She's having the time of her life. So is Sheila. She's in charge of publicity; she's got a real flare for it.'

The idea of his timid, homeloving Sheila charging around arranging publicity was so incongruous he could only shake his head in disbelief. But then the whole thing was incredible. 'I don't know how I'll fit into this women's' lib outfit,' he said.

'It's not an all woman show. Your sons are very much a part of it. James does all the installations and the real sales stuff. We've sold and installed a hundred computers in twenty-two countries. And James has done it so that they're all linked to a master computer here.'

'Say that again,' Thor broke in. 'All these computers you've sold are linked to a master computer here?'

'Yes. It was James's idea. If they have any problems, he can often trace it directly from here without leaving his office. And he can install and update programs from his computer. And he provides a kind of Internet service through it.'

'Brilliant! And all these computers are just as I designed them?'

'I think so. James made some refinements but I think that was only to allow interfacing with other equipment.'

'Is James here?'

'I think he's in his office. Do you want to go there or will I get him to come here?'

Thor considered. 'Ask him to come here,' he finally decided, 'but don't tell him I'm here.'

She picked up the phone and pushed buttons. 'James, honey,' she said, 'could you come in here for a minute, please? There's someone who wants to talk to you and it might be better if we talk to him together.'

She replaced the receiver. 'He's coming. Why are you grinning?'

'"James, honey",' he mimicked. 'Is something going on here I should know about?'

'Could be. I guess you could call us a twosome. Whether it will come to anything or not I don't know. Sometimes I think he's just a substitute for you. He's so like you in many ways.' She looked at him squarely. 'I think deep inside I'll always love you at least a little bit—the way a woman loves a man, that is—but noone will ever know there's any more than a daughter-father type thing between us.'

'Fair enough. I hope it works out. If he doesn't snap you up, he's a lot dumber than I think he is.'

'Oh, Thor,' she laughed, 'it's good to have you back.'

'It's good to be back.'

The door swung open and James hurried expectantly in. He scowled when he saw his father. 'So, Ulysses returns.' His tone dripped with sarcasm but there was hurt there too.

'Easy,' said Gina. 'Wait till you hear the story.'

'I bet it's a good one. He always did have a good imagination.'

'Not good enough to invent this one.' He told the story from the beginning, leaving out only his earthbound infidelities, watching the conflicting emotions tracking across his son's face. By the end of it, he knew that his son was like him—he'd suspend thinking about all the rest until the immediate, urgent problem of the threatened invasion had been dealt with. 'So, you see if Gina is right and you have linkage to all the computers you've sold and if they are still as I designed them, we can stop this invasion. Send them all a message saying you want to do an urgent update. As soon as each one okays, use that computer to send this...'

He broke off and asked Gina, 'pen and paper?'

She obliged and he quickly wrote down a sequence of computer commands and handed the sheet to James.

James took the sheet and quickly read it. 'Brilliant! If what you say about our computers and the ones on the spaceships is correct, this will certainly do the trick. It will make all our customers' computers slaves to our master and use them to disable the computers on the spaceships. What will happen then?'

'That's a good question. They could crash, blow up or maybe just become non-functional. Whatever, it should certainly stop them reaching Earth.'

James stood up. 'I'll get on to it right away. But we have a lot more to talk about after.'

'Perhaps you should let your father and your mother sort that out themselves,' Gina said softly.

James looked at her uncertainly and hurried from the room.

'Funny,' Gina said. 'It's often the kids who feel the father's betrayal of the mother more than the woman herself.'

'You think I've betrayed her?' he asked. 'I guess I have,' he answered his own question. 'Is she here?'

'I think she's out. Let's go and see.'

Reluctantly, he followed her to Sheila's office. Except for such details as the colour scheme and cedar furniture rather than oak, it was a carbon copy of Gina's. He sat behind the desk, trying to imagine her sitting there, but could not. He looked at the photo on the desk of himself and his two sons in canoes on the Brisbane River, while their two dogs splashed in the shallows. Memories flooded in on him and he had to swallow to ease the pressure of the huge lump in his throat that threatened to choke him. He glanced down at the desk diary. Twenty-third of January. Good God, he'd been away over eight months! He'd missed his son's birthday, his wife's birthday, Christmas, his own birthday. And then he noticed, written large across the page ANNIVERSARY. Today was their Anniversary! What's more, it was their twenty-fifth—the

silver. They'd never been much on buying each other expensive anniversary presents but surely the silver was different. He'd have to get her something silver and fast. Suddenly, it was all too much. He put his face in his hands, dropped his head to the desk and gave vent to all his pent-up emotions. He felt Gina's soothing, supporting hand on his shoulder and was grateful for it but it was still a long time before he could stop.

Finally, he straightened and said, 'Sorry.'

Gina softly stroked his hair. 'Poor darling,' she said. Then her glance fell on the desk diary and the notation there. 'Oh,' she said. The single syllable was full of understanding and import. 'Look, I don't care what, you're going out tonight to an anniversary dinner with your wife. And you'll have the prettiest ever silver doodad to give her.'

CHAPTER 22

Walking into the Coronation Motel Seafood Restaurant, Thor felt as nervous as a teenager on a first date. He was beginning to think this was all a mistake. It was really too much to spring on her, just walking in like this. What if she threw a mickey of some kind or other—cried, fainted, stormed at him? Just how would she react? She had always told him that if he went off with another woman not to bother coming back, and that was probably what she thought had happened—whether Gina had told him about Freya or not.

He spotted her sitting alone at a table for two, sipping water and scanning diners for some clue as to the identity of her dinner companion. She looked the same as he remembered but yet completely different. Her face was still rather chubby but there were fresh creases there he did not remember. More outstanding was the subtle air of calm confidence on her features. The anxious frown he'd frequently seen as she had scanned for him on such past occasions was replaced by a cool interest. A soft smile played on her lips as she apparently recognised certain people.

And then she saw him. Is it possible to scowl and smile simultaneously? To Thor, it appeared that she did. He crossed quickly to her table. 'You,' she breathed.

'Me.'

'Are you and Gina trying to kill me with shock? It won't work.'

What did that mean? Thor asked himself. Does she know about Gina and me?

'It was a damn stupid idea,' he conceded. 'It was Gina's, not mine. She thought we should celebrate. After all, it is our silver anniversary.'

'Fancy you remembering that. Is that why you came back today?'

Thor shook his head. 'I didn't know what day it was till I saw your desk diary. And I probably wouldn't have realised then it was our anniversary if you didn't have it written all over it.'

'I always was a sentimental fool.'

He reached his hand across the table and put it over hers. For an instant, she went to withdraw her hand but she let it stay, passive, unmoving.

'I want to go home,' she said.

Thor burst out laughing. 'Some things never change. But what about the meal? You can have cajun salmon fillet or fillets of coral trout, green prawns and Moreton Bay bugs in Thai coconut curry or spaghetti marinara.'

'I want to go home. I'll cook you a caribbean seafood chowder or Sichuan prawns and vegetables.'

'But I've booked a room in the motel.'

'I want to go home.'

A waiter appeared at his elbow, bearing a magnum of Dom Perignon 1982 in a silver ice bucket. 'Your champagne, Mister Ericson. I'm sure you'll find this to your taste.'

'I'm sorry. Something's come up. We have to go. We'll take the champagne with us. Could you please just make up the bill. We'll be happy to pay for the meal we would have had.'

'I'm sure that won't be necessary, sir,' the waiter said stiffly and shuffled off.

'I think we've upset him,' Sheila laughed.

Thor took out his wallet and extracted a twenty dollar note. 'I'm sure this will bring the smile back to his face.'

It did. Thor paid the bill with the Mastercard Gina had miraculously obtained for him in two hours and they walked outside.

'You mobile?' Sheila asked.

'No, I came here in a taxi.' His mind flashed back to how he had returned the Patrol to Tony and brought the three Asgardians up to date with developments. Freya had not been at all impressed when he told them he had to go out again and that they should sit tight.

'Lucky I've got my car then,' Sheila was saying.

Thor was still looking for the old Tarago when Sheila stopped beside a new Honda Legend. 'This is it,' she said.

Thor nodded approvingly. 'Goes well with the company image,' he said, with just a touch of ironic laughter in his voice.

'I guess you want to drive,' Sheila said, offering him the keys.

'No, I wouldn't dare. You go right ahead.'

'Rubbish! You never could stand being driven and I'm sure that hasn't changed whatever else has. You'd better let me unlock it and disarm the alarm, though.'

He watched as she did so. What's changed about her? he asked himself. She seems more capable or something. But she always was capable, even if she didn't always admit it, even to herself. That's it: now she knows she's capable.

She was offering him the keys again. 'No, honestly, you drive,' he said.

'Don't be silly. I can see you're aching to get your hands on the wheel.'

He took the keys, got in and adjusted the seat. As he did so, the box containing the silver chain with horse charm Gina had picked for him to give Sheila pressed into his side. He took it and handed it to her. 'Happy anniversary,' he said and kissed her.

She broke away quickly, opened the box and took out the chain. 'It's lovely,' she said. 'I guess it's the closest I'll ever get to owning a horse.' She hung it over the rear vision mirror. 'I can look at it there whenever I'm in the car, and that's pretty often.'

'The way the company seems to be doing, you'll be able to afford that horse farm you've always wanted any time you like,' he said as they started off.

'I'm not sure I like the way you said that. You should have said, "we'll be able to afford that horse farm we always wanted". Are you cutting out? You didn't come back just to tell me that, did you? No, you wouldn't have the guts.'

'That's not very nice.'

'It wasn't meant to be. Okay, I'm being bitchy but, for all I know, I've got a perfect right to be bitchy. Where the hell have you been? You'd better have a damn good story. And remember you never could tell a lie—particularly to me.'

'So that's really why you wanted me to drive—so you could watch me while I told my story.'

'No, it isn't. Stop stalling and get on with it.'

He told her an edited—and expurgated—version of his adventures as he drove, eyes fixed straight ahead. She made no comment at all until he had finished. 'That's not all there is to it, is it? Let's start again and have the whole truth.'

He sighed. 'I might have known you wouldn't believe me.'

'Oh, I believe you—every word of it. It's just that you've left half of it out, haven't you? Look, Gina told me about you and her and about you and the blond babe down the coast. Okay, now you tell me.'

He told her the story again, this time leaving nothing out. She even insisted hearing all the intimate details of his sexual exploits and he reluctantly told her everything. He flashed quick glances at her from time to time to see how she was taking it but her expression was giving nothing away.

His closing words were: 'So now you see we've got to stop this invasion. I hope what James and I have done will do it. It had better.' He hoped this would steer her away from thinking about other aspects of his story but he should have known better.

She sat shaking her head slowly from side to side. 'Thor Ericson, you're a worry,' she finally said. 'You would have been right at home as a Viking, heading out in your longboat every so often to rape and pillage and then coming back to the hearth and your ever-loving Helga.'

'No, it's not like that at all,' he protested. 'Look you know things haven't been too good with us for years—especially the sexual side. To be brutally honest, for years you've been the boringest, laziest lover imaginable. It didn't matter so much when I was younger and it didn't take much to get me going...and anyway you were a lot livelier then...but when I got older and...okay, we're being brutally honest...well, you turned into a middle-aged frump and you still thought all you had to do was lay back and give the signal...when you bothered to give any kind of signal and often I thought there was a signal and was told to shut up and go to sleep...well, somehow I was supposed to read your mind and know you wanted it and instantly be there doing just what you wanted...and you gave me bloody few clues what that might be. And then you went on the hormone replacement therapy without even telling me and from telling me one night sex just kept on getting better you went about two days later to saying ladies would rather just cuddle than have sex. And then when I finally found out what was happening and I pointed it out to you what it was doing to our sex life and you said "tough". I tell you then I regretted I hadn't taken my chances and left you years ago. You'll probably laugh, but I did have opportunities. To be honest, the main reason I didn't go off with Mary sailing around the

world was that I know nothing at all about sailing. No, not really. You see, I loved you...and I guess I still do.'

'What about this space girl who's carrying your child? Do you love her too?'

'I think I do. I always thought you could only love one woman at a time; now I'm not so sure.'

'It's not just a case of "when I'm not with the one I love, I love the one I'm with"?''

'I don't think so.'

They had arrived at their home. Incredibly, it still looked just the same as when he had last seen it. Sheila got out, opened the gate and the roller door and he drove in. She unlocked the door and they climbed the spiral staircase upstairs and into the lounge room. She automatically snapped on lights and the television.

'Put that champagne in the fridge,' she said. 'We'll have it later. If I'd known you were coming I'd have had some Coke—maybe some of Gina's special brew.'

What does that mean, he wondered as he put the champagne in the refrigerator and said, 'What have we got to eat. How does a cauliflower-parsley salad with chicken sound?'

'Go and change out of that suit before you slop something on it. Where did you get it?'

'A Greek tailor in West End. He knocked it up in about two hours flat—altered it to fit, actually. Like it?'

She crinkled her nose. 'I thought it looked a bit Dago flash.'

'Watch it. The Discrimination Board has spies everywhere.' He was suddenly serious. 'That's one thing I have learned from all this. Even those people out there are basically just like us. And there's good guys and bastards among them just as there is among all our tribes and races and clans and whatever.'

'I'm sure you're right but just go and get changed while I get you something to eat.'

He went to the bedroom and hung up the suit. He considered what to put on and finally just pulled his dressing gown from where he'd hastily hung it on a door of the wardrobe months before and put it on over his underwear.

Curiosity overcame him and he opened the doors of his wife's wardrobe. He instantly recognised many of the old familiar boyish shirts and simple skirts she had always favoured but there were also several smart new outfits similar to the one she was wearing now. I must remember to compliment her on it, he thought; she really does look very smart in it. Good Lord, there was even a leather skirt and jacket outfit.

He reached to touch it and saw, with shocked surprise, a collection of vibrators and dildos on the bottom of the wardrobe. It surprised him—not only because she had always been dead against anything to do with sex aids but also because he imagined she would have been quite content to do without sex with him gone. Maybe the odd occasion she had indicated her willingness for sex in the year or two before he'd been snatched wasn't entirely to keep him happy. Then he realised there was something rather strange about one of the dildos. He picked it up and quickly recognised it from an

illustration he had seen in a sex aids catalogue years ago. It was the type lesbians strap on to themselves when they take the male role.

He was still holding it when she came into the room. 'I found a couple of your gluten free pies in the freezer,' she was saying as she entered. 'They'll be ready soon.'

He turned around, still holding the dildo. Sheila froze. 'Betsy's,' she said.

'She uses it on you?'

'Yes.'

'I see...No I don't. I was convinced you were sexless. I would have thought with me gone you'd be saying, "You beaut; no more sex". So it wasn't really sex you didn't want, just me?'

'No, it wasn't that. Look, you were right about those pills. As soon as I stopped taking them...well, very soon after I stopped taking them...I began wanting sex as much as I ever had...maybe even more.'

'Why did you stop taking them?'

'Well, with you gone there didn't seem to be any point. You see, I originally started taking them because I thought I was in danger of becoming something less than a woman. Oh, there was the bit about preventing osteoporosis too, but I think that was really secondary. As you know, I wasn't even menopausal when I started them but I never seemed to get as wet as I used to and I thought here it goes I'm going to end up a dried up old prune before you know it. I know it will sound mad to you, but I really didn't realise how sexless I'd become till you obliquely raised the issue. Before that, I knew I wasn't wanting sex as much as I had and I wasn't enjoying it as much but, as a matter of fact, I blamed you for losing your appeal and your technique. And, of course, the longer it went on the more true that did become. By the time you made me realise the pills were making me sexless, I really didn't care. I actually persuaded myself I preferred it that way. And I guess I was enough of a bitch to use it to punish and torment you.'

'Why?'

"I started blaming you for turning me into a cabbage, making me stay home and look after the kids and the cats and the dogs and the house and not pursue some brilliant career. I know it was all bullshit, that you would have encouraged me to do anything I really wanted to, but I really did convince myself. You know, you were right when you warned me about marrying you; you high-powered scientific types are all the same. I know other wives have husbands who are always out playing golf or fishing or boozing with the boys or whatever but at least they have them when they are home. Even when you were lying there cuddling me, you were miles away more often than not. Maybe high-powered business types are just as bad; I don't know...I'm sorry, honey.'

He looked at her, frowning his puzzlement, still trying to take it all in. 'Where did Betsy come in?'

'Oh hell, Betsy. To put it simply, she seduced me. You don't want to hear all the gory details, do you?'

'Yes, I do.'

Sheila looked at him. 'Why not,' she said. 'I made you give me all the details of your affairs...Well, it was about three months after you'd gone. By this time, Betsy had got the patent applications sorted out and the company organised and we were starting to go into production. She'd left her New York firm and thrown in with us. She'd been staying in a hotel but now she'd decided she was going to settle here permanently and was talking about buying a Park Avenue apartment at South Bank. I'm not quite sure how it came up...I guess she planted the idea...but James and Murray were away doing important things for the firm and I was on my own and off those pills and dieting and exercising by then and maybe I knew what she was on about anyway and I was getting pretty horny...to be honest, I had even fiddled myself to orgasm a couple of times...anyway, I invited her out to stay with me for a while till she found something or the boys came back. She had a hire car she was driving but she told me to drive because I knew the way. We hadn't gone too far before she had her hand on my thigh and up my skirt and rubbing my pussy. Maybe I should have stopped her but it felt too good. When we got home and got out of the car, she held me and started massaging my back and then caressing my breasts so gently it was ecstasy. I hardly knew what I was doing as I led her towards the bedroom. She was peeling off her clothes as she went and she was naked by the time we got there. You wouldn't think it, but she has a magnificent body. She undressed me slowly, kissing and sucking at everything and praising everything she saw and touched. I've never felt so desirable in my life. And then she had me on the bed and was teasing me and then eating me and I must have had three orgasms in five minutes. And then she left me still moaning with pleasure and went away and came back with a miniature suitcase with a collection of dildos and vibrators. She used a vibrator first and then a huge rubber dildo that felt just like you when you're really, really excited. I came again and again and was too exhausted to move. She cuddled me to sleep and I slept like I hadn't slept in months. I guess I should be ashamed but I'm not; I enjoyed it too damned much.'

'You've done it again since then?'

'Many times, I'm afraid.'

'And you've done it to her?'

'Yes. I've become quite good at it, I think. She says so anyway.'

'What now?'

'I'd still rather you did it to me. But, boy, you're going to learn some of the things she taught me.'

'Maybe you should just stick with Betsy and I'll go with Freya. That would neatly solve the problem for all of us.'

'I don't want Betsy; I want you.'

'But you don't need me. Freya does.'

'Do you still love me?'

'Sometimes I wonder if I ever loved you or if you ever loved me. I can't remember you ever telling me you did without having it dragged out of you.'

'I love you.'

'I love you, but I also love Freya and she needs me. You don't. None of you need me. Even the company doesn't really need me.'

She looked at him steadily, silently, studiously for several long moments. 'Your pies will be burning,' she said and walked out.

They ate the pies in silence, seated in their respective favourite armchairs, several metres from each other, half-watching the television. Someone was talking about stress management.

'I reckon a good massage is the best stress reduction device known to man,' Thor said.

'I'll give you one,' Sheila quickly replied.

Thor immediately stood up and shed his dressing gown, standing in his underpants. 'You're on.'

'Hey, I didn't mean now.'

'What's wrong with now? I'm as stressed as I'll ever be.'

'We'll need some oil.'

'There should still be some in the bathroom cabinet. I'll get it.'

'You just lie down there and I'll slip into something more appropriate and get the oil at the same time.'

'Like your outfit,' he called as she walked away.

'Betsy's pick.'

He stretched out on the carpet and wondered where all this was leading. Was she going to use her womanly wiles on him to convince him to stay? Probably. He felt he should get up and make a clean break right now but he knew he would not. Why did I jump in like that and get all this going? he asked himself. Is it because I still really love her or is it because I'm so used to doing what she wants me to do or is it some sense of obligation or fairness? Most likely just the chance for a bit of good sex—or any sort of sex. God, I'm horny. I would have loved to have had Freya this morning, even with her father and Tony hovering around and so close to term. And then Sheila making me tell her all about me and Freya and me and Gina and then telling me all about her and Betsy! I can still picture them at it. Say, it probably would be fun to watch them, though I'm sure I'd end up chucking Betsy out of it and getting into it myself.

Sheila returned wearing the minute frilly nightgown he'd bought for her some twenty years before. If it was intended to arouse memories of happier times, it failed. He remembered, with annoyance, that she'd only worn it a couple of times, saying it was too uncomfortable to sleep in. On the other hand, it was nice to see that she'd regained the figure she'd had then, or even improved on it; he couldn't remember her ever having a waist like that. Despite himself, he could feel the blood flowing into his organ.

The phone rang. Automatically, he went to get up to answer it but Sheila said: 'Stay there. It'll probably be for me.'

The conversation from her end gave nothing away: 'No...Oh, I see...Sorry I can't help...better luck next try.'

'Just a woman found a dog,' Sheila informed him. 'It's got a collar with a phone number but she's having trouble reading it.'

Memories flooded back of the time their old Labrador had wandered off and their relief when a lady had phoned and told them she had her. A wave of nostalgic longing for his old life, with its unbridled domesticity and relative simplicity, engulfed him.

Sheila expertly massaged his shoulders, neck and back, easing away the tension, while he wallowed in nostalgia, remorse and guilt. It was a genuine massage, not a thinly disguised erotic stimulation. Sheila had done this for him many times and had become expert at finding and easing sore spots. True, it had often ended in intercourse, but this was not its intent.

It went on for what he guessed must be approaching twenty or thirty minutes. He'd really expected her to be making it more sexually titillating by now, but there was still no suggestion of that. Perhaps he had misjudged her intention. Never mind, he could lay there and enjoy this all night. Slowly she'd been working down to his lower back. Now she pulled down his underpants and worked on his sacral area. He began to feel himself stirring.

Suddenly, she said, 'Turn over.'

He rolled over, thinking this was a bit of a departure and wondering just what was coming. Smoothly she pulled his underpants down over his half-erect penis, right down over his legs, and tossed them carelessly into a corner of the room. Then she was caressing his penis, scrotum, perineum with hands and mouth. He lay back, feeling all his sensations concentrated in that one small spot of his anatomy as she licked, nibbled and sucked at him. Can this really be my Sheila? he kept asking himself. How many times have I tried to get her to do this to me and she refused? What's happened? Is this something else I have to thank Betsy for? Then she'd taken him in her mouth and was sliding up and down on him and sucking as though she would die if she failed to derive life fluid from him and he ceased to worry what had brought about the change and wondered only how long this overwhelmingly delightful sensation could be made to last.

Alas, not long enough. He could feel himself yearning to erupt. He was torn between letting things continue, thrusting himself in as far as he could go, and getting her to stop before it was too late. He remembered her most heartfelt objection to the practice had always been her fear of swallowing his semen. Moaning with delight and the effort of holding himself back, he put his hands on her head and tried to move it off him.

'What's wrong?' she asked. 'Am I hurting you?'

'Oh, no. It's just that I'm going to come any second.'

'So?'

'That was why you always said you wouldn't do it—because you couldn't stand the thought of swallowing my spunk.'

'Don't worry about that. As someone wrote in an article I read a while ago, why should I worry about swallowing a

teaspoon or two of a tasteless fluid rich in vitamins and minerals?'

'Have you tried it?'

'No, of course I haven't. But I'm sure it will be all right.'

'I think I'd rather do it where it's meant to go.'

'Okay. Come to think of it, the same article said a lot of guys prefer that anyway, so that they can thrust right in without seeing their partner turning blue and choking.'

She surprised him again by turning around and straddling him with her back to him. 'I've been dying to try this,' she said. 'Since I saw it in a book and they said how sexy it can be watching it going in and out of yourself.'

Slowly she lowered herself on him till he was completely buried and then just as slowly raised herself until he was almost completely out of her. 'Hey, they were right,' she said. 'It is sexy.'

They both spoke no more. She moved ever so slowly up and down, leaning now forward and now back and moving her pelvis from side to side so that it seemed every part of both of them was being incredibly stimulated. Neither spoke, but neither were they silent; both maintained a continuous stream of moans and groans and little screams and sobs and sighs. He finally came with a shuddering scream and a succession of spurts that seemed to go on far longer than he had ever experienced before.

He sank back, replete, exhausted, but she tightened her muscles on him and leaned forward. 'Stroke me,' she commanded.

He found her swollen clitoris and rapidly, steadily stroked till he felt her trembling in release and for many seconds after while she moaned her pleasure. Finally she lay back on him and his already slack penis slipped out of her.

They lay like that for several minutes until the pressure of her on his chest became intolerable. He rolled her off and she rolled back over to face him as he rolled over to face her. Their arms slipped about each other and they seemed to fold into each other as though all the bumps and hollows of their bodies had been made just to complement one another. They kissed before they knew they were kissing.

'We belong together,' she whispered.

What was there to say?

CHAPTER 23

They were awakened by an insistent, incessant ringing of the doorbell and knocking on the door. They both leapt up, startled. Thor grabbed his dressing gown and wrapped it around him. Sheila rushed off to the bedroom.

Thor stumbled down the stairs and opened the front door. Murray stood there, blinking in the harsh glare of the motion sensitive security light. Murray! thought Thor guiltily. I didn't even think to go and see him when I was at the plant. Once again I forgot all about him.

'Dad, thank God you're here,' his son was saying. 'I tried to ring but there must be something wrong with the phone; I couldn't get through.'

'What's wrong?'

'Your plan to stop the space invasion. It won't work. I went in to James's office to see him about something just a little while ago and he told me all about it. I didn't even know you were home.' (Another stab of guilt for Thor.) 'He told me all about it, what had happened to you and what was happening now and how he was contacting all the people we've sold computers to and their computers were going to run a program for us that will stop all the invading spaceships. But it won't work. Or it might work, it might stop them, but if they're destroyed or disabled in our atmosphere, how can we be sure the virus won't eventually come down, end up on Earth? I don't see how we can. We can't take the risk.'

Thor was stunned. Murray was right. Why hadn't he, or anyone else, thought of that? It was funny like that. He and James were the super-intelligent ones but it was Murray, with his straightforward logic, who saw the fatal flaw in many of their arguments.

'What can we do?' Thor asked, not really expecting Murray to come up with a ready solution.

'I don't know. Perhaps the first thing we should do is to stop James sending out those messages. We might just have to let them land unopposed and hope we can then convince them to destroy the virus.'

'Having the fate of Earth depend on the good will of Hadding and his crew doesn't really appeal to me but you could be right. Come on up and we'll talk about it.'

They made their way up the stairs to the lounge and sat down. Sheila came in wearing a simple, modest house dress. 'Murray! I didn't expect to see you tonight. Nothing wrong, I hope?'

'I think there's something wrong with Dad's plan to save the Earth,' he explained.

Sheila took it in. 'Maybe women really are stupid,' she said at last. 'I was just so glad to see your father I haven't really thought much about the invasion. I still can't really believe we're being invaded from space.'

'If Dad says we are, we are. What do you think, Dad?'

'I think you're probably right. We'd better call off the computer message thing. Is James still there?'

'He should be. I persuaded him not to do anything more till I talked to you and saw what you thought.'

'I'll ring him. What's the number?'

'Three three two three one zero one two.'

Thor went to pick up the phone. 'It's off the hook,' he said, looking at Sheila. 'You couldn't have put it back properly after that call.'

Sheila blushed and Thor was instantly aware it was no accident. Smiling to himself, he turned away and dialled the number. Several unanswered rings later, James' voice came over the line: 'James Ericson.'

'Oh, son, it's me. Murray just told me. I think he's right. We'd better abort our plan. How far have you got?'

'I've got three running and another twenty-three agreed at nominated future times.'

'Not so bad. Can you kill it?'

'Sure, if you think that's what we should do.'

'Don't you?'

'I guess so.'

'Okay. If you come up with a better idea, let me know.'

He hung up.

'Anyone got any ideas?' he asked.

Murray shrugged. 'Send a message: We surrender. We surrender. We surrender...'

'Oh, God,' moaned Thor. 'I just thought of something. What if some trigger-happy pilot or guy in charge of a missile silo or something sees them coming and decides to shoot them down?'

'Yeah,' breathed Murray.

They all sat silent, the strain of attempting a solution to the impossible problem showing clear on their faces.

Suddenly, Thor said, 'What did I do with Tony's number? Maybe they might have some ideas. Must have left it in my suit.'

He disappeared in the direction of the bedroom, to return shortly with a scrap of paper. He dialled the number. Tony answered.

'Oh, Tony, it's Thor.'

Before he had a chance to say more, Tony's excited voice filled his ears. 'Thor. Thank God. I've been trying to ring you but I couldn't get through. Look, you've got to stop your plan of sending messages by your computer. If it destroys or disables their ships close enough to Earth, you could have that virus coming down all over Earth.'

'Thanks, Tony. We just thought of that too. I've stopped it. Now what? Any bright ideas?'

'No, but I've sent out a message on Internet to our group asking for suggestions. Someone should come up with something.'

'That's how you organise your network—as an Internet group?'

'Right.'

'Can't anyone join in?'

'Yes, but I can pick our guys by their addresses.'

'How many are on our side and how many are on Hadding's?'

'I can't be absolutely sure, but I think I've identified Hadding's lot in a subgroup that emerged a few weeks ago.'

It's built up rapidly to a hundred and twenty-three in forty-five countries.'

'They got the message too?'

'Yes.'

'Won't they know what's afoot?'

'They'll probably interpret it as a little exercise to make sure the invasion can't be stopped. If they should tumble, what can they do about it?'

'Are they armed?'

'It would be best to assume so.'

'Okay. Let me know if anyone comes up with anything...How are the other pair coping?'

'Like caged tigers. I think they're both missing you. Are you coming back soon?'

'I'm not sure. Depends how things work out.'

'Wanna talk to Freya? Or Odin?'

'No, not now. I've got to go. Let me know if anyone comes up with anything. I'll keep in touch.'

He hung up, even more troubled, both by the thought of all those armed Hadding's agents and by the image of Freya and Odin anxiously awaiting his return.

He sat down again and they tried to brainstorm the problem but ideas were few and easily dismissed. They soon lapsed into silence. Thor's thoughts began to wander and he suspected the others were doing the same. Funny, thought Thor, how even with the fate of the entire planet dependent on us, the primary concern of each of us is with our own problems. But could it really be any other way?

The phone's strident ring jerked them all back to the present. Thor leapt up and answered it. It was Tony, but Thor's eager expectation of being presented with a solution was soon choked off. Even the way Tony spoke his name told him something was wrong. Tony was talking rapidly, agitatedly, maybe even in his own language, for the only word Thor caught was 'Freya'.

'Slow down,' he commanded. 'I can't understand a word you're saying. What about Freya?'

'I told you. She's gone.'

'Gone where?'

'Gone to try to talk Hadding out of it.'

Thor momentarily suspended breathing and his heart skipped. How could she do this? 'You let her go?' he stormed.

'I didn't know she was going. She supposedly went out to get us some pizzas. She was away a long time—over an hour. Finally, she rang up from Boonah and told me what she was doing. I tried to talk her out of it or get her to wait for me or Odin or you but she kept saying she was the only one who might be able to do it and it would be much better if she went on her own.'

'Do you know which way she was going? If she tries going up the Head road in the dark, she'll probably kill herself.'

'She didn't say. I didn't ask.'

'When did she call? Just now?'

'Yes. I got on to you as soon as she got off the line.'

'I don't think we'll ever catch her but it might be worth a try if she is going over the Head and we go round Warwick. We'll have to bring the Patrol back anyway. Beside the chance of having it stolen, it'd be too likely to bring official attention to us and that could be awkward.'

He turned to Murray. 'What are you driving?'

'Three litre Alfa. We can be there in two hours.'

'Feel like a drive in the country?'

'Why not.'

'Mobile phone?'

'Of course. Oh one eight one nine one nine oh one.'

'We're going,' Thor said into the phone. 'Try us on the mobile phone if anything comes through from your agents. Oh one eight one nine one nine oh one. Got that?'

A murmur of assent from Tony.

'Oh, and Tony,' Thor added as a seeming afterthought, 'can you find out what stage the refit of the spaceship in Nevada is at?'

'Sure.'

'Okay. We'll keep in touch. See ya.'

He hung up. 'Guess we'd better get going,' he said to Murray.

'You'd better get some clothes on first. And you might need these.' He picked Thor's underpants up from the floor and threw them to him.

Thor caught them and hurried off, not daring to look at his son. He was in the bedroom and starting to put on the long-sleeved moderate weight blue shirt and pinstripe blue slacks he had selected from his wardrobe when Sheila came in and shut the door—something that was never done in their house.

'So you're galloping off to save the fair maiden?'

'What else can I do?'

'Don't you realise your chances of achieving anything are far less than your chances of wrecking everything?'

'You think Freya can talk him out of it? You don't know Hadding...and you don't know Freya.'

'I wish I did know her so I could really know what I'm up against. She must be some girl.'

'She is.'

'And me? You don't really want me any more, do you?'

'Proust's law—we only get what we want when we don't want it any more.'

'You could have had me any time you wanted me. You still could.'

He shook his head. 'Not really. We've been together for twenty-five years but we've still always really been apart.'

Sheila sighed deeply. 'Maybe you're right. I read a poem a little while ago...Yes,' she said as Thor raised his eyebrows, 'I do actually read poetry now...It was a poem by Dipti Sava—something-or-other, some young female Australian poet, and it went something like:

"I don't want to live without your love
just want to live without you.'

Sometimes I feel like that, but only sometimes. Remember the old Meatloaf song about I want you, I need you, but I'm

never going to love you? It's just the opposite of that. I'll always love you, even when I don't want you or need you. I guess I wanted to want you and need you less than I did. Damn it, I did live without you for eight months. I guess I can go on living without you. But don't stop loving me, please.'

'I think I will always love you. I've never wanted to live without you. I always wanted to live within you—not just sexually, but to be a part of your being. You never really let me. You always kept the doors to your inner being tight closed.'

'You too.'

'Yeah...I'd better be going.' He finished tying his last shoelace, stood and folded her into his arms. 'I do love you. I wish none of this had ever happened.'

Sheila sobbed quietly on his shoulder then, still sniffing, unfolded herself from his embrace.

'Go', she commanded and he went.

CHAPTER 24

Murray had been as good as his word. It had taken them just on two hours to cover the two hundred odd kilometres to the spaceship hideout—or, at least, the roadway access point. The trip had started in silence, with Murray concentrating on his driving and Thor lost in his thoughts. Before long, however, Murray had been questioning Thor on his absence and had received the full, edited, expurgated version.

They had fallen into silence again until Murray had suddenly observed, 'You and Mum have both changed a lot.'

'Yes, you could say that.'

'It's still hard to think of Mum as a successful businesswoman. She's pretty tough. You should see her in a Board meeting sometimes. She even gives Gina and Betsy a run for their money. I think she would have really liked to have been managing director but Gina had your power of attorney and she and Betsy stitched it up. Funny that, for Betsy and Mum are really close. ' A little sideways look had shown that Murray realised just how close and wondered if his father knew. 'But I guess they weren't at that stage then. Of course, with you back, things will change. You'll have a controlling interest on your own and Mum will hold more than anyone else. If you ask me, Mum would make a great CEO or whatever you want to call the kingpin. But I guess you'll be taking over as the big boss now you're back.'

'I don't think so.'

'What are you going to do then?'

'I don't know. There might not be anything left to do.'

'You mean if these space guys take us over?'

'Yes.'

'I always used to think it mightn't be so bad if someone from another planet took us over. We haven't done all that well and they'd have to be more advanced and civilised.'

'I remember we used to argue about colonialism. You always thought the benefits outweighed the drawbacks. I'm still not convinced that was true. I sure don't think it would be true in this case. These people destroyed their own planet, created a society more authoritarian and unequal than any on Earth, where most of the population was kept in submission by drugs and terror and where bride-snatching was a way of life, and now they're going to wipe out most of our population with a virus. Do you really believe Earth will be better off?'

'No. We must stop them...And yet...you're harbouring the man responsible for a lot of this...for creating...or if not creating, maintaining that rotten society, and you seem quite attached to him. Or is it just his daughter you're attached to?'

'Strangely enough, for all his faults and misdeeds—and there's plenty of both—I've come to love that old man. I'm sure he wanted to change things. He just didn't know how. And I believe he did truly want to bring his people to Earth as peaceful migrants. Then again, you may be right. Maybe I have let my love for Freya cloud my judgment.'

There had been a short silence before Thor continued. 'I wasn't really honest before. I'm still not completely sure

what was the main reason I was snatched, but at least one of the big ones was to be a husband for Freya. Probably quite rightly, they're intent on maintaining diversity in their gene pool and not letting themselves become too inbred. Bridesnatching and husbandsnatching has apparently gone on as long as they've been visiting Earth. I can't rightly say whether it was decided Freya needed a husband and she picked me or if she fell for me and then it was decided she needed a husband and it might as well be me. I must admit I wasn't completely reluctant. There didn't seem a lot of alternative anyway. So, I'm kind of a bigamist although their law says marriages on Earth are not valid on the Earthship and vice versa and I guess our law wouldn't recognise the marriage up there.'

'Though I guess you could call it a marriage made in heaven,' Murray had observed dryly.

'Believe me, the Earthship was no heaven. Anyway, we lived together as man and wife and she is now very, very pregnant. That probably happened even before we were married, so she hasn't got long to go at all. That's another reason I'm worried about her.'

'I see...Do you love her?'

'Yes...very much.'

'More than Mum?'

'That's a question I keep asking myself. I think yes, but it could be just that Freya needs me more.'

'You don't think Mum still needs you?'

'I don't know. I remember my old boss telling me years ago that I was a great bloke and terribly helpful to everyone and how it was great how I used my intelligence to help everyone but the trouble was, without meaning to, I smothered everyone. Why try to work anything out for yourself when Thor would tell you, would probably even do it for you? I didn't really know what he was talking about but coming back and seeing how you've all blossomed without me I see he was right. I think my not being there was at least as important as Betsy being there. I honestly wonder if it wouldn't be better for all of you if I were to stay away—or go away again.'

'Where would you go?'

'I've no idea.'

'Not too far away, I hope. I'd miss you. And I'm kinda looking forward to having a younger sibling—or half-sibling at least. I hope it's a girl. It'd be good to have a sister.'

Thor had looked at him, thinking how little he really knew of his son. Over the years, they'd discussed and argued just about every topic on Earth and beyond and he knew pretty well how he thought. And he thought he knew how he would react in most situations. But there was always an unknowable core to him that he kept secret—so like himself. Was this why he felt such empathy for his son despite their differences—that sense of a kernel of deep hurt hidden inside? Where had Murray's hurt come from—his father's apparent neglect of him for his elder brother? Or something else? He'd probably never know. Perhaps Murray didn't know himself.

'You wouldn't mind if I went, deserted your mother?'

Murray had looked at him sharply before forcing his eyes back onto the road. 'Dad, I'm not going to judge you or excuse you. I'm not going to do or say anything you could possibly construe as helping you make up your mind. It's your decision. You're the one who's going to have to live with it. Sure it will affect all of us. Sure, whatever you do someone's going to be hurt. I'll tell you what you told me: It's your life, live it. That's what you told me when I was worried about tossing in the job I'd trained for, gone to uni for, and going back to uni to do something else. You made me see I had to put myself first, even if it meant asking you and Mum to make more sacrifices. I always knew you and Mum did make sacrifices—all the money you could have spent on yourselves, while I was arsing around, not putting myself into it, failing exams, being an utter pain...yet you never reprimanded me...oh, you always encouraged me to do better, but you never berated me as you were certainly entitled to do. Even when I got into trouble with the law, you stood by me. It's a wonder you both didn't have nervous breakdowns. Yet, I couldn't help myself and you knew that. I even used to try to get you mad sometimes, to try to get you to say, "You're useless. You always will be. Give up and take a dead-end job or be a bum." But you wouldn't. I wanted you to tell me what to do but you wouldn't. You'd give me plenty of advice when I asked for it but you'd keep telling me, "It's your life; live it." You were right. It's better to wreck your life yourself than to have someone else make a success of it for you. Noone else can tell you what's best for you to do. And you can't do a sort of cost-benefit analysis over everyone your decision's going to affect and decide on that basis. You've got to think of yourself first. What do you want to do?'

'I don't know. I think of Freya and I can't bear to think of being away from her—though I have doubts about what our life together will be like in the long run; I'm much older than she is and they live much longer than we do. I think of our child and I can't bear the thought of not seeing her born and not helping bring her—or him—up. I think of your mother and I find it impossible to imagine life without her. I think of you boys and I can't bear to think of going away from you and of not having your approval. I can't imagine a life without computers and yet I'm sick to death of the bloody things and I don't know what the hell I could do otherwise. I'm trying desperately to save Earth and yet I'm not convinced it's worth saving—or at least its people. Maybe I'm awaiting a sign or something.'

'You sound just like I felt. Maybe I did get it all from you.'

'I always did think it was uncanny how you pair were so different and yet I could see myself in both of you. Everyone always thought James was a clone of me but I could always see myself just as much in you.'

'Your darker side?'

'My deeper side. The side that wanted to sit in a cave away from everyone. The side with the guts to conclude the only meaning to life was what you gave it. The side that could nonetheless see everyone as gods in the chrysalis. The

side whose heart beat to a blues tempo. The side I sometimes tried to expunge but which clung to me more closely than body odour. A scent of fear mixed with incredible courage, of softness combined with incredible strength. The side that sometimes got me out of bed in the middle of the night when everyone was asleep to sit in my chair and smoke and contemplate a million things—including suicide. Do you know I've kept cyanide in my lab for nearly twenty years so that if things ever became intolerable I could take the final step without having to worry about how to do it? The only reason I'm here now is because I could never decide just when and where so that it wouldn't be more traumatic for your mother than absolutely necessary.'

He had broken off to see how his son had taken this latest revelation. Other than a single quick look, there had been no response. 'At least you didn't get that from me,' he had concluded.

'No. Now I know I was right when I sometimes got the feeling you were worried I'd do away with myself—and I know why. I know something else I only realised quite recently. Like I said, I always knew you and Mum had made a lot of sacrifices in money terms but I didn't realise till just a little while ago how I virtually killed your career, how you turned down jobs all over the country, all over the world because you wouldn't leave me here on my own while I was still going to uni. That's a hell of a lot of guilt to carry.'

'Don't think about it. It was my decision and I'll live with it. I don't expect gratitude, let alone guilt. It doesn't matter a damn now anyway. To be honest, I always thought success was a brilliant career; now I'm not so sure. Maybe I'm beginning to get religion in my old age.'

'You have seen strange things,
The awful hand of death, new shapes of woe,
Uncounted suffering;
And all that you have seen is God.'

'Good old Sophocles, eh. Sounds good, but it really doesn't make much sense, does it?'

'About as much as the modern poets:

"This world, this world, this world is shit
Weep away, say the angels, gold comes from shit." '

'Who the hell's that?'

'Pamela Brown. One of Mum's latest discoveries.'

'She actually reads that stuff?' he had shaken his head sadly.

'You might prefer Jan Owen:

"We are an affair
of more than fusion,
taste me—selenium, cobalt, zinc,
born of 1010 degrees
at the supernova's heart." '

Thor had been instantly catapulted back to the first time he'd met Hadding and Hadding had brought up his poem, 'A Piece of the Stars', on the computer. He had felt the mental tug again. The concept was something that appealed to him but he was not at all sure it was not so much mystical nonsense.

That feeling of oneness certainly wasn't going to stop Hadding rearranging the pieces to suit himself.

'Shut up,' he had said. 'Enough's enough.'

They had finished the trip in silence. Now they saw the Patrol reflected in the car's headlights.

'Methinks the bird has flown,' Murray said. 'At least she got here safely. Is it worth walking up to the cave to check she has actually gone?'

Thor considered. 'Maybe—just in case she's having trouble getting airborne or something.'

They locked the car and started off but they were only getting through the first barbed wire fence when a soft whirring drew their attention. It was the spaceship leaving on its mission.

'Missed it by that much,' Murray said softly.

Despite the gravity of the situation, Thor's lips curled in a slight smirk at the old 'Get Smart' joke.

'What now?' Murray asked.

'I'll take the Patrol back. I hope she's left the keys.'

The Patrol was securely locked.

'Bastard,' Murray said. 'What do we do? Call RACQ?'

'I'm not sure there is one in Killarney. I doubt if Tony's a member anyway.'

'We can always break a window and get in but what then? I never learnt the technique of hot wiring.'

'Me neither. Let's make sure she didn't stick them up on the wheels or something first.'

They both searched. They were about to give up when Murray stuck his finger up a rod holder and emerged with a key on a keyring. 'Bloody genius,' he said.

'Me or Freya?'

'Both. Okay, Pop, see you back in Brissie.'

'Hold on. I'm going to try to raise Tony on the mobile, though I don't think I'll have much luck.'

He didn't. 'We'll see if we can find a phone box in Killarney. Used to be one next to the Post Office. I'm anxious to see what's happening—if anything.'

They drove back to Killarney. The phone box was where Thor had remembered it. A frantic search for coins, an anxious wait through mysterious clangs and bangs in the system and then Tony's voice came down the line.

'We missed her,' Thor told him. 'Anything doing your end?'

'I've had quite a few stupid suggestions from the network. They've all been watching too much Spielberg.'

'Anything from Nevada?'

'Ready to go.'

'Great. How do I get there?'

'Why not let them bring it to you?'

'Great idea! Is it possible?'

'Sure. It's only four o'clock in the morning there. They can have a first light takeoff and come in and pick you up at first light. Works out fine—that will give them maximum invisibility.'

'They can just up and off any time they want? What about government snoops?'

'They can handle them. I know these guys; they're good.'

'You know them? Trust them?'

'Sure, sure.'

'Okay, give them the message. I'll await the pickup...But how do they know where to go?'

'I'll give them precise bearings. There's also a beacon in the cave to guide them.'

'Okay. Thanks, Tony.'

'Pleasure. Good luck.'

Thor rang off and went back to Murray. 'They're going to pick me up in a spaceship—one that was being refitted in Nevada.'

Murray looked puzzled but all he said was, 'I'm coming with you.'

'No, you're not. I'm going to sabotage the Patrol so that it'll just be able to make it to the garage down the road. I'm going to knock the guy up there and tell him I have to get back to Brisbane and have a lift, so I'll leave it with him for a few days. You're going to drive me back up to the cave and then buzz off back home.'

'Won't the guy at the garage be cranky at being knocked up this time of night?'

'No. He'll be grateful for the business and he'll know he can charge me double and I won't complain.'

'Won't he be worried about you leaving it there and nicking off?'

'He'll have the Patrol. That will more than cover his expenses if I don't come back.'

'It could be stolen.'

'Now, really, I wouldn't bother taking it to a garage if I'd stolen it, would I?'

Murray laughed at his own stupidity. 'Of course not. Okay, we'll do it your way. What are you going to do to the Patrol?'

Thor didn't answer the question. 'We'll stop at the park just up the road,' he said. 'I could do with a piss.'

They drove to the park and Thor went to the toilet, first pulling the lever to unlock the bonnet. When he came back, he quickly lifted the bonnet a mere few centimetres and pushed something inside. He got in and started the engine. There was an alarming noise from under the bonnet. He got out, lifted the bonnet and stood looking down at a badly bent fan and a holed radiator. 'What rotten luck,' he said.

Murray was coming back from the toilet and stopped to look. 'Lucky I happened to be having a piss at the same time and just happen to be going to Brisbane, isn't it?'

'Remarkably good fortune. I hope I can get the bloody thing to the garage.'

They drove to the garage, the Patrol's fan making satisfyingly alarming noises as it tried to simultaneously destroy itself and the radiator. A light was on in the residence behind the garage. A man in overalls emerged from the door. 'Trouble?' he asked laconically.

'Could say that,' Thor answered. 'Something's happened to the fan. Something must have flown up.'

'Let's have a look.'

There was a click as Thor unlocked the bonnet and then the mechanic had swung it up and softly whistled.

'Made quite a mess,' he said as Thor joined him. 'You're up for a new radiator and fan at least. Have to get parts. Don't run to Patrols much up here. Can you leave it with me? You ain't got a lot of choice anyway; you can't drive it like that.'

'No worries. Take as long as you need. I've got to get to Brisbane but I was lucky and I've got a lift. Bloke pulled up for a piss same time as me. I'll give you my phone number and you can give me a bell when it's ready.'

'Fair enough. Gunna cost ya a bit.'

'Yeah. Well, I ain't got much choice, have I? Thanks, mate. See ya.'

'Yeah. I'll ring ya.'

Thor strode off to where Murray waited and they headed off in the direction of Brisbane before cutting back on a side street on the outskirts of town and heading back to the cave.

When they reached the access point, father and son embraced for a long moment.

'Good luck,' Murray said. 'And take care of yourself.'

'You too,' replied Thor. 'Look after your mother. Tell her I'll be back.'

'Yeah.'

Strange how that one word affirmation seemed to encapsulate all the doubt and confusion of the situation, thought Thor. He waved briefly as Murray accelerated away, then trudged in the direction of the cave.

CHAPTER 25

They came at dawn, slipping in with the rising sun's rays so as to minimise the risk of being observed. This coming and going with the sun seemed somehow symbolic to Thor but he was not sure of what.

There were five of them—Craig, Ronald, Peter, Nicholas and Evangelos. Undoubtedly these were Earth aliases, not their real names. Given that, why choose Evangelos? True, unlike the others with their fair hair and complexions, he did look Greek, but...

Craig was obviously the leader. He took the controls and they took off again immediately. "Do you mind if we speak English," he asked. "We've kinda got used to it; you could even say we've got to where we like it. And Evangelos is not one of us. He's a scientist with NASA. Short of knocking him off, we couldn't get rid of the bastard. Clung to us like chewing gum. He's not a bad guy for an Earthman. I guess we might have to make him get out and walk when we get away from Earth a bit though."

Even Evangelos smiled; it was obvious Craig was joking. This was, however, thought Thor, a further complication they could well have done without.

"How much do you know about all this?" Thor asked.

"Bugger all. Just pick you up and do what you say. So, what is the screaming emergency? And where are we off to?"

"To answer the last part first, I'm damned if I know...out there somewhere." Craig looked at him sharply. He went on, watching carefully the reactions of the men. "Somewhere out there is a spaceship piloted by Freya, Odin's daughter. I want to find it and talk to her. She's flying out to try to intercept Hadding, whom I'm sure you know or have at last heard of. She's going to try to talk him out of invading Earth. He'll have all the spaceships except these two, fully armed. He intends to conquer Earth by hitting it with a deadly virus he's developed. We want to stop him."

"Who's we?"

"Odin, Freya and me...and Tony."

"How do you plan to stop him?"

"I'm damned if I know. I guess I've been waiting for inspiration—or a miracle."

"How did he get hold of all the spaceships?"

"He took over the Earthship. He was in with a gang of malcontents from the general population...well, actually most of them were probably from the elite. Anyway, they knocked out everyone with some gas and overpowered all the rulers, guards, etcetera. I guess they had plenty to be discontented about but..."

"What was Hadding's beef?"

"Odin had his father killed. There was probably more to it than that too. He always seemed to think he could do a better job of being Commander than Odin and he didn't like Odin's idea of coming cap in hand asking to be allowed to settle peacefully on Earth. He's always wanted to conquer Earth but couldn't see how he could do it without destroying

it. Now he thinks he can...He hasn't been in contact with you at all?'

'No, but I have heard murmurings. You were there when all this happened?'

'Yes. He sent us to Earth on a spaceship which was carrying a beam generator to guide the Earthship to Earth when he was ready.'

'Who's us?'

'Odin, Freya and me.'

'Funny he'd let Odin get away like that. How come?'

'I persuaded him. The Earthship was parked the other side of an anomaly only Odin had flown through. I persuaded him we needed Odin to take us through.'

'So Odin's on Earth now and Freya's flying around somewhere out here?'

'Yes.'

'If you don't mind my asking, just who are you?'

'Freya's husband.'

'Oh, I see.'

'What about the Earthship?' Peter butted in. 'Is it still up there or following Freya's ship around or what?'

'No idea,' Thor confessed. He was about to reveal Odin's actions in trying to destroy it but instantly decided that would not be wise.

'We certainly do have a problem,' Craig said. 'Anyone have any ideas?'

'Maybe we should jump on the winning side and join up with Hadding,' said Ronald. 'We don't owe Earth people anything.'

'I'm not sure about that,' Craig replied. 'Anyway, have you been immunised against this virus? I sure haven't. If what Thor says is true, the bastard's decided we're expendable too.'

'You got a point,' said Nicholas. 'How do we know what he's told us is true?'

'I believe him. Noone's got that good an imagination. Anyway, it fits with what I know of Odin and Hadding and of whispers I've heard...Time to switch drives.'

Evangelos had been sitting listening to the conversation with a bemused look on his face. Now he became alert. 'What do you mean "switch drives"?' he demanded.

Craig explained, while Evangelos listened, enthralled, excited. 'I knew this wasn't just a scramjet,' he exulted.

Thor laughed. Trust a scientist to get carried away with a new discovery. He could imagine Evangelos on the guillotine watching with interest a new superior design blade falling towards his own neck. Evangelos looked at him enquiringly and then, seeming to have decided the joke, whatever it was, was on him, sat back, apparently sulking.

There was silence, while they all mulled over the problem. Suddenly, Evangelos asked, 'Anyone got pencil and paper?'

Eyebrows arched enquiringly, Nicholas produced the desired articles. Evangelos immediately began drawing a diagram and making rapid calculations. This went on for

several minutes while everyone watched him expectantly but noone dared interrupt him.

Finally, still retracing his drawings, he said, 'If I understood you correctly how the drive works, this could just work. I'm assuming that the other spaceship we're chasing has the same sort of drive and that we will catch up with it.' He swung the diagram around toward Nicholas. 'Line the two ships up like that,' he said, 'and they should create a standing wave no spaceship could get through. It would be best to have them just sitting there...you could use your little manoeuvring engines to do that, couldn't you?...and switch their main drives on when you see the invaders coming. Of course, if you misguessed the direction they were coming from, you might have to do a bit of quick fancy manoeuvring, but I think you could do that, couldn't you?'

He glanced up expectantly at Craig, and Craig slowly nodded. 'Just as well we didn't make you walk,' he said. 'Show me that.'

He took the paper from Nicholas and carefully studied the diagrams and calculations. 'I do believe he's right,' he said at last. 'Anyway, it's all we've got. We'll give it a go if we ever catch up with Freya.'

'One thing,' said Nicholas. 'When we start our main drives, we're going to go scooting off. No way we can hold ourselves against their thrust.'

'You're right,' said Craig gloomily. 'I knew it was too good to be true. What have you got to say about that, genius?' he asked Evangelos.

Evangelos held out his hand for the paper and pencil, took it, immediately started doing more calculations and finally produced a diagram showing two spaceships following intersecting semi-elliptical tracks. He passed it back to Craig. 'Can you fly that?' he asked.

'Give me the exact bearing and speed and I can program it into the computer and we can keep flying it forever if you like.'

'Ah, there's the rub. I don't suppose you can give me thrust and acceleration figures from rest and at different times in flight?'

'You don't need them. I assume there's an equation describing that curve. Tell me what it is and how long it takes to do a circuit and that's all I need to tell the computer; it'll do the rest. It probably won't matter even if you can't give me the exact equation. As long as you can give me one that will produce something roughly the right shape, that won't suddenly turn inside out or something, that will do. We could probably even get away with a rough sketch if it came to the point, though we might need to do a few practice runs to teach it exactly what's needed.'

'How about a compromise?' Thor suggested. 'Give us an equation as close as you can. We'll feed that in and then do a learning run or two to fine tune it.'

'Sounds good,' agreed Craig.

They went through the process and were all reasonably confident it would work, though it would have been much better

to have been able to have tried it out in combination with the second spaceship.

It was only when they had satisfactorily finished the trials that anyone thought of the obvious next question. It was Ronald who raised it.

'So,' he said, 'we can hold them at bay for as long as we keep the drive operating. What then? We can't stay there forever. I take it this standing wave will stop them using their weapons on us too?'

'Well, if you've got a better idea,' snapped Evangelos.

'No, I ain't. I just thought someone might come up with another good suggestion where to go from there.'

Noone could. The silence of concentration was so intense it eventually became disruptive to thought. The resigned sighs around him told Thor all his companions were, one by one, succumbing to a sense of futility in the search. His thoughts too drifted.

It had been a long night. Sitting alone in the cave, beset by questions for which there were no answers and answers for which there were no questions, it had been impossible to sleep. Strange how the fantasy that had haunted him at odd moments all through his boyhood and even well into his adulthood, of escaping by himself into some secret, dark place where he could be alone, away from everything, away from everyone, away from all hurt, all embarrassment, all pressure, all necessity for forced decisions, all need for pretence of love or disguise of hatred, where love and hate became irrelevant, where noone could know, or even want to know, the secrets that sustained him, strange how when he had finally realised it, it had all been a nightmare. He had longed to feel Sheila's or Freya's hand on him, or to have James or Murray there talking to him, or Gina or Odin or anyone. Nature, which had once been his only solace, had now seemed to him cruel, remote, dispassionate, uncaring. He had been struck by the sudden thought that nature did not nurture man, or even life in general. It did its best to destroy life but life struggled and survived in spite of it all. He was not quite vain enough to hold that man was necessarily the acme of creation, that it was all done for his benefit. In fact, he was sure it had not, that man had evolved, survived and advanced despite the 'system', not because of it. Yet, it was strange that another people so like man had evolved on another planet so far away. Was that a gigantic fluke or was it true that man, while probably not the final peak of creation, was a likely—even a necessary—step on the way?

He saw now in his mind's eye a vivid image of himself and Freya cuddling in the cave...was it really only yesterday? A wave of feeling of incredible tenderness and love for her and for their unborn child and for her father engulfed him, reducing him to a passive acceptance of his inability to ever resist these bonds. Such an experience could never be erased, would forever mark him. He mentally compared it with Sheila's ministrations of the evening. If he'd never known Freya, he could have believed he had found the ultimate in Sheila. What was it about Freya? She couldn't be as perfect as she seemed—though, could one be called perfect who had connived in a

kidnapping? No, she was not perfect. Why then could he not only forgive her imperfections but embrace them as an essential, loved part of her—something he could never do with Sheila? It was, he decided, because she was truly his soulmate. He'd always sneered at the concept but now it was staring him in the face, saying 'deny me if you can'. He could not. In that moment, he decided that, no matter what, his destiny lay with Freya.

And her father—what was there for him? Even if this all came out all right, even if all his people were united somewhere on Earth, it was unlikely that he would ever be Commander again. Would that upset him? Thor was somehow inclined to believe he'd actually welcome being relieved of the responsibility, even to enjoy being cared for. Odin, he decided, was the quintessential man, the very epitome, but by no means the apotheosis, of humankind—so strong, so weak; so good, so evil; so petty, so profound; so caring, so unfeeling. Despite everything, he could not help but love the old man—a lost soul forever following the remnants of some shattered dream. As a migrant, he would be even more so. Thor's own father had been a migrant and he had come to realise what that meant—a permanent consciousness of loss, of lack of acceptance, of aloneness, no matter how successful one became. It would be even worse for the ordinary people without Odin's psychic strength. Would they ever adjust, especially those who had never known anything but the Earthship? Perhaps it would be better, if possible, to bring them down quietly somewhere, get them false identities somehow or other and spread them out in various places throughout the world. But that would hardly be feasible. The only thing to do was to land them and let them tell their story. After all, there was no way they could be sent back, was there?

And what about himself? The company his family and Gina and Betsy had founded was doing well and it seemed they barely needed him. In fact, he could sense among them a bit of a feeling of resentment at the idea of his return. They could see control inevitably gravitating to his hands. Probably they were right. Then the truth hit him—they were merely making and selling computers. They had missed the essential point that his computer was—or could be—much more than a super-powerful, multifunction computer. It could be the heart of an information gathering, disseminating, manipulating system. Even before his computer, information technology was the upcoming industry. With it, they would be well ahead of anyone else. They had wealth and power beyond their dreams at their fingertips. He would take control of the company and he would make it one of the world's biggest corporations and he would use it and the wealth it would generate to ensure peace and progress for Earth. Maybe I could even use it to solve the question of the existence of God, he wryly thought, remembering Hadding's story. He drifted off to sleep, already dreaming dreams of the paradise he would create on Earth.

He was still dreaming when something awoke him. For a moment, he thought it was an infant's cry that had brought him out of his sleep, but he slowly realised that had been in his dream and that it was Craig's excited voice that had awoken

him. 'Something big on the screen,' he was saying. 'It looks like some sort of spaceship but it's too big for one of ours and too small for the Earthship. I wonder what the hell it is.'

They all crowded around and peered at the image on the screen. None of them could imagine what it was until something Odin had said clicked in Thor's brain.

'I think I know what it might be,' he said. 'Odin said something about a survival ship in the interior of the Earthship forming part of the structure but even stronger, so that if anything happened to the Earthship it was supposed to come away from the rest and act as a kind of lifeboat. I think it could only hold about two thousand five hundred and twenty-five people though.'

'That would be about the right size for this,' Nicholas said. 'Funny, I never heard anything about it. Guess it was only meant for the chiefs.'

'And their families,' added Thor.

Even with the drive turned off, they closed the gap rapidly and overshot the ship, observing visually as they flew past.

'I think you're right,' Craig said to Thor, bringing his ship into docking mode. 'I wonder if there is somewhere to dock. Can't see anything here. Maybe the other side.'

They came round the other side and there was a spaceship already docked. Freya?

'Damn,' said Craig. 'Looks like external docking only. How primitive! We'll have to dock with the other spaceship and go through it to the big one. Here we go.'

They completed the tricky manoeuvre, coming gently alongside the spaceship and magnetically attaching to it. They opened the port in the side of their ship but the solid side of the other ship still faced them. Peter hammered on it with his fist. They could hear the echoing reverberations inside the other ship but no sign that anyone had heard it.

'Damn. Noone at home,' said Ronald. 'What now?'

'Hit them with a message,' said Peter.

'Yeah, why didn't I think of that?' Craig said dryly. He was already doing just that. Shortly a message appeared on his screen.

'So, what did they say?' asked Nicholas, still leaning against the port.

'They wanted to know the names of everyone on board. I've just sent them.'

They were still expectantly awaiting a further message when the corresponding port on the other spaceship opened and a man, clad in the familiar boiler suit uniform, beckoned to them to follow him. They did, Thor hanging back to last and having a quick look around the other spaceship on the way through. There was nothing to indicate that Freya had, or had not, been in it. They stepped through another port and into the larger spaceship.

It was constructed like a honeycomb, with small, communicating cells wherever one could see. Thor guessed this was all for strength. They went up a broad, spiralling ramp to a sort of mezzanine floor. When they reached it, Thor saw

that the outermost skin of the ship was here retracted to present a view through some kind of transparent material. The room was crammed with instruments, a desk and a bed. This was obviously the captain's bridge and cabin.

A man stood with his back to them, watching a screen. He turned slowly to face them, a twisted smile on his lips. He looked steadily at Thor as though seeking the answer to some question there.

'No,' he said finally. 'I do not think you would callously kill thirty thousand people. I believe Freya that you had nothing to do with it. It was Odin, was it not? And it was no accident, was it?'

It was not in Thor's nature to lie. 'It was Odin,' he said. 'And no, it was not an accident.'

'Why? How could anyone just suddenly decide to wipe out a society just like that? Especially someone who had spent years supposedly protecting that society...who was supposedly dedicated to doing everything possible to preserve it? I do not understand him. That is why I thought at first that I must have misjudged you and that you had done it, but I was right, you would not do that. But Odin...He must be even madder, more evil than I thought. How else can you explain it?'

'I think he honestly thought it was necessary to protect Earth. You know what Hadding was...is planning?'

'I did not. I found out when he got us all into the survival ship and had the whole two thousand five hundred and twenty five of us immunised. It was only then, when I asked what was going on, that he told me. Then he and the rest of his lot took off in the spaceships, telling me he would beam us in to Earth when he got there and got hold of the beam generator. I asked him how we were going to get through the anomaly. He said there would be no problem, the Earthship did it all the time, which surprised me because I thought we always had to detour round it. Then we hit it and it was like a small boat on Earth being smashed to bits by huge waves. I am not sure it was not sheer luck we survived. We seemed to pop out like a cork from a bottle under pressure. I think we must have got on to some sort of superwave created when the main ship disintegrated. We finally came to rest here—a long way from the anomaly.'

Thor frowned. 'You broke up when you hit the anomaly?' he asked. 'Not before?'

'No. Why would we?'

'Was the gravity control drive operating?'

'Of course not. It had not been on since we parked there. Why would it be?'

Thor's frown deepened. 'Hadding told us that if the beam was activated while gravity control drive was operating the ship would be destroyed. It sounded a bit strange at the time—not that I know enough about it to be sure it couldn't happen, but it seemed to make the Earthship so vulnerable to something that could easily accidentally happen. I think he planned to activate the beam as soon as we passed through the anomaly so that the Earthship would be sucked into it and destroyed. If you in the survival ship survived, well and

good, it was Odin who did it. If not, too bad. He told me he had disabled the manual "on" switch. I think he lied. I think he hoped Odin would do his dirty work for him. Perhaps he even had it set so that remote activation would operate through the manual position.'

'I do not believe it,' Plarisoc snapped, but there was a trace of doubt in his voice.

'So Hadding's still on his way to Earth with all the spaceships? Odin thought that would happen. He also guessed he wouldn't go through the anomaly but would make a huge detour.'

'He could not risk the other crews being destroyed. It appears to be a very tricky business and he had no time to go into it with them.'

'If what Odin said is true—and I believe it is—he'd never been through it and was afraid to try.'

Plarisoc looked startled for a moment. 'Why would you believe Odin about anything?'

'You'd rather believe Hadding? Hasn't it occurred to you yet that he knew the Earthship would break up when it hit the anomaly—whether it was using gravity control drive or not? Or maybe it could go through it using gravity control drive, which was why he was so adamant the drive had to be off. I don't know, but I can't think of any good reason why he would have got you and the chosen few into the survival ship unless he was expecting it to hit the anomaly and break up. And now he's intent on wiping out most of Earth's population. Do you think that is right?'

'I admit I was horrified at first. But Hadding might be right—it could be the only way. Would the Earth people really have welcomed us as migrants? They did not last time and even you yourself did not seem too sure it would be different this time. There are too many examples of races trying to completely exterminate other races on Earth; it is happening right now, is it not? And who wants to be a migrant if he can be a conqueror anyway? Besides which, the Earth's overpopulated; everyone on Earth is always saying so, from what I hear. Then again, even if ninety percent of Earth's population dies, we will still be outnumbered by about a million to one.'

He stopped suddenly. Thor thought he could detect a note of uncertainty creeping in, as though Plarisoc had finally put faces to all those victims. He decided to press his advantage. 'You could live with that?' he asked quietly. 'Dead bodies, disease, famine, death everywhere. It won't be a nice place to be. Even if you are immune to the virus, you won't be immune to many of the diseases that will follow along with all the deaths and rotting corpses and starving animals feeding on them. And you won't be immune to the sight and sound and smell of death. Think about it.'

'I have thought about it. I know it will be bad, but there are only two other alternatives. We could try to conquer Earth with our other weapons—which might, or might not, succeed and, if it did, would probably make the Earth almost uninhabitable; or we could go cap in hand and ask to be allowed to settle and hope we were not, sooner or later,

massacred. Hard as it is, it still seems the only way. In any case, even if I decided I wanted out, Hadding would still go on with it. It is out of my hands.'

'We might be able to stop him.'

'How?'

Thor was about to divulge the plan to create a standing wave with the two spaceships but thought better of it. He still wasn't sure of Plarisoc's conversion and Plarisoc had only to hold one of the spaceships there to thwart the plan. Perhaps this was a time to be devious.

'We have a hundred linked computers on Earth that can put out messages to foul up every computer on every one of his spaceships.' Plarisoc looked disbelievingly at him. 'It's true. That's where I first came into the whole thing. Hadding thought he was being smart giving me plans for a version of your computer that would have acted as a guide beacon for the Earthship but he stuffed up and gave me plans for one that can disrupt all your computers. So, we can hold him out beyond Earth until he agrees to destroy all his virus stocks and come in peacefully. He'll still have his other weapons, so there'll be no question of any of you being massacred by Earth people. What I'll do is take myself and my crew back to Earth with the beam generator switched on in my spaceship so that you will follow in. I'll land you at an appropriate place. You'll obviously be able to defend yourself from any attack—which is unlikely to happen anyway. I'll get messages to my lot to crank up the computers and to the big brass to negotiate your settlement—and Hadding's when he sees sense.'

Plarisoc turned away. It was obviously a tough decision. Thor was conscious how the man was weighing up each factor and trying to balance them one against another, hearing first Thor's arguments and then Hadding's echoing in his mind. Finally, after a long, long wait, Plarisoc turned back to him.

'All right,' he agreed softly, sounding drained. 'We will do it your way—with a few modifications. I will be with you on your spaceship—the one with the beam generator. Freya will remain here and her guards will have orders to kill her if you try anything smart. I'm afraid, my friend, I do not entirely trust you.'

Thor's heart sank but he had no choice but to take what was offered. 'Fair enough...Can I...?' He was about to ask to see Freya but, just in time, he remembered why Freya had flown out here and decided it was too risky. She just might blurt it all out and then the cat would really be out of the bag. If Plarisoc tumbled that they'd realised the computer disablement plan wouldn't work, it was all over.

Plarisoc was looking at him inquisitively. 'Can you what?' he asked.

'Ah, nothing.' He did his best to try to make it sound like he'd been about to make some trivial request which was unimportant and probably wouldn't be granted.

'Oh, I thought you might be about to ask to see Freya. I will have her brought if you like. No time for tender reunions though. She is a bit big for that now anyway.'

'I was, but then I thought you wouldn't have harmed her and it might be distracting if I saw her now, so I decided not to.'

Plarisoc shrugged. 'Suit yourself. We had better get on with it.'

'Okay. Craig, you can pilot the beam generator ship with me and Plarisoc, and the rest of you can go in the other ship.'

'Wait a minute,' Plarisoc snapped. 'I give the orders here. How many of you can actually fly a spaceship?'

'Craig and Ronald are the only ones,' Thor answered. 'I can't, you can't and none of the others can, so that seems to be the way it has to be.' He was talking rapidly to try to prevent Peter or Nicholas contradicting him. They seemed to divine he had some reason for his assertion and kept silent.

'Damn,' said Plarisoc. 'I was hoping there would be a spare pilot among you to help fly the survival ship—not that there will be much real flying to do.'

Too late, Thor realised he had blundered. He could have left Peter or Nicholas behind to protect Freya. Peter, however, was up to it. 'I'm almost qualified,' he objected. 'I'm sure I could handle it.'

So it was agreed that Peter would stay. Plarisoc handed him over to one of the crew to be shown the workings of the ship. He then summoned his lieutenants and spoke to them briefly but, it seemed to Thor (who could understand very little since it was spoken in their own language), emotionally. Thor assumed he was telling them what was going on and giving them their orders. He was chilled to hear Freya's name mentioned. Finally, Plarisoc finished speaking, turned abruptly and led them back to the docked spaceships.

They wasted little time in getting off and were soon earthbound, the much larger survival ship following behind as though on an invisible tow rope.

As precious time slipped by, Thor became more and more anxious. Somehow or other, he would have to overpower Plarisoc. He was sure the Asgardian was armed; he'd have to be careful. But unless he made his move soon, it would be too late. He decided to feign sleep and let his eyelids drift closed. Then Plarisoc's voice floated to him.

'You know,' he was saying, 'I am glad now you talked me into this. I do not know that I could have lived with the deaths of so many people. You sure made me realise what it would be like. I just hope it works. Are you sure it will work? Hadding's a computer genius, you know. Maybe he can get around it.'

'Perhaps,' agreed Thor, seizing his chance. 'There is another way to stop him. If we get two spaceships at just the right angle, we can use their drives to create a standing wave to hold Hadding's fleet there as long as we like.'

'Sounds a bit farfetched to me,' Plarisoc said. 'You would have to have everything just perfect and as soon as you turned on the drives the ships would move away.'

'Yeah, but you could have them do a circle and keep coming back. What do you reckon, Craig?'

'Let me think about it,' Craig said. 'Better still, I'll do some calculations.'

He fiddled at the computer, pretending to do calculations while feeding across the relevant information from the computer in the other spacecraft. Plarisoc watched him while Thor watched Plarisoc. We've got him hooked, he thought to himself. Time to reel him in.

'I just thought of something,' he said. 'There is a danger to stopping him with the computers. We could disable his ships or even make them crash. We don't want that. And if any of them did crash or blow up in Earth's atmosphere, we could still have virus raining all over Earth.'

Plarisoc looked at him. 'I thought you said the computers would just hold them there.'

'That's what I was thinking. Now I'm not so sure. Who knows what's likely to happen when you disable a computer?'

'Great time to think of it. Okay. Switch off the beam. We are going back to meet Hadding. I will talk to him, see if I can get him to change his mind.'

'Good idea, but I think we should hold him there while you talk.'

'That crazy idea will not work...will it?'

Craig broke in. 'It just might.' He moved sideways from the screen to let them see a simulation of the two spaceships executing a complicated flight pattern, while maintaining a broad stationary wave spreading out before them.

Wide-eyed, Plarisoc studied it in silence for several seconds. 'Okay, we will do it,' he said, 'but how will the other ship know what to do?'

'We can send their flight plan across to them via the computer,' Craig replied.

'Okay, we will do it.'

The beam turned off, leaving the survival ship to coast on.

'What's to stop it going on forever—or until it bangs into something?' Thor queried.

'Nothing, unless they give it just enough reverse thrust from one of the docking engines. We had better send them a message. I just hope they get it. The beam overrides most of the computer functions, including the communicator.'

'But the beam's off now.'

'Yes, but they probably think it is still on and they have not powered up the communicator. Try, please,' he said to Craig. 'You know what to tell them.'

Craig nodded and quickly sent a message.

Thor was suddenly troubled. 'If your crew interprets this as my trying something and carries out your threat against Freya, I'll kill you with my bare hands,' he threatened.

Plarisoc paled. 'They may not believe it is me sending the message,' he said in a very small voice, and Thor recalled that Plarisoc had shown signs of being in love with Freya himself. 'Perhaps we should redock and I'll tell them what's happening in person.'

'Too late,' said Craig.

The navigation screen was suddenly filled with objects in formation speeding towards them. Without waiting for orders or advice, Craig quickly put the plan into operation, signalling to Ronald in the other spaceship to take up station at the predetermined position from his own craft. This achieved, another signal and both craft went into their predetermined flight paths, their computers holding them precisely in their necessary positions.

The result was dramatic. As they came back from their first circuit and were now looking directly at the scene through the exposed direct sight window, the lead ship of the advancing fleet seemed suddenly to run into a brick wall and disintegrate before their eyes.

'You did not tell me that would happen,' screamed Plarisoc. 'Stop it! Stop it!' He leapt for Craig, who spun round and fended him off. Thor chopped down with the edge of his hand behind Plarisoc's left ear and he slumped inert to the floor.

'I wonder if Hadding was in the lead ship,' Thor mused aloud.

'I don't think it will matter,' Craig said. They were again facing the scene. Two more ships had hit the invisible wall and disintegrated.

The next time, however, the scene had changed. The remainder of the fleet seemed suspended in space, like swimmers swimming desperately but making no headway against a strong current.

'We've got them,' Thor exulted. 'Can we communicate with them?'

'Ah, there's the rub. We could if we could use the computer but it's too taken up keeping us on track.'

'You couldn't fly that path without it?'

'Be real. I'm good but not that good.'

'I wonder how long it will take the standing wave to dissipate if we turn it off?'

'Don't ask me. You're the scientist. I'm just a pilot.'

'I think we're going to have to try it. We'll do it next time we turn away; that should give us the maximum time. Can you signal that to Ronald?'

'Not till we switch off. Let him keep going. It might help maintain the wave and we only need our computer to communicate.'

'You're right. We'll give it a go.'

They had come round facing again and were just about to turn away. Craig was already starting to download the navigation program from the computer when Thor's startled cry stopped him: 'Holy cow! Look at that!'

A huge tongue of flame had leapt from one of the ships.

'They're firing the plasma weapon at us,' Craig said.

The next moment, the entire area containing the fleet and for a seemingly limitless area beside it became a sun.

'Let's get out of here,' Craig yelled. He quickly completed downloading the navigation program, flashed a message to Ronald to follow and took off at top speed away from the scene.

As they shot past the survival ship, Thor jumped up and turned on the beam. They sped on and Thor could see two dots on the navigation screen as the survival ship and the other spaceship followed.

'What's likely to happen?' Craig queried.

'Search me,' Thor replied. 'It'll spread out, coalesce or both or maybe one after the other or explode or collapse. I hope somebody's got a telescope trained on the area. We could learn something.'

'I sure ain't hanging around to see. We're heading for Earth. I just hope it doesn't reach there.'

'Me too...You know much about Oz or only the cave?'

'Huh?' Craig was clearly puzzled.

'Sorry. Australia, I mean. You been to any other part except where you picked me up?'

'No. Flown over but never landed. Where we headed?'

'Curtin Air Base in West Australia.'

'We're going to land on an air base? Won't they get a bit cranky about that? Even try to shoot us down? Or can anyone land at an air base in Australia?'

'Not really, but noone's going to try to stop us landing on this strip. There won't be any planes and only about four people there.' He laughed. 'Okay, I know it sounds a bit crazy, but it's not really. It's fully maintained in readiness but it only has a handful of caretaker staff usually. It only gets used during exercises. It's there for emergencies—if the balloon goes up, as we say. If there's war or something like it, in other words.'

'Well, I'll be damned. You're right, it could be ideal—if I can find it.'

'You'll find it. I had the foresight to find out the bearings while I was home in Brisbane. You can read our bearings, I hope.'

'Of course I bloody can. Give them to me.'

Thor wrote them down. 'I hope my memory's accurate,' he said.

'So do I. If you put us down somewhere in the Antarctic, you can bloody well walk home.'

CHAPTER 26

Thor and Freya stood looking out over the desert surrounding the air base. The whole area seemed still and lifeless but Thor knew that was as much an illusion as the apparent desertion of the air base.

True, there had been only four men to greet them when they'd landed. The two spaceships had come in like conventional—if that's the word for something so new and still experimental—scramjets, using up most of the runway before coming to a halt at its extreme edge. They'd unlocked the survival ship from its guiding beam some time before and it had glided in on a slowly spiralling course to finally settle on the desert beside the runway.

The four men had emerged from their underground control post, looking distinctly puzzled, as the six men from the two spaceships had made their way towards them. Despite their isolation, they had been smartly turned out in Royal Australian Air Force tropical uniform.

'What's this?' a well-built, sandy-haired man walking slightly in front of the others had demanded. 'We got a flash about a test firing of a scramjet that seemed to have gone wrong and to keep a lookout for anything strange buzzing over here. You've got half the US Air Force looking for you.' He had looked at the two ships sitting at the end of the runway and at the larger ship resting on the desert beside the runway and scratched his head. 'I thought it was only one plane, not all this.' He had shrugged. 'Well, we'd better let them know. I'm Warrant Officer Malcolm Whatty, by the way.' He had stuck his hand out for Thor to shake. 'Tubby there's my Sergeant Steve. That's Glenn and the scruff there is Bill.'

Each of the men had shot out a hand in turn as their names were mentioned, shaken Thor's hand and said, 'How ya goin'?'

Thor had introduced himself as he had shaken each man's hand, then indicated the other members of his group: 'Craig, Ron, Nick, Evan, Plarisoc.'

'Can't put you through to the States from here,' Malcolm had said. 'I'll send Canberra a message and they'll get in touch and decide what to do. I take it you can't just fly back there or you wouldn't be landing here.'

'Right,' Thor had agreed. His one thought had been to get to the survival ship to check on Freya, but when he had suggested to Malcolm that he would like to check out the other ship first, the officer had demurred.

'I don't think so, mate,' he'd said, amiably enough but leaving no doubt that it was a decision he was not prepared to discuss.

They had followed Malcolm back to the underground command centre—bare, functional, giving Thor visions of Hitler and his underground bunkers. It had all seemed to him so incongruous, so unreal. There had even been a red phone—the hot line? Malcolm had picked it up and spoken to the command centre in Canberra. 'We've got three pretty weird looking planes landed here. Two of them look like the scramjet we were told to keep an eye out for...Yeah, two...No, we're not seeing double...No, we haven't been drinking...or going troppo...Well, if they're spacemen they look just like us...Just pass it on will you.'

There had been a long delay until finally Malcolm had almost snapped to attention and said, 'Yes, sir. Right, sir,' and hung up.

When he had turned back to the six travellers, he had had a service pistol in his hand. 'Sorry about this, lads, but it seems I'm to hold you here till the brass arrives. They seem to think you're a bunch of desperadoes who've stolen the plane...planes...whatever.' His voice had trailed off, betraying his

uncertainty about the whole affair, but it had been obvious that he was not going to let this sway him from his duties.

'Take them into the conference room and keep them covered,' he'd ordered his men.

They had been herded into a largish room, most of which was taken up with a large table and twenty odd chairs. They had been told to sit evenly spaced along each side so that there were two spare chairs from each end and between each of Thor's party. Warrant Officer Whatty had sat himself at one end and told Leading Aircraftman Fletcher to sit at the other end and to keep them covered with his automatic rifle. He had dispatched Aircraftman Corones to listen for any further communication from headquarters and Sergeant Lucas to await the arrival of whoever was coming from Canberra and to keep an eye on the spacecraft—or planes, as he had called them.

He had then ordered them to take everything out of their pockets, one at a time, and to hand the contents up to him. Thor had been first. Whatty had raised his eyebrows at Thor's credit card and business card.

'Thor Ericson. Ericson Electronics. I've heard of you and your computer. You really are *the* Thor Ericson?' he'd asked with more than a little awe in his voice. Thor had merely nodded.

Plarisoc had handed over a notebook full of indecipherable jottings. 'Gotta be a scientist,' Whatty had commented.

The others had all handed over security passes for the Nevada base, which Whatty had noted with satisfaction. 'At least we know you did come from Nevada,' he had commented. 'Now, why don't you tell me why you suddenly decided to take off on a test flight without telling anyone and then end up landing here?'

They had all looked at Thor, waiting for him to set the record straight. Thor had realised he was not going to be believed and had searched around desperately for some means to make his tale more credible.

Suddenly, Plarisoc had dug into a pocket, said 'You might find this interesting,' and tossed something that looked like a coin or silver disc to each of the men at each end of the table. There had been two instant blinding flashes even as they had both automatically held out a hand to catch the objects. Ronald had immediately grabbed Whatty's pistol and Craig had secured the rifle.

'What was that?' Thor had demanded.

'It will only blind them temporarily,' Plarisoc had assured him. 'Nothing else will happen to them if they keep their mouths shut.'

'Why did you do it?' Thor had asked. 'It's not going to help our cause in the long run.'

'Because I do not like being threatened by someone I know I can destroy any time I want to. He was not going to believe us, was he? Will anyone?'

'If we show them the ships, they'll have to—especially the survival ship. Look, I've got to get out there and make sure Freya is safe.'

'Freya, I had forgotten all about her.'

'If your men have harmed her, I'll kill you.'

'I will kill myself. Let's go.'

'What do we do with this pair?'

'You and I will go and capture the men outside. Then we will bring them back here and lock the four of them in together. They will know where the key is.'

It had all been too easy. Fletcher had been staring at a radar screen devoid of any activity and had not even heard them enter until it had been too late. Sergeant Lucas had also been taken unawares, his attention distracted by the door of the survival ship opening.

They'd given him to Ronald and Nicholas to take back to lock in with the others and had made for the survival ship.

As they'd neared it, they had seen a figure in the doorway. It was Peter.

'Everything okay?' they'd both asked him.

'Yes,' he'd replied dully. 'If you call what happened to Hadding's fleet okay.'

'What about Freya?' Thor had demanded. 'Where is she?'

'Still locked up. They won't release her till Plarisoc says so. Some of them wanted to kill her when you went back to intercept Hadding. A lot more wanted to when the fleet went up in flames. I had to do some good talking. Lucky the guy Plarisoc left in charge here didn't want her killed.'

'Take me to her.'

'I will take you,' Plarisoc had said. 'My crew probably will not let you near her otherwise. They may even kill her on sight of you.'

Thor's hopes of a joyous reunion had been dashed. She had eyed both of them with a look of utter contempt. 'So, that's how much I mean to both of you,' she'd said bitterly. 'Just a pawn in a boy's game as usual. Something to be sacrificed whenever convenient. I suppose now you'll both tell me how much you love me?'

Unable to deny the truth of her accusation, both men had looked away.

'You, Plarisoc, I can never forgive,' she had gone on. 'I don't think you ever really meant me to be hurt but you certainly didn't give much thought to the fact that I might be. You, Thor, I guess I can understand. After all, if the situations had been reversed, I would have sacrificed you.'

She'd looked at him coolly, but he thought he'd seen—just for an instant—a flicker of a smile at the corners of her mouth at the start he'd given. The instant betrayal he'd felt had put it all into perspective for him. The romantic image he'd held of himself as nobly sacrificing even his most precious possession, his beautiful, beloved wife, for the great cause had evaporated as instantly as a drop of water hitting a hot plate. Though still unsure if he was getting the message she was trying to give him or if she had in fact spoken truthfully, he had suddenly seen things in an entirely different light. She's right, it's all mad boy's games, he'd told himself. He'd taken her hand and gently helped her to her feet.

'Time for some fresh air,' he'd said.

'We have to work out what to do,' Plarisoc had objected.

'You're the one who created the situation,' Thor had snapped back. 'You work out how to get us out of it.'

Now he stood with Freya, both of them saying very little and nothing at all of what really concerned them. He wanted to take her in his arms and say he was sorry and that everything would be all right but he could find no words that would not sound like more male platitudes.

Finally, Freya broke the silence. 'I still think I might have persuaded him if I'd had the chance,' she said.

Thor very much doubted this and was about to say so, but he was definitely not going to do or say anything that could possibly antagonise her more and responded merely with a noncommittal 'Maybe'.

She turned to face him suddenly. 'Why, oh why didn't you agree when my father first suggested you come back to Earth and negotiate with your government to let us settle here? All of my people might have been settled here by now. Now what will happen to us?'

He ignored her last question. 'It was only half a suggestion,' he defended himself. Then the unwelcome thought struck him that if

Odin had told Freya of the suggestion, perhaps he really had been serious. 'Or if it wasn't, he should have been more definite about it. I gathered that he didn't know himself what he wanted to do, that he would have been all for conquering Earth if he could have thought up a way to it without destroying everything.' He was becoming angry now. She was distorting everything and making him out to be the real villain. He wasn't going to take it. 'May I remind you that your father was directly responsible for the death of most of your people? Here on Earth he'd likely be tried for crimes against humanity.'

She gave a small, broken sob. 'Oh, God, people are rotten—both yours and mine. I wonder if they're like that everywhere in the universe—if there are people like us anywhere else in the universe, that is. Maybe it would be better if we all died out.'

'You think other animals are kinder, more honest, more caring? Not judging by Earth's animals they aren't. I think we're the best, as well as the worst, of creation—or at least of creation as we know it. I think that for any form of life to become ascendant it would have to be like us—a mix of sly, selfish, aggressive bastardry and saintly, caring cooperation.'

Freya started to say something but an unexpected voice cut across her words. It was Plarisoc.

'Thor, Freya, we've got to talk,' he pleaded. 'What are we going to do?'

Thor looked at him with displeasure. 'I thought you had it all figured out,' he said. 'Surely you had some plan of action when you decided to overpower them and get out of there?'

Plarisoc flinched at the evident sarcasm. 'I guess I did not think,' he muttered. 'What can we do?'

Thor sighed. 'Well, I guess we could just go back down there, release them, tell them we're sorry but we just don't like having guns pointed at us, and let's talk. I really don't think that would achieve much. They're going to be awful cranky at us and not too cooperative and they haven't got any power to decide—or even recommend—anything anyway. We can't cut our losses and try somewhere else...or, at least, I don't think we can. The survival ship has no way to get airborne, has it?'

'No,' Plarisoc quietly agreed.

'So, I'd suggest we wait quietly for the brass to arrive. They shouldn't be long. Then we'll just have to try to explain things to them and hope they understand...Actually, you know, your little trick could even come to our advantage. If they think we have powerful weapons, they just might treat us with some respect. What weapons do we have, by the way? Neither of the space ships is armed. What about the survival ship?'

'Only a few hand weapons—lasers. Nothing too much.'

'It might be enough if it comes to that—to persuade them not to just attempt to capture us and throw us in jail, I mean, not to have a battle with them.'

'What a mess,' Plarisoc said. 'Maybe Hadding had the right idea after all.'

'Maybe.'

'You don't mean that, do you?' Freya queried, a puzzled, concerned look on her face.

'No, not really. But it might have been better if you lot had just come in and conquered us one way or another. Maybe your father's first idea of lobbing a meteorite past...or even into a suitable spot...as a warning might have been the way to go. But to hell with that. What's done is done. We've got to think how best to get out of what is...I've been thinking...It might be better if we don't tell them all the facts. Maybe we should just tell them the

Earthship accidentally ran foul of the anomaly out there and your spaceship and the survival ship are all that survived...' His voice trailed off as he finished the sentence.

'No, that's not going to work,' his anguished voice went on. 'How the hell would we explain the other spaceship? Or how I got involved?'

He slapped his hand to his forehead. 'I just had another thought. They think we're some kind of a gang of crims or spies out to steal the spaceships. The survival ship is going to give them something to think about...your weapons could too...but I think we're going to have a helluva job convincing them you're from outer space...unless you can think of some way to convince them?'

Their silent contemplation of the problem was interrupted by the roar of jets overhead. Two F111s screamed in, landed smoothly one after another in a squeal of brakes and thunder of reverse thrust and taxied towards the end of the runway. The silence when the engine roar finally subsided was deathly. Two cockpit covers eased back and two men in flying gear descended and stood looking uncertainly in the direction of the control centre.

'They're wondering why noone's out to meet them,' Thor said. 'I guess we'd better be the welcoming committee. Where are the rest of our lot, anyone know?'

'Made themselves comfortable somewhere, no doubt,' Plarisoc replied.

They headed towards the latest arrivals, who were already striding towards the control centre. It was clear they would reach it long before Thor's group reached them. Too bad, thought Thor, no way I'm going to make Freya hurry or leave her here.

When they finally caught up with the two pilots, the latter had just walked in on Craig, Donald, Peter, Nicholas and Evangelos all comfortably ensconced in lounge chairs in what seemed to function as a combination waiting room/reception area/off duty lounge.

'I guess you lot are the crews of the scramjets the Yanks are chasing?' the man in the lead was saying. 'I'm Squadron Leader Whee Lim Vitsaras and this is Flight Lieutenant Lex Radby. We're from Amberley. What have you done with our blokes?'

'I'm afraid we've locked them in the conference room,' Thor said.

The two men swung round to face him, surprise, doubt and annoyance all showing on their faces. The Squadron Leader was a small man, probably no more than a hundred and sixty centimetres tall and slightly built, with round face, swarthy complexion and jet black hair. His companion towered over him by at least ten centimetres and looked like a World War Two fighter ace stepped straight out of an old movie.

'I told you we were multicultural,' Thor said in an aside to Plarisoc.

Unfortunately, the Squadron Leader heard him and registered a flash of annoyance that he quickly masked. But there was more than a trace of acerbity in his voice as he said, 'Would you mind telling me just what the hell is going on?'

'Well, you see,' Thor explained, 'they decided to interrogate us at gunpoint and my friend, Plarisoc, here objected and used one of his weapons to temporarily blind them and we overpowered them and locked them in. Merely to teach them a lesson in courtesy, you understand. Perhaps we should all join them and we can tell you our story.'

The two officers seemed about to object but Craig's voice swung them around to face him. 'I think perhaps that would be best,' he said.

He was holding the automatic rifle and Ronald had produced the pistol.

'Perhaps you'd like to lead the way,' suggested Thor. 'I'm sure you know where it is.'

The party moved towards the conference room, the two officers in the lead, with Thor, Craig and Ronald close behind and the other following. The door was unlocked and the two officers pushed in. Immediately, they were jumped on by the four inside. Thor smiled a small, smug smile. 'I thought that might happen,' he said.

Thor, Craig and Ronald moved into the room as the combatants disengaged themselves, the attackers apologising profusely to the officers. The rest of the party made their way inside. Thor closed and locked the door.

'Okay,' he said. 'All you lot arrange yourselves up the far end of the table. We'll take this end.'

They all took their places as directed, except for Craig and Ronald, who remained standing, nonchalantly holding their weapons.

'Firstly,' Thor said, 'I want to apologise for disabling you and taking you captive. It wasn't my idea. My friend sort of over-reacted...Let me tell you the full story. You're going to find it hard to swallow, but I hope to convince you it's the truth and that you'll agree to do what I say.'

He could see from the beginning that he wasn't being believed. There were blank, disbelieving stares when he bluntly stated that, except for himself and Evangelos, they were the remnants of a civilisation from a planet beyond the Southern Cross. He could see the men each looking from one to the other of the group, noting the similarity between the space travellers and the Earthborn present. Obviously, they thought people from other planets would have big heads, green skin, three eyes or something else to set them apart. He told how the Asgardians had accidentally destroyed their own planet and how their only chance for long-term survival was settlement on Earth. He told them he'd been abducted to help them prepare for this settlement and then to arrange it. He emphasised how they could have invaded Earth, inflicted much damage on it and quickly conquered it but had wanted to come in peace—or at least those surviving had wanted to come in peace and had in fact destroyed an invasion fleet of a rebel group intent on conquering Earth. He explained that it had been to stop the invasion that he and the others had taken the spaceship from where it was being outfitted in the Nevada Desert. Here he was forced to make a digression to explain what the spaceship was doing in the Nevada Desert. Finally, he told how the Earthship had been destroyed in a cosmic accident and how they had brought the survival ship with another two thousand five hundred and twenty three survivors to Earth. There was dead silence in the room when he finished speaking.

Finally, the Flight Lieutenant said, 'Look, we know you Yanks are working on all sorts of weird things you don't want to tell us about. Okay, keep your secrets, but don't give us all that bullshit about space invaders.'

Squadron Leader Vitsaras put a restraining hand on his junior officer's arm. 'Let's not be too hasty,' he said. 'He just might be telling the truth. As you very well know, I'm very interested in computers. Thor Ericson there is probably the top computer man in Australia and one of the top in the world—just the sort of guy the US government would be keen to get its hands on. I strongly suspect he's been working for their Defence Department or Air Force or NASA or something but there is one thing against that and more in line with his story. He suddenly came up with a supercomputer and his company has been selling it all over. We're even interested in it.'

The strange thing is that he was nowhere to be seen at its launch or for months after—right up till now in fact. Maybe he was pissing around on a starship—or Earthship, as they call it.'

'Or maybe he was working on some top secret project for the US Air Force—like this scramjet thing,' objected the Flight Lieutenant.

'That's what I was thinking,' his superior replied. 'Maybe there was some sort of deal for them to back him to set up production if he did some work for them...Am I right, Thor?'

'Dead wrong. Can you really imagine the US government or any of its agencies helping anyone to produce a computer like mine? No way. Not for general sale anyway. Think about how firm they are on not selling anything to do with computer technology to Russia—even now. They'd immediately see military implications and want to keep it to themselves. They might offer me some sort of deal not to produce, but help me to produce it? Never.'

'That's true,' agreed Vitsaras. He suddenly stood up. 'Let's go have a look at these planes,' he suggested.

'Why not?' Thor agreed. 'Craig, you come with me and the Squadron Leader and the Flight Lieutenant. The rest of you amuse yourself for a while. Just don't send any messages till we get back.'

Vitsaras seemed about to object but shrugged and said, 'Fair enough. Get me if there are any messages.'

Thor suddenly stopped. 'On second thoughts, the only way I can possibly convince you that this ship is not something that was born and bred in the Nevada Desert is to take you for a short flight. You game?'

The Squadron Leader considered for some time. Thor didn't blame him for being cautious; he could well be offering himself up as a hostage.

It was Freya who offered a way out. 'We'll give your men back their weapons,' she said. 'That way, both sides have hostages. And I'm sure Thor values me more highly than he values you.'

Thor crimsoned slightly. He knew Freya well enough to recognise the edge of sarcasm.

Vitsaras nodded. 'Fair enough, but Canberra is expecting a signal before too long. How long will this take?'

'Let's see,' Thor replied. 'Ten minutes to get up on gyro. Ten minutes to get outside Earth's atmosphere on scramjet. Ten minutes joyflight on vacuum drive. Same back. Maybe an hour all up. Am I right, Craig?'

'Near enough.'

'Okay,' Vitsaras agreed. He turned to the Air Force men. 'Do what he says and don't send any signals you don't have to till I get back. If Amberley or Canberra or anyone else calls wanting to know what's happening, stall them till I get back.'

'Why don't you all come up and watch the show?' Thor suggested.

They all trooped up above ground. Craig, Thor and the two officers headed toward one of the spaceships.

'Need oxygen masks or anything?' queried Vitsaras.

'No,' replied Craig shortly.

They boarded the ship and the Air Force pilots looked around them curiously. They seemed disappointed at the almost barren simplicity of the cabin and the paucity of instruments.

Craig caught their expressions. 'The computer does most of the work,' he said.

He kept up a running commentary of what he was doing and what was happening as he took the ship into the air under gyro, then went into scramjet mode and, once out of Earth's atmosphere, went into vacuum drive. Thor watched the expressions on the officers' faces change from scepticism to surprise to delighted wonder.

'I don't think we have time to fly them to where Hadding's fleet was incinerated in their own plasma,' he said. 'It might be best to keep away from there anyway.'

'Yeah, who knows what's happening there now,' agreed Craig.

Suddenly, Thor had an idea. 'If at least some of our observatories didn't pick that up, I'll be bloody surprised. Maybe they still are. Check with Canberra when you call them,' he told Vitsaras.

'I'll do that,' agreed the officer.

They turned back.

'Want to fly her a bit?' Craig asked the Squadron Leader.

It was a masterstroke. Vitsaras was like a small boy asked if he'd like to drive the train. 'Can I?' he asked in an awed whisper.

Craig let him take over the controls and showed him what to do. He talked him through the change back to scramjet mode and on into the flying saucer configuration and even let him manoeuvre it in for a landing.

'I can see why you made Squadron Leader,' he complimented him. 'You're a natural born pilot.'

Vitsaras beamed and Thor could see that Craig had gained them a valuable ally.

Warrant Officer Whatty rushed toward them as they set foot back on the tarmac. 'Sir, Canberra's been on to us wantin' to know what's goin' on. I told them you were investigating and would get back to them soon. He got pretty shirty.'

'Who was it?'

'Wing Commander Thompson himself.'

Vitsaras exhaled a long, deep exhalation. It seemed to Thor the sort of deep breath a speaker takes before giving his talk or an actor before going on the stage.

'I guess I'd better get back to him then,' Vitsaras said. He started to walk back towards the control centre. He stopped abruptly. 'Bugger it,' he said. 'Let's have a look at the other ship first.'

Thor found Plarisoc's face in the group of watchers and motioned to him to join them. 'Wanna show the officers around your ship?' he asked.

'Pleasure,' said Plarisoc.

As the three men walked off towards the survival ship, Evangelos came out of the group. 'Mind if I go with them?' he asked Thor.

Thor looked at him in surprise but the scientist had not waited for an answer but was hurrying to catch up with the other three. 'Don't worry, I'm on your side,' he called back over his shoulder.

Thor watched him go. Maybe we have a chance, he thought. He suddenly felt optimistic. He turned his eyes back to the other group. Freya was watching him possessively, admiringly, anxiously. He hurried to join her. He took her hands and kissed her softly on the forehead.

'Everything will be fine,' he assured her, but suddenly he was not so sure.

CHAPTER 27

They were back in the conference room again seated around the table. Their numbers, however, had been swollen by the addition of a party who had flown in that morning in response to a message sent by Squadron Leader Vitsaras the night before.

At the head of the table now sat Wing Commander George Thompson, a rather unprepossessing, average-looking man of medium height, medium build, mousy hair of medium length cut in a conservative style. But when he spoke he seemed to exude authority, his low, well modulated voice meshing perfectly with controlled gestures and facial expressions to create an unmistakable aura of being in charge.

'Whee Lim has told me what you told him,' he informed Thor and his companions. 'He's told me he believes you. He's told me about the flight you took him on. I too would like to go on such a flight, but there is plenty of time for that. Before that, I want you to tell me everything again, from the top, Mister Ericson, if you please.'

Once again, Thor told his story, much as he had told it to Vitsaras, though with a more honest account of the loss of the Earthship. His audience portrayed a variety of emotions as he spoke—scepticism, frank disbelief, alarm, sorrow—but whatever other emotions they displayed, they all listened with absorbed interest. Wing Commander Thompson's eyes remained firmly fixed on Thor's face the entire time he spoke but his expression betrayed nothing.

When Thor had finished speaking, he leaned forward and said, 'So, in a nutshell, except for you and...Evangelos, was it?...all these people are survivors from an Earthship that came originally from a planet somewhere beyond the Southern Cross. Somehow or other, that planet was destroyed. Care to elaborate on that?'

Thor hesitated for a moment before deciding only the truth would do. 'It was destroyed when the Earthship took off under gravity control drive.'

'I wish we'd been able to grab a good scientist to bring with us,' complained the Wing Commander. 'I guess I'll have to take your word for it that such a thing exists and that it could do that to a planet. But...were they too stupid to know that would happen? Or did they do it deliberately? Or didn't they care? Or what?'

'I understand they had to take off in a hurry to save themselves. The Commander was about to be arrested and all of them were facing possible massacre.'

'So, basically, this Commander destroyed his planet to save his own skin?'

'You could put it that way.'

'Where is he now?'

'Dead. Even at the speed the Earthship travels...travelled...it takes so long to get here that all the present population on the Earthship were born there.'

'That's rather an awesome thought. How many did you say there were in total?'

'Something like thirty four thousand.'

'It must have been a bloody big ship.'

'It was. I understand there was a maximum population of some sixty thousand.'

'That's a fair-sized city...I'm fascinated as to how the whole thing worked but we won't go into that now. What really intrigues me is the sort of civil war that seems to have gone on. You say one side wanted to come to Earth peacefully and request permission to settle, while the other side insisted on invasion. Was that the main bone of contention between the two sides? It seems an incredible reason for a civil war.'

'There was also a lot of personal animosity between the leaders of the two groups, and a fundamental disagreement on how the Earthship should be run—a good, old-fashioned power struggle. You could maybe even say the issue of how to establish a base on Earth was secondary, but it was certainly important. It's fair to say everything that happened after the initial uprising hinged on it.'

'I still don't understand why some of these people were so desperately anxious to defend Earth that they'd sacrifice their own people. What advantage could they hope to gain?'

'An intact Earth. Look, many of these people love Earth even more than we do. It's not so surprising really. Think of it. Would you feel more attachment to an Earthship where all you ever saw were monotonous rooms all functionally designed and with exactly the same basic features, or a beautiful planet like ours. Remember too that most of these people actually have Earth people in their lineage and that their home planet no longer exists and that they've never seen it anyway.'

'It's a bit hard to take to a people who have destroyed their own planet and gone in for wholesale kidnapping.'

'True, but we've done our share of immoral deeds and we're doing our best to destroy our planet. And they did save Earth from invasion and worse.'

'So you say, though there must remain some doubt whether the Commander wasn't merely seeking revenge when he destroyed the Earthship. It seems to be him and you and his daughter who were the prime movers in stopping the invasion. I hope I'm not being unfair to your companions but it seems to me if the other side had got to them first they might just as happily have joined in the invasion.'

There seemed no answer to that and the men did not seem anxious to speak for themselves. While Thor was still trying to think how best to reply, a soft female voice addressed him: 'Mister Ericson, I don't think you're being completely honest with us. For instance, you are obviously deeply attached to the very pretty, very pregnant young lady on your left. From what you say, she must be one of our space visitors. Is the child-to-be by any chance yours?'

Thor looked briefly at Freya's anxious face and smiled what he hoped was a reassuring smile before turning to answer his questioner: 'Yes.'

'Why don't you just start again and tell us all about it,' she gently suggested.

He looked at her, taking his time to study her. She was not exactly pretty, but she was by no means unattractive.

Flaming red hair cascaded to her well-rounded shoulders and framed a rather chubby face which was well-creased with laugh lines. Her age was indeterminate—probably late thirties or early forties. Her emerald-green eyes were steady, inspecting, evaluating but kindly. She had about her the same mix of softness and hardness as his mother and his Sheila and he knew he could no more look at her and lie that he could to his mother or his wife. But he fought the hypnotic effect she was having on him.

'You are?' he asked, knowing the answer but trying desperately to establish some sort of superiority.

'I'm sorry. How rude of me. Sometimes I'm vain enough to think everyone in Australia knows me,' she said with a self-deprecating little laugh. 'I'm Maggie Saunders, the PM's "man".'

She's trumped my ace, thought Thor, but still he hesitated, while those mountain-stream eyes coolly and patiently waited.

'How about it?' she prompted and he leapt into the pool, pouring out the whole story without any further thought of prevarication or concealment or holding back or presenting himself or anyone else in a more favourable light. As he spoke, she listened intently, eyes locked on his, betraying no sign of emotion or judgment, but when he had finished she said softly, gently, 'Poor boy, you do have some big problems, don't you?'

'So do we all,' cut in another soft voice, but this time it was a vibrant male voice. 'A couple thousand of them. From what you say, the people in the survival ship are a pretty dependent lot—and I don't mean just drug-dependent. The rest of you could probably just vanish into the community and never be noticed, but them...' He shrugged expressively.

'I should explain,' Maggie said to Thor, 'Major Grassnick is our top psychologist.'

Thor flashed a smile of gratitude at her and turned to face the Major. 'Too true,' he said. 'They'll have to be allowed to settle in a group somewhere where they can be allowed and encouraged to look after themselves and gain some independence.'

'They'll need to be kept isolated for some time anyway,' observed a grey-haired but not elderly-looking man. 'Sorry,' he said to Thor. 'I should have introduced myself.' He smiled a bland, suave smile. 'I'm Doctor John de Martin. I'm a consultant to the Immigration Department.'

'And one of our best epidemiologists,' added Maggie.

'They'll have to be quarantined in case they're carrying some alien bugs,' went on de Martin. 'All of you should be, for that matter, though it's probably too late to worry. From what you say, though, it might be even more to the point to protect them from our bugs.'

Thor nodded. This all appeared suddenly to be going remarkably well. It seemed to have got to the stage where his story was accepted and tacit agreement had been reached that they would be allowed to settle. Now, all they had to do was to work out the details. He had some ideas of his own about that.

'Maggie,' he said, 'I have a proposition I think the PM will find impossible to resist. He's got a real thing about Centres of Excellence and Research Cities and things like that. I can offer him one on a plate and where noone else would dream of building one. Now, it's obvious these people are well ahead of us in science and technology. Plarisoc here is probably their best scientist. Let's build a research city out here. They could put Australia well ahead in computers, electronics, flight, biospheres and lots of other things. They recently took the nuclear power plants out of their twenty odd spaceships and used all the nuclear fuel with no increase in background radiation. Think of that! They could treat all our nuclear waste—and everyone else's too if we like—and make it perfectly safe. You know how we're sending nuclear waste to Woomera to store it. We won't store it; we'll treat it. We can put our settlement there. It might seem a bit rough to stick them out in the desert but believe me it won't be a desert for long if they get stuck into it.'

Maggie grinned. 'Sounds wonderful. Could I ask you to write it all down so I can take it back to the PM?'

'Sure.'

'Just one thing,' a rather surly voice objected. 'I'd like to talk to these people, make sure our security won't be threatened.'

'I'm sure we can arrange for you to be assigned to keeping an eye on them, Tony,' Maggie blandly replied. 'Nothing like an ASIO presence on base.'

'There is something else your friend has been keeping very quiet about.' Thor traced the voice to a rather dapper man in a lightweight pale blue suit, whose pale blue eyes were fixed on him. 'How many agents do these people have around the place? If they've been observing and interacting with us for a long time, they're sure to have a network set up. What about it?'

'Well, Thor,' Maggie said as Thor hesitated, 'I guess ASIS does have a right to know if there is a network.'

'There is a network but I don't know much more than that. Ask these guys.' He indicated the Nevada contingent.

Craig, Ronald, Peter and Nicholas looked at each other. Finally, Craig said, 'I'll tell you how it works but no names...not that I know many.'

The man frowned and appeared about to reject this offer outright when Maggie cut in. 'That sounds fair enough, Michael. Surely it's not worthwhile spending time tracking them all down just to resettle them. Let them just melt into the woodwork. They must all have established identities.'

Michael appeared unconvinced but made no objection.

'What's for lunch?' asked Wing Commander Thompson, and the tension immediately vanished.

Just as quickly, it returned. Freya suddenly gave a sharp, stifled cry of pain. Dr de Martin was at her side even before Thor reached her.

'What is it, child?' he asked. 'The baby?'

Freya, eyes wide, looked up at him and nodded.

'Guess you don't run to a delivery room here?' he queried the room in general.

'Afraid not,' said Whatty. 'There's an operating theatre of sorts.'

'I hope it won't come to that. A bed on its own in a nice, quiet, clean room somewhere?'

'Sure.'

The doctor helped her to her feet and they followed the Warrant Officer to the room which was to act as the delivery room, Thor feeling useless as he tagged along. Then Freya grabbed his hand and held it tight and he felt even more helpless.

Dr de Martin decided the bed and room were satisfactory, settled Freya in and arranged with Whatty the supplies he needed. 'It will be a long time yet,' he told Thor and Freya. 'You stay with her while I go and grab something to eat and check the operating theatre just in case.'

He went and Thor sat awkwardly on the bed, holding her hand, not knowing what to say.

She looked at him, her eyes playing over every feature of his face, as though memorising it. 'What are you thinking?' she asked.

'I was wondering why any woman is silly enough to go through all this.'

'Someone has to do it and men are too big sooks.'

He laughed. 'Perhaps you're right.'

'You'll stay with me, won't you?' she pleaded.

'Of course I will,' he agreed, but he was secretly wondering how he would stand up to the experience of seeing a woman he loved tortured for something he was at least partly responsible for. Both his sons had been born in the days when fathers were discouraged, even prevented, from attending the birth of their children. How times had changed!

Freya gave another grimace as a pain hit her. Thor stroked her hair softly, silently, unable to think of anything to say that was not trite or would not seem patronising or uncaring. He was saved by a confident voice at his elbow. 'How's it going, honey?' Maggie asked.

'All right,' Freya murmured unconvincingly.

'Look, I've been through this a time or two,' Maggie went on. 'It's bloody hard work and sometimes you'll feel like the thing's going to get out if it has to rip you apart to do it and you'll wonder if it's ever going to end. But when it's all over and you hold your baby in your arms it's the most wonderful feeling you'll ever have in your life. The important thing is to go with it, not fight it. If you feel pain, don't fight it, go with it, but gently. Oh God, I'm confusing myself so I can imagine how much sense this is making to you. Look, I'll stay with you. I'll coach you through it. John's a great doctor, but I doubt if he's attended a delivery since his training days...oops, shouldn't have said that. Look, it'll all be fine, you'll see.'

She sat on the other end of the bed and proceeded to instruct Freya how to use her breathing and her muscles to assist the process, not to fight it. Thor listened, intrigued not only by the instruction but also by the woman who was delivering it. He had the feeling that if the Prime Minister relied heavily on this woman's advice, the country wasn't in

such bad shape after all. More importantly, she seemed to be in their corner.

CHAPTER 28

It had been a long, hard labour but at last it was over. Freya clutched her daughter to her as if she was the most precious thing in the universe—as indeed, to everyone in the room at that moment, she was. A beatific smile flooded Freya's fatigued features and was mirrored in the expressions of all the others in the room.

The baby was beautiful, the most perfectly formed newborn any of them had seen—which was strange considering she must be about a month premature, at least if Thor's calculations were correct and if the gestation period was the same for the space travellers as it was on Earth. A flash of suspicion hit Thor but he quickly, guiltily dismissed it.

He looked at his daughter—almost a replica of Freya but looking somehow even more delicate, more perfect—and felt a wave of tenderness for her even more profound than he had felt on first seeing his sons. He determined that, whatever it took, he would protect her.

He bent and kissed Freya lightly, tenderly on the forehead. She smiled at him and held the baby out to him. Very tenderly, gingerly, almost afraid to touch her, he took her. The flood of emotion as he held the tiny, helpless thing was almost overwhelming. Freya smiled at him and the feeling that she was offering him a share of her most precious possession only increased the bewildering sense of potent impotence he felt.

'We'll call her Maggie,' Freya said.

'Hey,' said Maggie, 'after me?'

Freya beamed and nodded.

'Hey, that's great,' Maggie exulted. 'I've never had anyone named after me before. If you want a godmother...no, I guess not.'

Wing Commander Thompson entered. 'So it's finally happened,' he said. 'Great! This is a dry base so I'm afraid we can't wet the baby's head. Smokefree zone too, so no cigars. Maybe we can find a Coke. You look like you could do with one,' he said to Thor.

'Were young Maggie's cries that loud or have you got some sort of sixth sense or did you come for something else?' Maggie queried.

'The Yanks have arrived,' he replied.

'Tell them to fuck off,' she said abruptly. 'The lad needs some time with his wife and daughter and we could all do with some sleep.'

'I think it would be best if we got it over with. Doc can stay with the new mother.'

'You're a heartless old bastard, George.'

She turned to Thor. 'We'd better do what he says. The Yanks could make life difficult for us—not that they're going to get an easy time of it.'

Thor reluctantly handed his daughter back to Freya, who looked at him anxiously. He kissed her softly and assured her, 'It'll be fine. I'll be back soon.'

George was already on his way to the door. As Thor moved to follow him, Maggie put a hand on his arm. 'Don't tell

these bastards too much,' she said. 'Give them only the bare facts. Don't say anything about your plans. Let me do most of the talking.'

Thor nodded in grateful agreement.

They followed the Wing Commander back to the conference room. The same group were again around the table but there were notable absentees—Freya and Dr de Martin of course, but also the two pilots from Amberley—and there were an extra seven men seated, who all stood up as they entered.

'Like to introduce your lot, Colonel?' Thompson suggested.

'Certainly,' replied a tall, fair-haired man in full US Air Force uniform. 'I'm Colonel Tony Bornhorst. This is Jim Lockyer and Greg Ryan of the CIA, David Manilow and Sam Broxton of the FBI, Tony Wharton from DOE. And the good-looking one there is Gary Hudson from NASA. This is Thor Ericson and Maggie Saunders?' He held out his hand in greeting. Thor shook it briefly but Maggie ignored it pointedly and sat down.

The Colonel seated himself and the others of his party followed his example. He frowned at Thor and Maggie. 'I gather you pair have stitched up some sort of deal. Don't you think that's a bit premature? After all, we have interests in this. It is our scramjet after all.'

'Not really,' Thor demurred. 'The scramjet was developed long ago without your aid. All that happened in Nevada was that they used your facilities for a refit.'

'That's right,' Evangelos said. 'I know that now, though they sure fooled me at the time.'

'You're the guy who got taken along for the ride?' queried the Colonel. 'So you can vouch for all this? You can verify what this craft can do and all the rest of the story?'

Evangelos nodded vigorously. 'Sure, sure.'

'Okay, that may all be true but I still think we have a claim. After all, we provided funds and facilities.'

'I don't see any reason why you shouldn't take it back with you,' Thor said. 'Does anyone else?'

Noone raised any objection.

'Only one thing,' said the Colonel. 'How do we fly it?'

'I'll fly you,' Craig said, looking somewhat apologetically at Thor. 'Fact is, I rather like Nevada. I wouldn't mind settling there.'

'Me too,' agreed Ronald.

Peter and Nicholas looked at each other. 'What do you say, Nick?' Peter asked. 'Think we should be in it too?'

Nicholas nodded assent.

'I think that could be arranged,' said the Colonel. 'You could fix that couldn't you, Jim—give them some sort of identity that would hold up?'

'Sure,' agreed the CIA man. 'We'd want a bit of quid pro quo though—like the details of what other agents are operating, who they are and where and how the network is organised.'

'And we'd want to know just how you worked the system,' said the Department of Energy representative.

The Nevada group looked at each other. 'We can certainly do that,' Craig agreed. 'But we can't help you much with the network. Our contact was through an Internet group. You could try making contact through that but I'd imagine it's all closed up like a clam by now.'

'Okay. We'll talk about that when we get back to the States.' There was a slight air of threat in the CIA man's reply that made Thor vaguely uneasy but there did not seem to be much he could do.

'What about you, Ericson, what do you know about how the network operates? How many guys there might be running around and so on?'

'How would I know?'

Lockyer shrugged. 'You seem to know a lot about everything. More, I suspect, than you're telling us.'

Before he had a chance to reply, David Manilow jumped into the conversation. 'In fact, you seem to be the linchpin of the whole operation,' he said emphatically. 'You seem to have been pulling most of the strings. Even these guys seem to see you as their leader. And you are right up the top, aren't you, Commander's son-in-law?'

Who the hell blabbed that? Thor wondered.

'Where is the old guy?' went on the FBI agent. 'It would be interesting to talk to him.'

'I'm not exactly sure.' That's not exactly a lie, Thor assured himself. He and Tony could well have moved for security reasons.

'I'm sure you are sure.' It was Sam Broxton, the other FBI agent. 'It would be in your interest to produce him. He could corroborate your story.'

Thor nodded. Why do I keep thinking of him as a helpless old man? he asked himself. He's like an old lion—no longer able to run down prey but well and truly able to make a meal of any human crossing his path.

'I'm sure it can be arranged,' he said. 'But the Australian security organisations have priority and I'd like to be there—not to brief him or to stop him telling the true story,' he assured them, 'but he is a very old man and what has happened will have been very traumatic for him. He probably doesn't know the final chapter yet and I'd like to tell him rather than have you guys hit him with it.'

'Sounds reasonable, but the sooner the better...You do understand we'll have to pursue that network?'

'No, I don't. They aren't going to be subversive. The whole reason for the network has ended. Why can't you just let them be?'

'Because we can't be sure they won't be subversive,' growled Greg Ryan. 'Sure they won't be planning an invasion but they could plot a takeover of one kind or another. Or they could decide to go criminal. Or they could even sell their services to the highest bidder. What weapons do these guys have?'

'None. The Commander always insisted on that.'

'And you're sure that was followed? None of them were in with the bunch who were going to invade and been given weapons?'

Thor was stopped dead in his tracks. He suddenly remembered that Tony had told him some of his agents had defected to Hadding. 'You're right,' he said reluctantly. 'They will all have to be accounted for. The Commander is with the guy who runs the network. I'll take you to them when we're finished here.'

'No need,' said Tony Cutts. 'My men already have them.'

Everyone except Michael McSweeney looked incredulously at him.

'Don't look so stunned,' laughed Cutts. 'We're not quite the blind incompetents the press likes to make us out. The amount of traffic in and out of their apartment couldn't fail to attract our attention. We've had them under surveillance for some time. Incidentally, I've had some of our agents' reports faxed over since our last meeting and they tend to confirm Ericson's story. I haven't seen any reports of the interrogations but I gather they're being cooperative. Of course, we'll share anything relevant,' he assured the American agents.

There was a rather bemused silence, broken eventually by Wing Commander Thompson.

'Well, I think that about wraps it up,' he said. 'At least for now. The rest is women's work, eh, Maggie?'

'Like the washing up,' she replied. 'Yes, I think I can tie up the loose ends and get everything in motion.'

'I'm sure you can. Well, all that's left is to thank you all for coming and to wish you a good flight back to your respective homes—something those coming with me are assured of, of course.' He smiled a confident, self-mocking smile. They all rose and began shaking hands with one another, muttering, 'Good to see ya,' and 'See you again,' and 'Have a good one,' and 'Keep the faith.'

'We'll expect a full report in due course,' Colonel Bornhorst told Thompson.

'Of course, of course,' Thompson assured him. He seemed to be suddenly anxious to get away—or was it to get them away?

Thor slipped quietly and quickly away and made his way back to Freya and the baby. Freya was sleeping peacefully, a smile on her lips, with the baby beside her. Dr de Martin was asleep in the chair beside the bed. Thor was almost overcome with conflicting emotions. His sense of awe at the messy, mundane but mysterious drama of birth remained and with it the sense of awesome responsibility for the little newcomer and for her mother. He was awestruck too with the beauty of them both and by the seemingly indissoluble bond immediately forged between the three of them. To try to wish all this away was to try to wish away the sunrise, but it was like watching the sun rise on the day of a final examination for which he was unprepared though he had sat up all night preparing for it. For he had other responsibilities he could not ignore. At least he knew that now he could, if it came to that, split from Sheila without having to worry about financial consequences for either of them. But was that really the question? It was a riddle to which there were no answers.

He was overcome with an intense weariness but there was nowhere to lie or even sit except on the bed and he wasn't

going to disturb Freya's sleep for anything. He cautiously, as silently as possible, sat on the floor with his back to the wall and almost instantly fell asleep.

He was awakened by a firm hand placed softly, lovingly on his head. He looked up at Odin standing over him and for a moment thought he was hallucinating. About to offer a greeting, he remembered where he was and looked toward the bed where Freya was sleeping. She still seemed inert, so he contented himself with raising a hand and grasping the old man's wrist. As quietly as he could, he rose to his feet and embraced him, while Odin paternally patted him on the back.

There was a small cry from the sleeping baby. It instantly galvanised the room. Freya's eyes opened wide and she drew the child gently to her and placed her on her full breast. Dr de Martin instantly awoke and eyed the pair approvingly. Thor and Odin moved, like iron filings drawn to a magnet, to the bed.

Freya's eyes opened wide at the sight of her father. 'Isn't she beautiful?' she asked.

'Not as beautiful as you.' He bent and kissed her.

'Oh, I don't know,' Thor said and Freya looked at him questioningly then, realising he was teasing, smiled a smug little smile at him.

'Where did you spring from?' Thor asked Odin. Seeing the puzzled look on Odin's face, he amended this to, 'How did you get here?'

'Your Air Force brought me...and Tony. Your Security Service grabbed us and asked lots of questions and then they took us to an Air Base and we were flown here. I do not think they brought me here just to see my grand-daughter, did they? What is happening, Thor? And what happened? They would not tell me anything.'

'There's a lot of bad news and a lot of good news,' Thor said gently. Quickly he filled Odin in on all that had happened.

When he had finished, Odin said, 'Thank you, Thor. My daughter did indeed choose well. You have saved my people. I can never forgive myself for what I brought them to, how I failed them, and I am sure those who are left will never forgive me. Without you and my very brave but very foolish daughter, all would have been lost. The fate of my people safely rests with you.'

'No,' objected Thor. 'I have no right to lead. You are the leader and will be till you die. And Plarisoc is your natural successor. After that...or, maybe, long before that...you people will all be part of Australian life and not need leaders in that sense.'

Maggie and Tony Cutts entered, both smiling in a friendly, reassuring fashion.

'Hey, Maggie, you're right, she is beautiful,' Cutts said. 'I have always thought newborn babies were pretty gross. Maybe mine just took after me.' He turned to Odin. 'Commander, do you feel up to answering a few questions? There are a few details we want to fill in.'

'Of course I am up to it,' Odin replied haughtily. 'I will tell you anything you want to know—as long as I know it of course. My son-in-law will tell you I do not know much.'

'I think you've forgotten more than I'll ever know,' Thor said. 'Off you go. Maggie and I will look after your granddaughter.'

Odin and Cutts went out and Dr de Martin stretched and said, 'I think it's time I went too. I should be working out necessary quarantine arrangements for one thing.'

'Maggie, you're wonderful,' Thor said when he had gone. 'How did you swing it?'

'I didn't. It was all George's idea. He arranged it all. Mind you, he cut it pretty fine. He'd just got the Yanks airborne when Vitsaras flew in with Odin and Tony. That's why he was so keen on getting everything wrapped up and getting the Yanks away.'

'The old fox.' There was admiration, affection and appreciation in Thor's voice. 'Still, without you, I'm sure none of this would have happened. If it had been an all male affair, it would have gone on for weeks.'

Maggie smiled and inclined her head. 'Thank you. It's guys like you who really appreciate women and the contributions they can make that gives me some hope for the future.'

'More women like you and we might have a future.'

'And like your wives.' There was a deliberate emphasis on the plural.

'Like my wives,' Thor agreed. He seemed to crumple suddenly, child-like. 'Oh Maggie, what am I going to do?' he beseeched her.

'That's something only you can decide. It's only because you're such a nice guy that you've got a problem. A bastard would just walk out on one or the other or both and be completely able to justify it to himself. Or he'd keep one as a wife and the other as a lover or maybe make lovers of both or...but none of that helps you, does it?'

He shook his head.

'Maybe there is a case for polygamy sometimes,' she said slowly. 'I don't know. I just hope things work out for all of you...You know, I met Sheila at the launch of your computer. She's a very nice woman too. I can see you wouldn't want to hurt her either. Unfortunately, you're all likely to end up very badly hurt if you're not careful.' Suddenly she smiled. 'You know, this reminds me of an old movie where the hero was a Captain of a ship sailing regularly between Gibraltar and Morocco or somewhere like that and he had two perfectly happy marriages, one in each of the ports. And then one of the wives decided to visit the other port and stuffed everything...So...just a highly speculative immoral semi-suggestion...maybe you could have Freya in an establishment with her people wherever they settle and Sheila in Brisbane? I assume you will be moving between the two?'

'I guess so,' Thor replied. 'I haven't thought that far ahead. At the moment, I'm just planning to stay with these people for a few weeks till they get settled and then get back to Brisbane.'

There was a stir from the bed and both of them were acutely embarrassed to realise that, low though their voices had been, Freya had evidently heard the entire conversation. She was looking directly and steadily at Thor and her eyes were moist. Anguish showed as clearly on her face as on Thor's, but there was determination there too.

'Whither thou goest, I will go; and where thou lodgest, I will lodge; thy people shall be my people, and thy God my God,' she said.

To Thor, it was like being punched between the eyes. He knew the biblical passage well, as he did most of the Bible. His God-fearing parents had made sure of that. He had long since rejected the Bible and its supposed truth, but the rejection was still tinged with guilt. To have this alien, beautiful and beloved though she was, quote it to him (at him?) was as disturbing as the uncompromising devotion it asserted.

'I have no God and I'm no longer sure who are my people,' he murmured, more to himself than to her.

CHAPTER 29

'You have seen strange things,
The awful hand of death, new shapes of woe,
Uncounted sufferings;
And all that you have seen is God.'

Yes, I've seen strange things, thought Thor, but none stranger than Plarisoc standing up intoning Sophocles before thousands of people in the middle of Australia. Yet it was fitting that one whose very name had been derived by combining the names of the three greatest Greek philosophers should be quoting one of their greatest dramatists.

Perhaps, too, they were fitting words for Odin, though in truth Odin had not been exposed to the spectacle of the holocaust like Plarisoc and himself. It all seemed so long ago. Well, it was a long time ago. Twelve years is a long time. A lot had happened since then, things that seemed, in some ways, stranger even than what had happened to him in the months from his attendance at that conference to the time of his bringing the survivors of the Earthship to Earth.

His instinct to let the Asgardians get on with rebuilding their lives in their new land with the absolute minimum of assistance or interference had proved sound. Sure they'd needed some help with materials but—with Maggie's active connivance—the hordes of professional helpers had been kept away. No social workers or counsellors had appeared, no clerks from government departments, no politicians, no union officials. They had not asked for public welfare or private charity and had been given none. Despite this—or because of it—they had thrived, under conditions where many others would have perished.

'And god is all that we have seen and done and all our
ancestors saw and did before us.'

Their science had helped, of course. On the Earthship, they'd been forced to learn how to be very self-contained, how to survive without fresh rations, how to manufacture food and water from almost nothing. Plarisoc, as the only surviving scientist, had been essential to this—not that he had known it all but he had also been able to access, in the survival ship, carefully stored archives that had revealed much.

It was difficult to say which had been the greater magnet—the science or the historical record—for the visitors who, when the Asgardians had decided they were ready, had been freely permitted to come.

Scientists of all kinds had come in plenty and few had been disappointed. Those who had been disappointed had been the weapons experts who had come, frequently disguising themselves as something else but quickly revealing themselves for what they were. The few hand-held laser weapons the space travellers had possessed had been, on Odin's orders and with Plarisoc's eventual acquiescence, destroyed.

Cosmologists had also been disappointed. They had come expecting to have all the secrets of the universe revealed but

had found a jumble of theory no more coherent than their own and as frequently contradicting itself as it did their own views. Thinking of this now, Thor smiled to himself as he recalled his own experiences with Odin when he'd first been brought to him on the Earthship.

His mind went back to that meeting, but did not linger there. He saw himself back at the conference where it had all begun, back to his first sight of Freya. I've changed so much since then, he thought. Was that what this was all about? Don't be such a stupid egoist, he told himself; thousands of people didn't die just so you could learn...something...what...Just what have I learned?

'We celebrate the God that gave us you and put into you the good that is all the God there is, that led you to lead a good life inspired by love and guided by knowledge.'

That is true, Thor thought. Odin did live a life inspired by love and guided by knowledge and, in balance, one could call it a good life. But the same love and knowledge had led him to commit great wrongs and to harm many. Was this what Plarisoc was getting at in his mystical way? What was it Hadding had said in his poem he'd shown Thor way back when they'd first met at the conference? Something about God and the devil being one or else they are nothing. It was a pity Hadding had destroyed himself; he could have been a more than worthy successor to Odin.

'You have restored us to our original nature and healed us and made us happy and blessed.'

Call no man happy until he is dead, thought Thor. You, as a Greek scholar, should remember the words of the oracle, Plarisoc. Happiness is always in retrospect.

'Still and all I'm happy
The reason is, you see
Once in a while along the way
Love's been good to me.'

The words of the song ran through his brain. True, he thought, overall love has been good to me, brought me much happiness—and some pain.

He looked at his two wives standing together, side by side. Freya still had the same ethereal beauty despite having borne him two children. To say Maggie was pretty was the understatement of the year. She was very like her mother in looks except her hair was a shade or two lighter and a micron or two finer, and her features were even more mobile and expressive, mirroring an all-knowing, all-feeling soul. He knew that, to him at least, no man would ever be good enough for her. Sometimes the thought of protecting her from attacks and temptations till she reached maturity almost overcame him.

Their son, Thorbjorn, was the archtypical Nordic male—tall for his age, blue eyes, well-built—but with ginger hair. And he was as rambunctious as a Viking on a raid. Thor was always amazed at Freya's calm in dealing with him. Many times he had been inclined to show the lad the kind of discipline a

Viking might have suffered at sea but Freya calmly restored order with a few soft words and left him wondering what he had missed.

Sheila was still looking youthful for her age, despite strain lines round her mouth and eyes. Their daughter, Fiona Freya, stood a little apart from the group, absorbed in her own private thoughts. She was not a head-turner like Maggie, rather like her mother—hair an indefinite shade of brown-black, eyes an indefinite blue-green, slightly chubby face, a figure without definite waist. But, like her mother, when she smiled her special little smile at you, you forgot about everything and everyone else.

How pleased he was now that he had not been able to persuade Sheila to abort. Even now, it was painful remembering how she'd been during her pregnancy. Apparently, she'd started vomiting even before she'd missed her first period. The first he'd known about it had been when his sons had arrived at the settlement bringing some computer equipment. Rather diffidently, he'd asked the boys how their mother was.

'Terrible,' Murray had replied. 'She vomits all the time.'

Thor had seen the quick look that James had thrown his brother and wondered what it meant. He'd soon found out when he'd asked how long this had been going on, been told nine days, and asked why he hadn't been informed earlier.

'Mum didn't want you to know,' James had told him.

He'd been shocked, puzzled, disturbed.

Murray had answered his unspoken question. 'She wants you to come back to her because you want to, because you love her and need her, not because you feel sorry for her or think it's your duty to look after her.'

'I'm coming back with you,' he'd told his sons. 'Don't tell Mum you told me.'

He'd told Freya he had to go with the boys for business reasons and would be back before long. She'd wanted to come with him but he'd finally managed to persuade her it was only a short business trip and it would be better if she stayed behind; or, perhaps more likely, she saw through his excuses and decided not to press the point.

He hadn't been able to keep up the deception with Sheila either. He'd never been able to lie to her and she'd very quickly seen through his attempt to persuade her his return had nothing to do with her illness. By this time, it had been established that her vomiting had a normal physiological cause—pregnancy—though why it should have started so early in the pregnancy no one could explain.

Except for the unremitting vomiting—at least once every hour—they might have joked about the pregnancy, about forgetting that Thor's vasectomy had been reversed and that he was obviously still fertile, and about the obvious fact that Sheila had not yet completed her change of life. Sheila had tried to make something of a joke of it by claiming that it all showed how compatible they were when one shot at their age could have such a result, but it had been obvious she had not been entirely joking.

What had seemed to worry her even more than the vomiting itself had been the conviction that what was keeping Thor with her was not his love for her but her illness and the fact that she was pregnant—in other words, that she now needed him more than Freya. She'd obviously been worried too that Thor was neglecting his business and career to take care of her. He'd set up James' old bedroom as an office, with telephones, computers, printers, copiers, faxes, modems, but she'd worried that it had not been really adequate. In truth her illness had been disruptive; he had seemed to be ever alert for every sound of distress from Sheila, and if the now familiar sound of her vomiting reached him he'd sprung up from his work and hurried to her.

He'd suggested they get a nurse for her but she'd retorted that what they needed was an old-fashioned housemaid to cook and clean and not too proud to clean up after her when she wasn't quick enough to reach toilet or bathroom or even the small plastic bucket she carried everywhere with her. Thor had realised that her chief concern was that she was neglecting him. He had tried to convince her that it was time the boot was on the other foot but it had obviously irked her that she was, as she saw it, failing in her main duty of looking after his welfare—more, that she was being a burden to him and preventing him doing the things he should be doing.

Eventually, she'd presented him with an incredible solution. Out of the blue, she'd asked him if he missed Freya and Maggie. He'd been completely flabbergasted, not knowing what to say, but eventually he'd answered honestly that he did.

'Why not bring them here?' she'd suggested. 'If she'll come, of course. It's not as silly as it sounds,' she'd rushed on, while he stood in stunned silence. 'You need looking after I can't give you. I need looking after you can't give me. She needs attention noone is giving her. And Maggie needs her father's love and attention.'

'But...'

'But won't I be jealous? Of course I will, but I'd rather have part of your love than none at all and I can see that happening if this keeps up.'

This had increased, rather than abated, Thor's shock, doubt and confusion. Sheila had turned their relationship, all he'd thought he'd known of her, on its head. Was this the same woman who had always threatened to walk out on him the first time he had an affair? Of course, that had been shown to be a bluff, but to invite the other woman into her house? Was it love or lack of love that now made her willing to share him with another woman? Maybe she wanted him around but didn't want him sexually any more and thought Freya would ensure that he made no such demands on her. Or—remembering Betsy—maybe she fancied Freya herself.

Finally, he'd agreed—on the understanding that there would be no sex between him and either of them. Sheila had laughed at that, kissed him tenderly, told him she loved him, said she knew him too well to believe that and that Freya might have something to say about that and anyway she wasn't going to remain celibate the rest of her life; just wait till

all this was over. Nonetheless, he'd moved all the office equipment from James' bedroom and moved himself in there.

Freya and Maggie had arrived and occupied Murray's old bedroom. Strangely, the two women had seemed to hit it off immediately and everyone adored and spoiled Maggie. The strain, not unnaturally perhaps, had come in Thor's accommodating to the presence of his two wives in the same house. He'd found his natural tendency to express affection to either one completely inhibited by the actual or potential presence of the other, despite the fact that both of them would unashamedly touch, caress and cuddle him in front of the other and the other would show only a friendly reaction. It was beginning to look like Bertrand Russell's perfect world, where 'every sentient being would be to every other the object of fullest love, compounded of delight, benevolence, and understanding inextricably linked.' But Russell had also warned that 'in sex-love, benevolence will only exist where there is secure possession, otherwise jealousy will destroy it,' and Thor knew how jealous Sheila could be.

Eventually, warmly received accidental or unconscious contacts and his ability to stifle rising sexual impulses had reassured him and he gradually relaxed into his old spontaneously affectionate self to both the women. He had congratulated himself on being able to control his sexual urgings and to show affection without expecting it to lead to sex, but frequently in the night he had found himself embracing his pillow and fondling his erect penis. He had sensed the two women watching him anxiously and he had suspected they were well aware of his torments but he had not known what they expected of him and he had been determined to conquer the habit of sex as he had once conquered the habit of smoking.

Ten weeks into the pregnancy and twenty-five pounds lighter, Sheila had been admitted to hospital and had a tube surgically inserted through her chest wall and into her heart. Each night, a computerised pump had fed lipids and glucose through this tube directly into her bloodstream. It had been then that Thor had suggested she have an abortion and end her agony. She had reacted angrily at first but had realised he was only concerned for her welfare, calmed down and merely asserted, in a way that had made it clear there was no possibility of her changing her mind, that she intended to continue her pregnancy to term no matter what. He had had no choice but to accept her decision.

He'd been afraid to spend time in the house with Freya without Sheila there. When he was not at the hospital with Sheila, he had spent the time at his office, though in truth he accomplished very little. He would go home at night only when he felt he would be too exhausted to drive home if he left it any longer. Then he would have a long shower and stumble into bed, being careful not to waken Freya or Maggie.

One night he had awoken to find the form he was hugging was not his pillow but Freya's warm, live, luscious body and that the hand holding his penis, directing it toward her opening, was hers. Even then he had tried to pull away but his natural inclinations were too strong and soon he was

exploding within her. She'd clung to him and he to her, their faces wet.

'You do still love me?' she'd asked, almost plaintively.

'Yes.' It had been like a confession wrung from him.

'But you also love Sheila?'

'Yes.' Another confession, even more difficult than the first.

'And we both love you, so there's no problem.'

'But...'

'Yes, I know. It's not supposed to happen this way. But it has. Sheila and I talked it over. We both agreed that we couldn't live without you. And we both agreed that to make you choose between us would tear you apart. So, you'll have to be prepared to satisfy both of us.'

'What if I can't? I'm getting old, you know.'

'I'm sure you'll manage. The way Sheila is she won't be wanting her share for a while yet.'

'Yet she's happy for you to get yours?'

'What really concerns her is that you get yours. Do you think we haven't noticed how not getting it has affected you? You mightn't realise it, but you're a cranky old sod. And you haven't done any useful work since I've been here. We've both been trying to give you hints for ages but you've been acting thick as a brick.'

Sheila had looked at him questioningly when he went to see her the following day and he'd asked himself if the guilt was showing or if Freya had been to see her first. She'd smiled at him and said, 'So, Freya finally took things into her own hands, did she?'

'And other areas...You sure this will work? You don't mind?'

'I mind like hell. I wish it had been me. I wish none of this had ever happened and everything was just it was before you went to that conference. No, I don't, not really. Then I wouldn't be having our daughter.'

'You've had an ultrasound? They can tell already?'

'No, but I'm sure it will be...Freya really is very sweet. She's almost like a daughter to me.'

'Christ! Now you're making it sound like incest.'

She had laughed. 'Sorry. I was just being bitchy...She is nice, though. I can see how you fell in love with her...I can see how she fell for you too...The only thing that surprises me is that you still want me when you can have her.'

'Oh, Sheila.' He had reached for her but his movement had been arrested by retching sounds from Sheila.

For six months the vomiting had gone on—six months of desperate attempts to keep food down ending in gut-wrenching stomach contractions and the expulsion of bile and stomach contents. Weeks of being bedridden. How she had endured it all was beyond Thor's comprehension. He had suffered through each spasm with her.

The cruelest blow had been when, after the vomiting had been going on for some four months, her obstetrician had decided she was neurotic and demanded she see a psychiatrist. Thor had been livid when she'd told him.

'Who is this nut?' he'd demanded, reflecting guiltily that he didn't even know the name of his wife's obstetrician.

'Toni Landau.'

'I'll break his neck.'

'Not his, hers. It's Toni with an i, not a y.'

Thor had shaken his head sadly. 'No wonder you women don't get anywhere when even female doctors think their sisters are neurotic when they have hyperemesis gravidarum. I guess they're still taught hysteria comes from having a womb.'

'How did you know it was called that?'

'Umm...Oh, hyperemesis gravidarum. I've been looking it up. Chasing it up through Index Medicus and Internet and Medline. There are those who think it's neurotic but noone really seems to have a clue why it happens. Neurosis in these things is clearly just a case of we can't explain it so it must be neurotic or psychosomatic. Just like your local GP will tell you it's a virus if he doesn't know what else to blame.'

He smiled wryly to himself as he remembered how pleased she had been with his assurance that she was not neurotic. In truth, he'd wondered if she was not a bit that way—not because she had been, as the doctor suggested, causing her vomiting because she was rejecting the baby, but because she had clung so obstinately to having the baby despite all the misery it was causing her. He'd wondered whether it was to have a more secure hold over him. Early in their relationship, she'd discovered his intense need to be needed and had used it. He'd decided she was probably using it now. Whether or not, it had been obvious to him that she needed him, that she and the child would need him and that he would stay with her as long as she needed him.

'We do not grieve because you are at last united with the Earth you loved. We weep because we are suddenly deprived of good companionship, sound judgment and familiar counsel.'

He looked at the two women standing sombrely, heads bowed, listening to the eulogies, and wondered again why Sheila hadn't played her hand and asked him to choose between them then—for he knew, as he had known then and was sure she had known then, that he would have chosen her as the one with greatest need. Certainly he wouldn't have abandoned Freya and their daughter, he would have seen they were well provided for—but somewhere else. Maggie Saunders' suggestion had been an inspired one; why couldn't Freya have stayed with her people and he divided his time between two households? It would have been perfect; after all, he did spend almost equal time in the two places—or he did later when the baby had been born.

Perhaps it had been that she really did need Freya—or someone like her (and who else was there?...obviously I wasn't good enough...no, that's not fair; I believe she was really genuinely concerned she was upsetting me and taking up too much of my time)—to look after her. He remembered his happiness when, after about six months, her vomiting had diminished to almost nothing. She'd convinced him she was

okay and that he should spend more time at his business and scientific interests and he'd started to do so until he realised the nausea remained and migraine headaches and blackouts had been added to the misery.

It had finally ended and their daughter had been born. He had been immediately captivated—not by her perfection, for she was, at least compared to Maggie, not perfect, but perhaps by her very lack of perfection, the ordinariness that was nevertheless broken by an indefinable something that caught and held the eye—like Sheila herself.

Now had begun the anxious wait for Sheila to reclaim her marital rights. He'd been caught between hoping she would (part ego and part because he needed her to love him) and hoping she wouldn't (thus sparing the relationship the trauma of competition for his sexual interest). He and Freya had made love many times during Sheila's pregnancy, mostly when he had awoken to find her in his bed, but sometimes when he had gone to her when his need for her and his wish not to hurt her or disappoint her had overcome his doubts about maintaining what—despite the fact that he was sure Sheila not only knew of, but approved of, their activities—he could not help feeling was a disloyal and vaguely incestuous relationship.

The weeks had gone by and still Sheila had made no move. She had been eating like the proverbial horse and was already beginning to pile on the ounces. Thor had begun to wonder whether she was making up for lost time, whether it was some sort of physiological reaction, whether she thought he really preferred the fuller figure she had previously had, or whether she just didn't care what he preferred. He had longed to take her in his arms and assure her that he still loved her but he had feared rejection. And he had been finding that it was not that easy to love two women simultaneously. Man-woman love, he had decided, did have an exclusivity about it that meant it was diminished, if not destroyed, by an attempt to share between two. Again Maggie Saunders' suggestion of the two households had come back to him. He had come to the conclusion that it was the only real solution and had begun to lay plans for splitting his time between Brisbane and Woomera and persuading Freya to make them a home at Woomera.

It had been then that Freya had discovered she was pregnant again. The discovery had reminded him that he was again potent, a fact he had still had trouble coming to terms with. He'd immediately taken himself off for another vasectomy.

Then Sheila had made the obvious observation that the house was too small for the growing family and was it not time, now they could afford it, for them to buy that small horse farm they (actually she) had always wanted? Thor had readily agreed, envisaging a maximum \$300 000 deal, but a mansion plus horse stud had come on the market at Rochedale, a steal at three million dollars, and reluctantly he'd agreed to borrow against the business to buy it. He'd worried that maybe Schopenhauer had been right and Sheila—who had always been careful with money—had been finding wealth to be like sea water: the more we drink the thirstier we become.

For a while, it had seemed so. The expenses of running the new establishment had been enormous. Sheila had been determined to run the place as a business; fine, but it had been a business that required large expenditures before income, let alone profits, started to come in. Sheila had tried to involve him but he had told her the horse farm idea was hers and it was up to her to make it work. She had; the losses had slowed, ceased and turned into profits inside twelve months—a remarkable achievement. He had been inordinately proud of her.

The only problem had been that, though the computer business had been extremely profitable, its profits had been largely eaten up by its own needs for capital for expansion and in servicing the debt on the property. Thor had been forced to postpone his plans for taking charge of the information highway.

Still, the large house had certainly had its attractions. In effect, he, Sheila and Freya all had a wing to themselves, with a further wing available for guests. This had given each of them the opportunity for privacy, while still allowing plenty of scope for contacts, including sexual liaisons. In fact, the arrangement had seemed to make the whole thing more romantic, giving it a kind of a courting atmosphere. Thor had no longer felt the all-embracing love for either woman he had once felt for both at various times, but it was nonetheless a not too unpleasant lifestyle. His unease that sexual jealousy would flare between the two women had abated, though he had continued to be amazed that sharing him sexually did not seem to worry either of them as long as each got their required share. He had realised that his vanity was slightly put out that they did not fight over his favours but had been sensible enough to be grateful they did not.

But if they had not battled over sex they had fought over the right to sleep—that is, truly sleep, not the euphemism for having sex—with him. This had seemed a completely insoluble problem. All of them had felt a deep need for a warm, loving body next to them to help them through the night. None of them wanted to sleep alone. Both the women had decided that sleeping with him on alternate nights would be worse than sleeping alone all the time. So, Thor had suggested they would all have to sleep together. Somewhat to his surprise, both women had taken him seriously, but they had both raised the objection that they would be too far away from their babies. But they had agreed it would be the ideal if it could be done, so Thor had had some remodelling carried out so that they had a bedroom with a nine feet by seven feet bed (complete with sheets, blankets and bedspreads to match), with wardrobe space for the three of them, and with adjacent rooms for the babies.

The arrangement had worked—and was still working—surprisingly well. They could all cuddle, be cuddled or spread out to their heart's content. It was not even unknown for the women to cuddle each other—something which initially Thor had found quite strange and disturbing but which eventually he had got quite used to and looked upon as quite natural. If one of the babies whimpered, one of them would

get up and, if not the mother herself, bring it to the mother to feed. As time went on and the babies had grown, they would come into the bed in the early morning and cuddle in and attempt to arouse one or other of the sleepers. This custom had continued and now, with visiting grand-children, it could be a very full bed indeed. Through all this the golden rule of 'no sex' had been strictly observed, though not all the cuddling was strictly platonic.

Thor had also soon come to realise that, while they gave no sign of being jealous of each other for sharing his attentions, they were intensely jealous when it came to their progeny; let there be the slightest suggestion of favouritism shown by him to the other's child and the offended mother would leap into action in an attempt to redress the balance.

He looked at them standing all in a group now and wondered again how little, after all these years, he really knew of women and how their minds worked. The feminists and others who claimed women were just the same as men and it was all acculturation! Rubbish! There's more difference between men and women of the same culture than there is between men and men, or women and women, of different cultures, he thought.

He looked around him at some of the aboriginal families standing there. Funny, he mused, I never thought of it before but our little family group is a bit like an aboriginal extended family. Not that many aboriginal blokes have two wives, though I've heard it does happen, but Sheila and Freya are much like the aboriginal aunt 'mothers' to each other's children.

Strange how the Aborigines and the Asgardians had hit it off. True, the Asgardians had cleaned up the Aborigines' land for them, rid it of the radioactive debris the British had left behind from their atomic bomb tests, but it went much further than that. It was partly that the Asgardians had shown them much respect, acknowledging that the land was theirs by right and making them an active part of planning for the city—now approaching thirteen thousand people and pushing on toward the forty thousand Odin had maintained was the absolute minimum for long-term viability.

Odin's views on this were now accepted almost as gospel throughout much of the world. He had long seen the lack of genetic heterogeneity of the Earthship population as the greatest long-term threat to its survival and had tried to enrich the gene pool by interbreeding with Earth's population—whether the Earth men and women involved were willing or not. When they had come to Earth, he had realised that racial mixing was the best way to preserve the genetic traits of the Asgardians and had actively encouraged marriages with the local Aborigines and with the white Australians who had come to work in the area.

Further, he had encouraged Asgardian agents who had married and settled in various parts of the world to come to the settlement, together with their families. Thor had helped greatly in this. He had persuaded Maggie Saunders and Dr de Martin to convince the Australian Government of the

desirability of a special immigration policy to apply to the settlement, outside normal quotas.

Thor smiled to himself as he remembered the information technology conference he had arranged at Uluru. Through Tony, he had contacted all the Asgardian agents and invited them to attend. He'd also invited everyone useful in information technology he could think of. The conference itself had been a bit of a shambles, with many of the attendees forced to sleep in tents, but he had persuaded many of the Asgardians and a fair number of the information technologists to move with their families to Woomera.

Over the years, headhunting and the growing reputation of the establishment had brought many others, and a good smattering of refugees from various war zones and trouble spots had been added. It was now probably the most polyglot settlement on Earth and was proving to all the success that mixed race populations could enjoy, shattering 'pure race' racial supremacy doctrines in the process.

I guess the Aborigines and the Asgardians respected each other's ability to survive under extreme circumstances, mused Thor. They also had a drug problem—the Asgardians their tea, the Aborigines the white man's grog. Fortunately, removing their dependence on other people to solve their problems seemed to put them well on the way to solving their dependence on drugs—helped by Plarisoc's antidote/blocker.

'Of waxing and waning there is no end,' Plarisoc was droning on.

Strange how Plarisoc, the Asgardian scientist, had become the High Priest of a new religion that Thor called 'Greek Unorthodox'. As far as he could ascertain, the Asgardians had been nominal atheists like himself. That is, they believed, as he did, that the whole concept of God was illogical and an unnecessary, non-explicative hypothesis. Yet, like him, they seemed to have a feeling—logically indefensible but real nonetheless—of being 'gods in the chrysalis', of being involved in some sort of cosmic competition in which the winner would lead the way in the evolution of the God that would one day come to pass.

All mystical nonsense, Thor told himself, but still more satisfying, and to him more believable, than the Christian concept. Plarisoc's concept was even more mystical, reaching back beyond Christianity to the ancient Greek tradition. Thor ran the words from Sophocles that Plarisoc had earlier quoted through his mind again. Now what the hell does that mean? he asked himself. Great poetry, great drama, but really quite meaningless.

His mood became sombre as he pondered again on the meaning of it all. The meaning of life is just what we give it, he told himself, not for the first time. Why can't we all be content to ask the scientific 'how?' rather than the philosophical 'why?', he demanded of himself. Who said there has to be any meaning to life, or to anything for that matter?

Was there any message in all this for himself and for others? James Gleick said something about the first message

being that there is disorder. Well, the second message must be that there is order. Complete chaos is perhaps an even more ordered state than complete order. Sometimes there is more disorder, sometimes more order. Oh, crap, it's all ordure.

Some Russian wrote about some other Russian that as long as the first Russian lived, the stars would stay in their place. Well, both of them were long dead and the stars were still in their places. Perhaps we are all a piece of the stars, he thought, but we are very, very small pieces.

He had the sudden feeling that all this had been an elaborate ceremony to honour someone who had failed to turn up. Odin was gone. There was no spirit hovering over, watching the obsequies, or winging its way to heaven. There was nothing, nothing at all left of the one who had been. As Bertolt Brecht said, 'Death is no good for anything.'

He looked up and saw Freya approaching, tearful but proud. He looked down at Maggie and Thorbjorn clutching at him. He looked around at the departing crowd. Something is left, he told himself, and what a wonderful legacy it is.

Freya put her arm in his and they started to walk away but Freya stopped and indicated Sheila standing forlornly, restraining Fiona from following. They both smiled at her and, somewhat uncertainly, she came.

'Let's go,' Thor said, linking his other arm in Sheila's.

They walked together to the waiting cars, where James and Murray stood watching their approach, together with their brides and the first four of Thor and Sheila's grandchildren. His sons had certainly kept up the multicultural tradition. James had married a Chinese girl, delicately pretty and with a Ph.D. in computing. Murray's bride was of Italian extraction, dark, vivacious, an up-and-coming artist. Both unions had produced two children, a boy and a girl in each case. He was an indulgent grandfather and they knew it.

Perhaps after all it is true that the more love you give the more you have to give, he thought—and the more love you will be given. He felt himself enveloped in love, as with the warmed towel Sheila would hand him when he got out of the shower on a cold night. Whatever other meaning life may have, he decided, without love everything is meaningless.

That night, he stood with Freya in the cold desert night, looking out at a completely cloudless sky, seeking the Southern Cross.

'It still seems incredible that you people all came originally from way out there. I wonder if there's another planet somewhere just like Earth,' he mused.

'Perhaps. Plarisoc thinks so. In fact, he's worked out an area where he reckons it's likely. He's planning to go look. I may go with him.'

It was like a vicious blow to the solar plexus. 'You what?'

She remained looking out over the desert, avoiding his eyes. 'It won't be for at least ten years. He has to get a new starship built and outfitted and find 12,910 volunteers. That's his estimate of the number needed to maintain genetic

diversity as long as we select the volunteers from a diverse enough population.'

'But...what about us?'

She looked at him. There was more than a hint of calculation in her look and he was struck by how much she had changed in the past twelve years. No longer was she the starry-eyed young bride for whom the only real meaning in life was to fulfil her destiny as wife and mother. She had a confidence and an enlightened selfishness about her that she had not previously possessed. There was a sense about her of a self-realisation of her worth as a person in her own right, not in relationship to anyone else. Intellectually he applauded it; emotionally, it devastated him.

'It will be best for all of us,' she said. 'You and Sheila are winding down; it is best you do it together without me. I am winding up; I can do that much better with Plarisoc.'

'What about Maggie and Thorbjorn? Will you take them with you?'

'That will be up to them. They will be old enough to make up their own minds by then.'

Thor sighed. 'You really are Odin's daughter. The dynasty continues. Maybe he was right about making you fly through that anomaly.'

She put a hand softly on his arm. 'Don't be bitter,' she said. 'We still have years.'

'Why don't you go now?' This was a hint of asperity in his voice and a small subconscious movement of rejection of his arm under her hand. Another line from Brecht's diaries came to him--'not without relief I note the total disappearance of love in me'--but he could not convince himself of its truth.

She dropped her hand. 'Because the kids still need their father. When Thorbjorn is eighteen I'll go to Plarisoc. They can decide themselves whether they'll come with me or stay with you or do a bit of both or...whatever.'

He stood still and silent for a long moment, his mind in tumult. His sense of impending loss was almost overwhelming, though the vision of a sunset period alone with Sheila was not altogether unappealing. It was true that love for him was passing from a two-person orgy of knotted limbs to a calmer, serener, softer thing. But yet...

'How dull it is to make an end, to rest unburnished, not to shine in use,' he voiced Tennyson's lines, that had been running through his mind, aloud.

'My purpose holds to sail beyond the baths of all the western stars until I die,' she continued the quotation. 'So you do understand.'

He shook his head. 'No. I was talking about myself. Men go exploring; women don't.'

She laughed. 'On this sort of expedition, they do. Remember, we have to be there to keep having babies--and we have our other uses.'

'Take me with you then. You told me once--just after our wedding, remember--that you could make me live for two hundred or three hundred years. We could have another hundred years together.'

'I lied. I didn't mean to, but I lied. It doesn't work the way I thought it did. It's possible that, with faster than light travel, you might get an extra ten or twenty years but you'd be a pretty decrepit old bugger long before that. I'll be doing well to live another hundred years.'

'Women here reach their sexual peak in their thirties. Is it the same with you?'

She blushed furiously. 'A little later.'

'Just about the time you'll be going to Plarisoc?' He shrugged. 'You're right; you'd kill me...Why didn't you go to him in the first place?'

'Because I loved you and because Maggie needed to be with her father and because it wasn't fair to take her away from you.'

'And none of that applies now?'

'I still love you. I always will. Maggie will be with you till she's an adult. Sometime or other, adults must leave their parents.'

'The one thing I've learned in my life is that I'll never understand women. I'm sure that men and women of the same race and culture are more different than men and men, or women and women, of different races or cultures.'

She laughed. 'Maybe you're right. Maybe it's just as well.'

'I just had a thought. This starship that Plarisoc's going to build. What sort of drive is it going to have? He's not going to do the same trick to Earth as your grandfather did to your planet, is he?'

She laughed again. 'Of course not. He'll use a giant slingshot.'

'Very funny. How does he plan to get it up?'

'I'm sure he'll have no trouble getting it up.'

He shook his head sadly. 'Freya, Earth has corrupted you. It's just as well you're going.'

She stopped laughing. 'Sorry,' she said. 'It's some sort of electromagnetic effect. I can't tell you more than that. He explained it to me but it didn't make a lot of sense.'

'But the ship will still have a gravity control drive?'

'Without some sort of gravity control device, we wouldn't live very long, so you might as well use that as a drive as well. Plarisoc thinks he can get it up a lot closer to its theoretical limit too.'

'So it will be just like the old Earthship Four?'

'Except that I'll have a hand in its design and I'll make sure it's a lot less monotonous and more cheery. There won't be any more of that damned tea either.'

'So...you'll be spending a lot of time with Plarisoc before it's ready to fly?'

'Jealous?'

'Bloody oath...but I guess I asked you to share so I can't object if you do the same...But I ask you again—wouldn't it be simpler to make the move now?'

'It would have been simpler for me to have stayed with him in the first place. The simplest things are not always the best.'

'Oh, I don't know; what about women?'

'You just finished telling me women are too complex for you to understand.'

'Perhaps it's because they're so simple-minded they make everything complex.'

'You men will talk your way out of anything,' she laughed.

CHAPTER 30

'I ain't gonna work on Maggie's farm no more,' Thor was singing happily to himself when a voice interrupted.

'It's not Maggie's farm and you've never done much work on it.' There was fondness, not reproof, in the voice.

He looked up from the engine he was lubricating and marvelled again at the beauty of his daughter. Even dressed in a man's cowboy shirt, faded, tattered jeans and old boots as she was, there was no hiding her beauty. The ever-present pang of loss of her mother once more intruded.

True to her word, Freya had taken off with Plarisoc in search of more Earths. Thorbjorn had gone with them, together with his bride, Kate Castro, daughter of a Cuban refugee father and Irish immigrant mother. They had been co-captains of Springwood High School. Thor had heard many stories from his son about the fiery, selfish, stuck-up, smartarse bitch he had to share his duties with and even complaints of rigging when she'd just edged him out for the Dux of the School prize.

It had, therefore, been a real shock when Thorbjorn had started going out with her and shortly became engaged to her. When Thor had discovered that Plarisoc was insisting that only couples and families—no adult singles—would be allowed on the expedition, it had suddenly made sense. From the very first he had heard of the planned expedition, Thorbjorn had made it clear that he intended to be on it.

Maggie, on the other hand, was not interested. Her main interest in life was in the farm and the horses on it. Because of this, she had forged a deep bond with Sheila. In many ways, Maggie and Sheila were closer than Maggie and Freya or Maggie and Thor or Sheila and Fiona or even Sheila and Thor. There had been flashes of jealousy from the others but nothing seemed likely to loosen the attachment.

Perhaps it was because of this partial exclusion that Fiona had turned more and more to her father. She soaked up knowledge like a sponge and had been a traveller on the information highway before she made her teens. The one driving ambition of her young life was to absorb all she could of computers, information technology, business and management so that she could take her place in the family business empire. Whenever she possibly could, she shadowed Thor as he went about his many duties. She'd been obviously distraught when he'd announced that he was going to retire from active running of the business.

'What's wrong?' he'd queried her. 'You can still go and help your brothers. And you can still join the firm when you're ready. And I'll be able to spend more time with you till you finish your studies and start work full-time.'

'I guess so,' she'd agreed dully.

It had been some time before he'd worked out that she had been worried that the bond she'd forged with her father through his work would loosen and that Sheila and Maggie would grab his time and attention. By this time, what his daughter had feared had, he realised, already happened.

It had been Murray who had opened his eyes. Fiona had started brilliantly at university, with High Distinctions in all her subjects, but then the quality of her work dropped

dramatically and it seemed she was even in danger of failing subjects. Thor had spoken to Murray, who had had his own study problems at university, in a desperate search for answers.

'I'd say the poor girl's feeling neglected,' Murray had advised him. 'Since you've retired, you've spent all your time poddling round the farm with Sheila and Maggie and forgetting about her. You know, she idolises you. That's the main reason she got into information technology and all the rest of it. Now you're apparently not interested in it any more, neither is she.'

This had shocked Thor but he had realised the truth of Murray's words and pondered what he could do about it. To go back and again grab the reins of the company had seemed out of the question; it would be too unfair to the others who had moved up and were thriving on the increased responsibility. And indeed he had been enjoying being somewhat remote from it all and free from pressing responsibilities—to be able to do what he wanted to do when he wanted to do it, even to think about what he wanted to think about without having 'must do nows' grabbing his attention. Finally, he had hit on a solution.

He'd gone to her room and found her doodling despondently on a notepad set in front of a number of textbooks. 'Honey, I know you're very busy with study,' he'd said, 'but I wonder if you'd have any spare time at all to help me?'

Her head had shot up and her eyes had widened. 'What is it?' she had asked, pathetically eager, and Thor had instantly recognised that Murray had been right in his diagnosis.

'Well, I've been thinking about some books I should write. Actually, that was one of the main reasons I retired—to write them. I've got a lot of things I've half started and not got far with because I never had time or I got interrupted and lost the thread or maybe just lost interest. Well, books, I don't know. Maybe some of it would be better as articles or pamphlets or even CDRoms. But then there are a couple of things I'd like to do as books at least. Maybe you could help me go through it sometime and see what you think. And, if you've got time, maybe you could help me with some proofreading and research and that sort of thing. But only if you can afford the time. I don't want to interfere with your studies.'

She'd looked at him thoughtfully. 'Dad, you're an old darling,' she'd said at last. 'Of course I'll help you if you want me to. But right now I need your help with an assignment. I don't have a clue where to start.'

Now they continued to help each other and the bond was as close as it ever had been. And he actually had, with a lot of help from Fiona, written two books and several articles and, with her help, seen them published.

But now he was playing hooky in the way he liked best. Some time ago, he'd bought a mini steam train, with several carriages and track, from an amusement park that had gone bankrupt. Over the years, he'd enlarged the track until it now went almost right round the property.

Murray had been fascinated with steam trains from his earliest childhood and often came to ride with his father as the train chugged round the track. Of course, the grandchildren also loved it and came as often as they could, frequently with friends in tow. The women would shake their heads at the boys playing and Sheila and Maggie would worry about the train disturbing the horses but neither their amusement nor their concern worried Thor and Murray one little bit.

Now Murray came hurrying towards them. 'Ready to go?' he asked.

'Yeah,' Thor replied. 'Trust you to turn up when the work's all done.'

'Hey,' Murray retorted, 'I've been slaving my guts out over a hot computer all day to earn the dough to pay for your extravagances.'

Thor laughed. 'Okay, smarty, just for that I'm driving.'

'You always do.'

'Rubbish,' Thor snorted.

Maggie laughed. 'I don't think you pair will ever grow up. Off you go and don't blow the whistle near any of the horses.'

'Yes, Mum,' said Murray and Maggie laughed again.

They set off with a toot and a cloud of smoke. 'You know,' Murray said, 'it's funny. She looks just like her Mum but she reminds me of mine.'

'Ummm,' Thor agreed. 'On the other hand, Fiona looks just like her Mum but acts like...I don't know.'

'Acts just like her Mum.'

'You think so? But she doesn't think much of horses, is mad on computers, would rather read than watch television, enjoys business and finance, enjoys wine...and so on.'

'If you suddenly decided the thing to do was to ride horses all day and watch television all night, she probably would too.'

'Maybe,' Thor said doubtfully. 'But your Mum's not like that anyway. Else she'd be here instead of fussing with the horses.'

'Mum's just learned to be subtle over the years. She knows she has to give you space. But how many times a day does she find something to do for you? And how many times a day does she find something for you to do for her?'

'You mean I've been manipulated all these years and never known?'

Murray laughed. 'You're probably the most easily manipulated person I know, particularly by a female you care about. And, let's face it, females have a strange fascination for you. Have you ever met a female you didn't care about? Mum's always manipulated you. Freya manipulated you. Gina used to manipulate you at work. Maggie manipulates you. Fiona manipulates you.'

He's right, thought Thor, women have always been able to manipulate me; Freya certainly did, though she swore she didn't spike my drink with an aphrodisiac that first night; Gina did, although it wasn't her fault I drank the cocaine-spiked Coke. He was hard put to think of a woman who hadn't

used his weakness for the female touch to their advantage. But then it wasn't only women who took advantage of his nature.

'And you don't?' he demanded of his son.

Murray laughed again. 'I've learned a bit from Mum over the years. But Mum's the master of the art. Look at the way she got you back with her and kept you with her. Look at the way she got her house and horse stud and the running of it. Look at the way she finally removed Freya as a rival. Look at the way she stole Maggie and remade her in her own image. She had to pull a lot of strings to do it, and no doubt suffered a lot of heartaches on the way, but she's finally got her perfect world.'

Thor was silent, pondering his son's words. Was he right? Had Sheila really manipulated the situation all along for her own advantage?

'Don't take it too hard, Dad,' Murray interrupted his thoughts. 'Like all mothers, she only did it for your own good.'

Murray laughed uproariously at the expression on his father's face, then suddenly became serious. 'Seriously, Dad,' he said, 'I think Mum was the best thing that ever happened to either of us. I wish I'd been more easy for her to manipulate when I was younger.'

Thor didn't answer. He was staring into the distance, seeing visions of many past events in a new light. His entire world view had been destroyed. He felt strangely childlike, uncertain. Well, he told himself, the Bible said something about not being able to enter the kingdom of heaven unless you became a little child; maybe there's hope for me yet.

'Women,' he said and, smiling, tugged a blast on the whistle.